

Summer 2021

Leading Through Educational Distress: An Autoethnography of the Journey of a School Administrator

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LEADING THROUGH EDUCATIONAL DISTRESS: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF
THE JOURNEY OF A SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR

By

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A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Education

Major: Educational Leadership

Under the Supervision of Dr. Tamara Williams

Omaha, NE

July, 2021

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THE JOURNEY OF A SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR

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University of Nebraska, 2021

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The purpose of this autoethnography is to provide analysis of personal leadership experiences during times of educational distress in order to extend understanding of the nuances of educational leadership for new and experienced leaders. An autoethnography is a qualitative research method in which the researcher is also the subject of the study. When looking at cultural groups or events, quantitative research methods do not translate to the meanings of humans in social interaction or speak to the significance of human thought and action (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis, 2015). In autoethnography, the researcher uses autobiographical stories to analyze and interpret their lived experiences with the purpose of extending sociological understanding. It reflects the interconnectivity of self, others and culture (Hamdan, 2012).

This autoethnography utilizes a leadership framework as an analysis of learning and growth of the leader during two specific events of educational distress. The six domains of the leadership frame are: relational, collaborative, systems, visionary, instructional, and servant. A person cannot predict when an educational distressing event will occur. To lead during times of educational distress, it is important to have a strong understanding of your leadership framework and personal beliefs.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my appreciation to the individuals that were integral to the completion of this dissertation and my academic journey. First, I would like to thank the faculty at the University of Nebraska-Omaha, especially the members of my committee: Dr. Tamara Williams, Dr. C. Elliott Ostler, Dr. Kay Keiser, and Dr. Sheryl L. McGlamery. Thank you for your feedback, questions, and support of writing this autoethnographic dissertation. I want to specifically thank my chair: Dr. Tamara Williams. I appreciate your constant encouragement, patience, and unwavering belief in me. You endlessly shared your wisdom, time, questions, and care. Your inspiration to journal and reflect helped me find my voice during a difficult time. I am forever grateful for our collaborative relationship and friendship.

Secondly, my sister, Angie Claussen, who has believed in me and encouraged me my entire life. She has always set the bar high and shown me how to live in the pursuit of one's dreams. I appreciate that through each distressing event I experience, I can always count on her to listen and provide support. I am blessed to have an older sister who is also my best friend.

I have been told that the most important thing a child needs to know is that they are loved. I would not be where I am today without my parents, Mike and Ranell Johnson, who, no matter the circumstances, have loved me unconditionally. Thank you for raising me to be strong and independent, believing that there are no limits to what a woman can do. Your endless support led me to pursue my dreams. I love you and thank you with all of my heart.

My hope in completing this doctoral program and dissertation is that I have modeled for my two sons, Brooks and Brennan, the value in education and that with hard work you can achieve your goals. I am thankful for their empathy when dinner was a little late, their laughter when I was exhausted, and on those late nights their encouragement with extra hugs and kisses. I love you both unconditionally and I am excited to experience with you the achievements of your own goals.

Lastly, my heart is filled with gratefulness for my husband Brett. You were by my side, providing strength and love, through both of the distressing events in this dissertation. I believe my journey as a leader would have looked different had I not had your support at home. Thank you for providing me encouragement, a listening ear, and when needed a voice of reason. Through my doctoral program and dissertation process, your compromise and patience with me have been endless. Thank you and I love you. We did it!

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Introduction

Every year of life is full of challenges along with opportunities to persist, reflect, and grow. The person experiencing the challenge can choose to define it in numerous ways. What I am going to share with you in this dissertation is my journey of leadership through two distinct events. Some may refer to these events as crises but I have made the distinct decision to describe them as distressing events. Merriam-Webster Dictionary (n.d.) defines a crisis as a, “negative change in the human or environmental affairs, especially when they occur abruptly, with little or no warning”. The word distress is defined by Merriam-Webster Dictionary (n.d.) as a “temporary cause of great physical or mental strain and stress”. The two events I will describe played an important role in my leadership journey and I am confident in saying I would not be the educational leader that I am had I have not had these two experiences. Therefore, they are not negative changes that were done to me and cannot be called crises. These two events were difficult to navigate, but they were temporary, resulting in them being distressing.

Each distressing event and each success help define our personal and professional identity and influences how we serve others. This work, while centered on two events, is less about the event than it is about the professional and personal growth through these times. It is my hope that my story and academic analysis will be of use for others, and myself, as we all continue to refine our leadership identity and grow by serving others.

Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a qualitative research method in which the researcher is also the subject of the study. In autoethnography, the researcher uses autobiographical stories

to analyze and interpret their lived experiences with the purpose of extending sociological understanding. Therefore, it reflects the interconnectivity of self, others and culture (Hamdan, 2012).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this autoethnography is to provide analysis of personal leadership experiences during times of educational distress in order to extend understanding of the nuances of educational leadership for new and experienced leaders. It gives a voice to the experiences, challenges and triumphs so that other leaders may gain better insight into their own experiences and leadership development.

Autoethnography Defined

An autoethnography is a qualitative method that offers specific knowledge about particular lives, experiences, cultures, and relationships rather than general information about large groups of people. When looking at cultural groups or events, quantitative research methods do not translate to the meanings of humans in social interaction or speak to the significance of human thought and action (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis, 2015). Autoethnography helps generate insights with which we can learn and grow from what other methods might miss. An autoethnography encourages the reader to think about experiences and practices in new, unique and challenging ways. An autoethnographer allows readers to feel validated in their own feelings and then better able to cope with or want to change their behavior or circumstances (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011).

Autoethnography reflects the interconnectivity of self and others (Hamdan, 2012). It allows the researcher to analyze and interpret one's cultural assumptions and its effect on the development of the researcher (Benoit, 2016). Chang (2008) offers additional insight about autoethnography:

Autoethnography as a conceptual framework for research rests on four foundational assumptions: (1) culture is a group oriented concept by which self is always connected with others; (2) the reading and writing of self-narratives provides a window through which self and others can be examined and understood; (3) telling one's story does not automatically result in the cultural understanding of self and others, which only grows out of in-depth cultural analysis and interpretation; and (4) autoethnography is an excellent instructional tool to help not only social scientists but also practitioners gain profound understanding of self and others and function more effectively with others from diverse cultural backgrounds. (p. 13)

Additionally, the formation of autoethnography is the result of the increased importance of social identities and identity politics (Adams et al., 2015). It allows the researcher to articulate their personal identities, experiences, relationships and cultures. Because an Autoethnographer's narratives are reflected on, analyzed, and interpreted they can provide educational experiences for others.

Autoethnographies can be diverse due to the variance in the research process (graphy), on culture (ethno), and on self (auto) (Ellis et al., 2011). Hamdan (2012) states that autoethnography is useful for explaining, illustrating, and connecting personal experiences to identity claims. Wall (2006) looks at the different purposes that

autoethnographies can cover such as seeking meaning in difficult situations, exploring issues within a social context, or examining extant literature related to a topic of personal significance. Although the purposes may vary, the autoethnographer is still drawing upon their personal experience for the purpose of extending sociological understanding. Those experiences help to cast light on those areas where understanding has not yet reached or where others would benefit from the knowledge gained for personal growth.

Cultural Identity and Leadership Framework

There are many components which influence our identity: our lived experiences, our core values and our observable and non-observable culture. Throughout this dissertation, you will observe pieces of my identity on display, sometimes intentionally and other times unaware to me as the author. These next sections are intended to provide you context on my perception of essential components of my personal and professional identity.

My Cultural Identity

I was born in a town of 20,000 people in Northeast Nebraska. I lived in the same house in a middle-class neighborhood until I left for college at age 17. My childhood is similar to my mother's childhood who grew up on a farm in Nebraska and lived there until she went to college. I stayed in Nebraska for college, and though I traveled as far as Spain and Morocco, I found myself in Nebraska for my first teaching position. I started out as a Special Education resource teacher working with kindergarten, first and second graders and was then moved to an alternative behavior skills program serving sixth

through twelfth graders. After moving to a larger city, I moved to teaching at a Class A high school as a resource teacher for ninth through twelfth graders and then an alternate curriculum Special Education teacher in the same building. My transition to formal leadership was three years later when I accepted the role of Special Education Department Head. I led the Special Education department for six years and was then an Assistant Principal in that same building for eight years. I moved from the high school level to the middle school with sixth through eighth graders where I have been as the Principal for the last two years. This is currently my twentieth year in that same school district and twenty-first year in education.

I identify as part of the majority within my culture as a school leader. I am a Caucasian female secondary school administrator in Nebraska. Within my current district, there are ten secondary schools and of those principals, four, including me, are female. There are six middle schools in my district and of the eighteen middle school administrators, nine, including me, are female. My background in Special Education provides some uniqueness because of the ten secondary school principals, only three, including me, were Special Education teachers.

Special Education.

I did not start out my educational journey knowing that I wanted to be a teacher, in fact, my bachelor's degree is in psychology. While I was working on my bachelor's degree, I worked in group residences and day programs with individuals with disabilities. This is where my passion for teaching and advocating for others began. I loved finding ways for the residents I worked with to learn to do new things while also seeking out

ways for them to have similar experiences to their same-age peers. I also found it important to educate others about individuals with disabilities and finding ways for them to be included in typical, everyday activities. After graduating with my bachelor's degree, I went straight into a program at the same college and earned my Masters in Special Education along with my teaching certificate.

Parent.

