

What Keeps Administrators Stuck?



By John Trotta

It is mind-boggling how the youngest learners in kindergarten and oldest seniors in high school similarly and eagerly strive to “keep up with their peers” in an innocent attempt to “speed up” life, dedicated teachers hurriedly dash around classrooms from early morning to late afternoon, and high-speed school administrators rapidly travel an imaginary high-wire throughout the school building. Somehow each constituent becomes “stuck” and emotionally cemented more than any stakeholder wants to admit.

Being a student, teacher, or administrator has never been easy. Adapting to the challenges in education in recent years has made learning, teaching, and leading more difficult. Not only are all individuals in a school environment unique, our experiences, perspectives, personalities, support systems, and ambitions are varied.

When you analyze the necessary tasks for a school to function (arrival and dismissal, buses, classroom resources, cleaning responsibilities, food services, instructional activities, health office needs, professional development, and schoolwide events) combined with ongoing battles being faced (absenteeism, behaviors, cell phones, emotional and learning needs, resource shortages, social media, safety, and security), it is almost inexplicable how competent and resilient schools actually are.

While being “stuck” has a pessimistic connotation, this state of mind is real and more normal than our high, and sometimes unrealistic, expectations think. Every administrator, no matter how successful or positive, experiences problems on an hour-to-hour, sometimes minute-to-minute, basis.

Listed below are common challenges experienced by administrators and strategies to gain momentum. The goal is not to grumble, but identify with leaders and provide encouragement to gain acceleration.

ADMINISTRATIVE CHALLENGES AND MOMENTUM BUILDERS

Challenge # 1 – Undeserved Criticism

During morning arrival, it is commonplace for an administrator to check in with a head custodian, touch base with kitchen staff, console a student, answer parent questions, confer with the school psychologist and social worker, help direct traffic, discuss health issues with the nurse, follow up with teachers, lead morning announcements, thank the secretaries for keeping things at bay, finalize an agenda for tomorrow’s meeting, and prepare for the evening’s PTA event. And the day just started!

Fortunately and unfortunately, no one sees “behind the scenes” of lead-

ership, and truthfully, most people don’t really care. Nevertheless, leaders carry a heavy boulder of weight and strive to make decisions that support the school community. Administrators are frequently “in the middle” of tough situations, delivering unfortunate information in an attempt to unify.

Learning that an individual (regardless of your relationship) is gossiping, talking negatively, or quieting down when you enter a room can be hurtful. No amount of experience can completely shield a leader from the pain of being unjustly appraised. Unfortunately, administrative roles come with opinions.

Gain Momentum:

- Vent privately (to a trusted colleague behind doors)
- Remind yourself: The judgment is likely circumstantial, not personal
- See the best in others and stay professional (Treat people with kindness and understanding)
- Spend more time in classrooms (Students and teachers bring joy)

Challenge # 2 – Difficult Conversations

Every person you encounter does what makes sense to them at the moment of your interaction. As a leader, you are prodigiously in charge and need to set boundaries to keep your institution operating efficiently. Having to hold someone accountable or share disappointment is rarely effortless. The awkwardness and friction from challenging discussions is essential to improvement and also produces strain.

Gain Momentum:

- Investigate (Learn facts and details)
- Collaborate (Talk to team members for insight and perspective)
- Plan the conversation (Role-play and practice language)
- Practice honesty with heart (Be truthful and sincere)
- Find the “win-win” (Make things better!)

Challenge # 3 – Unplanned Events

It has been a productive morning and you feel inspired to admire the beauty and ethos of your school. Strolling with a smile, you suddenly see a learner struggling, a staff member shares a social media incident, and before another colleague

asks if you have a minute, the fire alarm sounds!

The unknown activities in a day make leadership exciting and oddly stretch the school community to be well prepared for future circumstances. However, staying flexible and dealing with the anonymous can be taxing.

Gain Momentum:

- Simplify (Think “next moves” over final solutions)
- Find support (Who can help?)
- Be proactive (Continuously meet with teams to simulate academic, behavioral and safety issues that may arise)

Challenge # 4 – Managing Requests

Administrators are invaded with minor to major inquiries from the moment they step into the building until their exit, often while juggling various other duties. The variety of daily requests can be rewarding and absolutely draining.

