

With incredible resilience and teacher support, he succeeded in introducing a major instructional change while conquering life-threatening cancer.

Sandra J. Balli

THE PRINCIPAL WHO BEAT



I wasn't at Robert Louis Stevenson Middle School to talk about the principal, but to begin research with teachers about the school's new interdisciplinary team program. But the conversations returned to him again and again as teachers chronicled a remarkable account of the principal's leadership in launching the program and his steadfast resilience in the face of a life-threatening illness.

I had met Lance Hanson a year earlier in the middle of his first year at Stevenson, a school with 325 ethnically diverse students in grades 6 to 8. He was noticeably visible on campus with an engaging aura of enthusiasm and energy. He greeted students amiably and affirmed teachers consistently. Discovering our common interest in interdisciplinary instruction, he described his experience with implementing interdisciplinary strategies at another school and said he planned to introduce them in this school. He believed that a middle school was a good environment for his interdisciplinary plan and that his teachers had the skills to make it happen.

The following year, when I met with the teachers, I discovered that Hanson had been diagnosed with a malignant tumor that was growing aggressively in his chest. Radiation, chemotherapy, and depleted energy had kept him away from school for most of the school year. Yet, despite his absence, the interdisciplinary model that he had introduced was moving forward successfully.

How could that be possible? Everyone knows that implementing school change is an uphill struggle at any time, but particularly so when teachers are without a full-time principal. Moreover, the vice principal had taken another position, leaving the teachers, as one put it, "in the wilderness."

IN BRIEF

Lance Hanson was a new middle school principal who had just begun to introduce an interdisciplinary team model when he was diagnosed with a rapidly growing malignant tumor. During his absence while undergoing surgery, radiation, and chemotherapy, the school's teachers carried out his plan by establishing interdisciplinary teams for each grade level. Medically cleared, Hanson returned to witness the program's success, as measured by a 22-point rise in test scores.

The teachers' attitude understandably could have been that, since we have no leader, the status quo is fine. Instead, they pressed forward to implement the new program. Interdisciplinary teams were established for the three grade levels, each consisting of four core teachers (math, English, science, and social studies). Each team was responsible for about 110 students, who circulated among the four core classrooms. According to one teacher team, the faculty and students became like a family in believing that their determination to carry out what Hanson had started would contribute to his recovery. I wondered what kind of principal could garner such support.

THE

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Leadership in Action

What I learned from the teachers revealed that Hanson was a principal with many of the leadership qualities described in *The 21 Indispensable Qualities of a Leader* (Maxwell 1999). Ten of these leadership qualities reflect the teachers' recollections:

Vision: *Leaders draw on past experience to see a brighter future.* Hanson embraced the interdisciplinary model that had worked in a previous school, but he understood that he could not simply dictate a new direction. Instead, he laid the groundwork, demonstrated credibility, and shared his vision while waiting patiently for teachers to feel comfortable enough to reach their own conclusions.

Initiative: *Leaders regularly step outside their comfort zone.* Hanson looked for opportunities to share his vision and was not averse to taking risks. He introduced his plan slowly, sowing the seeds of change and letting them germinate gradually during staff meetings throughout the year. He also had the good judgment to meet early with parents, including many who were committed to other school programs already in place. He was never pushy and would pull back when facing objections or hesitancy from staff members, taking whatever time was needed to reach consensus.

Passion: *Leaders know that passion drives ideas home.* In order to reach a consensus with teachers and the community, Hanson shared research evidence substantiating student success with an interdisciplinary curriculum and team approach. He believed that these ideas were effective and he had the ability to passionately present ways to implement them. He operated through a philosophy of inspiring rather than coercing the teachers. As a result, teachers were drawn in by his vision and avoidance of top-down decision-making.

Courage: *Courageous leaders inspire commitment.* Hanson had hoped to implement the new program a year or two after introducing it to the teachers,

but only if they bought into the idea. However, the teachers got on board early and decided not to wait. As a result, Hanson decided to take a giant step forward, despite acknowledging the risk that standardized test scores tend to initially drop whenever there is an instructional change. Indeed, Hanson told the teachers that it could take up to three years to realize the full benefits of the change.

Discernment: *Leaders learn how others think and then trust their instincts.* When the teachers agreed to move forward with interdisciplinary teaming, Hanson encouraged them to form teams based on similar personalities. For example, the sixth-grade team was composed of teachers who were naturally nurturing, possessing qualities that could ease their students' transition from elementary to middle school. The eighth-grade team, on the other hand, was composed of more independent personalities best suited to provide confidence for their students as they prepared to move to high school.