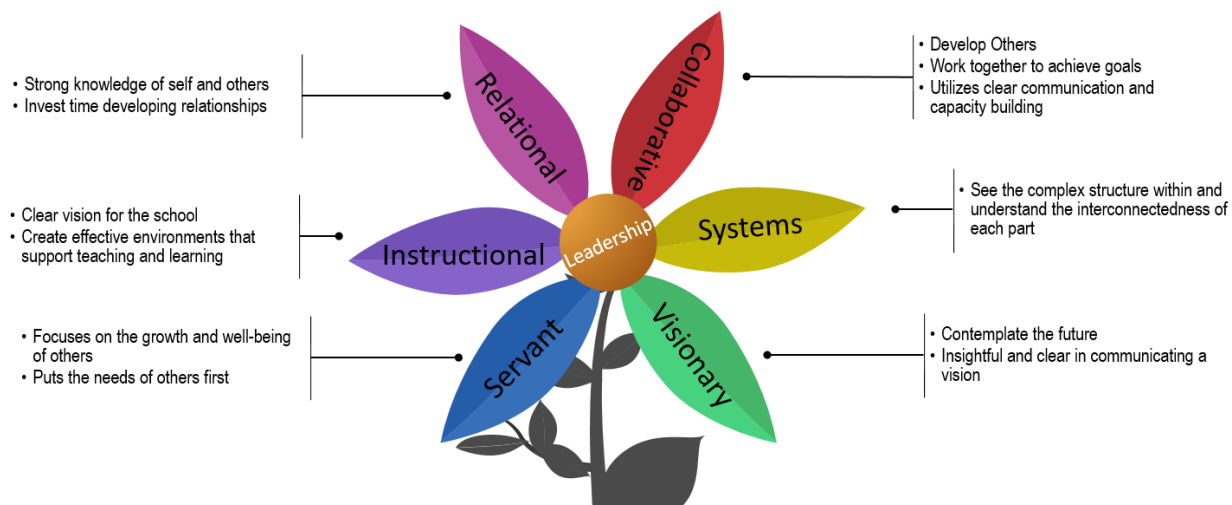
I remember leading an IEP meeting my second year at the high school for a student on my caseload that I had spent countless hours supporting. After providing numerous suggestions to the parents, the mother told me that I would not be able to understand because I was not a parent myself. I remember feeling insulted, offended, and incredibly frustrated by this comment. Seven years later, when I became a mother myself, I understood exactly what that mother was trying to tell me.

As a mother of two boys, my empathy and compassion for other parents has grown. I have also learned that though siblings may be raised in the same home, they can be incredibly different children. My oldest is a compliant child with a need to please others. My youngest is a strong-willed child that chooses to learn most lessons the hard way. I have learned a great deal raising children with very different, yet wonderful, personalities. My most influential lesson learned is the importance of supporting, not judging, other parents. As parents, we all do the best we can with the resources we have at the time. For myself, I have learned that as a parent I make mistakes along the way. I also give myself grace in those moments. As a school leader, I choose grace for others as

well. For me, becoming a parent has helped me grow and understand life differently than before.

Leadership Framework

My leadership philosophy has been developed through my own graduate school academic learning as well as the leadership development and support from the school district where I have been employed for the past twenty years. My current district defines leadership as, “Leadership is the art and science of inspiring others toward a common mission and a shared vision through collaborative relationships characterized by integrity, humility, resiliency, and commitment to empowering others to reach their highest potential”. My personal leadership framework includes five domains of leadership: relational, collaborative, systems, visionary, and instructional. These domains align with Reeves (2006) leadership dimensions. I have added servant leadership as the sixth domain to my personal leadership framework. A servant leader is focused on serving and developing others to then reach a goal together (Bragger, Alonso, D’Ambrosio, & Williams, 2021). There is not one of the six leadership domains within my framework that carries more importance than the others. All six are equally as important within the framework. What I present here is my first leadership framework I developed in my early years of leadership as a Special Education Department Head. You will see how this framework becomes more developed through life experiences and the impact the two distressing events have on my leadership framework.



Relational

A relational leader invests time in developing the relationships that they need to reach common goals. Relational leaders understand that leadership success stems from the trust and credibility formed through the development of those meaningful relationships (Kouzes & Posner, 2000). An effective relational leader listens, has respect for confidentiality, and utilizes deliberative inquiry to demonstrate genuine empathy (Reeves, 2006).

A relational leader is someone who has taken time to learn about a person both professionally and personally. They can tell you about the person's family as well as the person's opinion on an important topic within the school. When a person comes into a relational leader's office, the leader will put their cell phone down or move away from their computer so that they can be an active and engaged listener. A relational leader values the opportunities to interact with others.

Collaborative

Collaborative leaders utilize clear communication and capacity building to work to achieve their goals. A collaborative leader spends time investing in relationships and developing others. This team approach capitalizes on the expertise and strengths of individuals to carry out different functions and roles as they work towards their common goal (Sol & Sheldon, 2020). A collaborative leader creates opportunities for dialogue with internal and external partners to then plan, execute, and evaluate processes (Young, O'Doherty, Gooden, & Goodnow, 2011).

An educational collaborative leader utilizes leadership teams within the building to gather ideas and input. When creating or refining a structure, a collaborative leader may present several options, listen to the feedback, and when sharing the final plan explain to others the decision-making process that was involved. A collaborative leader finds the value in explaining the 'why' before asking others to invest in the plan.

Systems

A systems leader sees the complex structure within the school and understands the interconnectedness of each part. A systems-aware approach helps leaders to navigate within their community the networked patterns of relationships (Greig, Bailey, Abbott, & Brunzell, 2021). Garland, Layland, and Corbett (2018) states that leaders having a systems approach will align organizational structures and processes to then effectively and efficiently improve performance.

Within a school community, there are numerous systems in place. A systems leader is consistently analyzing and evaluating the systems to ensure they are positively

influencing the school while also productively working with other systems in the school. A Principal as a systems leader also understands that their school building is a part of the larger system within the district so they need to ensure their school is productively working within that school district system.

Visionary

Visionary leaders anticipate and plan for the future. They are insightful and have clear communication with their vision. However, as Davis (1998) said, a leader does not need to have a grandiose idea to be visionary, they should include others in the process of developing the vision and give it time and care. The leader utilizes their vision as a blueprint, a way to build trust, and helps individuals to see their importance within the organization (Reeves, 2006).

As a visionary leader, a building principal oversees the site planning process for their school. The site planning process differs between school districts, but overall it incorporates a short-term and long-term plan for the building. The principal involves all stakeholders in creating the site plan including families, staff and students when appropriate. The site plan then become the vision and plan for the future.

Instructional

An instructional leader creates environments that support and prioritize curriculum, instruction, and assessment (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015). To support instruction and student learning, leaders need to stimulate, encourage, and promote specific classroom practices (Garland, Layland, &

Corbett, 2018). In promoting those classroom practices, an instructional leader communicates a clear vision related to instruction. An instructional vision includes a focus on learning, instructional strategies, implementation, and student engagement.

An instructional leader is visible and present in the classroom. They provide feedback to teachers to support the teacher's own reflection and growth instructionally. An instructional leader seeks out opportunities to learn about the curriculum and instruction so they may better support their teachers.

Servant

A servant leader focuses on the growth and well-being of others while putting the needs of others first. Greenleaf (2014) describes a servant leader as someone who wants to serve first, and then makes the conscious choice to lead. Servant leaders have empathy, listen, and support healing (Crippen, 2005). They seek out opportunities to understand the needs of their people and immerse themselves in shared experiences. Those shared experiences are one with humility and a spirit of service (Nair, 1997).

A servant leader sees when something needs to be done and they jump in to get it completed. This may be assisting someone else or completing it on their own. This is not done with the expectation of recognition, but instead with the desire to help others. However, these servant actions may positively impact your relationships as they help to build respect and trust.

Throughout this dissertation, you will see these components of me personally and me as an educational leader. Our lived experiences influence our identity. Although

there are components of my identity that will not change, you will see the growth of my leadership philosophy through these two experiences.

Preview of Events

As I mentioned at the beginning, we all experience different events in our life that impact us individually and we choose to define those events in different ways. My two events were difficult to navigate, but they were temporary, resulting in me defining them as distressing. Our distressing events are not a competition to say that my distress is bigger or smaller than your distress. The humility of sharing distress can be personally healing and provide insight for self and others. Our perseverance through the distress is important in our journey of growth, especially as a leader and our ability to serve others.

My leadership journey has included two distinct distressing experiences that have shaped my growth as an educational leader. Leadership frameworks and philosophies can be taught, but none of which will adequately prepare a leader in their response during a distressing situation. In times of distress, it is important that leaders have courage, strong values, and noble character (Davis & Leon, 2014). My leadership journey is a cumulation of many events. I specifically chose these two events because they resulted in my personal leadership identity reflection and the refinement of my leadership traits as a result of these experiences. This is a preview of my two educational distressing events.

First Event

My leadership journey in education started as a Special Education Department Head at a high school. During my seventh year as a Department Head, and my tenth year

at the school, a student that was suspended came back into the school and fatally shot an Assistant Principal and wounded the Principal. The shooting happened on a Wednesday, the school was closed that Thursday, and when back in school on Friday I was called to the office to meet with the Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources. During that brief meeting, he asked if I would step in as the Interim Assistant Principal. They wanted to announce who the interim would be at the staff meeting after school, so he encouraged me to call my husband but asked that I let him know my decision within the hour. At the staff meeting that afternoon, I sat by friends that I had not yet told. As part of the flood of new information, announcements and support, my name was announced, “Michelle Klug will serve as the interim Assistant Principal”. I realized my practical learning about leadership had officially started.

I was in the interim role for three months before the position was posted to be permanently filled. I applied and interviewed for the position and was officially hired a month later. Four months is a significant amount of time to be under a microscope of judgement while in a temporary role. It was four months of self and perceived evaluation of my leadership abilities. At the most basic, it was unsettled and fragmented.

