A BALANCED APPROACH

Create a smooth path while leveraging urgency in change initiatives.

By Steven V. Hall and Susan K. Green

Educational leaders are called to act with urgency on issues that range from demanding external pressures, such as pay for performance and public accountability, to internal convictions for success. These imperatives, as well as those based more directly on curriculum, invariably demand that a principal navigate and lead the complexities of organizational, cultural, and instructional change. However, urgency can create counterproductive emotions that interfere with producing our best efforts. Thus, leaders must learn to redirect their own and their staffs’ sense of urgency to motivate and unify the school community around a common purpose, if the desired change is to prove successful.
Acknowledging Emotions
The initial step in this process is to recognize that generating a sense of urgency involves a significant emotional component for both leaders and their staffs. Emotions can be subtle or volatile, so reading them correctly is crucial. To accomplish this, a principal must realize that emotions are often camouflaged as something other than the fear of change and failure that is likely at their core. According to Leadership on the Line (2002) by Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky, emotional reactions to urgent initiatives may be expressed through such behaviors as scapegoating, denying personal responsibility, finding an external enemy, and denigrating authority.

We recall staff reactions when this article’s first author was a newly assigned principal at a highly regarded school in Charlotte, North Carolina. Steven V. Hall started his tenure as principal by addressing the school’s significant achievement gap and by sharing the previous year’s achievement data. The staff were asked to discuss the data and provide possible explanations. Without hesitation, they called out, “Poor leadership by the prior principal” (denigrating authority), “lack of teacher assistants for differentiating instruction” (denying personal responsibility), and “unrealistic expectations by politicians” (scapegoating).

Leaders can be sidetracked by these deflections, especially when one’s own leadership is attacked. Some leaders are comfortable working through these emotions in one-on-one conversations or together with their staff. Managing and communicating about change at this point requires a deft balance of empathetic listening, candor, and reframing. However, many principals fear that addressing the underlying emotional challenges may open the floodgates to conversations they do not feel fully prepared to have. To simply “suck it up” and barrel forward is often the first instinct. But, as Heifetz and Linsky explain, forging ahead before addressing these issues will compromise a culture of urgency and derail the building of morale.

Using the strategies described below, the skillful leader must confront these emotions and channel them productively.

Clarify and Refocus Emotions
The second step in leveraging urgency is to accurately identify, acknowledge, and respond to the emotions that leaders and staff members are experiencing. As noted expert on systems thinking, Peter Senge, says, mastering the ability to view reactions from the distance of the “balcony” is a critical leadership skill in this process. It requires a unique distancing to view the larger picture, with nuances of intentions and subtleties of emotions at work. Most significantly, the impact and limitations of our own perspectives are clarified as a result.

Sometimes just taking a few breaths before speaking can provide clarity. Developing an effective, aligned school leadership team can also provide valuable input for candid feedback and diverse viewpoints. Many principals also engage a mentor or coach to help broaden their perspective. Over time, using a few trusted, honest colleagues, developing a measure of self-control, and practicing ongoing reflection will make the balcony view increasingly familiar.

The pressure gauge in the meeting described in the opening example skyrocketed when the disaggregated data were shared. The broader balcony view revealed the likelihood that there were more fundamental feelings at work. The urgency produced by the data had, in fact, led to the staff feeling both personal guilt and fear that they could not do any better.

Acting on the recognition of those underlying feelings, principal Hall employed a second key strategy—empathy. The staff very much needed to know their predicament was understood. At this point, leaders can share their own frustrations and failures with similar challenges to empathize with the staff on a personal level. After doing so, staff will likely be more willing to share their own doubts and feelings.

In our example, by injecting a few choice experiences of challenges from his past, the principal refocused the conversation with staff so they could safely examine their frustrations in having attained such uneven success as a school.

Leaders must ensure empathy does not turn into mere complicity when entering such a dialogue, however. They must keep focused on moving the staff forward while simultaneously kindling their confidence. Mindful of that challenge, principal Hall offered reassurance that success, in fact, was
well within their collective power and abilities. To support that understanding, a third strategy, using data from success stories, proved invaluable in moving the conversation forward.

Principal Hall distributed disaggregated results from four local schools, with one data set going to each of four staff teams for analysis. He urged the teams to look for patterns that could illustrate their own situation and provide clues to help them take steps forward.

After each of the teams reported to the rest of the staff what their group had gleaned from their data set, the energy and focus in the room shifted. Teachers wanted to know, “What are they doing over there?” “Could visits be arranged?” and “How soon?” Sincerity and urgency were palpable in the air. After identifying and acknowleding the deeper emotions underlying staff resistance, and using data to re-engage in the possibility of success, the staff were ready to pivot into action by formulating a plan.

