Fear in the Principal’s Office

Greg M. Romaneck

Fear is a fact of life that principals need to understand and conquer.

For principals, conquering fear is a necessary skill. As a leader, complex decisions will be thrust upon you. Conflict will occur and you have to be able to deal with it. The key is to understand fear and develop coping strategies to address it.

Here are some strategies to consider. While they are in no way novel, they may help you to better address this potentially debilitating emotion. One need only substitute the word “stress” for fear to conjure up a host of wellness concerns related to significant exposure to pressure.

Fear is a natural emotion. Some of the emotions we routinely experience are productive and some are destructive. Fear is one of those emotions that can be both a plus and a minus. For example, if you work for a supervisor who likes to use his or her power to hurt other people randomly, fear is a legitimate feeling that can help you to chart a course of future action while avoiding present problems.

Don’t dwell on your fears. Bad things happen to everyone, and some, like the death of a spouse, child, parent, or other loved one, can overwhelm your ability to cope. But even in the worst situations, the long-term gain of dwelling on past losses is nonexistent. If you find yourself doggedly holding on to fears and anxieties, stop, identify the cause of these emotions and consciously find something else to think about or do.

Dare to act in the face of fear. Fear can paralyze a person. But if you have chosen to be school leader, to be struck numb by fear removes your potential for leadership and cheats those around you, as well as yourself. If you feel overwhelmed by fear, consider those who depend on you and the impact your inaction may have on them. Use your obligations to others as a vehicle for allowing you, at least temporarily, to overcome your emotional inertia.

Fear of rejection is a fact of life. Most people want love and acceptance in life. Yet, in a leadership role there will be times when you must make difficult decisions that can alienate others and bring criticism. If you fear rejection or are apprehensive about other people’s negative impressions of you, then you need to reassess your feelings. As a leader, if you choose not to make difficult decisions, you will face even sterner criticism from people who legitimately question your leadership credentials. Keep this in mind when you are forced to make difficult and unpopular choices.

Don’t fear change. To attempt to hold back the flood of change is to live in an unhealthy dream world. Change brings destabilization and it is natural to fear the unknown. If you are faced with changes, minor or major, and you feel anxious, then it may be useful to analyze what you fear. Some changes carry significant risk and your fears may be very reasonable. In other cases, your fears may be far worse than the reality they mask. List your fears and then use your metacognitive skills to assess and rate them. If they are legitimate, readjust your course of action.

IN BRIEF
Fear and anxiety are emotions that principals must learn to overcome if they are to be effective leaders. This article provides some observations and suggestions that can help principals understand and cope with fear on the job.

Each of us faces fear and its nagging partner, anxiety, with some regularity. These unwelcome visitors may arrive as heart palpitations when you think about meeting a particular person. Or they can creep into your existence at 2 a.m. when you awaken with a start because of a problem that remains unresolved. Fear can paralyze our ability to function in our work as well as our broader life.
Don’t be afraid to take your time. Sometimes leaders become agitated over the pace of desired changes. If you are charged with making changes, resist the temptation to rush to accomplish them. This is a surefire recipe for failure, or at least no long-term gain. Change may be inevitable, but its form is more relevant and sustainable if the pace of its implementation is reasonable. To force your fear of inertia onto others will simply increase their anxiety and stymie change. Bring people along at a steady and acceptable pace and you increase the probability of buy-in and success.

Don’t gossip about your fear. Reactions to fear can take many forms. One is to denigrate the source of our fear to others. While it is may be appropriate and healthy to talk to trusted friends and loved ones about important elements of your life, be cautious in what you say. For example, if you hate your supervisor and spend a great deal of time criticizing him or her to colleagues, then you run several risks. First, you really do not always know who you can trust or who understands discretion. Second, to criticize someone openly may leave an impression of you that is quite unseemly. Gossiping does honor to no one and leaves a negative afterimage.

Even our deepest fears are not eternal. All things pass. We are all mortal beings who must occasionally operate in fearful circumstances that eventually will fade to memory. In the long run, you will leave the job you may be fearfully clinging to, and the political issues that seem so important today will be but historical blips at some future time. No fear can go on forever.

Fear is a fact of life. Hopefully, these simple remedies or suggestions can be of use to you in coping with it. As a principal, you leave home every day to become part of a world in which you are destined to intersect with the needs, hopes, irritations, and fears of other people. How well you are able to balance your own anxieties and fears is a critical factor in establishing your ability to be a positive force in the lives of others. Fear can be a reality, and a necessary one. But how sad it is to miss the joy of life because you are afraid of it.

Greg M. Romanek is coordinator of Prairie School in DeKalb, Illinois. His e-mail address is gregromanek@hotmail.com

WEB RESOURCES

Bill George’s Authentic Leadership Web site tells leaders how to cope with fear, stress, and trauma.
www.authenticleaders.org/index.htm

Jim Collins’ Web site offers suggestions on how to achieve bold leadership by overcoming obstacles, including fear.
www.jimcollins.com

John C. Maxwell’s Maximum Impact site is a resource for a number of books by Maxwell, a leadership authority, on strategies for making decisions under stressful conditions.
www.maximumimpact.com
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