

TEN LESSONS

IN LEADERSHIP AND LEARNING



An Educator's Journey

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INTRODUCTION



In 1971 I started teaching math in East Boston, Massachusetts. Personal computers did not exist. The Internet was not available. Special education was not a program in our schools. Girls were not encouraged to play sports or enter many careers that were considered solely the domain of men. In 2007, I became the superintendent of a school district south of Boston. During these thirty-six years, technology has transformed many, if not most, aspects of our lives. Our knowledge base about learning disabilities has grown exponentially. The walls separating the genders have become thinner. Our President is an African American—a fact that would have been inconceivable when I entered the teaching profession. Within this four-decade period, I have been a teacher, guidance counselor, principal, superintendent, and parent. Each of these roles has provided insights and a unique perspective on both learning and leadership during this amazing period of change.

This book offers ten significant lessons for educational leaders that I have distilled from my experience, from the research literature, and from my professional collaborations. While the main focus of the lessons is aimed at educators, there are ideas and insights that will be helpful to parents, coaches, and others who are involved in the growth and development of young people.

At first glance, the lessons are out of sync with many state and federal initiatives. You will not read about test scores, performance pay, or new technologies for transforming schools into 21st Century institutions. I believe that focusing on the lessons illuminated in this text will create learning environments in which teachers continually and thoughtfully improve their craft. As an extension, I believe that the outcome for students will be that they focus on their areas of weakness without embarrassment or shame as they challenge themselves to excel.

Ultimately, many of the current initiatives for improving education in the United States are aimed at having our schools develop smarter, better-educated students. In order to achieve this goal, however, we must develop a common

understanding of what we mean by smart and better educated. If we conceive of smart as achieving a certain level on a standard test, we will be selling the next generation short. Test scores, while helpful in calibrating growth and providing indications of how to improve skills, may mask weaknesses or misrepresent strengths. Most importantly, test scores are silent about the creativity, collaboration, perseverance, resilience, and flexibility in thinking that will be required of students in the workplace and as citizens and parents. This limitation, however, should not cause us to throw out quantitative data. We have other approaches, explored in these lessons, that enable us to avoid using test score analysis as our primary lens for describing growth, development, progress, and all of the other elements of a good education.

It is difficult to criticize our current national conversation about education without sounding like an old educator who wants to return to a time and a place that no longer exists. My contentions and beliefs are firmly rooted in the present with a look toward the future. My insights are based on what I see in the eyes and countenances of current classroom teachers, principals, and 21st Century students who are in the front line of modern day schooling.

The Ten Lessons suggest that leaders must:

1. Foster a climate that nurtures constant growth and improvement
2. Develop and promote new mindsets about learning
3. Cultivate core values
4. Understand that professional relationships are the engine of change
5. Courageously address nondiscussables
6. Exercise emotional intelligence
7. Transform difficult conversations into understanding
8. Use meetings (of all types) to increase academic focus
9. Remember the choices that constantly present themselves
10. Recognize that leadership is an improvisational art

OVERVIEW OF THE TEN LESSONS



Each of the following ten lessons contains an important insight that is central to effective leadership. These lessons are presented briefly in this overview.

LESSON ONE

Foster a climate that nurtures constant growth and improvement

Once a leader establishes a climate or culture that promotes learning, growth, and improvement, a school system becomes flexible enough to adapt to the future and changing needs of students. The system becomes malleable. As students with unfamiliar learning disabilities enter the schools, as technology shifts to impact teaching differently, as curricular or pedagogical emphases change, staff who have internalized and embraced a culture of continual growth are positioned to meet these changing needs.

Similarly, a school's culture impacts students. Cultures that emphasize improvement and growth over test scores encourage students to work on their weaknesses, overcome setbacks and obstacles, and develop the habits of mind that produce resiliency and a desire for mastery. Lesson One is pivotal in this framework of ten leadership responsibilities because it provides the environment on which all of the others depend.

In using the terms culture and climate interchangeably, I am referencing a set of learned beliefs, values, and behaviors that relate to how people interact within a particular society, organization, or group. In these lessons, culture and climate imply shared norms, rules, and ways that people work together.

LESSON TWO

Develop and promote new mindsets about learning

One of the ways to achieve a climate that is focused on learning, improvement, and development is by promoting a “growth mindset” that highlights the effort and strategies required for achievement. This approach negates native ability as

the prime factor that determines the ability to achieve. With a growth mindset, people are able to learn new approaches, new strategies, and new techniques without the shame and embarrassment that can sometimes obstruct growth. A growth mindset encourages learning because it diminishes the influence of the inevitable mistakes and setbacks that learners encounter.

