

A man in a dark grey pinstriped suit, light blue shirt, and patterned tie stands against a dark grey background. He has large, vibrant butterfly wings (orange, yellow, and blue) attached to his back. He is holding a black briefcase in his right hand.

HARRIED PRINCIPALS

Patience and perseverance provide better results than fluttering about "like a butterfly on speed pills."

Mike Connolly

Mahatma Gandhi once said, “There is more to life than increasing speed.”

The same might be said of work. But one would be hard-pressed to believe that by peeking into the office of a typical principal. What would you see? A desk piled high with papers, the telephone ringing incessantly, 40 or 50 e-mails screaming for attention, a line of people queuing up outside the door, and a harried principal rushing from one task to another.

Most principals (and I count myself among them) have not yet learned you can't fit 10 pounds of tasks into a five-pound day. Far from being the models of self-control, balance, and rationality they should be, many principals resemble butterflies on speed pills; they can't devote sustained attention to anything. And far from being the oases of order and regularity their schools need, their offices and staffs manifest the kind of frenzy you'd expect to find on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange.

Stop! A harried leader is not a helpful leader. Schools need calm, well-

balanced, helpful leaders every bit as much as they need visionary ones. In fact, in this era of frenetic change in schools, principals should be devoting at least as much time to helping teachers to be more focused and less frantic as they are to formulating new visions for the school or embarking on new improvement initiatives.

As Hargreaves and Fullan (1998) point out, overeager teachers and their leaders can easily fall into the trap of being *projectites*—“pursuing change frantically through one uncompleted task after another.” In such schools, teachers, principals, students, and parents

end up feeling frustrated rather than fulfilled, angry rather than empowered. Harried principals can never be part of the solution; they can only add to the problem. The good news is that a harried principal can choose to change. But where does he or she begin?

A principal who undertakes the task of becoming a more well-balanced and helpful leader begins by learning to better order, regulate, and control the pace of the school day. A principal who can't do this can't help others regulate and control theirs. But how can a principal gain control of his or her chaotic existence? Here are some suggestions.

IN BRIEF

The author, a principal, offers five suggestions for restoring order and regularity to the frenzied workday of today's principals: make a firm commitment to gain control of your schedule; establish short-term and long-term priorities; plan ahead for the resources needed to meet those priorities; develop patience and perseverance in pursuit of the priorities; and dump activities not related to the priorities.

Aren't Helpful Principals

Five Ways to Slow Down

First, make a commitment to gain better control of your own schedule. This commitment should be regarded as though it was your most important improvement initiative (which, for some of us, it is).

The second step is to establish your priorities. What is it you want to accomplish this year, this semester, this quarter, this week, and today? Work backwards so that your important priorities don't

"...Becoming a more well-balanced and helpful leader begins by learning to better order, regulate, and control the pace of the school day."

get nicked and dinged to death by the urgent (but not necessarily important) demands of each day. Your priorities, once established, should be the rudder by which you steer the course of your workdays. Write down your priorities or yearly goals, and keep them where you can see them. Revisit them frequently and assess your progress in achieving them. Don't allow yourself—or others—to forget them. Make them known to your staff, your superintendent, and your fellow principals. Once they know your priorities, they know where you expect to spend most of your time.

Third, plan what you must accomplish in big chunks: years, months, weeks. Put a timeline on each chunk and write down the human and material resources you'll need to help you get the job done. This is often called action planning. A simple action plan template should include these headings:

- Objective;
- Action Steps;
- Resources Needed;
- Person(s) Responsible;
- Completion Date; and
- Evidence of Completion.

Fourth, work to develop patience and perseverance in pursuit of your priorities. On the bulletin board in front of my desk is a poster with this quotation from Samuel Johnson: "Great works are achieved not by strength but by perseverance." It serves as a constant reminder to me that nothing truly significant or lasting is ever accomplished in the absence of patience and perseverance. When I recently reviewed what my faculty and I have achieved together over the years, I found that most of our goals were not fulfilled in the year we developed them. They were accomplished a year later—or the year after that—because we had the patience to persevere despite changes in our faculty and central administration, and in the face of numerous other hurdles.

Cultivate patience and perseverance at work and away from it. Anyone can lead when the task is easy and success

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is assured; real leaders emerge when the task is difficult and the road ahead is obscured.

Fifth, develop strategies for dumping some of the extra baggage that eats away at the time you need for pursuing your priorities. There is a lot of jetsam in the cargo of any leader. It needs to be sorted out from time to time and thrown overboard. Successful leaders stay focused on the big picture and don't allow themselves to be distracted by other claims on their attention. Learn to jettison at least some of the excess baggage in your work life: meetings that have little or nothing to do with what you must accomplish; committees that want an administrator as window dressing; tasks that could/should be done by others.

This is a ruthless task that takes courage because all those who make claims on your time believe their claim should be your priority. Here, it is helpful to apply a tried-and-true lesson: *It is a lot easier to ask for forgiveness than permission.* "I'm sorry I had to miss that meeting because..." or "I'm going to have to withdraw from this committee because..." Of course, it is far better if you can avoid taking on excess baggage rather than to have to jettison it once it is in your schedule.

When Speed Doesn't Count

There is more to life than speed and excess. If you want to be a less harried, more helpful, and more successful leader, you must first develop focus, patience, and perseverance, and then add balance, optimism, and enthusiasm. Need inspiration? Consider this example:

Erik Weihenmayer, a former middle school teacher who has been blind since age 13, had achieved distinction as a marathon runner, skydiver, downhill skier, scuba diver, and long-distance cyclist before 2001, when he became the first blind climber to reach the top of Mount Everest. Interviewed by a reporter after the climb, Weihenmayer offered a comment that should apply to all of us who are pursuing our own lofty goals: "Be focused. Be

full of energy. Keep relaxed. Don't let all those distractions—the fear and doubt—creep into your brain, because that's what ruins you up there."

Weihenmayer doesn't accomplish his goals by being faster and busier than other people. He does it by being more focused and determined, proving there is more to life than speed. **P**

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Reference

Hargreaves, A. and M. Fullan. *What's Worth Fighting For Out There*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1998.



WEB RESOURCES

Education World provides feedback commentary from principals in "Principals Offer 30 Ways to Fight Stress."

www.educationworld.com/a_admin/admin/admin394.shtml

Principal has a list of useful suggestions in "Managing Stress for Better Leadership."

www.naesp.org/ContentLoad.do?contentId=1200

The New Teacher Center's School Administrator Web site describes the emotional challenges of leadership in "Emotionally Intelligent Principals."

www.newteachercenter.org/article8.php

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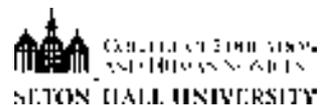
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