What Have You Done for Yourself Today?

One afternoon I opened the door of a school storeroom and knew immediately that something odd was going on. It was dark, but I could hear the sound of breathing and a radio. When I flicked on the lights, I startled a custodian catnapping on a hammock jerry-rigged between a battered old teacher’s desk and an office chair. He was as embarrassed as I was. I said, “Hello, how’s it going?” and got what I was looking for.

That custodian wasn’t a sluggard; he had a reputation as a good worker. But he knew he had to take care of himself after a full morning of hard work, and I wondered if I might learn a lesson from him.

The work we principals do is enormously exacting. Roland Barth, a former principal, issues a warning to all of us still in the field whose Spartan work ethic keeps us from taking care of ourselves:

The bottom line is that the work life of a school principal is depleting. Depletion of leadership leads to depletion of faculty, of school, of community and ultimately of the learning experience of the students (Barth 1991).

Evidence abounds that principals who don’t attend to their own needs are not as able to attend to the needs of others. William Bridges writes:

The average manager’s situation at home and at work is made up of constant and difficult change. It often seems like something between a Greek tragedy and a sitcom. No wonder most managers spend a great deal of time wondering if it is all worth it. And it is understandable if you are wondering…How do you take care of yourself? In the long run it will be impossible for you to help others effectively if your own situation is deteriorating (Bridges 2005).

So, let’s say you’re convinced you need to take better care of yourself. What are you going to do: set up a hammock in your office and take afternoon naps? Not likely! But here are a few things you might consider.

“There is nothing to be ashamed of in admitting we need a break from the rigors of our work to renew our energy…”

Eat a healthy breakfast and lunch. How many lunches have you missed lately? Well, stop. Principals need fuel to keep going, just as students and teachers do. Are you trying to thrive on caffeine and nicotine? Get control of that, too. Write down the time you will go to lunch on your daily calendar. If this doesn’t work, make arrangements to go to lunch with one or two other people. The point is to break the habit of not going to lunch by establishing the habit of going.

Leave the job each day at a reasonable hour. I’ve been told Japanese middle managers are expected to stay at work until the boss decides to leave. This keeps many of them at their desks doing bogus work long after they could have called it a day. What lack of regard for the value of personal and family life! Yet, I suspect that many of us emulate this practice, unaware of the example we set for teachers and support staff. Even if they don’t attempt to match our marathon work hours, they leave for home knowing that we don’t practice what we preach about the value of family life.

Take daily breaks. That custodian knew the value of taking a break. So what’s to keep the principal from taking a break during the day? Here is a technique I’ve used to build a break into most days before things get crazy. I keep a weekly calendar on my computer and every weekend I review it and look for open time slots. In some of these, I write in “time for observation” or time for “walking around.” Built into these slots is also some time for a break, when I can do some professional reading, journaling, have a snack, or just relax for a few minutes.

Develop friendships with people unrelated to your job. I often hear principals complaining that all we ever talk about is school. Yet, there are plenty of people out there who have other things on their minds besides education. Are you making an effort to meet them and talk with them? What about the person who sells you that cup of coffee in the morning, or gasses up your car, or rents you a video? In my last job, I struck up a friendship with the woman who managed the local video store. Whenever I came in, we’d engage in witty repartee. It was a great way to relieve the stress of a busy week and I enjoyed my chats with her as much as I enjoyed any film I rented from her.

Make time for relaxation. As school leaders, we are determined to preserve the arts, physical education, and field trips for our students because we know they are essentials of a well-balanced life. But how many of us take the time to engage in these activities? I know principals who find relaxation by running, playing musical instruments, singing in choirs, or participating in exercise, theatrical, or book discussion groups. There are plenty of opportunities for exercise and for other forms of relaxation outside of school. So take time to read a book, listen to music, or take a hike with your family.

Take mini-sabbaticals. Look for opportunities to take mini-sabbaticals—retreats from the daily routine for a few days or a few weeks. You can accomplish this by attending a workshop or principal’s institute, arranging for a temporary job exchange, visiting other schools, or simply taking some time off to relax and regain your energy.
In “Birches,” Robert Frost describes his need to retreat temporarily from the demands of daily life: “I’d like to get away from earth awhile. / And then come back to it and begin over…That would be good both going and coming back.”

A slight twist yields an excellent prescription for what ails every principal: “I’d like to get away from school for a while. And then come back to it and begin over.”

There is nothing to be ashamed of in admitting we need an occasional break from the rigors of our work to renew our energy and spirit, nor in taking steps to address that need.

References


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