Second Event

The second distressing experience occurred nine years later. After serving eight years as a high school Assistant Principal, I applied for and earned the position of middle school Principal at a school in the same district. Never having taught or led at the middle level, I anticipated the work of any new learning would be found on the understanding of middle level philosophy and the typical leadership growth and challenges of moving from

an Assistant Principal role to a Principal. What I found instead, is that my greatest growth as a leader would come from experiencing something no other educational leaders had yet experienced, and that was a pandemic that shut down our schools.

The Wednesday before Spring Break in March, our Superintendent gathered all Principals to announce that school would be canceled that Friday due to the Covid-19 health situation. Teachers and administrators were to collect materials and plan for an unknown amount of time outside of the building. That Wednesday became the first of many days where new decisions were made hourly and we began to live every day in the unknown. It was also the day I knew school and education as we had known it would never be the same.

These two events of educational distress made a significant impact on me as an educational leader. Whether you are an aspiring, new, or veteran administrator, as the reader, take a moment to pause and identify your own moments, your distressing events, that have led to your growth as a leader. As I stated above, our distressing events are not a competition and their significance can only be judged by you and your personal reflection of your identity as a leader.

Analysis of First Event

The first event happened the day students returned from Winter Break. I was in the Special Education office sitting at my desk working. The teachers had just finished eating their lunches and they were starting to return to their classrooms. Two people were still in the office with me as their lunch group returned later than the others. Those two people happened to be my closest friends in the department. They were packing up to head back

to class when an announcement came over the intercom that we were going into a Code Red and that it was not a drill. The voice was our Activities Director and you could tell by the quiver in his voice that it definitely was not a drill. I walked out into the hallway so I could lock the door to the office, which is a part of the Code Red process. The teacher across the hall was locking her door as a student stood outside of her room. I asked her if that was her student and she said yes, so I told her she could have him go into her room. I then locked the door and went back into the office. We sat there, waiting and wondering. We started to hear cell phones go off in desk drawers, but we did not want to answer them because we did not have any answers. The time continued to go by, and we continued to refresh our email to see if we had received any communication. And then my office phone rang. I decided I better answer it in case it was the office and they needed help. It was not, it was a parent of a student on my caseload that I had worked closely with and she said she just drove by the school and there are police cars, ambulances, and SWAT vehicles surrounding the building. She wanted to know what was going on and I had to tell her that I did not know. I started searching on my computer the local news site and then I found it. There was a shooting at the high school and two administrators had been shot. My heart plummeted. And my head began to swirl. Which administrators was it? Were they going to be okay? Was the shooter still in the building? Then the news updated that the shooter was a current student that had been suspended that day. The three of us all thought of the same student, one of our Special Education students had been suspended that morning. Could it be him? Was he really capable of that? As our questions continued to spin, there was a knock on the door of the Special Education office. I heard our Activities Director's voice say his name. I froze. He knocked again and then asked if we could help. I looked

at the other three in the office and I knew I had to step up and take the lead, they expected me to. I peeked around the corner and could see him standing there. I went to the door and opened it for him. Why did I do this? He would have had a key and could have opened that door himself. In hindsight, that could have been a critical failure as I had no idea if he had a gun to his head. He said that they needed help evacuating the building and asked if we could help. I grabbed the other two that were in the office with me and without thinking about what we would need, we walked out of the office with him. I instantly started asking him questions. He shared who the two administrators were that were shot. He knew one was in worse condition but he did not know which one. I asked him if the shooter was the student that we thought it was and he said no, but he did not share with me who the shooter was. He also did not share if there was only one shooter or if the shooter had been detained. He then took us to work with the Police Sergeant to discuss a response plan to evacuate our most medically or cognitively fragile students. These students were in two separate locations in the building that day. Our evacuation route took longer because we walked them around the outside of the building so that no one would see them. I also wanted to shield them from seeing the SWAT officers as I was concerned at how they would react. When we got over to the evacuation site there was not a specific place to go. We quickly claimed an area for that teacher and her class. An officer then took me and the other two teachers that were helping back into the building to get the other classroom out of the library. We took them out the back entrance of the school which was closer to the evacuation site. There was media set-up and parents had already started to line up. I was not prepared for how emotional it would be for myself to walk out of the building that day with students but also for the parents that were in that parking lot and could see students

come out safely. We got the two Special Education classes evacuated and then we stood there and waited. No one had answers for me. What else could we help with? What more should we be doing with the students? People were asking me questions and I had no idea what to tell them. As more students started to come out of the building there were questions about if they could leave with their parents or if they were supposed to wait. I had been told two separate answers and was unsure which person to listen to. I was thankful that through the whole thing, I had my two friends with me.

At the end of the day, we went to the board office for a debrief meeting. We learned there would not be school the next day. That next day I spent most of the time talking on the phone with my two close friends. One of the teachers organized an opportunity for staff to get together at a restaurant that was close to the school. About 30 staff met there before we then all went to the school for a staff meeting. At the meeting, we learned we would be back in school the next day. On Friday morning as I walked into the school there were district leaders that were spaced out throughout the hallways greeting people. It felt nice to see support but also weird to have these strangers in our building. We went about our day, trying to make things as normal as possible. And it seemed normal until I got a call to go to the main office to meet with the Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources. During that brief meeting, he asked if I would step in as the Interim Assistant Principal. They wanted to announce who the interim would be at the staff meeting after school, so he encouraged me to call my husband but asked that I let him know my decision within the hour. I do not recall many of the details of my conversation with my husband, but I remember he was supportive and encouraged me to follow my heart. If I felt like stepping

in was the best way to support the school, then I should do it. I did not have time to talk to anyone else about this decision.

At the end of the day we went into the auditorium for a staff meeting. I sat with my two close friends as well as others in the Special Education Department. One of the Assistant Principals spoke and then at the end of the meeting, it was announced that I would be filling in as the interim Assistant Principal starting on Monday. My two friends looked at me in disbelief. I knew instantly that by not communicating with them prior to hearing this in a staff meeting, I had lost their trust. I would now need to repair my relationship with my two closest friends at school.

That Monday morning when I arrived at the school, I had no idea where to park. So, I parked on the side of the building where I always parked, which was on the opposite side of the building as the main office. It was determined that I would not office in the office where the Assistant Principal had been shot, so instead I was put in a much smaller office that had previously been for the School Resource Officer. It was the farthest office away from the main office door and it was difficult to not feel excluded. When it came time to eat lunch, I had no idea where to eat, so I ate lunch by myself in my office. I had so many questions, but who do I ask questions to? Everyone was still dealing with their emotions from the events of that day and they did not have time for questions from me. This is how I felt almost every day. I felt alone. At one point, I was told that filling in as the interim did not automatically mean that I would get the job. I questioned why I agreed to step in and I questioned if I wanted to be an administrator. But I could not tell anyone that, not even my two friends at school, because they were still upset with me for stepping in.

In this new role, I evaluated one of the main departments. One of the first obstacles I faced was that the Department Head for that department was upset because she felt like she should have been asked to be the interim. I spoke with the district leader that was filling in for our Principal. She provided me the advice to not focus on that one staff member that was upset, but to instead focus on the relationships with the other members of that department that were needing me to be a leader. She suggested I have a breakfast with each of the departments that I was now going to evaluate so that I could get to know them. I knew many of them, but in such a different capacity. It was a great way to start to build on the relationship foundation that I already had with them.

I stepped into the evaluator role in a unique situation so what I had learned about teacher evaluation during my graduate classes was quickly thrown out. The district level leader that was filling in for our Principal tried to support me with evaluation, but it had been several years since she had done a classroom teacher observation. Together, we fumbled through a classroom observation but it was evident after being in that first classroom that my focus could not be solely on planning, instruction, and assessment. My focus needed to be on the learning environment, specifically the emotional environment. The teacher was not teaching the curriculum with the same enthusiasm that I knew he had, because he was not emotionally ready to provide that instruction. The students were not learning the curriculum, because emotionally, they were not ready. In future observations and walk-throughs, I changed my focus to provide praise and encouragement for even the smallest things that I saw when I was in a classroom. Everyone needed to hear the positives right now as they emotionally healed.

There were a lot of decisions that had to be made pretty quickly and there was concerns that I would be missing communication that would normally go to the deceased administrator, specifically information about Advanced Placement testing. So, the technology department came up with a quick solution, which was to forward her email inbox to me. What this meant was that every morning when I opened my email, I would have anywhere from 1-20 emails from the deceased administrator. And every morning, it took my breath away. That part never got easier.

During that semester, I often stayed late at night at school as I tried to learn about the job and get everything done that I needed to. The principal's secretary worked late as she oversaw the community college classes that took place at the school at night. One night, the son of the deceased administrator was there packing up his mom's office. The principal's secretary and I went in to help him and ended up spending hours in there talking about her and laughing as we remembered and shared different stories. It felt good. The principal's secretary and I would often remember that night as we talked with each other and how we had to jam those last few items into his car that night.

In my new role, I took over all of the job duties the deceased administrator had. One of those duties was assisting with the building Department Head meetings. It was time for our first Department Head meeting. I had sat in those meetings for several years, but this time, instead of sitting around the circle, I would be at the front table. Prior to going into the meeting, I pondered what I should do in the meeting in this new role. The deceased administrator always brought a candy basket that we passed around throughout the meeting. Do I bring a basket of candy? I went back and forth numerous times. The secretary that I worked with came into my office to see if I needed anything before the

meeting started. I asked her what she thought, do I take a basket of candy or not? She asked me if I would normally take a basket of candy into a meeting. I said no. She asked me then why would I take one now? What a great moment of realization on being my own leader. I was never going to be her, so why would I try to do things that she had done. The candy basket was a part of her cultural ritual. During the meeting, we talked about this being the first time we were together without her and a long-time Department Head shared that he was so glad not to see the basket of candy as it would seem weird to have it here without her. I was so thankful I had not brought it! This was my opportunity to update a symbol within the culture of our school and Department Head meetings. We could create together a new culture within the meetings that unites us together (Bolman & Deal, 2013).

