



Becoming a Risk-Taker

Women must take care of themselves to be confident leaders, especially during periods of sudden and significant change

BY PAM GILDERSLEEVE-HERNANDEZ

She described herself as a capable leader. After all, she had been chosen to lead as a school principal in a district with high expectations. Yet, she questioned herself when she was notified that her school would be closed for the remainder of the year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. For all the times she had thought to herself, “They didn’t train us for this in admin school,” leading the shift to online learning in a matter of days seemed like a crisis straight out of a science fiction movie.

Still, she was determined. The teachers, the staff, the students, and the community trusted her to lead. While she hadn’t been trained to deal with a pandemic, she had been trained to lead with confidence. She began by connecting with her professional support system, teams from her site and her district, and professional colleagues on social media. After listening to their thoughts and advice, she sat at her computer and prayed for guidance and wisdom.

Her training had taught her the importance of communication, the power a sense of belonging brings to a group of people, the importance of shared values, and above all else, the value of each person on her team. Now, a year and a half into leading her school through the crises that are defining the early 2020s, she is exhausted but more confident in her leadership and her team. “I feel that through the connections we have built and the sense of belonging we feel with one another, we have developed so much more as a team than we would have otherwise,” she thinks.

Rife With Risk

Today’s principals lead in an almost constant state of crisis. Every day that the principal, her students, and her staff come to work is a day they might be exposed to the coronavirus. Some communities live in a state of hyper-awareness, while others prefer to move forward unmasked. At the same time, heated discussions about critical race theory, racism, and censorship are cropping up, making it difficult to focus on student learning goals.

It takes confidence to lead in times like these. Site leaders, teachers, administrators, and staff have to have courage to show up and lead with determination. These leaders are also laying the groundwork for structural and systemic changes that will redefine an education model that has been in place since the Industrial Revolution.

As structures shift, a natural tension arises between the comfort of pre-pandemic routines and new strategies that include virtual classrooms, meetings, and parent conferences. It takes an open mind, a high degree of flexibility, and resiliency to lead during times like this. Where does one get the confidence to lead through rapid change and crisis without burning out?

Exercise Your Endorphins

The answers lie not only in the values of the systems in which we work, but also in our everyday choices and the expectations we place upon ourselves. Self-care allows the chemicals that regulate our moods to flow at optimal levels—dopamine for energy, serotonin for calmness, oxytocin for optimism, and endorphins that reduce stress.

While some people are genetically wired to have higher levels of endorphins, functional MRIs show that the brain can be rewired by engaging in activities that ameliorate essential hormones and neurotransmitters. Wellness—the foods we eat, the music we listen to, laughter, meditation, and a good night’s sleep—impacts our confidence. Regular exercise enhances one’s mood and increases confidence, so go for a walk if you need a boost.

A confident leader sets healthy boundaries. In *Becoming a Resonant Leader*, Annie McKee, Richard Boyatzis, and Frances Johnston say that the pressure to perform can lead to what they call “sacrifice syndrome,” when leaders don’t take the time to recharge and eventually see their effectiveness slip or burn out. School communities need strong, well-rested leaders more than they need leaders who answer their emails in the middle of the night.

Suppose you notice that it’s difficult to leave work at a reasonable hour. You might be struggling to say no, delegate, or accept help from others. Take a moment to reflect on what you’re afraid will happen if you let an issue wait until the morning. Then, consider what you’re like at your best, and put structures and strategies in place to maintain that feeling. Taking care of your own needs will increase self-assurance and give you the energy to meet the needs of those you serve.

Innovation Means Risk

Creative risk-taking can lead to great innovation. Learning is now being offered in pods, virtual environments, and outdoor environments. Innovative educators and parents are choosing from a variety of play-based, place-based, and project-based options. Rapid change can create tension, so be prepared to persevere through the political and workplace dynamics that your decisions might produce.

Risk-taking takes courage, and it has never been more critical. The public education system is changing fast. K-12 school enrollment dropped nearly 3 percent in the 2020-2021 school year, according to data from the National Center for Education Statistics, and preschool and kindergarten enrollment dropped almost 13 percent. At the same time, staffing schools successfully has become a challenge.

A confident leader understands that risk-taking, creativity, knowledge, and preparation are rewarded with accomplishment, however. Be strategic in how you take care of yourself, and understand the impact—good or bad—that your voice and presence might have on those around you.

The confident risk-taker is driven by purpose and has a clear vision. Think deeply about what it is you would like to accomplish. Set a clear vision and purpose for your personal goals and professional growth. Invite others to be a part of your goal-setting conversation to clarify what you want to accomplish and how to get there.

Today’s educational leader moves forward knowing that her leadership will take her into the unknown. She is confident in her values and her integrity. She takes care of herself, eats well, exercises, and sets boundaries while still actively engaging with the people she serves. These are the leaders who are prepared to guide our schools with strength and resiliency. ●

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The author is a facilitator in The Center for Women in Leadership Book Study, which is now reading *The Confidence Code: The Science and Art of Self-Assurance—What Women Should Know* by Katty Kay & Claire Shipman.