

BEING HUMBLE

by
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... Yet Remaining Confident

On February 3, 2022, Anthony MacKay – advisor to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) – spoke to our university cohort about the importance of being humble while retaining one's confidence. In his opinion, any school leader must be adept at doing so. His words were instrumental in helping me to work through a recent experience as a Vice-Principal at an elementary school in Nanaimo. I am sharing a reflection I recently submitted as a student in UBC's Transformation Educational Leadership Program (TELP).

"As a leader, it is important to be humble and yet remain confident."

- Anthony Mackay, Case Study #3, February 3, 2022, UBC TELP Zoom session

As a Vice-Principal, one of my tasks is recess supervision. Exclusively, I supervise the blacktop area of our school, Brechin Elementary. Picture cracked concrete, loose gravel around the edges, puddles, and rusted basketball hoops. Most students avoid the blacktop area because it offers little to do and is visually unappealing.

However, every recess, some choose to go there. In particular, 10-15 behaviourally-challenged boys, ages 9-11, converge in this space to do what behaviourally-challenged boys often do together: cuss, destroy things, physically challenge one another. Justin is one of those boys. And, on one particular day, despite issuing several warnings to be careful, I had to call him out for repeatedly trying to kick another boy's soccer ball on the roof. I eventually felt it necessary to confiscate the soccer ball, to the other boy's disappointment. Understanding how that other boy, Anthony, must have felt, I promised myself I would return his soccer ball by the end of the day.

When school was over, I went out to the back field to return the Anthony's ball, and found Justin's grandmother was standing on the other side of the fence, a distance away, and witnessed our exchange. She called me over. "What was that about?" she asked. I responded that I was returning Anthony's soccer ball, and I asked Justin if he could make an effort to act more respectfully during recess. She rolled her eyes and nodded. "Well, maybe he would act more respectfully towards you if you respected him."

I was taken aback. Was she actually accusing me of being disrespectful towards her difficult grandson? *Me?* I immediately recalled several occasions when I overlooked and ignored his behavior. "What do you

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mean by that, Dawn?" I asked. Her accusation had me upset and defensive. "Well, I hear the stories at home. I hear about how you single him out, and let others get away with stuff." Single him out? Preposterous! If anything, I let him get away with things, otherwise I would be calling his mother daily. "I'm sorry to hear he feels that way, Dawn, but every day I have to talk to him about swearing and hurting others. I don't think I'm ever disrespectful," I replied. Again, she rolled her eyes and nodded her head. "Well, that's not how we see it," she answered, then walked to her car. Offended and speechless, I went back inside the school, reliving the exchange in my head.

Once inside, I felt compelled to tell the story to several colleagues. How could I, the friendliest guy ever, possibly be labeled 'disrespectful'? What garbage! Especially by a family whose children routinely fill our school with profane language and dysregulated behaviours? The injustice of it. The ignorance of it. I'm the fairest, most patient guy around. Everyone who heard my story took my side. I was looking for vindication, and I was finding it easily among my colleagues.

Three hours later, having put my own kids to bed, I was washing the dishes and ruminating over the exchange. Apparently, Dawn's comments had touched a nerve. But why was I so perturbed? *Was* there truth to what she had said? *Had* I been disrespectful to him? I dug. No: actually, I hadn't. His grandmother had no concept of the number of sidebar conversations I've had with him, the patience I've exercised towards him daily. So, if I was totally confident in how I treated Justin, I must be bothered for another reason. What was it?

It took three days. Three days of reliving the exchange with Dawn through the fence. Finally, while helping my son deliver newspapers, what was bugging me about the situation became clear. *One of the families I am being trusted to serve and advocate for – with all their faults, traumatic background, and weighted perception of reality – was sharing that in their household, I am seen as disrespectful. I had failed the people I had been asked to serve.* I couldn't live

with that. I was either going to hear that and argue with them, or I was going to hear that and figure out how to fix it. Choosing the latter, which is what a true leader should do, would mean humbling myself: putting aside my defenses, and hearing their words.

Once I had made that realization, I was able to reflect on how I could do things differently with Justin. I recalled that people who suffer trauma often experience 'persecution syndrome', believing that everything is against them. Justin had witnessed plenty of abuse. Justin had grown up never knowing his father. Justin needed understanding. Maybe he doesn't like that I holler his name out when he acts inappropriately. I would try to do that less. Maybe he's bored out there, and needs some new playground equipment. When was the last time I said a compliment or positive comment to him? I couldn't recall. Maybe never. I would compliment him more, starting now. Once humbled and off my high horse, I was able to think of ways to adjust my practice and work towards a better relationship with Justin.

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A couple of weeks later, Dawn was standing by the school entrance around 2 pm, picking up her grandkids early. I seized the opportunity, and said, "Hey, Dawn, I was thinking about what you said the other day, about my appearing disrespectful." "Yes?" she answered

guardedly, probably expecting an argument. “After we spoke, I reflected on how I act towards Justin. You’re right. Maybe some of the ways I interact with him may make him feel disrespected. I apologize for that. I’m going to try and act differently towards him from now on. I don’t want him feeling disrespected here.” Her face lit up with a smile. “He really is a nice boy Mr. D. He just needs understanding and more patience than other kids. Thank you for saying that!”

I walked away from that exchange feeling far more victorious than from the first one, even though no one had been ‘put in their place’. And, unlike before, I didn’t feel compelled to go colleague to colleague retelling it. I guess boasting of one’s victory over oneself just doesn’t have the same ring. Instead, I wandered off down the hall thinking about how complex this job of leader really is, and how opportunities for growth can come when you least expect them.

Mr. Mackay’s talk came about five days after that playground incident. The taste of humble pie was still fresh in my mouth. But my confidence in myself as a leader was stronger than before. When he said that line, “To be a leader, you must be able to be humble and yet remain confident,” it resonated for me. Yes, you really do. I only hope that in the future I can remain open to catching those moments to practice humbleness.

Oh, and Justin and I do have a better relationship now. Not perfect...but better.

Marc Daneault is a Vice-Principal in the Nanaimo-Ladysmith Public School District.

Their motto is “Success for All” and it is a value Marc truly believes in.

He recently completed UBC’s seventh cohort of the Transformational Educational Leadership Program (TELP).