Gain Momentum:

- Relationships first! (Listen openly before responding)
- Ask: Did you need me to listen or is more support needed? (Provide direct answers when possible)
- Complex requests: Thank the “requester” for sharing and ask for a note or email with specifics (Thoughtfully identify the next course of action)

Challenge # 5 – Information Overload

Leaders truly are bombarded with information. Student success stories, teacher conversations, parent concerns, schoolwide and districtwide initiatives, handouts, packets, digital platform reminders, emails, attachments, phone calls, voicemails, post-it notes, text messages, radio interruptions, and reactive meetings happen often. There is not enough time in the day to manage the excessive content. No matter how hard a leader stays organized, it is arduous work to process data and develop an action plan for the material shared.

Gain Momentum:

- Encourage conciseness, summaries, or “one-sentence versions” and ask pertinent

imperative, some situations do not require every detail)

- Be brief in agendas, memos, and emails (Use bullets instead of paragraphs)
- Streamline resources on accessible platforms (such as website or live document with relevant and mandatory items)
- Empower staff to focus on “quality over quantity”

Challenge # 6 – Ambiguity

It is not uncommon to leave a meeting or discussion unclear about what follows. Often, wonderful ideas are brainstormed, but fuzzy direction on how to execute leads to over complication. Due to the busyness an administrator experiences, direction is key.

Gain Momentum:

- Model transparency (Be specific to prevent confusion)
- Be deliberate about decision making (Determine “decision leaders” before discussions. Executive decision? Delegate the decision? Collaborative decision?)
- Ask for clarity (Don’t complain without requesting your need)

Challenge # 7 – A Full Plate
(Battle between START and STOP)

All constituents in schools are overloaded with responsibilities and confined time. The professional imperatives and burdens are unending. There will always be another item on the to-do list, email popping up, or conversation about to happen. Figuring out when to halt procrastination and START, and when to “call it a day” and STOP – and having fun along the way is a struggle.

Gain Momentum:

- Prioritize and don’t multitask (Prepare tomorrow’s “top three” items in the order of intended completion. Solely finish one task before the next!)
- Save time with templates (Stop retyping, copying, and pasting, and develop a workflow with word processing templates)
- Make creative calendars (Celebrations, birthdays, time

you want to leave work, and events that remind you of why you love education should be in your calendar!)

- Simply STOP! (This is hard, but remember that tomorrow is another day)
- Rest (Slow down and leave “work” at work. Enjoy time with family/friends as best you can rather than ruminating)

Challenge # 8 – Ironically Isolated

Administrators are continuously surrounded by some of the most considerate people and yet leadership can be lonely. While many colleagues offer assistance, it is a job in itself to figure out how someone can support your workload without understanding the intricacies of every responsibility, obligation, and decision you make.

Momentum Builder:

- Put your reflections in writing (Jot down challenges and lessons learned for self-clarity)
- Engage in healthy conversations (Plan time with colleagues to chat. It is comforting to connect and share similar experiences)
- Join administrative groups (There are many associations to share ideas and approaches)
- Find mentors (Reach out to retired administrators and teachers for insight)
- Lift others up! (When you feel down, help someone else)

CONCLUSION

Genuine administrators know that leadership is “not about you” but the betterment of others. The realities listed above and ideas for momentum earnestly attempt to embolden leaders, not judge or oversimplify.

Most leaders yearn for “smooth days” but can appreciate how conflict morphs into progression. No matter how experienced any leader is, some days are amazing and others are perfect storms. Administrators never “fully arrive” and work happily ever after. Each school year takes deliberate fine-tuning and continued attentiveness to lead successfully.

Schools are filled with miracle workers, and serving as an administrator is one of the best jobs in the world. Not many

positions provide the opportunity to interact with high-quality educators and see learners evolving before your eyes. No individual has all the answers or a “quick fix” to getting “unstuck” while working in the beautiful and puzzling field of education. The hope is to get a little better each day!

You made it out. Now help end it.

JOHN TROTТА is the assistant principal at Polk Street School in Franklin Square, New York.