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Passion for Education and Leadership: Lessons from My Mentor

Julie K. Marsh

Dr. Christopher Corallo was Assistant Superintendent for Elementary Education and Organizational Development for Henrico County Public Schools in Richmond, Virginia. Dr. Corallo died on June 11, 2013, at the age of 56. The following is an interview conducted a few months before his death:

When Dr. Corallo was 13 years old, he started work at a large, family-owned restaurant. He stayed until he was 22, learning leadership as he worked through the ranks. His experience at the restaurant taught him to surround himself with people who believed in him and pushed him to be better. Corallo was a music major in school, but he wanted to teach instead of perform. He looked at his principal and thought, “I can do a better job than that,” which pushed him to observe other principals and start thinking about better ways to run a school.

Corallo met his mentor, Len Gearuea, at a professional development conference. Gearuea encouraged Corallo to become a middle school principal and assistant superintendent. Gearuea’s purpose was to groom Corallo to be the superintendent; however, Corallo soon decided he did not want to be superintendent:

Every superintendent I’ve ever seen is so far removed from the instructional piece that [...] it is a very political role. I get concerned about getting stuck in a position where there is more concern with going to the Rotary Club meeting...and building that frame for the other people to do their work. I like the work too much.

Corallo enjoyed pulling an idea apart, asking how it worked, and then putting it together again in a more creative way to move to the next level.

Corallo changed many times as a leader over the years, but the most significant change occurred after he made the decision not to become a superintendent. This decision helped Corallo clarify what was most important to him. He left the school division and worked for the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) for three years before moving to work for Appalachian Education

Labs (AEL). His roles put him on a national stage to make changes within education, work with other researchers across the country, and work on the state superintendent level. These experiences changed Corallo as a leader and led him to Henrico County where he became Director of Staff Development and, ultimately, Assistant Superintendent. Corallo’s non-traditional career trajectory afforded him a broader perspective on education.

Corallo’s experiences sculpted his own vision for Henrico County. His vision included creating a viable framework within Organizational Development and changing educational expectations and outcomes in elementary education. The framework he instituted focused on analyzing process, setting goals, and creating strong strategic planning. While in the early stages of this vision, Corallo was aware the county did not always have structure and had a lot of redundancy:

We have lots of standard operating systems that we have built. We have a very strong strategic plan...we have good communication to our stakeholder groups, which is a big part of being a quality organization. Where we are falling down in meeting that vision is we don’t always have the structures in place for easy flow of information...we have a lot of redundancy that is not necessary [and] that really is not the hallmark of a quality organization.

The other piece of Corallo’s vision was improving elementary education. Corallo wanted to create the expectation that all students should read by third grade, and focus on the parents’ need to understand that students need literature-rich environments from birth. Corallo’s expectation was that students who could read on level by the third grade would stay on level. Corallo also expressed the need to focus on 21st century learning skills starting in prekindergarten.

Corallo recognized there are many obstacles to overcome when in a leadership position, like

the difficulties in innovation and attempts to shift the culture of what a classroom should look like. Corallo noted that educators have too much on their plates, but educators still need to get people excited about new ways to improve education:

People who give only lip service to really making a change, people that you have been unable to get them excited about the vision because they have been teaching this way for a long time, classrooms have looked this way for a long time, parents expect things to look a certain way. To change people's mindsets or to change people's vision of what things could be, I think, is very hard work and you need to keep chipping away at it.

Corallo stated the best way to overcome these obstacles is to show the way, step-by-step, in how new ideas can make a difference, expose teachers and parents to technology, and continue to communicate the vision.

Corallo's path to leadership was not easy, and he experienced many personal sacrifices along the way. When asked what his major personal sacrifice was, he mentioned the dissolution of his marriage. Corallo explained that his wife did not expect the many changes that occurred when he went from teacher to administrator; she thought she married a teacher. Corallo also did not regret his decision to pursue an Ed.D. instead of going to law school:

That was not where my passion was. I would be chasing money and not my passion. So, to me, that is kind of a sacrifice. I've done well financially, I can't complain, but...I work every night: I'm either at a meeting or I am at home working on something for work. There's not a whole lot of downtime with this job. But I love it.

When asked for his advice for aspiring leaders, Corallo suggested following a passion. He said you must love what you do and surround yourself with others who do as well. Corallo also suggested finding a good mentor, someone to believe in your goals and push you to be the best. Finally, Corallo said do not shy away from opportunities or failures even if they take you off your original path.

Corallo noted that sometimes it is the surprises in life that lead to the most successful outcomes. "It is okay to have failures, but learn from them and don't be afraid to take the next step."

About the author

Julie K. Marsh is a PhD student in the Educational Policy, Planning, and Leadership program, focusing on Curriculum and Educational Technology.