

Navigating the First Years...Six Tips to Keep You Swimming

By Kelly Williams and Kathleen Moore

“To lead people, walk beside them”-Lao Tzu, Philosopher

The first years of anything new and worthwhile may be challenging. However, much growth and experience will be gained as a new leader navigates the waters of a newfound position.

Stresses, expected as well as unexpected, take a toll on time and energy. All in all, it is best to rise above the tide and keep afloat even through the turbulent times. It may be best summed up as Laura Ingalls Wilder states in her novel *The First Four Years*; “The real things haven't changed. It is still best to be honest and truthful; to make the most of what we have; to be happy with simple pleasures; and have courage when things go wrong.”

In order to navigate the early years, some advice is provided here that may help assure you that you are doing the right thing. These tips may help keep your ship sailing smoothly upon the seas whether you are facing stormy or calm days. However, when the eye of the storm is near, just remain calm and breathe. Take out these tips from time to time and decide how best to proceed.

First year challenges may include working within an established school climate from a previous administrator, interacting with parents who have immediate concerns/various needs for their children, needing to increase student performance according to data driven information, implementing technological advances to remain current, and evaluating teachers effectively so that growth is attained. These are a few of the first-year challenges, but if you keep everything in the proper perspective your ship will continue to navigate safely.

There are skills and dispositions that are essential in order to become an effective school/building leader. As you read through the tips that follow, keep in mind that it is of the utmost importance

to maintain a strong sense of self. You may ask, “Do I have what it takes to become an exceptional leader?” If you’re not asking this, are you satisfied with just the status quo? As a beginning leader, you will want to prove that you are caring, kind, and genuine. Integrity is at the heart of leadership. Knowing how to lead with humility and steadfastness will be essential.

Having a strong foundational background knowledge in teaching and classroom management will be a positive factor. As the leader of the school/building, teachers may look to you for advice and ideas to help build their classroom climate. Since you will have had real experience teaching students in grades pre-K-12, this will benefit you greatly. In order to truly understand the needs and challenges teachers face, it is important to have walked in their shoes.

As a new leader, it is extremely important to be an effective communicator. Leaders need to correspond with other administrators, teachers, staff, parents and community members. In fact, as a leader, you may need to hold faculty meetings, present workshops, introduce parent night programs, and lead other professional development opportunities for the growth of their faculty. Therefore, leaders must possess exemplary communication skills. Exemplary communication skills, however, take time to cultivate. This will be a good goal to work towards achieving in your first year. Since administrators are models for teachers, their verbal as well as their non-verbal communication must be polished. Performing in a professional and humble manner will provide an atmosphere of trust so teachers and staff will feel comfortable sharing their challenges, needs, and desires. Open communication and positive interactions with faculty and staff will result favorably.

While keeping these six tips in mind, remember that the way in which one communicates is essential. Communication is at the heart of how you perform.

1. Know yourself. This includes having a leadership vision. Where do you see the school in five years, ten years, etc.? Have a “can do” attitude. Which decisions/items require your immediate attention and which ones can be delayed so thought and accuracy can be used to inform the best decision?
2. Be able to provide teachers with thoughtful advice to their classroom problems. Sharing your best strategies and approaches to teaching will engender trust and collaboration. Use your strong foundational background knowledge of instructional strategies and best practices in classroom management to support the teachers. Continue to increase your knowledge in areas such as interpreting data and evaluating best teaching practices by attending workshops and providing professional development on-site for your faculty.
3. Communicate carefully and strategically both verbally and non-verbally. You are a role-model for the school and the community in which the school resides. Active listening should be a critical part of the first-year process. By listening to the faculty and responding to them after careful thought, you will make the right decision in new and unfamiliar situations.
4. Remember that you are a role-model. Engender trust in others so a community of learners is established and maintained. The way you promote positivity will be important. Having a positive outlook and attitude will set the stage for happiness and will establish a positive morale. By creating a caring and visually appealing student learning environment, a feeling of welcome will exude from your building. Use the hall bulletin boards/monitors to create a visually appealing environment and share current information. Invite parents to join family-school based organizations such as PTAs to provide their perspective and maintain a collaborative relationship.

5. Actively seek advice and take risks to make improvement a reality. Learn how to implement change by getting faculty buy-in for new programs and ideas that will improve student learning. Clearly communicating needs and goals will allow faculty to fully invest in any changes you would like to implement. If you have the faculty on board for the plan, it will make it that much more doable.
6. Celebrate accomplishments. Attaining even the most trivial goal is worthy of celebration. In the hustle and bustle of everyday work, it is important to take pleasure in small victories. When goals are realized and progress is being made, throw a party for all to acknowledge the win.

Time and experience will provide opportunities that will increase leadership qualities. Navigate the storms and continue to reach for the beacon by remaining truthful and honest. Enjoy some simple pleasures and be sure to save time for your family and friends each week. Stay courageous by keeping in mind these tips. With time and experience, the first years will become happy memories. Before you know it, you will be a veteran captain, navigating steadfast against the current of time.

Book Reference:

Wilder, Laura Ingalls (1971). *The First Four Years*. New York, NY: Harper Trophy.

Contributor Biographies

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