MESSY, CHALLENGING, AND VITAL:

Leading with Empathy and Kindness

By Kim Smithgall

In his book and during his travels around the country to speak about kindness, Houston Kraft often references a fellow airline passenger named Helga whom he met while being stuck in what he calls the hot dog seat — that annoying middle seat in between two "people buns." Helga squeezed past to take the window seat and immediately and energetically began rummaging through her bag to retrieve items to decorate her small area. Kraft had been really looking forward to a nap during the three-hour flight, as he had little down time between speaking engagements at schools across the country. It didn't take long for Helga to introduce herself and strike up a conversation, peppering Kraft with questions about himself.

NO NAPS, **JUST AN AWAKENING**

Once Helga found out that the two had shared experiences working in schools, she asked about Kraft's favorite part of high school. He explained that his senior year was his favorite time because he and some friends created a kindness club that had just two rules for weekly activities: meet someone new and leave that person better than you found them. The school was large and Kraft realized he could accomplish this goal every single day and still not meet all of his peers. Still, he inherently understood that his fellow students were craving connection.

Helga's eyes welled up and she passionately spoke about the importance of kindness above all else. She then disclosed that her last airplane trip involved rushing to see her father when she received a call that he had unexpectedly taken ill. Helga waited five hours before a flight was available and just as she was ready to board, a doctor called to say that her father had died. She sat in stunned silence during the subsequent three-hour plane ride and upon arriving at an Arizona airport, she made her way to the nearest wall, slumped to the floor and wept. Noisy, gulping, heart-wrenching weeping.

In his book, *Deep Kindness*, Kraft writes, "And here's the part I'll never forget about Helga's story: for two hours, she sat and cried in the airport while nearly three thousand people walked by. Not a single person stopped to help."

Not. One. Person.

THE **EMPATHY** AND **KINDNESS GAP**

This experience and others caused Kraft to question what gets in the way of acting with deep kindness and empathy.

"There is an observable gap in our current culture between what we know is good and what we are actually good at. In that gap resides both the world's sufferings and our most personal heartaches," Kraft writes. "The widening gap between moral knowing and kind action is a quiet epidemic that many will diagnose in others, but few will treat in themselves. It is a disease that drives us toward loneliness, greed, anguish, and a deep separateness that prevents us from solving the most pressing needs of our collective future."

Education leader Thomas R. Hoerr has observed a similar gap. In the first chapter of his book, *The Principal as Chief Empathy Officer (CEO)*, he writes, "I begin with empathy because there seems to be a striking lack of it everywhere I turn. Perhaps that's not surprising because in times of conflict and crisis, and we often find ourselves in such times, the human tendency is to dichotomize the problem or the differing points of view by simplifying the matter as us versus them. Then we discount, stereotype, and generalize 'them.' Avoidance, physical distance, and psychological barriers form a lacuna that prevents us from learning about, understanding, or working to appreciate others. Empathy is absent, and we wonder why so many of our problems seem intractable."

The effects are definitely visible in schools. A study from the University of Michigan found that students entering college since 2000 have empathy levels that are 40 percent lower than those who came before them. Students are losing connections with each other and adults. Educators and school leaders are losing connections with children and with each other.

Educational psychologist Michele Borba attributes a decline in empathy to the increase in anxiety. After all, it's difficult, if not impossible, to feel and express genuine concern about what is happening in someone else's life if you're worried about the circumstances in your own life. For teachers and principals — especially after the pandemic — self-reported levels of anxiety and stress are troubling. A recent RAND Corporation research report based on findings from the 2022 State of the American Teacher and State of the American Principal surveys shows the following:

- Nearly twice as many teachers and principals reported that they experience frequent job-related stress as the general population of working adults.
- Compared with other working adults, more teachers and principals also indicated they were not coping well with job-related stress and were experiencing burnout.

On a more positive note, teachers and principals who were working in supportive environments were less likely to report poor well-being and intentions to leave their jobs compared to those who were not in supportive work environments. "Our interviews confirm that positive school climates — particularly positive adult relationships — were key sources of job satisfaction and reasons many teachers stay," the report states. Additionally, teachers and principals indicated a desire to focus on positive adult relationships to help alleviate stress.

PROFILES

Thomas R. Hoerr is the author of seven books, including *The Principal as Chief Empathy Officer (CEO): Creating a Culture Where Everyone Grows* and *The Formative Five: Fostering Grit, Empathy, and Other Success Skills Every Student Needs.* He led schools for 37 years and is now a scholar in residence at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, where he teaches prospective principals. Hoerr is also a presenter and consultant on such topics as school leadership, faculty collegiality, and school culture.

Houston Kraft is the author of *Deep Kindness: A Revolutionary Guide for the Way We Think, Talk, and Act in Kindness.* He has visited more than 600 schools to advocate for empathy, kindness, compassion, and leadership. In 2016, Kraft teamed up with educator John Norlin to create CharacterStrong, a program focused on teaching social emotional skills, such as resilience, self-regulation, and kindness. CharacterStrong has been implemented in more than 5,000 schools in all 50 states, as well as 21 countries.