It was a difficult transition for the Principal when he returned back to school after being in the hospital and recovery from his bullet wounds. It was evident right away that it was difficult for him to have me there. One way that I knew it was difficult for him is that he would not step foot in my office, even though it was not the office that the deceased administrator had been in. And at one point he told me that having me in the admin meetings was a reminder that she was not there. It was tough to hear that every time someone sees me in a meeting they are thinking about someone else or remembering what happened. No one could relate with me or give me guidance on how to best handle this. I felt alone.

The district was working with a psychologist who was an expert on school crisis. He came and met with each of the office staff individually during the first few months after the shooting. I was given the opportunity to talk with him as well. I felt guilty meeting

with him and yet, I needed someone to hear my pain. I needed to know that it was okay to have the feelings that I had.

Driving to school one morning the song *Sigh No More* by Mumford and Sons came on and it spoke to me with the words I needed to hear in that moment. The song lyrics start out “Serve God, Love me and Mend”. The lyrics are about love, forgiveness and wanting to be healed from pain. And it incorporates into the line “Man is a giddy thing” which looks at mankind being happy and joyful and created to connect. Through the lyrics it looks at love as providing healing and hope. This song still speaks to me and every time I hear it, I am drawn back to that car ride to school when I needed to be reminded that it was time to mend my hurting heart.

I had been in the interim position for three months before the Assistant Principal job was posted. Prior to the interviews, I spoke with the district leader that had been in our building. She had supported me throughout this process and I needed her input. She knew this was a difficult position for me to be in. I had been interviewing for a job for the past few months, I had been scrutinized by many, and I still did not know if the Principal could emotionally support hiring me. I was thankful for the encouragement that she gave me, her guidance through the entire process and her assistance in preparing me for the interview.

Once I was officially hired as the Assistant Principal, I was able to dive further into the role and start to make it mine. I no longer felt like I was trying to carry out the previous Assistant Principals plan, instead I was now carrying out mine. This was the freedom I needed to start my leadership journey as a building administrator.

Analysis of Second Event

After being an Assistant Principal for eight years, I was hired in mid-January to be the Principal that next Fall at a middle school within my current school district. Being hired early allowed me to start my transition into this new role early. I had the opportunity to come over and meet the staff, sit in on numerous meetings, and start planning how I wanted the beginning of the year to look. During Fall Workshop, I presented information about me to the staff which included detailing what they can expect from me and what I expect from them. During the first semester I focused on not making any changes, but instead getting to understand the building and start to build relationships with the staff. I was making notes of things I wanted to look at and changes I wanted to make, but I kept those in notes format only.

Not only was I building relationships with the staff in my building, but I was also building relationships with the other five middle school principals. I found that my background in high school was beneficial, except that no one wanted to hear about the high school. In meetings, I found I often did not share information that I knew because I was worried it would impact their desire to have me as a part of their middle school principal team. This was a challenge that I had expected as I moved into this new role.

During the first semester in my new role as a Principal, I was experiencing typical challenges that pushed me to grow as a leader. And then the second distressful event happened two days before our district was to go on Spring Break. That Wednesday, we learned that school would be canceled on Friday and the determination of where and how to return after Spring Break was in flux. I was instantly thrust into a position where I was trying to figure out who my people were. Similar to the first distressing event, I found

myself once again wondering, who do I ask questions to? And who will give me honest feedback and not try to compete with me or do something more or better than me? I felt alone. I could call and ask the high school principal I had worked with questions, but high school was just different enough that it was tough to rely on her for input or to know what to do.

On March 19, seven days after we sent students home a day early for Spring Break, one of my teachers contacted me to let me know that he had been in another state the week prior. He had only come to school on that Wednesday and he did not come to school Thursday because he did not feel well and the doctor treated him for influenza and gave him Tamiflu. He felt worse by Sunday and got tested for Covid-19 on Tuesday and found out that he was positive. I tried to ask him as many questions as I could think of but I was also panicking inside trying to figure out what I should do now. Our school district has built strong systems so that as Principals we are consistent in our response to different situations. However, in this situation, our district was still determining what our response would be so I did not have guidance on what I needed to do. In this I texted my district supervisor and she called me with the Associate Superintendent of Human Resources and our district Director of Communication in the room with her. After I got off of the phone, I then called my two Assistant Principals know but was told to hold off on telling my staff until the district heard from the County Health Department. The next morning, I got a text from one of my counselors letting me know that my staff member had told another teacher that he was positive. I asked her to keep it quiet as I was waiting for guidance from the County Health Department. As a leader I value communication, so it was difficult for me not to communicate something right away. Finally, at 1:30 p.m. I

got communication out to our staff and community. I personally called nine staff members to tell them they had to self-quarantine though I did not completely understand what that all meant. That night it was on the news. My middle school had the first known educator in the state to test positive for Covid-19.

On March 23 I had my first staff meeting via Zoom. I did not realize until doing a Zoom meeting how much I rely on being able to see my staff and read their nonverbals. I also showed my screen so I could only see three people during the entire meeting. This was tough as I wanted to see all of their faces. One teacher later posted how fun it was to see babies and dogs on the Zoom meeting. I wish I could go back now and see all of them!

At our staff meeting, I started out by sharing a quote about Grace and Grit. “Grit determines that life challenges will neither defeat nor define us. Grace gives kindness to ourselves and others even when it’s hard” (Anonymous, 2019). As a leader, I love to find quotes that tie into our moments. I believe this also helps to show our heart as a leader. After that meeting, we continued to reference giving ourselves and others grace but I kept thinking, what are we trying to do right now? It is not just grace that we need, and then I came up with it, we are our trying to fill the gap. We have this gap, this space between what school has been and what it looks like right now. We are trying to fill the gap of providing instruction while also not seeing our students in-person or even seeing them every day online. We are trying to fill the space between us. To fill that gap between remote learning at home and school was the difficult task we had been handed. And from that struggle, I created the idea of filling the gap with the acronym GAP – Grace, Affirmation and Patience. I found a picture of space between two boulders as the visual.

And then I discussed with the staff the importance of providing grace while still making sure that we are acknowledging and providing affirmation for those things that students are doing. Maybe their work isn't turned in, but they were present on the Zoom class today so you can provide affirmation. Affirmation also helps to support emotional health. And then patience as we figure out how to best fill that gap and knowing that we do not have all of the answers so we need to do our best with what we have. And as we discuss grace, we have to acknowledge that staff right now may not be giving us their best, but acting with grace gives you the capacity to appreciate their struggle and support them through it (Love, 2020).

I had a follow up meeting with my counselors after the staff meeting on March 23. I wanted them to share with me ideas of what they could be doing during remote learning. It was evident that they have not been asked to provide input in the past as they could not provide me any guidance on their roles. This was not a culture that I was used to. As a leader, I relied on input so it was difficult to operate in a culture that I had not created and we had not had enough time together as a team to find our rhythm with collaboration.

Our first day of remote learning was on March 24 and unfortunately one of technology infrastructures in the district failed so numerous families had issues getting onto their laptops. This was not the start I wanted! The phones were ringing like crazy with parents calling in so I spent a majority of the morning answering calls. It was interesting to see that neither of my Assistant Principals wanted to help nor thought it was their job to help with answering calls. Our social worker ended up coming in to assist in the main office with answering phones. I was so thankful for her.

After the issues with the technology infrastructure on the first day, it was determined that the middle schools had to change their plan. I was thankful that my building did not have to make changes but I felt bad for the three other principals that had to change theirs. This was one of the few times it was beneficial to be a new Principal. Our admin team had received several questions about what synchronous learning meant so we decided to make a video of the three of us acting like we were doing synchronous swimming. We wore shower caps and did a lot of laughing!

As we worked remotely, I struggled to find something that my Dean of students either could do or would be willing to follow through on doing. His lack of follow through on tasks that I had assigned were frustrating. Prior to the pandemic the definition of his role was not clear and this became even more evident during this time. He is on a teacher contract, and this difference in his position became even more evident as we worked from home and I found he was quickly becoming less a part of our admin team.

On March 27 I journaled that it was difficult to find ways to connect with the staff. I had met with the counselors to discuss ideas but I was worried that it would be adding one more thing to the teacher's plates. Our Monday morning staff meetings were the best way for me to reach out to staff but I quickly found that planning for them each week was difficult. I was spending my Sunday evenings preparing for the meeting and trying to find ways to engage with my staff.

March 31 was my first official day of working from home and it was tough. Trying to balance my own children's remote learning as well as being on Zoom meetings proved to be a difficult task. I found myself wondering how do I run a school from my home while being a teacher to my children. I was instantly empathetic for any of my

staff that was trying to do the same thing. I did take time that afternoon to sit out in my driveway and while my boys played basketball, I wrote thank you cards to the secretaries and my two Assistant Principals. I wanted to share my appreciation for the work they had done in the building the previous week.

