



The 5 Best Pieces of Advice I Ever Received

Keeping these tips in mind can help you stay centered and calm

By Chris Antonicci

Principals spend a lot of time trying to stretch scarce resources. Time, money, and teachers are often in short supply. Advice, however, is not. Everyone seems to have a few ideas about how we should do our jobs.

In my nearly 30 years as an educator, I've received a lot of advice—some good, some not so good. These five tips have stayed with me for years because they contain essential, important truths.

1. Very few decisions need to be made immediately.

Principals make a lot of decisions. Most are easy, due to their innocuous nature; either the decision is guided

by a strongly held belief, or a district policy is already in place and simply needs enforcing.

But for difficult, more complex decisions—ones in which the answers aren't obvious—it's OK to take some time. Go walk the hallways, or play four square with some second-graders. Unless there is an alarm indicating that you need to evacuate the building, you have time to ponder or consult a trusted colleague.

Don't be afraid to tell others that you need time to think and solicit input. Yes, you are the educational leader, but you don't have to know everything. And you don't need to make decisions right away.

2. Regardless of how tempting it may be, don't make promises you can't guarantee.

You know the conversation: Something happened to one of your first-graders—perhaps a classmate spit on her lunch. Her father is irate, and you want nothing more than to alleviate his concerns. But whatever you do, don't say, "It won't happen again."

To paraphrase former president Bill Clinton, you can't possibly guarantee, nor control, the actions of a 6-year-old (or any child, for that matter!). The language I use is, "I have spoken with the student, and there is a consequence. I'm confident it won't

happen again, but if it does, let me know immediately.”

This statement does a couple of things: First, it lets the parent know you’ve dealt with the situation, and that’s all most parents want. Second, it tells the parent that you aren’t simply giving lip service; you take the matter seriously, and in the unlikely event of a repeat offense, you will address it in a timely manner.

Another thing I’ve learned over the years is that families really want to know whether the parents of other involved children have been made aware of the situation. So, let them know. This information is not confidential, and sharing it will go a long way toward building relationships.

3. The key to failure is trying to please everybody.

I had a colleague who tried to please everyone by saying yes ... a lot. That eagerness to please may help you in the short term; it’s a wonderful way to end a meeting or make someone feel good about you.

In the long term, however, constantly saying yes will come back to haunt you, because people compare notes. Making tough decisions is part of the job. Get used to it. As long as you’re fair and honest, and are acting in the best interest of your students, you’ll seldom be “wrong.” People may not always like your decisions, but they will respect them if they are based on deep concern for children and their well-being.

4. It’s more important to be right at the end of the meeting than at the beginning.

I didn’t receive this advice directly from David Cote, CEO of Honeywell; I read it. But it’s true: Humility is an essential trait for any leader to possess. Doing the right thing is far more important than how you get there.

Yes, I have had meetings to which I go in knowing what I want the outcome to be, but those are few and far between. It’s best to listen to the views of all the stakeholders with

an open mind, weigh the different options, and try to come to consensus, voting if you must. Remember, you don’t have to decide immediately. (See point No. 1, above.)


5. No matter how badly your day is going, you can always find some love in kindergarten.

I don’t know whether there is a corollary for my high school colleagues, but elementary principals know of what I speak. On bad days—and make no mistake about it, I’ve had my share of bad days—my spirits never fail to be lifted by time in a classroom full of 5-year-olds.

If no kindergarten students are available, find another amazing

group of students and simply spend time with them. Read, eat lunch, play a game—what you do really doesn’t matter.

Most of us entered this profession because of a desire to work with children. Don’t lose that passion, and remember to nurture it.

Several years ago, one of my kindergarten students told me his favorite people were “Jesus, God, my dad, and Mr. Antonicci.” If my whole school would simply adopt this hierarchy, I would never have another bad day again. 

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