There are some things that principals can learn only in the school of hard knocks.

Mike Connolly

A retiring principal, a veteran of many campaigns, was cleaning out his desk for the last time and talking with his replacement. They had spent several weeks together as part of the transition plan and now it was time to leave.

“Well,” he said to his eager young successor, “I’ve told you all I can tell you at the moment, and it’s time to go. But listen, you’re bound to get yourself into a few jams from time to time; we all do. So I’ve prepared three 3-by-5 cards with advice you can use in an emergency. They are numbered, so be sure to use them in the order I’ve given them. I’ve put them here in this little metal box. Put it where you can find it when you need it.”

And with that he departed.

Things went swimmingly for the new principal for a while. But, as predicted, within six months he found himself in an impossible situation. He struggled mightily, trying to find a solution, but to no avail. And then, just when it seemed everything would be lost, he remembered the metal box. He rushed to where he had left it, opened it, took out the first card and turned it over.
“Blame me!” it stated simply.

At the next faculty meeting, the principal rose and declared, “It is not fair to hold me responsible for the errors of my predecessor. But together I’m sure we can move ahead and find a solution for this problem.”

His predecessor’s advice worked like a charm.

Things went well for a while before the new principal again found himself in an unforgiving situation. Again, he remembered the metal box and rushed to it. Once more he was rewarded.

“Form a committee,” the second note read.

At the next meeting of the school board, he stepped to the microphone and confidently said, “What we need in this situation is a committee to conduct a study and make some recommendations.” It worked and he was again free from anxiety.

It took a year and a half before he found himself in yet another impossible situation. By now he knew what to do, so he rushed off to get the little metal box. Opening it, he turned over the last card.

“Update your resume” was its terse message.

Maybe you’ve heard this apocryphal story before, but it’s worth retelling because, while I’m not yet ready to retire, I’m prepared to share some experiences gleaned from my many seasons as a principal. My suggestions may not be as succinct as those left by the retiring principal in this story, but I trust they will be helpful. They are things I’ve had to learn by trial and error over the years that I was never told about in the courses and seminars I took while preparing to be a principal.

Broad shoulders are better than burly biceps. Veteran principals know that their jobs are much more heavily weighted toward responsibility than power. In fact, when they hear someone talking about the “power of the principalship,” they know it’s either a new principal or, more than likely, not a principal at all. When I was a novice principal, just cutting my teeth on the job, I was a strong believer in the power of the principalship, but after a couple of decades in the job, I’ve learned that while there is power in the principalship, that power usually resides in the opportunity to persuade rather than push.

Don’t come running every time someone shouts fire! A principal soon learns that overreaction is every bit as dangerous as underreaction. It’s true that when there is a problem, people expect action from the principal and most principals are

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always primed to take action. Therein lies the problem. For if the principal does not take adequate time to assess the problem, she or he can rush out in full firefighting gear to confront a blazing inferno that isn’t there—and never was. That is not only embarrassing, it is often counterproductive.

Overreaction often occurs when a faculty member, a parent, or a student comes into the principal’s office upset about something, vents his or her spleen, and announces that there are a whole lot of others out there who feel the same way. The veteran principal who takes the time to properly assess the situation often finds that the heat felt by the informant was nothing more than individual anger. As a principal, I’ve learned that you will encounter those who light a match and are convinced they’ve set the woods on fire. Be forewarned and deliberate in your response.

My door isn’t always open. I don’t know the principal who first announced, “My door is always open.” But you can be sure he or she didn’t get much work done after that. Well meaning though that advice was meant to be, it is nonetheless bad advice. If the principal’s door is always open, one can be certain that there will always be a steady stream flowing through it, like a gully in a torrential rainstorm, and that much of the important business of the school will be inundated by the flood.

Just think. If doctors’ doors were always open, we would never see them in the hospital and they would have no time for operations. If lawyers’ doors were always open, none of their cases would ever come to court. And if ministers’ doors were always open, their congregations would be left waiting for services that would never begin.

A far better motto for principals to adopt is: “I will always make myself available to you if you have a need.” That gives principals the time and opportunity to assess and prioritize needs and to allot their time judiciously.

Principals also need to know how to set another boundary when they are at home. At those times, they become private citizens, parents, spouses, and good neighbors, with obligations other than school except for emergencies. And when a principal attends a school function as a parent, others need to learn to respect that boundary as well.

Principals need to establish these boundaries for their own health and welfare, as well as for the health and welfare of their families. One of the things principals should be taught in their preparatory education is the polite but important demurrer: “I’ll be in school tomorrow. Could you contact me then?”

Veteran principals understand that they must be servants to those they lead, but never slaves, and they have learned to recognize the difference.

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WEB RESOURCES

NAESP has posted the article, “The Top 10 Mistakes that Principals Make,” from Principal, September/October 2003, www.naesp.org/ContentLoad.do?contentId=965

The Clearinghouse on Educational Policy Management provides “Mistakes Educational Leaders Make” (ERIC Digest 122). http://eric.uoregon.edu/publications/digests/digest122.html

Education World shares comments by principals about lessons they’ve learned about staffing, bringing about change, and the importance of listening. www.educationworld.com/a_admin/admin/admin305.shtml

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