That week I was able to get onto several different teachers Zoom class meetings which was great. I had emailed them ahead of time to remind them I would be joining their class. I was so impressed with what they were doing with the students. The lessons they were teaching were what the students would have received in the classroom and it was encouraging to see all of the learning that was continuing to happen. Plus, it was really fun to see the students! One of the classrooms I joined asked the teacher through chat why the Principal was on their meeting. It made me laugh! I made a point to email the teachers as well as put feedback for them on the walk-through form I typically use. I did this because I still do not know how comfortable they all are with me and I wanted this to be a positive experience.

During our staff meeting on March 30, only three weeks into being remote, I reminded our staff during our weekly meeting that they needed to take care of themselves. I reminded them that this is not a race or competition. They do not have to do everything in fact, they need to keep it simple for students and parents. Everyone is learning a new balance – it is difficult when you are working from home because you do not have the boundaries of being able to leave something at school. I reminded them the importance of grace for ourselves, our colleagues, our students and our families. I do not know who needed this message more, me or the staff.

On the evening of April 1, one of my Assistant Principals sent a text message that showed that the governor had canceled schools for the rest of the year. I texted him back and thought it was an April fool's joke. Within the hour of getting that text, our superintendent sent a message to administrators and then to all staff. It was great to finally have a direction and know where we were going for the rest of the year; however, it was really hard to find out that we would not get to go back before summer. The next morning our superintendent sent a message to families letting them know that school had been canceled for the remainder of the year and that we will continue to do remote learning. Seeing that email was sad as I could imagine the many mixed emotions that were happening in many of our students' homes.

On April 3, I journaled about how difficult it was to not feel like what the schools are doing is a competition when you see things posted on Twitter. Our admin team and counselors were trying to do outreach for our staff and students but at the same time trying to be original and not compete. Last week another middle school delivered goodie bags to their teachers. We had wanted to do a drive-by lunch for our staff where we grilled out and they could drive up and we would hand them their lunch. Unfortunately, we were told we could not do it. I struggled with how do you tell your staff that you have these fun ideas but you are not allowed to do them? The answer is, you cannot tell them, so you have to show them this in different ways. This was difficult.

One of the Assistant Principals and I worked up at school on April 13. It was amazing how much faster I could get things done when I could talk to him between our offices. It was also nice to be able to have that relationship where you are talking to a person rather than trying to communicate through Zoom.

Communication was important during this time as things were constantly changing. We decided the best way to have consistent communication within our building was to do a staff meeting every Monday morning via Zoom. During the year, our staff meetings always started out with celebrations so we continued to do this. I also wanted to add a little fun to the meetings while also sharing some new learnings and tips that teachers were learning. So, we had three categories that staff emailed me if they would like to share “Remote Realizations”, “Funny Failures”, and “Shining Successes”. These were fun and I was surprised by a few of the teachers that were willing to share. As the weeks continued with our Zoom meetings, we found it continued to be difficult to connect with the staff and keep them engaged in the meeting. Plus, we were finding that staff were not keeping their cameras on. Our social worker shared an idea with me that she then used at the start of our behavior core meeting that week. She then helped me adapt the activity so we could do it with the whole staff. We had them find their car keys and then the first 10 people that could find them, show them on screen and comment in the chat would get a jeans sticker. Then we had them find their school id badge. It was a lot of fun though it was difficult to see how many actually participated.

It was important for our teachers to keep their passion and love for students at the top of their priority list. If staff can do this, White and Carter (2021) shared, then they can successfully transform through disruptions. We worked to find fun ways to connect with our students through Zoom. Our counselors planned a Remote Learning Spirit Week which included Pajama Day, Hat Day, Sports Team Day, Crazy Hair Day, and Cyclone Spirit Day. Teachers took pictures of their classes on Zoom and we shared the pictures on Twitter as well as in our newsletter.

We continued to find ways to stay connected with our students and staff during this time. We had each staff member write on a piece of paper what it means to be a Cyclone and they submitted a picture of them holding it. We then took those pictures and put them into a collage that we sent to families through email as well as posted it on Twitter. Our message was that though we may be learning remotely, we are still Cyclones together.

We found there were some activities that we could continue to do remotely much easier than others. Since we did not have students in the building, we could not hold our 5th grade step up day and parent meeting. We struggled with the decision on if we should have a Zoom meeting with the parents or if we should send out a video. There were pros and cons to both and as an admin team we ultimately decided to do our parent presentation via video and emailed that out to parents along with an informational video that had previously been done about the school. We were worried that we would not be able to answer parent questions since we were not doing a live Zoom meeting so instead, we put together a Google Form that parents could submit questions on. The idea was that our admin team would go through the questions and email back the answers. What ended up happening was that my two Assistant Principals were not checking the submitted questions and I was worried about getting a response to parents in a timely manner so I ended up responding to all of the parent questions. This was another reminder that my two Assistant Principals were used to being told what to do not being asked to help do something. They needed to be told exactly what the expectations are, otherwise they do not do it.

Our 8th graders were not going to be able to have their Honors ceremony or to have their final 8th grade social. We were able to put the Honors ceremony into a video that we could share out but we could not find a way to have a social while following the health guidelines and restrictions. Instead, we put together an 8th grade t-shirt that we gave out to all of our 8th graders when they came for distribution day.

An important component of school culture are the traditions that have been formed and shared over time (Deal & Peterson, 1990). As we worked to continue traditions, another question we had to ask ourselves was how do you celebrate retirees remotely? We had teachers fill out a Google Slide about our retirees. They could share a memory or a good luck message. The secretaries then printed those off and put them into a book for the retirees. This ended up being so successful that we have continued this idea. We also celebrated our retirees in our final celebration meeting of the year. Each retiree asked someone to speak for them and they invited that individual to attend the Zoom. As a new Principal, honoring the retirees was difficult, not because I did not think they were great educators, but because I had only worked with them for seven months so I hardly had a chance to get to know them. Because of this, I asked one of the Assistant Principals to talk about each of the retirees which was difficult as I wanted to as the Principal.

Through this time, our building still had teaching positions to hire for so we had to conduct interviews through Zoom. It was difficult to feel in control of the interview when you are not sitting by the people you are interviewing with it. It was also hard to give the interviewee those nonverbals to encourage the conversation. I knew that interviewing and hiring teachers would be a new challenge for me as a Principal so

having clear expectations with individuals on my interview teams was important to me. Prior to going remote, I had only done a couple of interviews so I had not developed interview expectations yet with my Department Heads. Not having an interview system in place made conducting remote interviews difficult.

As I mentioned earlier, it was important to me that we continue doing a few things during this time that we had started at the beginning of the year. These were rituals and celebrations that impacted our school culture and were important as we continued the need to have a sense of community (Deal & Peterson, 2016). One of those was our student and staff recognition. Our student recognition nominee process was already electronic so we did not have to make changes to that. To then recognize the winners, I reached out to their parents to let them know that their student had won and then invited them to attend a Zoom on Monday mornings. I loved Mondays! I loved seeing the Outstanding Cyclone winners on Zoom and then delivering their certificates and prizes to their house. This was one of the best things that I did during remote learning, not just because I was able to recognize students for doing a great job, but also because I was able to see where many of our students lived. As I drove through the neighborhoods on Mondays, I was reminded how there are parts of the school district that are older and some of those homes have been poorly taken care of. I would find myself wondering as I saw those run-down houses, which of them belonged to our students. My own children often rode along with me when I delivered the awards out of necessity as I could not leave them home alone. Having them along was a great learning experience for all of us as they realized that there were homes that kids lived in that did not have grass and only had dirt for a yard. And they learned that kids live in apartments where they can't outside

as easily when they need to take a break from a school. This was a great reminder for me that the experiences that my students were having during remote learning were not the same as my own children. As we drove around, I also learned a lot about the neighborhoods that our students live in. I found parks that I did not know existed and beautiful areas with big old trees. I have lived here for 19 years and I was surprised at how many areas I did not know about. Having this level of understanding about where our students and families live is something that I think would be good to share with the staff.

We had the opportunity to maintain the idea behind a newer tradition of how we recognized staff. Staff recognition switched to electronic and it was nice to receive the emails of being nominated. When we were in-person, I was rarely recognized. I am guessing this is because the nominations were posted in the mail room and teachers did not want others to see they had nominated the Principal. This made the nominations during remote learning seem very genuine. For the winners, I mailed home a note with their gift card so that I could personally recognize them.

Every month, the admin team delivered birthday brownies to the teacher's classrooms. During remote learning, I wanted to continue this cultural ritual that was a component of our school culture. To do that, I delivered birthday brownies to the staffs' houses. This was a fun way to stay connected and continue to build relationships with the staff while maintaining a tradition.

As we continued remotely, our admin team meetings became more and more unproductive. I wanted to have in-depth conversations and start to talk about the next school year but with everyone having their own children at home with them, I could not

get everybody to be on the Zoom meeting at the same time. We would waste time trying to catch the person up to the conversations we had already had. This was frustrating because in the building we may have small interruptions but nothing that would take up to an hour. I needed admin team meetings to be a priority.

I found myself frustrated and struggling to plan for next year. There were conversations I needed to have with my leadership teams. I wanted to meet with them and get the input I was looking for, but I could not because of the situation we were in. I spoke to one of the other middle school principals and it helped to hear that he was feeling the same way. He reminded me that everything that we are doing right now is reactive and so it is hard to do anything that would be proactive or looking forward.

The last day of school was May 14 but it did not seem like the last day. We never get out of school that early so the timing of it seemed odd. And because I did not teach classes on Zoom with students, I did not get the feeling of saying goodbye like you typically get as closure for the end of the year. I was excited for distribution day as that would be like my last day of school and provide me closure for the school year. Our distribution day was fun. It was great to see everyone and we had so many staff show up. We played music and tried to make it seem welcoming, even though many of us were still a little unsure of how to best keep us all safe.

At the start of remote learning, we were concerned about the needs of our students being met. Our district food service put together a plan so that students could pick up meals at school every day. It was important at the end of the year for us to celebrate the time and dedication this took from our food service staff. I made a point to thank them any time that I was up at the building and then at the end of the year I shared out with our

entire staff that our school alone served 31,119 meals. What an incredible number and a great showing of how we ensured our students had access to food during the pandemic.

At the start of the school year, visibility was important to me. The previous Principal was often not in the building so she was not visible for students, families or staff. Similar to when I was the interim Assistant Principal at the high school, I found myself staying late to answer emails because I spent all of my free time being in the hallway talking to students or staff. When we went remote, I struggled to find ways to be visible. Popping into Zoom classes was awkward because I often could not actively engage in the lessons and the students did not understand why I was there. How does visibility look in a remote setting? I also realized how much I relied on that visibility to get the pulse of how things were going in the building. When I was in the hallways, that was often when staff would ask me a quick question or share a concern with me. Without that informal interaction, I was not only struggling with visibility but also with making those connections. As Bricker (2021) shared, during critical times, leaders need to convey a presence of confidence and a reassuring message. How do you provide this reassurance when you are struggling to have a presence?

At the start of the year, my focus on relational leadership was having the staff learn about me and me learn about them. I spent time on each individual staff member. It was a whole group focus. During remote learning, I found that a whole group focus was not realistic nor was it genuine. When I was trying to reach out to everyone, it seemed forced and unnatural. As a result, my focus began to be more specific and I was investing more time into those staff members that I worked directly with and that were a part of my leadership team. I began to utilize those core groups more and spent more

time specifically developing those relationships. At the end of the year, my progress with those relationships was beyond what I believe they would have been if we would have been in-person.

As I mentioned in the first event, my instructional leadership changed from specifically the instructional environment to the entire environment, including the emotional environment. Similar to the first event too was the need to focus on the emotional well-being of both students and staff. Different than the first event, I was now an experienced evaluator engaging my teachers in the evaluation process by using reflective questioning. Those skills that I now prided myself with having, were tossed out the window. I now had to refer back to the skills of providing praise and encouragement in create an emotionally safe environment where students and staff could heal and grow. It is important to know when to throw your own personal skills on the back burner so you can address the needs on the front burner.

Context of Events

Leadership is influenced not only by learning educational content, but also by the opportunities and the environment that leaders experience. Every leader is unique based on their lived experiences, which Williams (2020) describes as our standpoint, our worldview based on those lived experiences. Those experiences may not be singular events but perspectives, experiences, and external factors that continue over time (Seemiller & Priest, 2017). Our standpoint then influences the larger systems and communities we are a part of by how we interact with others and set goals. The cultural context of the school along with the political pressures and educational reforms pose

challenges which can impact leaders (Cruz-Gonzalez, Perez Munoz, & Domingo Segovia, 2020). A leader's response to this impact can both contribute and hinder those systems around the leader (Cruz-Gonzalez, Lucena Rodriguez, & Domingo Segovia, 2021) influencing the social, political, and cultural contexts (Lucena Rodriguez, Cruz-Gonzalez, & Domingo Segovia, 2020). This influence goes back and forth between the systems and the leader creating a continual push and pull (Williams, 2020). School leaders must be analytical and adapt to this push and pull of the systems while also moving the school forward.

As a leader, it is important that you have a pulse on your building but also on your community. Similar to the influence experiences have on me as a leader, our students, staff, and school community are impacted as well. Understanding the messages and images they are seeing outside of the school provides context to then positively and productively support them. As mentioned above, the reaction of the leader impacts the response within the systems to those experiences.

School Shootings Media

What had the media told us about school shootings prior to the school shooting I experienced? Images of school shootings have been flashed across our television screens and magazine covers for years. The first school shooting that drew national attention was in 1999 in Columbine, Colorado. TIME magazine put the picture of the two Columbine shooters on the front cover of their May 3, 1999 edition. Around their two pictures were smaller pictures in black and white of those individuals that they killed. The cover stated, "The Monsters Next Door What Made Them Do It?". Unfortunately, this cover gave

attention to the offenders rather than to the victims. It also gave the idea that something suddenly snapped that caused them to carry out a heinous crime. Almost twenty years later, the cover of TIME magazine on April 2, 2018 had a picture of the five survivors of a school shooting with the word enough in all capital letters across the front. This was a change in the right direction as the attention was no longer on the offenders of the crime, but instead of the surviving victims. This also created an image that people could identify with which ignited a different type of fear. This fear was now the realization that it could happen to us. Would this shift of the images in the media have impacted our response that day in January 2011? Would we realized that a school shooting could happen at our school? And if we were aware that it could happen here, would we have had a plan? As a leader we often oversee professional development that is defined by the district. One professional development we have to discuss is our crisis response system. When leading that session at the high school where the shooting had occurred, the level of engagement is higher and the number of questions asked is much greater. The topic of crisis response is taken seriously because it can happen in our school. When I moved to the middle school, I was shocked by the lack of engagement during the yearly crisis response training. A school shooting had happened in this district in the school up the street that our middle school students fed into. How did the staff not see that it could happen in our school? Perhaps, the fear of the media had not worked.

I do know that these covers stir up memories for individuals that have survived a shooting. Personally, these covers are a reminder to me that things still have not changed since the school shooting I experienced ten years ago. As a school leader, how do I address those emotions? And how do I share those emotions with others so that we can

learn and move forward so we do not continue to have covers of magazines referencing mass shootings or school shootings?

After the shooting at the high school, the headlines of newspaper stories across the state appeared to be accusatory of the school. The Kearney Hub (2011), posted a story the day of the shooting with the headline, “Suspension ignited fury in [School] shooting”. The day after the shooting the Lincoln Journal Star published an article with the headline, “Police: [School] gunman was handed suspension on day of shooting” (Matteson, 2011). Three months after the shooting, a news station in a neighboring city did a story with the headline referring to the school reviewing security after the shooting. All three of these media outlets created the theme that school had done something wrong. This direct attack creates a poor image of the school. How as a leader do you respond? My answer is that you cannot respond but instead, focus on those areas that you can control and blast everyone with the positive images and message of what students are doing.

Coronavirus Pandemic Media

The cover of TIME magazine for March 30, 2020 said coronavirus in big black letters with an illustration of what the virus potentially looks like under a microscope. The cover on April 20, 2020 was a more concerning picture of an individual in a white hazmat suit and blue latex gloves with a mask and face shield on. The image was concerning to see and created the idea that we were not safe unless we were armed with this same attire. Four weeks after the image came out, I was asking my staff to assist with distribution day. As a leader, it is important to acknowledge that this is what my

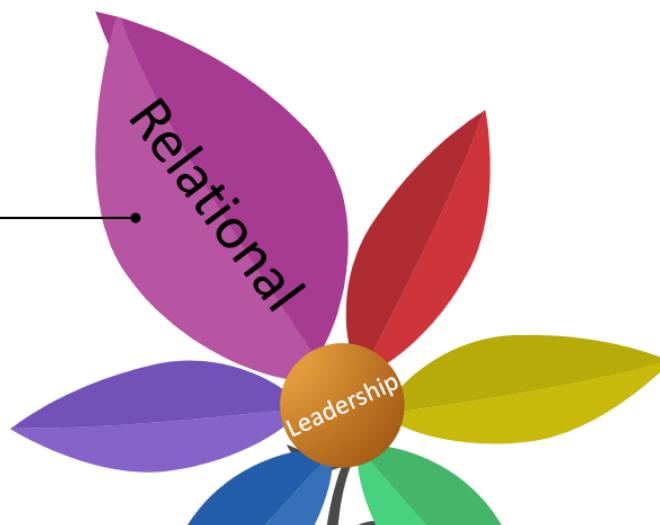
staff may be referencing when they are thinking of being at school and handing materials back to students.

A common theme among the media attention around the two events is the message of fear. It supports the idea that we do not have control over what happens. As a leader, you cannot get caught up in the emotional response to fear. Instead, it is important to use the domains of your leadership framework in your response. What others need from you is a calm response that is clearly communicated but done so in a caring and empathetic way.

Leadership Framework with Events

Through this dissertation, you have met me as a person, learned about my two educational distressing events, and have context of what was happening in the media during those events. I will now take you through the impact of this on me as a leader. As I reflect back on these two experiences and my leadership framework, my growth as a leader is evident. Each of these events pushed me in different ways as a leader and provided me with constant reminders of why a strong leadership framework is important during those times of educational distress. I encourage you as the reader to reflect on your own milestones, your own events as a leader. Take the time to write about them and identify the impact they had on you personally as well as with your own leadership framework. These events provide you with opportunities to persist, reflect, and grow as a leader.

I had presented to the staff what you can expect from me and what I expect from you. At the time that seemed important, but during a pandemic, I needed them to know that I cared about each of them individually, and that I understood we were all having our own struggles.



Relational

My leadership strengths have consistently been in the relational domain. I value relationships and am always willing to invest time into developing relationships. The development of those relationships looks different based on the circumstances. After the shooting, my relationships with some of the staff changed because of my new role, including the relationships with my closest friends. While at the same time, I was forming relationships with other staff that had worked in the same building with me, but had not worked directly with me.

As a new Principal in a building, you start out building relationships with people on a general level. I had presented to the staff what you can expect from me and what I expect from you. At the time that seemed important, but during a pandemic, I needed them to know that I cared about each of them individually, and that I understood we were all having our own struggles. We had our own emotional reactions and our home situations looked very different and I needed them to know that I would have realistic

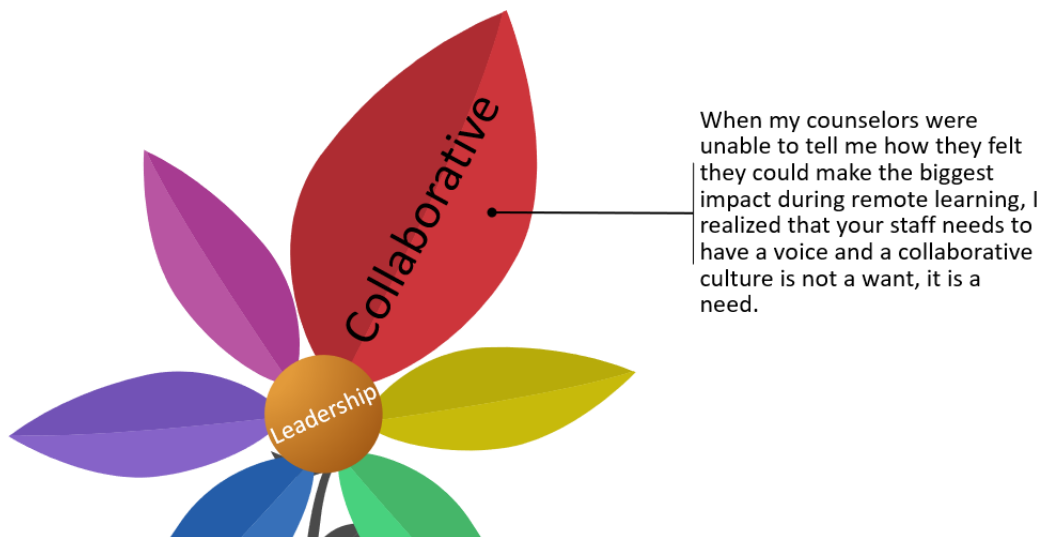
expectations. What I would share now with staff is that as a Principal, I have high expectations but I also have a great deal of grace and empathy.

I also learned from the pandemic the importance of utilizing my core groups of people. As a leader it is easy to feel alone, so you need to identify your support systems. After the shooting, I realized I neglected the relationships I had with the two people that were my support system, my closest friends from before the event. I should have taken the time to communicate with them what was happening with changing positions right from the start. And after the shooting, I should have defined better how my new role impacted our relationship before that impact was felt. At the same time, I needed to communicate that they were still an important part of my support system and I needed those relationships.

During remote learning, I realized that I needed to focus on the groups that make an impact on me and my leadership. They are the leaders in my building and had the ability to help make a building-wide impact. And once I focused on those relationships, rather than trying a whole group approach, I made more growth overall as a Principal. It will be important, after the pandemic, to return to focusing on all staff members. As a relational leader, you cannot maintain a small focus. This transition with my focus will be important.

Shared experiences create a deep understanding and bond. As a relational leader, you cannot rely solely on that as the relationship. It is important to put in the time to listen and be compassionate and empathetic (Daskal, 2021). If you do not listen, then you do not have a good pulse and understanding of your staff's emotional well-being.

During times of uncertainty, staff need administrators that they can count on and that they know care about them.



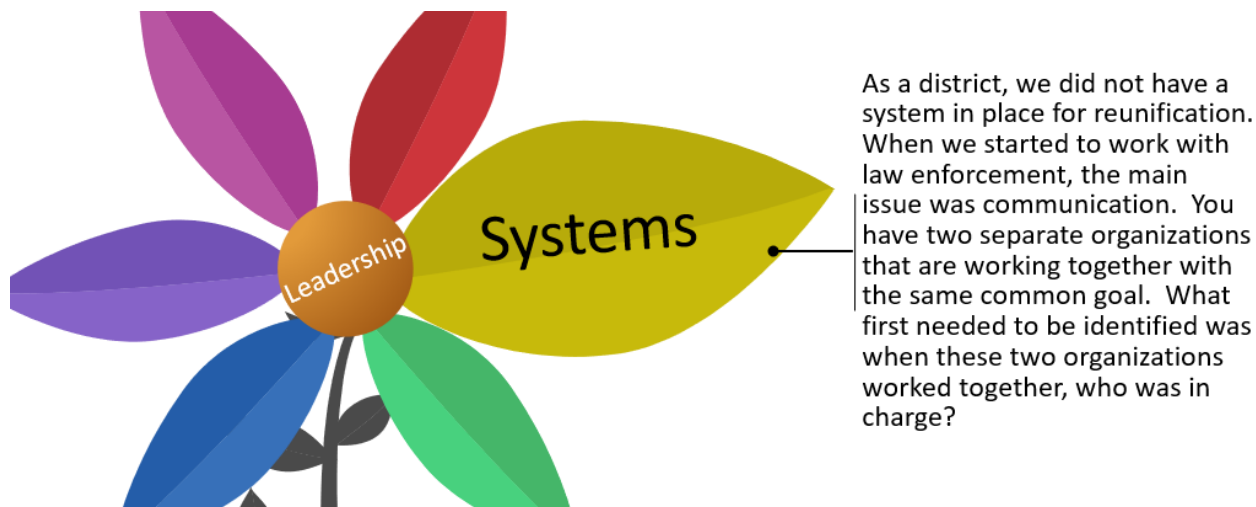
Collaborative

Collaborative leadership focuses on the overall team working together to achieve specific goals. But what if the goal is not clearly defined? How do you define a goal when you've survived a school shooting and experienced a pandemic? Is the goal survival?

One piece of collaborative leadership is having clear communication. Even if you cannot clearly define the goal, you need to clearly communicate what you do know and what your current-state of expectations are. After the shooting, people had a lot of questions. It was important for me to be a listener, but to be transparent about what I could and could not share. As a leader there is confidential information that you now have access to, but that you cannot share.

As a leader, I have always valued being open and honest with those that I work with. Unfortunately, during times of panic or distress, sometimes you cannot be as open as you want as it could create more concern for different individuals. And sometimes, the information you have is sensitive to the situation and cannot be shared. The inability to communicate all of the information that I knew was a pull on my leadership values during both of these events.

One of the most difficult things about being a new Principal at the time of the pandemic, is that I had not had enough time to build a collaborative culture. I had shared with the staff that having open and honest dialogue and hearing their input was important to me as I make decisions but what I had not yet established, is that I make all decisions that way. During remote learning, Principals did not know if they did or did not have the right answer or idea, as no one had gone through this before. Having an established collaborative culture would have been beneficial because I would have had others brainstorming with me rather than me generating all the ideas and having them give me a thumbs up or down on a Zoom meeting. When my counselors were unable to tell me how they felt they could make the biggest impact during remote learning, I was reminded of the importance of your staff having a voice. A collaborative culture is not a want, it is a need. A building will struggle to be successful during a time of educational distress without collaborative leadership.



Systems

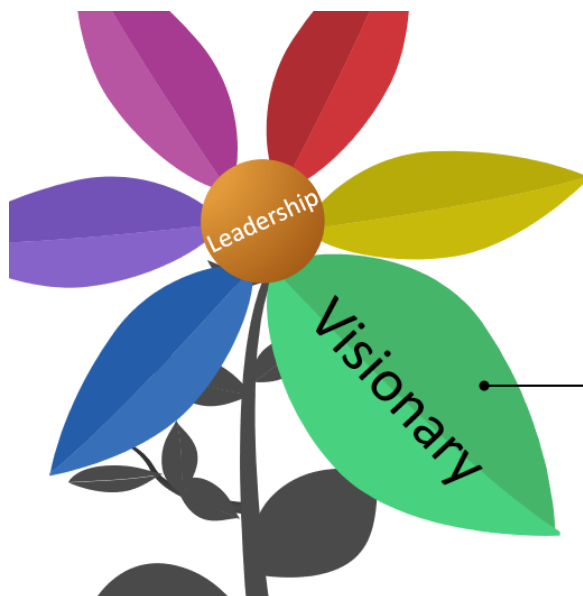
The importance of the systems leadership domain became very clear going through both of these distressing events. Not simply to have the systems in place, but to have the systems with a clear structure that have parts that are interconnected with each other.

After a shooting, no matter where the location is, there is always a need for reunification. How do loved ones know that their person inside the shooting location is safe? As a district, we did not have a system in place for reunification and when we started to work with law enforcement, it was evident that they did not have a process for reunification either. The main issue was communication. You have two separate organizations that are working together with the same common goal. What first needed to be identified was when these two organizations worked together, who was in charge? I was asked five years after the shooting to participate in a law enforcement and school reunification workshop held at the county sheriff's office. It took five years for the conversation to even start to create a reunification system. During that workshop, I

shared what had gone well with reunification the day of the shooting and what did not go well and needed to be addressed. I shared my perspective from the school viewpoint but there was not a representative from law enforcement that shared the perspective from their organization. Again, there was an issue with communication between the two organizations. A year after that presentation, the reunification system for our local area was completed.

During the pandemic, our systems are what kept our school moving forward. I had to rely on the systems that were in place, the difficult part is that these were systems that I had not created and some of which I was still learning. An example is my Dean of Students position. I did not create the behavior system that included the Dean role so I had not defined that role. As we got further into remote learning, it was evident that there was not a system that clearly included or defined this role. This lack of structure created an impact on our admin team as we were no longer working as a team of four, but were instead completing tasks and making decisions as a team of three. This created an even greater burden on what we had in place with our systems.

Within our current systems, our focus was on student achievement and safety. The pandemic created a new concern with safety that had not been addressed before. As schools went into remote learning, leaders were quickly trying to put together systems to address the new safety concerns which included not only keeping students safe from Covid-19 germs but also the mental health safety that came with remote learning. We needed a new system.

