Fresh From the Field: Member Memories of Mastering the Middle School Schedule

Trials of a First-Year Principal: Midyear Review

Reflecting on the first half of the year, this principal has learned lessons in leadership, perception versus reality, trust and communication.

By Christopher Bailey

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Midway through the school year is a great place to stop and reflect. As I have conducted formal and informal discussions with staff members this month, I have taken the opportunity to think about how we have grown as a learning community. It is easy to get mired in the minutia of the year and forget to celebrate the progress along the way and realize the areas needed for growth. As I personally reflected and had conversations with colleagues, several thoughts trended to the top of the list.

Relational Leadership

Building relationships has been fundamental to my work as a new principal to campus. Each time that we interact with an individual on our campus, whether it be students or staff members, we have the opportunity to build up or tear down a relationship. I can certainly reflect on many instances where, in a passing conversation or a formal meeting, I could have taken the opportunity to be more gracious, thoughtful, knowledgeable, or compassionate of the needs of others. Reflecting on these moments of failure in building up a relationship allows me the chance to do it better the next time.

Relational leadership also allows me to build capacity in others for leadership. In his book Culturize, Jimmy Casas talks about how to model positive interactions every day and the impact this has on culture within a learning community. By working to model positive interaction on our campus, I am showing others what really matters. Do I get it right every time? Of course not! Am I human? Yes. Unfortunately, as leaders we are under a microscope, but when we don’t get it right, we have to make it right and strive to do better the next time.

Reality—Not Perception—Is Reality

I have said the cliché “perception is reality” over and over in the past. As I have reflected on this school year, my mindset behind this thought has shifted. What others think about the work that takes place in our building every day is important. What they perceive, however, does not mean that it is a true reflection of the work that is taking place. It can become a slippery slope of a lost vision when we chase the perceptions of others.

Instead, what I have tried to do this year is receive feedback from others and test that feedback against the vision we have set out to achieve. For example, you might have heard a teacher say, “These students misbehave more than any other year at this school,” when the data on discipline does not support this claim. You might dismiss the comment as the teacher being frustrated in their incorrect perception. Another way to proceed might be to reflect on the communication cycle for discipline and see if the teacher has been left out of the discussion about how to support student behavior on campus. One way builds resentment within the campus, while the other way builds collaboration.

We Have Nothing if We Don’t Have Trust

In his research on the neuroscience behind trust, Paul J. Zak explains that a sense of higher purpose and trust produce oxytocin in the brain, which leads to happiness. In fact, Zak finds that those that work in high-stress organizations are 50 percent more productive and 40% less likely to exhibit burnout. If we do not build a community of trust within our learning community, we will struggle to provide the environment students deserve.

Being new to a campus, there is an obvious skepticism that occurs with change. While I would love to wiggle a magic wand and, suddenly, trust ensues. That is not the realty. Trust is something we must work on daily. It’s built in communicating broadly and collaboratively. It’s built when we do what we say we will do. And it’s built when we face conflict head on and agree to work in the spirit of doing what is best for kids.

Treat Others as They Want to Be Treated

When I began my administrative career, I thought that everyone showed up to work every day for the same reasons that I did. That was naïve. What I have learned over the years is that different people are motivated by different things. Some might come to work every day because they have a passion for the content they teach. For others, it is a financial means to an end. Yet, others might come to work because they feel a social sense of purpose to support the human development of adolescents. None of these motivations, or any other reason for that matter, is wrong, but recognizing them does allow me to support staff needs in different ways. By seeking to learn about the uniqueness of each person that I serve, I have been able to have more meaningful conversations and dig deeper into why we do what we do.

I have also learned to be careful of filtering how others want to be treated through the lens of how I want to be treated. Of course, there are some standard social norms that we should practice in a learning environment. Understanding how to support the individual, however, allows me to work more efficiently and effectively. For instance, I enjoy one-on-one conversations. So when I started the year and asked someone to come visit with me in my office, I thought nothing of it other than it being a conversation. I quickly realized that for some, having a conversation in the principal’s office meant something entirely different. Thus, I had to adjust my conversation style with some, choosing a fly-by to the classroom or an email communication instead.

As I reflect on this midpoint in the year, in some ways I wonder how we made it through the stress of what this year has given us. Mostly, however, I am humbled every time I think about the opportunity I have to serve kids and how important this work is to the future of our community. I am grateful to be reminded every day that I chose the greatest profession on Earth!

Christopher Bailey is principal of Clack Middle School in the Abilene Independent School District in Texas. Connect with him on Twitter at @stixbailey.

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