

As a school leader who has now completed 27 years as an administrator in the Kamloops/Thompson school district, I am feeling the need to share some of my experiences with colleagues who are either just embarking on their own careers as Vice-Principals and Principals, or those who have been in the business for some time and may find some delight or refreshment in reading a number of stories that have never been told before. Yes: *I'm writing a book!*

The purpose of my book is to share some of the lessons I have learned along the way through informal stories taken from my stops at nine different schools along the way. The book will be organized by three central themes which underline

my own philosophy of school leadership. School leaders:

1. **Influence** their community
2. **Intercept** entropy
3. **Invigorate** their followers

Everything we do fits into at least one of those categories. When we can personally identify our own mission as leaders, we have something to 'hang our hats on' each day that we take on the immense and awesome challenge of leading our schools!

Here's a chapter from my upcoming book:

Chapter: Balancing the Odds Of Life

The German philosopher Immanuel Kant once wrote, "Heaven has given human beings three things to balance the odds of life: hope, sleep, and laughter." As I reflect on Kant's words, I must say I agree with him wholeheartedly, but I wonder if sleep should come before hope and laughter, especially when it comes to being a school Principal. It is very difficult to lead with any sense of confidence when one has not had enough sleep to refuel his energy tank. You must keep your wits about you, and be ready to wholeheartedly invest in the myriad of unexpected problems that are bound to surface at any given moment. There is no such thing as coasting through your day when you are a school leader.

That is why I make sure that I am in bed as close to 9:00 pm as possible every school night. My days start early at 5:00 am, and I need that quiet time in

the morning to prepare my mind, body, and spirit for the challenges of the day ahead. If I can arrive at school by 7:45, I have time to make notes for my morning announcements and connect with my staff, even if it's just quickly popping my head into their classroom to say good morning. I want to be sure to set a good tone for everyone by my positive, welcoming presence and attitude in the morning, and that is very challenging to accomplish without a good night's sleep under my belt.

One of the best ways to ensure that I get a good sleep is to stay away from reading any school district emails after I get home. There is nothing worse than opening up an email from a distraught staff member or concerned parent at 8:30 pm. Suddenly, I go from peacefully winding down my day to anxiety, and steep myself in worries about how I will handle the problems of tomorrow. The

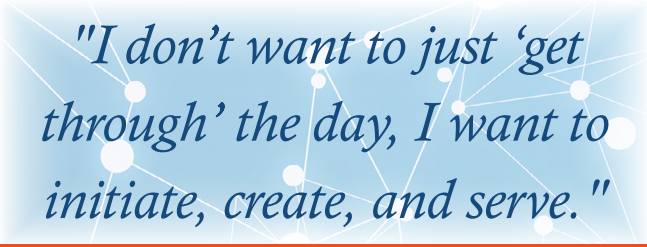


HOPE

by
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truth is those problems will be there whether I read the email or not, and often they will resolve themselves before I even respond. Many a good night's sleep has been sabotaged by a last-minute email check: resist the temptation. I can count on one hand the number of district emails I received over the past year that would have brought joy to my heart at bedtime!

So, I set my boundaries, and communicate them to my team members. I let them know that evening emails will be check in the morning, and to phone me for an emergency. My intention is not to be selfish: establishing boundaries around my personal time is motivated by my desire to do my work wholeheartedly. To do that, I have to be refreshed so that I can be present and engaged during my work hours. I don't want to just 'get through' the day, I want to initiate, create, and serve. Preserving my off hours and sleeping soundly positions me to be that kind of leader!



"I don't want to just 'get through' the day, I want to initiate, create, and serve."

I write these words during a time when the world is facing fear and uncertainty in the midst of a global pandemic. I suspect that many people have lost hope as they slog through life, with so many of the pleasures and routines they have come to count on taken from them. We keep hearing about a 'new normal' and witnessing chaos and despair on the news each evening. Life was challenging enough without these present circumstances, and I am not immune to the effects of these catastrophic events even though I have not experienced the devastating effects many others have. Losing a sense of hope is a constant danger, and it would be easy to give in to the attitude that there is nothing to look forward to anymore.