CHANGING SYSTEMS

This understanding that improving and deepening adult relationships in a school can promote positive change will provide a strong foundation for educational leaders who are focusing on kindness and empathy. And while top-down approaches are generally frowned upon, in this case, the approach is likely necessary to jump-start real change and improvement.

"People in positions of power have the ability to change systems and practices, to dedicate time to things and to create value around things," Kraft said. "You can certainly implement kindness without those things, but when you imbue them in the systems, now you're talking about longer-term, sustained change because, on average, it takes three to five years for new practices to really take hold. And if you don't have people protecting time and steering the ship over time, you might have some really fun moments, but I don't think you're going to have the kind of sustained school culture change that systems usually crave."

Hoerr would likely concur. Being in the position to consciously and proactively allocate and invest the time and space to create a more empathetic and kind school culture is vital to effecting meaningful change. Committing to investing that time is crucial, Hoerr commented. And the top-down approach can expand from there.

"I give a lot of presentations at conferences and talk to a lot of people about these ideas. And near the end of my presentation, I say, 'I hope I've left you with some really good ideas and you can't wait to get back to your school to implement them. Let me give you a warning: Don't. And everybody just kind of looks at me like, 'What are you talking about?'" Hoerr commented. "And I say that the worst thing you can do is to get back to your school and say you heard this speaker and now you're going to implement his ideas. If you do this, you're going to fail. You need to go back and convene a group to share what you heard. Say something like, 'The speaker had some interesting ideas and maybe a few things I'd like to try, but I want to get some feedback first.' Because no matter how good my ideas are and no matter how good your ideas are, you're not going to be successful unless you're part of a team."

Hoerr also suggests going beyond the tried and true school leaders and also include those who would not normally be part of your brainstorming team. "Chances are, whatever you bring them is going to get changed," he said. "That's appropriate. You need to go into it knowing that, as with any new venture, it's going to need revisiting. You're going to make mistakes and you're going to learn with people. And then what you have is not simply a chief empathy officer, but now you've got a team trying to help that principal [or other educational leader] be a chief empathy officer."

This might also be an opportunity to discuss how empathy and deep kindness would present itself in your school. "What does empathy look like in our school? How is our commitment to empathy reflected by what's going on in the hallways, for example?" Hoerr said.

These discussions can have additional benefits: buy-in, understanding commitment from staff members because they can begin to envision how empathy and kindness are linked to school culture and even to student achievement. Alternatively, with the stress and anxiety that educators and leaders are feeling, focusing on empathy and deep kindness might seem like just one more thing to do, one more obligation to meet.

"More than anything, we need a reminder that when you do the kindness piece well, that provides the foundation for relationship-building. And no learning happens without a relationship," Kraft said. "If kids aren't treating each other with kindness, if adults aren't treating each other with kindness, you're going to have a much harder time creating a space where people want to show up and learn. Kindness is not another thing on the plate…it is the plate."

> **"…draw a circle around the people with whom you don't talk a great deal. Part of being a chief empathy officer is consciously making the attempt to reduce that list."**

SELF-REFLECTION

Self-reflection is also a vital part of the process…even if the results are uncomfortable.

That could mean analyzing why someone might pass up the opportunity to practice kindness. Kraft writes that there are often three main reasons:

- Incompetence: When I don't know how to do a thing, I tend to avoid that thing.
- Insecurity: When I'm afraid of a thing, sometimes I avoid that thing.
- Inconvenience: If I don't feel like doing a thing, sometimes I avoid that thing.

Kraft added, "As I reflect on my own answer to 'What gets in the way?' I've realized that my main categorial barriers all have something in common. They all start with the same letter and, more important, the primary identity of our biggest obstacle: I. The only person who would prevent me from stopping to help Helga that day in the airport is me. I am my number one obstacle to overcome when it comes to practicing kindness."

Ouch. Definitely not a comfortable conclusion.

You might come to a similarly painful conclusion about your level of empathy if you take the empathy quiz in Hoerr's book (p. 14). It's a valuable starting point. Hoerr also suggests taking an honest look at the feedback you receive from school staff members via surveys and other feedback loops.

"I would hope that every principal already does surveys in which staff members — all staff members, not just faculty — give feedback to that principal about how he or she is

> "A culture rich with personality but low on character is a dangerous one."

perceived and seen," Hoerr said. "For me, one of the most effective ways to get feedback was to ask my staff: 'What should Tom start? What should Tom stop? What should Tom continue?'" Then, listen.

"Being a chief empathy officer means you do lots and lots of listening," Hoerr said. "There will be times when there are uncomfortable pauses. For me, there were times when I wanted to ask questions, but I also wanted to know how people were thinking and how they were reacting."

Along with surveys, Hoerr also scheduled time for staff members to talk with him — a sort of "Ask me anything/tell me anything" scenario. "You need to plan those opportunities to listen," he explained. "One thing I did four or five times a year was 'Breakfast with Tom.' Typically, it would be on a professional development day that officially started at 9 a.m. I would be available at 8 a.m. and would let folks know that I was going to be in the library and 'the agenda is yours.'"