Generosity: *Leaders serve people first.* Hanson understood and addressed the obvious question of why any teacher would want to assume the extra work of planning interdisciplinary units with a team. He scheduled a daily preparation period for each teacher and provided additional support by scheduling a daily common conference period for each teacher team. Hanson fostered a low-pressure approach by encouraging teacher teams to brainstorm and plan at least one interdisciplinary thematic unit the first year.

Communication: *Leaders make a complicated message simple.* Change itself is not as important as perceptions about the change. Hanson was not hesitant to ask for help and for strategies needed to educate parents and the community about the need to try new things. Even as he was receiving treatment, he dropped in at the school regularly to encourage the teachers and to organize opportunities for each team to share with other teams what they were doing in their classrooms. The sharing opened new avenues of thought and

ideas, and facilitated a schoolwide support system.

Relationships: Leaders serve with their heads and their hearts. The teachers admired Hanson for his interpersonal skills in managing the process. He inspired others to embrace change by listening and affirming. For example, in the late spring when he came to school to meet with me and one of the teams, we reflected on the successes and challenges these teachers encountered in implementing an interdisciplinary thematic unit. I noted that the teachers felt free to share the good and the bad, secure in the principal's nonjudgmental reaction and response.

Charisma: Leaders focus on others rather than themselves. Hanson displayed an engaging personality and a vital presence that reached out to others. I was visiting the school one morning when I saw him dressed in an outrageous costume, marching through classrooms and singing with a student leadership group to announce an upcoming school event. At the time, he was in the throes of his difficult recovery, completely bald and somewhat swollen, yet he strolled the campus with a self-assured presence as he greeted teachers and students.

Character: Leaders walk their talk. Hanson demonstrated fight and resilience when he could have quit. At one time, he said that the cancerous tumor in his chest was growing so fast that he felt like something was going to explode. His treatment involved six weeklong chemotherapy sessions and 25 radiation sessions. Because he lived alone about 30 miles from the school, teachers, parents, and students collaborated to assist his recovery. For example, the sixth-grade teacher team invited parent involvement and received an outpouring of volunteers to help with meals, house cleaning, and transportation, including the 100-mile round trips for his radiation treatments.

Reciprocal Resilience

Hanson's treatment included radical surgery that cut through his throat and chest to remove the tumor. In the

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process, his vocal cords were damaged, necessitating the use of a voice modulator. Although the doctors told him he might never get his voice back, he miraculously was able to speak within two days.

The circumstances of Hanson's recovery are a noteworthy testament to a spirit of reciprocal resilience that he inspired, even though he was only at the school for one year before becoming ill. The local newspaper covered his return in the spring of 2005, when students and teachers gathered in the gymnasium to welcome him back. They showed their support by wearing the yellow LIVESTRONG wristbands popularized by cancer survivor Lance Armstrong.

According to one teacher, having Hanson back on campus was like a "breath of fresh air" for everyone. "We all just practically laughed out loud when we saw him because we were so excited." At the gathering, Hanson said, "I don't think I could have gotten through my treatment without the help of everybody." Referring to the school-wide changes implemented largely in his absence, he attributed the program's first-year success—a 17-point overall gain in standardized test scores—to the remarkable team spirit of the teachers. "For a staff to go through a complete restructuring and then have their principal gone, they did a phenomenal job this year," he said.

His amazing journey completed and medically cleared, Hanson continued to build on what his teachers had accomplished with—and without—him the following year, when the test scores rose 22 points.

"The second year is when I saw the confidence in the staff and students," he said before leaving to take on the

challenge of another, troubled middle school. "They were taking more chances with their interdisciplinary projects by making them more sophisticated and started looking at the standards in each of the subject areas. It was an exciting time to be there."

At Altimira Middle School, where one-third of the 455 students in grades 6 to 8 are eligible for free or reduced-cost lunch, Hanson faces a fresh challenge in introducing an interdisciplinary team concept.

"I have to be much more careful with this staff because they have been changing a lot of things over the past few years to improve their AYP scores, and they are frustrated with the lack of growth in the students," he says. "I'll have to figure out a different approach to presenting my ideas to them."

That will require some resiliency, but Lance Hanson seems to have an ample supply. 

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Reference

Maxwell, J. C. *The 21 Indispensable Qualities of a Leader*. Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999.



WEB RESOURCES

The Art of Leadership includes links to more than 50 short articles on different facets of leadership. www.art-of-leadership.com

The Job Stress Web site has keys to becoming resilient and thriving in today's challenging world. www.jobstresshelp.com

Strategic Connections describes "The Role of Leadership During Change" and provides links to leadership-building articles on trust, communication, and organizational improvement. www.strategicconnections.com/lship_roles.htm