LESSON THREE

Cultivate core values

Core values answer the question, “What does this school stand for?” Responding to this question in a manner that is both genuine and authentic provides energy for getting through difficult times. It establishes a unique voice that lets the school community communicate effectively with its constituencies. Core values are an important means of both enhancing the culture of the school community and guiding its direction. Core values help a school community remain true to its vision as it encounters the innumerable challenges and dilemmas that are part of school life.

LESSON FOUR

Understand that professional relationships are the engine of change

Professional relationships generate human energy that can move a system forward or obstruct its progress toward its academic and social goals. These relationships are especially critical when they facilitate open and honest communication among people with differences of opinion and divergent ways of thinking.

LESSON FIVE

Courageously address nondiscussables

It is difficult to develop an atmosphere in which controversial and “hard to talk about” topics are discussed openly and honestly. Developing this atmosphere is a key component in making effective change in schools.

LESSON SIX

Exercise emotional intelligence

While the main focus of the work of schools is the mind, the heart plays a vital role in learning. There are inevitable frustrations that occur when mastery and success are not easily achieved. Educators who understand emotional “data” and interpret it insightfully will be more successful as leaders.

LESSON SEVEN

Transform difficult conversations into understanding and better informed decisions

There are three skill sets that are essential for managing the complexities of relationships and maneuvering successfully through the conflicts that are an inherent aspect of school communities. These skill sets are described and explored in this lesson.

LESSON EIGHT

Use meetings (of all types) to increase academic focus

Professional development is increasingly designed as learning opportunities that are ongoing and embedded in the workplace. Meetings, if constructed thoughtfully and managed successfully, can provide an effective forum for professional development. The “regular” work of meetings should be focused on helping educators who are struggling to solve problems, improve lesson plans, strengthen learning experiences, and achieve more success with students.

LESSON NINE

Remember the choices that constantly present themselves

Leaders inevitably face choices that are less than visible to colleagues and stakeholders. Understanding with clarity what these options are can help a leader understand the importance of high expectations, vision, courage, and efficacy. These personal qualities are essential for effective leadership but are not the qualities explicitly taught to aspiring administrators.

LESSON TEN

Recognize that leadership is an improvisational art

Leadership is a domain that demands creative thinking, long and short time planning, and the ability to think on one's feet. There is no easy formula for effective leadership.

These Ten Lessons are interrelated and require applications that are nuanced to the leader's particular context. Each lesson provides a strategic means for strengthening the academic focus of a school community. The domains described in the lessons are ones that are sometimes overlooked or under represented in the reform literature. These lessons must be examined and worked on by school leaders and staff. If continuous attention is not paid to these domains, efforts aimed at improving a school's performance will be like pouring water into a colander. There will be little effort or success that is sustained.

LESSON ONE



“Keep in mind your overarching goal: to create an atmosphere where constant growth and improvement occurs. An essential pre-requisite for this to happen is that people honestly discuss where they are struggling, where they are uncertain, where they have concerns. This is the basic form of a learning community.”

John D'Auria, Opening Address to Administrators, Canton, MA, August, 2009

While contexts vary significantly from town to town and state-to-state in America, optimizing the teaching resources that exist in communities is a constant that will give students the best chance to obtain a quality education. While some communities suffer from insufficient resources, even more are affected by the inefficient utilization of the resources that exist. Leaders have the dual role of advocating for the resources needed and optimizing the resources they already have.

*Foster a
climate that
nurtures
constant
growth and
improvement*

LEADERSHIP RESOURCES

Optimization is central to Lesson One. In order to maximize resource utilization, a leader must develop a climate or culture that nurtures, encourages, demands, and sustains continual improvement. While technology and 21st Century tools can help support this culture, technology is not a central factor in climate control. The climate is communicated through the behaviors, reactions, thinking, and messages of the leader. It is a highly human domain. There are no short cuts. Climate cannot be created and nurtured long distance or off site. Climate control is the primary responsibility of leaders and supersedes all other objectives.

Haim Ginott, a teacher, child psychologist, and author of the book, *Teacher and Child: A Book for Parents and Teachers*, writes:

I've come to a frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element in the classroom. It is my personal approach that creates the climate. It's my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher I have tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration.