

From Newbie to Veteran Principal

When I started my first administrative assignment, I had no idea what I was getting myself into. I was a new principal—and I mean new. At 38, I had never held an administrative position. I had worked at only one other school, where I was comfortable. I had started there as a teacher and later became an instructional coach and finally a coordinator in charge of Title I and English learners. None of those experiences adequately prepared me for what I was now doing: leading a school.

That said, I began teaching in much the same way. After a brief, unfulfilling career in corporate America, I became a teacher during a shortage that allowed me to teach on an emergency permit. Until my first day, I hadn't set foot in an elementary school since my fifth-grade culmination. That first day teaching was simultaneously exciting and terrifying. At the end of it I sat down at my teacher's desk (for the first time that day) and thought, "I have to do this again tomorrow?" My body buzzed from being "on" all day, and I didn't know how I would come back and repeat it all the next day. But I did, and gradually things got better. And so did I.

As a new teacher, I was no overnight success. It took time for me to develop into an effective teacher. I learned from trial and error. I learned from other veteran teachers and from reading professional literature and attending classes.

Becoming a better school leader has come in similar increments. A lot has happened in the past two years. It reminds me of the advice my friends who were parents gave me when my son was born. They said to enjoy this time, because it goes by fast. Before you know it, your son will be grown, and you'll be an old man. My first two years as a principal have gone by like that. At first, I struggled with many things. People would come with problems and expect me to have the answers. Often I was just as unsure of what to do as they were. On the plus

side, it was the honeymoon period, and whenever I made a mistake people tended to cut me slack. I guess they thought I was a nice guy who would eventually improve. The more

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experienced principals I observed seemed to have all the answers. They never seemed to let anything rattle them and they were so poised. "I want to be just like them," I would think.

Growing Pains

Year two was a reality check. I had learned a lot during year one and felt


ready to lead my staff. The problem was, they weren't ready to follow. As I had learned in my admin program, I didn't change anything until year two. Although everyone was anxious for change, and many teachers expressed their desire to see changes in the school, I was greeted by hesitation and resistance when I tried to implement anything new. "That isn't the way we do things here," I heard numerous times.

In some ways progress came slowly, but eventually we got in stride. I used what I had learned from my few experiences and watched and learned from other principals. Slowly, I began to feel like a real principal. I no longer hesitated when people came to me with problems. I learned that listening to an upset parent helps diffuse the situation. I realized that having tough conversations ultimately makes things better. And I discovered that although change comes slowly, real progress comes only in small steps.

Continued Growth

These days, I am starting to feel like a veteran. New principals come in and ask me for advice. Sometimes I think, "Are they crazy? Don't they know I don't have all the answers?"

As a principal, however, you don't have to have all the answers; you just need to make a decision and learn from each experience. Sometimes your decisions are met with applause and cheers, and other times with silence and criticism. But I've learned you can't make everyone happy and, when you are a school leader, that shouldn't be your goal anyway. Your goal should be to do what's right for kids and lead by example. You are what you do, not what you say.

If you are a newbie, enjoy this time, because it goes by fast. Before you know it your school will be all grown up, and you will be a veteran principal like me. 

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