Pace Urgency to Action

A strategic plan is critical when leveraging urgency because it clearly charts the pathway from vision to action, defines benchmarks for progress toward goals, and aligns all stakeholders through explicit actions to which they will be held accountable. Clearly articulating and consistently referring to this plan so that it is integrated into the fabric of the entire school community is essential. Newsletters to parents, visual displays posted throughout the school, and devoting part of every staff meeting to identifying progress are just a few ways to make a strategic plan an integral part of the ongoing conversation.

According to Heifetz and Linsky, an error many leaders make with strategic planning is prematurely gauging the staff’s readiness to move forward, thereby threatening buy-in and, ultimately, lowering morale. This seriously jeopardizes the plan’s success. The failure to ensure an issue has “ripened” can also alienate the staff from their leader, who will appear to be an unrealistic visionary with little understanding of the daily challenges and readiness for change among the staff.

In the case we have described, the staff’s engagement, initiative, and comments demonstrated their eagerness to act. But eagerness to act does not always ensure readiness for a successful resolution. Too often, staff will prematurely jump directly into solutions without fully realizing the complexity of the challenges. Principals must adeptly acknowledge and affirm a staff’s eagerness, but then channel it without alienating them.

One way to accomplish this “ripening” is to reframe information gathering and analysis as a form of action.
Problem analysis requires several complex stages of gathering relevant data, securing information regarding resource management, engaging stakeholders, and contextualizing the accumulated information before effective solutions can be developed. When the principal redirects staff energy to action in this way, momentum and collective ownership can flourish.

In this case, before that first meeting ended, the staff developed an initial 30-day plan and formed teams of volunteers, with each responsible for a different piece of information gathering. For example, tasks included identifying possible instructional resources and locating and observing local schools with successful school improvement processes.

Morale increased because the principal ensured both the specificity of each team’s work and the feasibility of completing the assigned tasks within the designated time period. Initial, clearly achievable steps also served to reduce the underlying fear of failure staff had been experiencing. The principal, too, was assigned responsibilities, furthering the collective ownership of the work. These focused tasks leveraged urgency, united the entire staff in an aligned direction, and built momentum for further action.

Maintain Morale and Urgency

Great beginnings often turn into disappointments, frustrations, and decline in morale if school leaders do not anticipate key pressure points. Hurdles abound because data can easily be misinterpreted through habitual ways of thinking that can be counterproductive. The principal’s attempt to address the achievement gap could easily have slipped into the category of “another failed initiative.” For example, following the first school visits, returning staff failed to note the significant instructional initiatives and instead focused on overdue technology updates that would bring their own school in line with those they had seen.

After meeting with informal leaders on the staff, the principal sensed momentum and morale were turning in the wrong direction. Fortunately, the team returning from another school observation offered the pivotal opportunity for the leader to re-establish the initiative and steer the conversation forward. The returning team identified strategic use of parent engagement as one of the primary ingredients in the observed school’s success.

When such opportunities arise to regain lost momentum, an attentive leader will move rapidly to re-engage staff in action by recognizing a remark that could provide a key point of entry. In this example, principal Hall built on their realization about parent engagement and immediately urged the team to list every conceivable way in which parent volunteers could support the instructional program to address the achievement gap. They then solicited input from the entire staff to create an extensive spreadsheet of clerical, instructional, office, supervisory, and celebratory functions parents could perform to support that goal. Some of the resulting tasks enabled teachers to focus more intently on student needs by freeing them from other duties (e.g., making copies and checking their mailboxes). Others related more directly to instruction (e.g., leading small reading groups following training and serving as tutors).

The PTA eagerly filled in the spreadsheet with names and times. They were excited about the opportunity for a legitimate role in the critical mission of moving the school forward.

The Bottom Line

Establishing an urgent need for change and charting a successful course forward will only translate into a process that builds morale when there is transparent and continued attention to the complicated feelings accompanying urgency. Clarifying and refocusing those emotions into a plan of action is a central task of leadership. To maintain the momentum of that process, an aligned, engaged total school community is invaluable.

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Principal ONLINE

Access the following Web resources by visiting Principal magazine online: www.naesp.org/SeptOct14

Read the authors’ two-part article, “Principal Leadership Tips,” which provides strategies and examples principals can use to promote change.

“Leadership without Easy Answers” offers Ronald Heifetz’s perspective on the complex emotional and cultural conflicts associated with “adaptive” change.

For more information on how to communicate changes with colleagues, read “Developing a Culture of Change” from the Communicator archives.

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