A veteran principal offers some practical advice to newcomers.

Paul Young

When I was a little boy, I remember touching a handle of a hot pan in my mother’s kitchen (even after she warned me), burning my fingers, crying, and learning the lesson: “Been there, done that—and won’t do it again.” The painful lesson learned about touching hot pans has stuck with me in my 19 years as a principal, during which I had to touch many hot items. In recent years, as a mentor, I have attempted to guide and advise new and aspiring principals in the hope that they will listen and learn from my “been there, done that” experience. I try to help them avoid unnecessary frustration or pain when encountering some of the “hot pans” that every principal encounters. What follows are some bits of advice I had to learn the hard way—and won’t do again:

Don’t write e-mail messages when angry.
Even if you use the computer to document your thoughts, don’t hit the “send” key. Anything you send via e-mail can come back to haunt you. It’s always best to address your concerns with another person face to face.

Don’t become part of a gossip network.
Misery loves company and you may even sense some value in commiserating with teachers or colleagues who feel they have been wronged. But as the principal, what you say or don’t say will inevitably be spread through the district’s informal “gripevine” and likely be heard by your bosses. Learn to stay away from those on your staff who thrive on lunchtime gossip. You’ll be better off eating lunch with the kids.
Never shoot the messenger. Hopefully, you’ll develop quality relationships with staff, parents, friends, and colleagues so that people feel comfortable approaching you with information you might not want to hear. How you react and handle those confrontations will affect their perception of your approachability the next time they have information you should know. When people bring you bad news, take a deep breath, thank them, and if necessary, vent privately or with your mentor.

Don’t become the Lone Ranger. You can have the best ideas and be the most ambitious principal in your district, but if you fail to work collaboratively with your staff, your efforts will likely fail. Success comes when there is mutual agreement. If you allow yourself to go too far out on a limb alone, you can expect others to saw it off behind you.

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Don’t conceal big problems. Sometimes, issues blow up and become media nightmares. When that happens, don’t hide the facts. Telling the truth is always better than trying to conceal it. Lies or misinformation always lead to more lies and misinformation. So tell the truth, accept the fallout, and move on.

Always make the superintendent look good. If you engage in conversations with teachers in which you express frustrations with your boss, don’t be surprised when you learn they talk about you in disparaging ways. Model the conduct you expect in others.

Don’t knock your predecessor. “But we’ve always done it this way at our school” is a comment every new principal hears. Don’t fall prey to a perception of implied criticism of the previous principal’s practices without allowing time for others to embrace your ideas. Don’t

For every principal, facing retirement is a unique experience. During the eight months following my announcement, I read as much as I could about retirement and listened to what other retirees had experienced. My mind (and my financial adviser) knew it was time to leave, but my heart wasn’t ready.

I resented acknowledging that I had passed another life milestone, so I adopted a façade that betrayed what I felt inside. I found myself uncomfortable encountering friends and accepting their congratulations. My ambition and drive began to wane, and there were days of depression when I struggled to adjust to changing professional and social networks.

Younger principals expressed envy of my new freedom, but they didn’t seem to comprehend when I described my inner turmoil. They were facing real, day-to-day principal issues, and I realized we would never again relate to each other in the same way when I was no longer a principal.

I’m sharing my experience to highlight some of the challenges—and opportunities—facing retiring principals. Perhaps others like me, with an urge or need to keep working, will learn from my experience and effectively transition into related areas of professional life. I would urge them to consider the expanding opportunities presented by after-school programs.

A Win-Win Opportunity

These programs are rapidly increasing to fill multifaceted and unique community needs, particularly the provision of a safe environment for children in the high-risk afternoon hours of 2 to 6 p.m. As baby boomer principals relinquish their keys to a younger generation, moving to after-school administration seems a perfect fit. It’s a win-win opportunity for everyone who cares about high-quality after-school programming.

There simply isn’t enough time for students to learn everything they should know in a traditional school day and year. While many after-school programs provide enrichment and recreational opportunities, a growing numbers of students need after-school time and support to keep up in today’s test-oriented school environment.

In 2001, an NAESP/Mott Foundation survey found that two-thirds of the 800 responding Pre-K-8 principals reported that they had after-school programs in their schools. The principals considered them to be very successful in accommodating students’ academic and social needs, as well as the schedules of working parents. But they identified adequate funding and staffing among ongoing challenges.

Here is what retired principals can offer to after-school programs:

- Highly developed administrative skills;
- Experience in interviewing and hiring staff;
- Communication skills;
- Conflict resolution experience;
- Understanding of grade-level curricula;
- Expertise regarding the diverse needs of at-risk and special needs students; and
- School and community connections.

Retired principals are uniquely equipped to ensure continuously improving, self-sustaining after-school programs that play a vital role in extending learning opportunities for students and families everywhere.

I left the principalship of West Elementary School on a Friday and assumed new duties as executive director of the West After School Center the next day. I was fortunate to have a new place to go and new challenges. Let’s face it, most principals never want to stop working, so why not look at after-school administration when you retire? You may not need after-school programs, but they certainly need you!

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attempt to evaluate your predecessor’s decisions, even if you believe some were wrong. Until you’ve walked in his or her shoes for a while, keep your perceptions to yourself.  

If you can’t think of something nice to say, don’t say anything. Principals must be very mindful of this timeless advice and how critical it can be to their success. When completing a poor or unsatisfactory observation or evaluation report, it is tempting to balance negatives with positives to soften the blow. But a sprinkling of positives (even if you had to stretch to think of them) will be used against you if and when an employee must be reprimanded or terminated.  

Align yourself with people who do things the right way. Select friends and colleagues who make decisions and live their lives guided by a code of ethics. Those who do things the sneaky way may appear to be more fun or even more successful. However, in the long run your association with shady characters leaves you prone to guilt by association.  

Learn to pick your battles. When people bring problems to you, focus on how you can help them find effective solutions. You don’t need to assume full responsibility for everything. Only problems that can potentially have a negative impact on your core values, personal or professional goals, or the mission of your school are worthy of consideration for battle.  

Don’t try to be a martyr. Don’t volunteer for everything, but do your fair share. Maintain a balance in your personal and professional life. You won’t win plaudits from your staff or colleagues for allowing yourself to become totally consumed by the demands of your job. And don’t ever agree to a job demotion or pay decrease.  

Don’t make promises you can’t keep. If you agree to kiss a pig or shave your head as part of a reading challenge, you had better do it! And don’t tell parents you’ll do something when you know you can’t deliver the goods. It might feed your ego to make promises you can’t keep, but in the end it denigrates both your credibility and the principalship.

I should have listened to my older brother, who experienced the same lesson with hot pans in mom’s kitchen a couple years before me. But I never viewed him as a mentor. In my early years as a principal, I learned to listen and gather advice from veteran principals who had gone before me. Their words of wisdom helped me avoid being “burned,” and I hope that sharing my own experiences, as one who has “been there, done that—and won’t do it again,” will help a new generation of principals get off on the right foot.

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