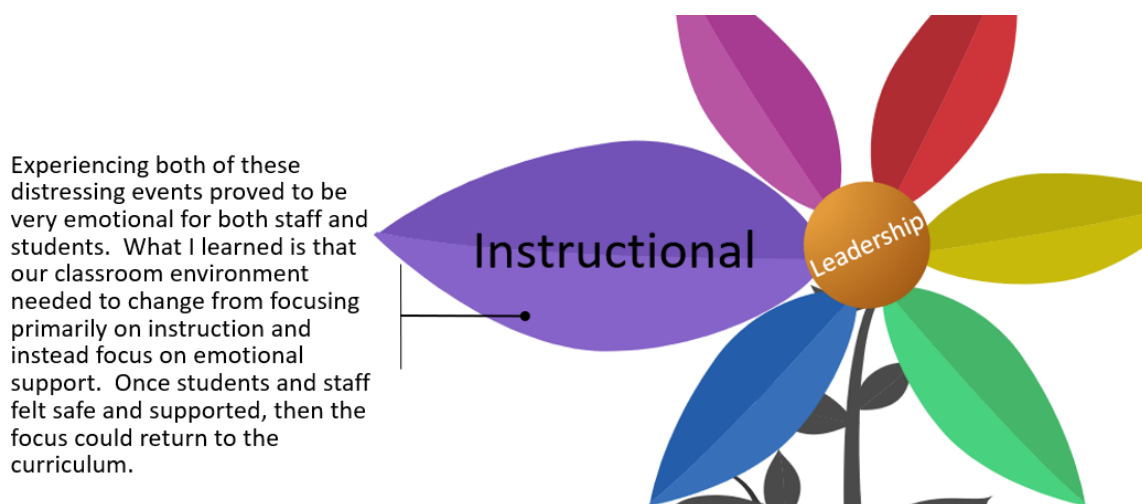


There were so many unknowns with what was happening in the world that people needed to have some answers, some idea of what was to come. It was difficult as a leader to not be able to provide that to them. I had to tell them that I was unable to have a vision let alone communicate it with them. People look to their leaders for a vision, and it is okay to be honest and real that you do not know what it is.

Visionary

As I mentioned earlier with collaborative leadership, it is difficult to have a clear vision when you cannot define what your goal is. Reeves (2006) shared that leaders can use vision to build trust. And trust was one piece I was trying to building with my relationships. So how do you build that trust when you cannot share a vision? During the pandemic, decisions were constantly changing, by the time I had shared the information I knew, that information had now changed. I found it was important to have a weekly touch-base with my staff. This is not something that would be necessary if we were in-person, but it was important now so they could hear in my voice that I cared about them and that I truly did not have the answers. One reason that vision is so important, is that it helps with the emotional reaction. There were so many unknowns with what was happening in the world that people needed to have some answers, some idea of what was to come. It was difficult as a leader to not be able to provide that to them. I had to tell them that I was unable to have a vision let alone communicate it with them. People look

to their leaders for a vision, and it is okay to be honest and real that you do not know what it is. But I needed to have something, so I created a new vision that no matter what was happening or how unclear our goals were, that we were working together as a team. That we had Grace, Affirmation, and Patience (GAP) and that we were filling the gap with those three things.

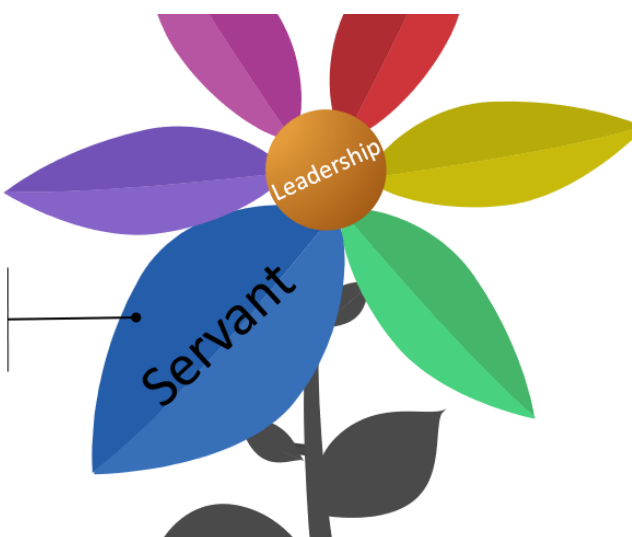


Instructional

When I became an administrator, I had visions of spending my day in classrooms working with teachers on instruction. There are numerous parts to the job of an administrator so realistically, the majority of your day cannot be spent in classrooms. What I found is that it is more important to create an environment in the building that supports teaching and learning, rather than be in classrooms all the time. Experiencing both of these distressing events proved to be very emotional for both staff and students. I learned that our classroom environment needed to change from focusing primarily on instruction and instead focus on emotional support. Once students and staff felt safe and

supported, then the focus could return to the curriculum. Prothero (2020) states that brain development flourishes when children feel emotionally and physically safe. In creating an emotionally safe environment, an administrator needs to acknowledge both the teacher and student emotions. This does not mean you cannot give feedback to your teachers, but you should remain empathetic while providing that feedback (Fisher, Frey, Smith, & Hattie, 2021). Following the two distressing events, my feedback changed to reinforce more the positives I observed.

On the night when the former Assistant Principal's son was packing up her office, I looked at the secretary that was still there with me and there was no hesitation, it was important to help take care of him. We spent time that night helping him pack up the office, and though that decision was made by putting his needs before mine, ultimately, we all benefitted from spending the time together remembering those wonderful memories of her.



Servant

One belief that I had as a Special Education teacher is that I would never ask someone to do something that I was not willing to do myself. This belief aligns with being a servant leader. A servant leader supports the growth and well-being of others, which is especially important during a distressing event.

After stepping in as the interim Assistant Principal, I found myself putting in late nights so I could learn everything and get everything done. There were days when I left

the house before my family had woke up and did not return home until after they were in bed. And yet, on the night when the former Assistant Principal's son was packing up her office, I looked at the secretary that was still there with me and there was no hesitation, it was important to help take care of him. We spent time that night helping him pack up the office, and though that decision was made by putting his needs before mine, ultimately, we all benefitted from spending the time together remembering those wonderful memories of her. Servant leadership does not mean you are selfless, it means your decisions are not made with selfish intentions.

During the pandemic, this was an important belief. When it came time to distribute materials back to the students, I did not know how comfortable I was with being up at school and around all of the different families coming to the building. But I had to ask myself, if I was not willing to be there, then how could I ask my staff to be there? So instead, I had to put a very detailed plan together so that we could maintain a safe environment. As a leader, I had to make sure that I helped enforce those guidelines so that others felt safe as well. As a team, we needed to work together to get the materials back to our students.

I experienced what it meant to create a culture of servant leadership during remote learning. As I mentioned above, on the first day of remote learning, the district network had errors and students could not get onto their classes. Parents called the school in a panic and our secretaries quickly became overwhelmed trying to answer all of the calls while also trying to calm down the parents they were talking to. I jumped in to help with answering the calls as it was evident the three secretaries could not do it on their own. But being a servant leader myself, does not mean that the other leaders on my team will

also be servant leaders. This is taught by modeling and creating a culture of working together as a team where no one is above doing any job. I had not yet had enough time to create a servant leadership culture and so my two Assistant Principals did not assist with answering the calls that day. And in that moment, I made note, this was an important area for me to address as we moved forward.

One important part of servant leadership is understanding what you are asking for. You need to understand the difficulties that come with implementation. It is a combination of your personal commitment with respect for the commitment of others (Nair, 1997). Servant leadership took on a new look during remote learning and I found myself trying to model things in staff meetings that I was asking my teachers to do in their classrooms. We want the teachers to celebrate with their students and we were starting every staff meeting with celebrations. We were asking our teachers to use new online tools and I was now trying out a new tool, including Zoom, in front of them during staff meetings and finding that a few were complete failures. It was important to laugh at myself as they failed. Also, by utilizing a new online tool during a staff meeting, you are saving teachers time in searching for and figuring out a new tool to use. This is servant leadership.

As I reflect back on these two experiences of educational distress and my leadership framework, my growth as a leader is evident. And yet, I still found myself having some of the same feelings of uncertainties and loneliness during the second event as I did during the first. This is a reminder that even with a strong leadership framework, we are always growing. Another reminder as a leader is that it is important to make sure

that you keep your bucket filled, otherwise you will not have anything to give your staff. I still have growth to make in that area.

Conclusion

It is important as a leader that you have a strong understanding of your beliefs and know the leadership framework with which you want to operate under. You cannot predict when an educational distressing event will occur which is why having a strong foundation is important to weather those events. You also need to take care of yourself. When you are leading during times of educational distress, it is easy to put your own needs on the back burner and focus solely on the people you are leading. This is not healthy nor helpful for you as the leader, nor for the people you are leading.

As a leader, you do not have the ability to control the situation or have all of the answers, but you know that as a team, you will make it through together. I am witness to staff at two different buildings during two different distressing events step up and do tremendous things. And I am confident, that if another event should occur, that I will again witness this same response. As a leader, you need to lead with confidence and provide your staff the support and grace they need.

As Nair (1997) stated, "There are many opportunities for sharing experiences, but it has to be done with humility and a spirit of service". My hope is that this autoethnography shares with you, the reader, my experiences in a way that highlights the spirit of service in my leadership and that this will help you grow and refine your leadership identity and framework.

As I reflect on my two distinct distressing events that shaped me as a leader, I am reminded that these two events, though stressful at the time, were temporary and ultimately led me to the growth I have had as a leader. Without these two challenges, these distressing events, I would not be the leader that I am today.

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