Hoerr would often end up talking with around a third of his staff at those events. "It was a great opportunity for me to hear from people — and it was often the people who would never come to the office," Hoerr recalled. "It's not enough to think I'm a listener or I want to hear from people. I would argue that you've got to ask, 'What can I do? What strategies can I develop to elicit what people are thinking and how they're feeling?'"

OUT OF THE **COMFORT ZONE CONVERSATIONS**

Next? Deeper conversations, and deeper listening, to further build meaningful relationships — the type of conversations that lead to knowing teachers (for example) as people, not just as teachers. In reflecting on his own early career experiences, Hoerr admitted that he had a certain group of people he was most comfortable speaking with or areas of his school where he tended to migrate for staff interactions.

"Everyone has their comfort zone," he said. "I suggest taking a list of your staff members and underlining the people with whom you talk most regularly, the people you trust the most. Everybody's got that list. Then draw a circle around the people with whom you don't talk a great deal. Part of being a chief empathy officer is consciously making the attempt to reduce that list."

As Hoerr became more secure in his leadership role, he began initiating "empathy conversations" with staff members. For example, he would reach out to educators and tell them that he would like to have an empathy conversation. "By calling it an empathy conversation, it says to the person that my goal is to simply know what you're thinking and feeling," Hoerr explained.

PROVIDING **KIND FEEDBACK**

In addition to getting to know colleagues, the deeper empathy-based conversations and interactions can give school leaders valuable insights that allow for authentic — and kind — feedback. Think of it as a compassionate circular feedback loop.

Kraft recommended taking advantage of these types of opportunities with what he calls "secondhand compliments." They're among "character dares" that administrators can use to help improve school culture.

"The practice looks like this: You just walk into a classroom and speak to the students, not the teacher," he said. "And you speak about the teacher in front of the kids. So, it could be, 'Hey, sorry to interrupt, but there's something you should know. I know firsthand that Mrs. Peterson appreciates and supports you, and the way she talks about you outside of class is awesome. She's an amazing educator that you're really lucky to have.' So, you're complimenting the adult to the students in front of the adult. You're getting the double win of role-modeling kindness to kids while you're also demonstrating it to someone on your staff."

Kraft also suggests being as specific as possible — something that's much easier if you've had some empathy conversations. "Specificity drives significance," he stressed. "In education today, one of the worst compliments you can give someone is 'Thanks for all you do' because it shows people that you really don't know what they do."

One of the routines that Kraft and his colleagues teach administrators in their workshops is to choose one person per week to acknowledge rather than sending a mass email. "Choose a person and get specific," Kraft said. "What is the specific thing you're trying to celebrate, affirm, or recognize this person for? It doesn't have to be complicated. But the more specific the kindness, the more meaningful it is to the recipient."

THE **HARD WORK**

Both Hoerr and Kraft acknowledge that this kind of empathy and kindness work is hard, and the required self-reflection can be painful. Courage and vulnerability are necessary.

"This is a journey and you've got to start off knowing that you're not going to get as far as you would like or get through it as quickly as you would like. But the important part is making progress," Hoerr commented. "If you really believe the goal of school is preparing children to succeed in life, not simply do well in school, then that has lots of powerful implications for how you work with faculty members and how they work with kids. And, empathy, I believe is integral to all of that."

The work takes strong character, as well.

In Houston Kraft's words, "Have you ever known people who are charming but not always very kind behind closed doors? People who are funny, but that humor is usually at the expense of others (especially those who have less power than them)? People who are charismatic enough to get themselves elected or selected into positions of power, but don't really want to do the work?

There are examples of people with a lot of personality, but not very much character. The difference between the two is important. A culture rich with personality but low on character is a dangerous one.

The kind of kindness the world needs is rooted in the desire for the common good. It's the kind willing to get sweaty in the pursuit of selflessness and do the hard work necessary to cultivate their character — their habits — toward compassion."

Today's educators and students deserve nothing less.

Will you be the one out of 3,000 people in a busy airport who consciously chooses to stop and sit on the floor with Helga?

KIM SMITHGALL is an award-winning communications specialist and freelance writer, designer, and photographer.

RESOURCES

- RAND Corporation Research Report, Restoring Teacher and Principal Well-Being is an Essential Step for Rebuilding Schools: Findings from the State of the American Teacher and State of the American Principal Surveys – https://tinyurl.com/538k7npz
- YouTube video, "Making Kindness Normal" – https://tinyurl.com/2k5cw7dm
- YouTube video, "Brené Brown on Empathy" – https://tinyurl.com/yuhhtw7m
- TED Talk from Stanford University Professor Jamil Zaki, We're Experiencing an Empathy Shortage, But We Can Fix it Together – https://tinyurl.com/4yt4m4a4
- TEDx Talk from Dr. Michele Borba, Empathy Is a Verb – https://tinyurl.com/3z6tf9nu