

Teacher Leadership Magazine

Leading Well Depends on the Wellness of the Leader

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Life is hard. It is complicated, capricious, biased and fickle. At least that is how it can feel. It is also a beautiful and magnificent opportunity... often for those same reasons.

The distinction can be found in the distance between our experience and our expectations. Most low-level, everyday pain is caused by that distance. An email that was never sent, a delayed flight, or the coffee shop running out of oat milk. Frustrations come from unmet expectations far more often than deliberate malice, or the world somehow conspiring against us.

When these moments pile up we feel stuck. The feeling is exacerbated when we do not take the time to identify what our expectations are, exactly. Emotional discomfort can alert us that we want something different, but what? Without naming the problem then aiming for a solution, that generalized state of discontent can linger and intensify.

Erikson suggests that one component of an evolving mind is the ability to self-diagnose and self-manage (Batra, 2013; McLeod, 2018). When you want something different, and possess the focus and emotional maturity to name what it is that you want, you may pursue it. Even if you do not accomplish the goal right away, it is empowering to notice the shrinking proximity between you and your aim, encouraged by whatever distance has been covered.

Name your objective. Then bring awareness to your behavior relating to its pursuit. Only then can you consider this essential question: does your behavior match your goal? We call it the mantra of “practical mindfulness” – a way to bring awareness back to the moment and evaluate our role in its creation.

Mindful Systems

Leaders often hope to teach emotion regulation. It is a prized capacity (Graziano, 2007). But do they create situations which enhance its probability? Do they model it themselves? The boss who throws the remote control against the whiteboard certainly does not. In that case, it would be easy to spot, though misalignment can be far more subtle.

Sleep deprivation has been shown to increase emotional reactivity, indicated by increased amygdala activation and a possible increase in anger (Saghir, 2018). Still, schools and businesses everywhere create situations where early wakeup calls are necessary and early bedtimes are impossible. The sleep deprivation pandemic continues (Davis, 2019).

Within those tired systems, we attempt to teach character and social emotional learning skills (i.e. emotion regulation) to exhausted brains. In other words, we are teaching a skill to regulate a state we have exacerbated. This can be a frustrating cycle if it goes unnamed.

Those same organizations seem to have increased interest in supporting the mental health of their employees. Sleep-deprivation is directly connected to a variety of mental health concerns, including suicidal ideations (Davis, 2022a; Bernert, 2015). Schools create quiet spaces for meditation, wear green mental health ribbons, but are rigid in protecting schedules which automatically deprive students of sleep and run counter to natural circadian rhythms (Davis, 2022b; Crowley, Acebo, Carskadon, 2007).

If this sounds critical, it is. Leaders routinely fly the flag of worthwhile goals without being honest about the behaviors we enlist in their pursuit. I'm a routine perpetrator of this.

Over and over again, I trip up. I stay up late watching Netflix even when I say that my sleep schedule is important. I spend time scrolling through social media even when I have committed to using my free time for writing. I say that I want to be a patient communicator but sometimes, I am not. In those moments, my behavior does not match my goal.

So what do I do about it? I forgive myself. Practical mindfulness demands forgiveness, humility, and thoughtfulness... only then can we make adaptive decisions. Easier said than done.

Generous Objectivism

During a recent round of field research, we asked a large group of high school students (n=146) to reflect on one of the organization's wellness initiatives.

A committee within the organization was appointed to intervene and create solutions around rising drug and alcohol usage. With wonderful intentions, this committee set out to prevent these concerning behaviors. Additionally, the organization was making an annual five figure investment for an external consultant to create visual aids that would, in theory, educate the student population.

On a monthly basis, committee members would strategize, debate, and ultimately arrive at a research-based message to share with students. This message would then be turned into a poster by the consultant and hung around school, most notably in the bathrooms. The theory was that bathrooms provided a low-distraction environment where students had just the right amount of time to read the poster. They were posted above urinals, beside the sinks, and on the backs of stall doors. It was a great idea in many ways.

There was only one problem: no one was willing to ask the question of whether or not it worked. Did the students read those posters? And if so, did they incorporate the information in subsequent decision-making? So eventually, we did exactly that. We created a survey to evaluate the initiative. One hundred forty-six (146) students were asked about their experience.

The two questions we were most interested in were “How often do you read the messages on the informational posters in the restrooms?” and “How often do you incorporate information from the restroom posters in your decision-making and behavior?”

On a scale of 0-5, with 0 indicating “never” and 5 indicating “always”, the students responded with average scores of 1.51 and 1.69, respectively. In other words, people did not often notice the posters, and when they did, failed to incorporate the information in their decision-making and behavior.

How often do you read the messaging in the informational posters in the restrooms?



Avg. Score 1.51

How often do you incorporate information from the posters in the restroom in your decision-making and behavior?



Avg. Score 1.69

We must meet this objectivity with grace. The committee members were big-hearted people doing meaningful work. We also have to be honest. Does our behavior (informational posters in the restrooms) match our goal (improve student decision-making)? In this case, no. And that's okay!

Had we kept pouring resources of time and money into these restroom posters only to be confronted by the same student behavior concerns, that would have been frustrating. And if, in the presence of this newly discovered truth, we continued with the poster initiative, that would be a problem.

Instead, we meet this gap between intention and outcome with generosity. It was a thoughtful attempt. But it didn't work. We had to try something else.

Leaders, when was the last time you checked in on your personal or system-level efforts to see if they were having the desired impact?

A Secondary Mantra

When our experience does not meet our expectations, it can be helpful to begin with personal accountability. Practical mindfulness includes regular appraisal of our decisions with the question, does my behavior match my goal? This will require confrontation with potentially frustrating misalignments. We cannot bring judgement to those gaps. Only appraisal.

This can be a real challenge, which is why we also ask people to employ a second, slightly longer mantra:

You don't always have to be "right"
But you should operate thoughtfully
Have humility when it's not "right"
Forgive yourself and those around you
And be willing to adapt.

Many leaders I work with have this saved on their phones or pasted it above their desks. It is, in many ways, the soil for practical mindfulness to grow. Perfectionism continues to plague high achievers (Curran & Hill, 2019); Endleman, Brittain, Vaillancourt, 2022), so *if we want to grow, we must learn to let it go.*

This does not mean that workplace errors are irrelevant. It means that forward progress should not be bogged down by errors of the past. Guided by them, but not governed by them.

Leaders, in their own lives and in the systems they oversee, should keep an eye out for nonobvious misalignments, which can have major impacts. Adaptation will be necessary. Confronting expectation gaps with thoughtfulness, humility, and forgiveness will allow for adaptation. It will allow for evolution. When it comes to that consistent question of practical mindfulness, it will allow you to answer 'yes'.

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