Here I will skip back to the first of Kant's balancing elements, that of hope. He wrote that hope is one of the three things that balances the odds of life, and I ask myself this question each day: how can I as a school leader instill a sense of hope in the children and adults who comprise the fabric of my school community? The author of the Biblical book of Proverbs wrote that "Good-tempered leaders invigorate lives; they're like spring rain and sunshine." (Proverbs 16:15). If I had to choose a single statement to describe my primary mission as a school leader, I would embrace this verse: I am going to invigorate lives!

Everyone needs a mission statement to 'hang their hat on', one that forms the foundation of each decision and action – large and small. 20th Century French philosopher Pierre Teilhard de Chardin made this observation: "Do not forget that the value and interest of life is not so much to do conspicuous things ... as to do ordinary things with the perception of their enormous value."

A typical day as a school leader is comprised of countless such 'ordinary' or mundane moments. Our days are filled responding to emails, signing cheques, unlocking doors, and engaging in spontaneous conversations. I believe there is no such thing as an insignificant moment, or a second that does not matter. It is the amalgamation of those moments that tell the story of the kind of leader I hope to be, and the true impact and influence that I hope to have. Are we effectively leading in those moments which could be viewed as mundane? I believe we are, when we:

- Greeting staff members in the morning
- Making eye contact and smiling at individuals in the hallway
- Picking up bits of trash on the ground
- Helping someone solve a problem now, rather than waiting until later
- Showing a willingness to be interrupted

- Visiting several classrooms a day, listening, observing, and participating
- Returning phone calls the same day
- Responding to email messages
- Thanking people
- Recognizing the efforts of others, privately and sometimes publicly
- Sharing encouraging words
- Standing outside after school to wish students farewell
- Sitting down in the staff room and joining conversations
- Washing other peoples' dishes
- Being present when others are speaking
- Playing with children
- Having as many moments of mutual laughter as possible

"I believe there is no such thing as an insignificant moment, or a second that does not matter."

And that brings us to Kant's third and final element, laughter. One definition of the word is 'the sound of mirth or joy'. It is a sound that almost always brings light to its surroundings, an irresistible force of positivity that draws people in. I am not much of a joke teller, but I tend to see the humorous side of things (which is nearly always lurking just beneath the surface when children are around). I currently have one staff member whose laugh is so infectious, I can't help but chuckle whenever I hear it, even if I don't know what prompted it. Laughter invariably makes us smile.

Some of us come naturally by a sense of humour: in my case, it was growing up with a mother who



embraced silliness. While she is no longer around, the sound of her laughter is forever engrained in my memory, and the thought of it even now makes me smile. I continue her tradition by bringing up the silly side of things. One of my favourite ways to respond to a situation at school is by saying, "That reminds me of a song..." It's amazing how simply letting loose and belting out the first line of a familiar tune will shift the energy of the space around you!

We can also encourage laughter in our schools by surprising or shocking people. Perhaps because of my role as a Principal, people expect me to be serious and business-like. And I am, as required. So, when someone asks for the school phone number and I reply with a straight face, "867-5309", the reaction can be priceless (at least, for those old enough to remember Tommy Tutone's 1981 hit single). Or, if I announce at a staff meeting that the school board has decided to install a driving

range on our roof to raise funds for an addition to our building, or use a foreign accent when doing announcements over the P.A. system in the morning, it can break the ice. I find that not taking myself too seriously, being ready with a smile and a laugh and allowing an opening for lightheartedness, can make all the difference.

I can hear Louis Armstrong's voice, those timeless lyrics a reminder that my smile and my laughter is needed now more than ever before:

"When you're smiling, when you're smiling

The whole world smiles with you

When you're laughing, when you're laughing

The sun comes shining through"

Louis Armstrong and Immanuel Kant both were on to something: keep life in balance and maintain perspective with a daily dose of hope and laughter, always preceded by a good night's sleep, of course!

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