How I Survived a Leadership Challenge

It’s amazing how the old cliché, “Things happen when you least expect them,” never fails to prove itself true. For me, life took an abrupt turn on July 17, 2007, as I was eating a late lunch by the pool. Having interviewed that morning for the position of elementary dean in the same school district where I was teaching eighth-grade English, I was still reflecting on my answers when the telephone rang. Although the conversation was somewhat lengthy, the only words I recall hearing were, “Congratulations, Tom. You’re our new elementary dean!” Having had a score of interviews during the past few months that ended with phrases like, “You’ll be a great administrator someday, but we decided to go with another candidate,” I was speechless.

With the adrenaline rushing through my veins, it was not until many hours later that it became apparent to me that my life was changing. A large portion of my new position would consist of overseeing the district’s kindergarten program and its transition from half-day to full-day. I would no longer be Mr. Reardon, teacher, coach, club adviser. Instead I was now Mr. Reardon, an elementary dean without any administrative experience, let alone elementary administrative experience!

As I prepared for my first day, my nervousness increased. The logistical questions of building policy and procedure were piling up in my head, but the underlying question that woke me up each night was, Would I be the type of administrator that I would want to work for?

I was replacing a woman who had spent more than 30 years working with kindergarten and elementary-age children, so I felt defeated before I started. Would the faculty respect me, or simply look at me as a middle school teacher without a clue? Being 27 years old, I even lacked the years of experience that usually are featured in administrator biographies. My five years of teaching certainly wouldn’t be enough to put my credentials on the faculty’s minds at ease.

It was the wisdom of my fiancéé that gave me the strength to take on the position. “Be the person you are in the classroom and the person that came through on your interview,” she said.

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I could bring to the job the energy, enthusiasm, and passion that originally brought me into education.

I spent the first two weeks in my new position sifting through old notes and files, trying to find some semblance of where to begin. Then I remembered a time when I first began teaching, and the new principal called me to her office to ask if I had any suggestions for how to introduce a new program to the faculty. That feeling of trust and empowerment not only solidified a personal admiration for this new leader, but caused me to work harder to make her transition easier.

I invited all of my staff to an informal “meet and greet” coffee session (if nothing else, they would at least realize my love of pastries). As I put the final touches on the buffet, the teachers arrived and my mind raced as to how I should introduce myself. Should it be a formal speech? Should I rattle off the various articles and publications I had read over the past week relating to kindergarten and elementary education?

Should I introduce a few of my new ideas? I didn’t want my introduction to be a topic of conversation in the parking lot, which I was certain wouldn’t be flattering.

“I Am Here to Serve You”

Instead, I gave the staff a warm welcome, and said that while I was extremely happy to be a part of their school, primary education was something quite new to me. I anecdotesly told them of my attempts to learn more from the literature by deciphering old files and schedules, only to realize that I had done nothing more than confuse myself. After a few laughs and some light summer stories, I made my resonating point: If I could ask you for one favor, it’s that you guide me to be the leader that you had and always wanted. Any help you can give me to understand where we are and where we are going would truly mean the world to me. I am here to serve you.

Though some might say this took away my authority, I would completely disagree, as illustrated by the unity of the faculty in coming together during those first weeks to explain to me what had worked in the past, confident that any tweak or change would be based on that knowledge.

As a new administrator, I thoroughly believe that one’s authority cannot come from fear or through taking on the faculty, but instead comes from admitting shortcomings and using honesty as a building block for long-term relationships.

How would I assess this leadership approach? A simple card on my desk, signed by all members of the faculty at the end of the year, provides the answer: “Thanks for all that you do for us.”

Though I continue to learn, I couldn’t be happier with my decision to take a humanistic approach to my daunting task, and to be a leader who leads by building a long-lasting and respectful relationship with my staff.

Thomas B. Reardon is elementary dean of the Bethlehem Central School District in New York. His e-mail address is treardon@bcsd.nERIC.org.

Thomas B. Reardon

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