



A Step Toward a Low-Stress School

Reduce teacher anxieties by showing your own vulnerabilities first

By Jon Harper

What if I told you that there was something you could do that would decrease teachers' stress levels and help reduce their anxiety? And what if I told you that it doesn't involve you reading a book, watching a video, or sitting through any professional development?

What I am about to share is going to sound crazy and counterintuitive, but it will work. It is the result of personal experience and the experiences of educators with whom I have had

the opportunity to speak over the past several years. You need to do what I call "stepping first."

What does that mean? Stepping first means you are the first in your district, organization, or building to display vulnerability. More specifically, you need to be willing to openly share your mistakes, your flaws, and maybe even your weaknesses.

Am I saying I want you to share something embarrassing and possibly

even painful with the people you are charged with leading? Yes, that is exactly what I'm telling you.

"I can't possibly share my screw-ups with the people I work with," you'll protest. "I need to be seen as a role model. I need to be seen as someone who makes good decisions and models appropriate behavior at all times. If I share my mistakes, I'll lose the respect of others, and they will lose faith in me. This will have a negative impact on the entire organization."

In fact, just the opposite will occur. When you display vulnerability, it gives others permission to do the same. This is no small feat, since most people feel as though they must hide their weaknesses and always show their best side—a “highlight reel,” if you will. But by making it OK to share mistakes, you are saying that it’s OK to *make* mistakes.

Facing the Fear of Mistakes

I don’t know the number of decisions an educator makes in a day, but it must be in the hundreds—and anyone who makes that many decisions in a day is bound to make a few mistakes. And if educators are judged, critiqued, and evaluated based on the number of mistakes they make, they can’t help but worry. Worry becomes stress, and stress becomes anxiety.

On the other hand, when educators work in an environment in which they know that it is safe to make mistakes and display vulnerability, their stress levels go down. So the question is, how do we create these conditions?

It is not as simple as just telling our colleagues that it’s OK to make mistakes. Educators are smart people, and they are not going to be willing to expose their weaknesses and display vulnerability until they feel it’s safe to do so. And they will believe that only once they witness others stepping first.

Daniel Coyle, author of *The Culture Code: The Secrets of Highly Successful Groups* (2018), says that according to his research, vulnerability almost always precedes trust. “In all the groups I visited, the leader sending a small signal of fallibility ends up being one of the most powerful things,” he said in an interview with psychologist Adam Grant, of the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania.

The Best and Simplest Policy

Stepping first doesn’t require much preparation, nor does it require sharing our darkest secrets. It can be as simple as sharing an experience in which you “went off” in a classroom,

for example. You’d reached your boiling point and instead of taking a deep breath, you *screamed* at a child. Telling your staff this doesn’t give them permission to lose their tempers. Instead, it lets them know you are just like them—someone who makes mistakes.

I experience anxiety and take medication to help me better cope with its effects. But it took me a while to share this fact with my colleagues; I kept it hidden. But as you might have gathered in this article, I’ve learned the value of doing otherwise. I now share this information with students, parents, and colleagues, and I don’t do so for sympathy. I share this with others because I want them to know that they are not alone.

People are comforted by the fact that they work for someone who they know not only makes big mistakes, but also shares them. They stop

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worrying about making mistakes; their stress levels go down, and their anxiety decreases. If we, as leaders, can create conditions like these, we will have accomplished something special.

The sooner we start sharing our imperfections with the people we love and the people we serve, the sooner they will stop expecting to be perfect. **P**

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