Shawna was a veteran principal of six years, all at the same middle school. Scores were climbing, and the school had consistently made most of its AYP targets throughout the changeover to Smarter Balanced assessments. Unfortunately, Shawna felt pretty stressed much of the time, and had just learned that she had slightly elevated cholesterol. But when she asked her teachers to complete an online 360-degree survey about her leadership in transitioning to Common Core State Standards, she was confident that, overall, her staff would say her leadership was strong.

When the results came in, she was quite surprised that more than half the staff still regarded this nearly three-year-old initiative as “second-order” change – change that represents a sharp departure from the familiar. But the real shock came when she saw that her scores in Communication and Culture were much lower than she expected. After a short spate of rationalizing and excuse making, she mustered the nerve to call in her site language arts coach, Melanie.

She showed the graphs to Melanie and began wondering out loud if the program erred in recording the scores for these particular areas. Melanie became visibly uncomfortable. Surprised, Shawna asked if she would be willing to share some honest feedback about her leadership in second-order change.

Slowly, Melanie began to share her own feelings, careful to clarify that she was speaking only for herself. “When I come in to talk to you about all that’s going on, I always feel like you’re in the middle of something more important.”

Shawna exclaimed that Melanie was certainly welcome in her office, anytime – she had an open-door policy.

“Well, that’s part of the problem. You’re always looking past me, out into the office. You’re either waving and saying “Hi” to someone walking by, or jumping up to run out there and intervene with some situation that’s going on. Even when it’s quiet...”

By Terry Wilhelm
out there, like late in the afternoon, you’re always looking at your computer while we’re talking, or just answering an email “real quick.” Or you’re trying to eat while we’re talking, because I know you never have time to have a real lunch, and I just feel like I’m trying to squeeze in on top of everything that has you so snowed under. It’s hard right now, but you just seem too busy.”

With that pronouncement, Melanie slumped down in her chair, clearly wishing she hadn’t said so much. Shawna, now more shocked than before, stammered out her thanks, and quickly added an assurance that she appreciated Melanie’s candor. Melanie hastily stood up and shot toward the door, giving her a nervous half-smile, “You’re welcome, I guess.”

Shawna closed her office door and sank back into her chair. If Melanie, one of her closest partners in all the site’s current leadership endeavors, had all this to say, what was the rest of the staff saying?

Shawna is a composite of numerous principals I have known, including myself. One of the most valuable – and scary – tools a leader can use is a 360 instrument that allows others to express their views of his or her leadership – anonymously.

Writer and diarist Anais Nin wrote, “Life shrinks or expands in proportion to one’s courage.” If your leadership is an important aspect of your life, and you have a desire to raise your leadership to a new level, I highly encourage you to find and use a tool that will give you this kind of very personal feedback.

Yes, it does require courage. But perhaps more powerfully than any other vehicle, it will enable you to take your leadership to a new level.

As we reflect on leadership in education today, perhaps no descriptor is more expressive than “frantic.” The day simply contains too few hours; yet the hours we devote on any given day can be exhausting. Being thoroughly unqualified to offer advice, I will instead offer a few of the learnings I’ve gleaned from reflecting on my own practice, as well as observing other leaders, using Shawna as my medium.

Confronting these “brutal facts,” Shawna made several small, though not necessarily easy changes. Habits die hard. She rearranged her office furniture so that instead of being tempted to look past the person sitting in her guest chair out into the office, she could only look at his or her face as they talked. She forced herself not to look at her computer monitor or type on her keyboard when someone was in her office, and swiveled her chair slightly away from the computer so that she wasn’t tempted.

She couldn’t figure out how to get an actual lunch built into her day, and she continued to eat at her desk. But when someone came in to talk, she stopped eating and started giving the conversation her full attention – with the added bonus of not having to talk with her mouth full.

John Maxwell has written, “No one can lead others until he can lead himself.” Unfortunately, few of us seem to be able to find the time or energy for the reflection necessary to lead ourselves, or even care for ourselves physically as we should.

Although countless experts remind us of the critical importance of breakfast in a healthy diet, and for maintaining a healthy weight, Shawna’s commute made this next to impossible. By the time she actually got to school, no matter how early, it was not unusual for a parent or staff member – delighted by their lucky timing – to accost her as she got out of her car.

She started eating a banana just before the day began, and gave her a few nutrients to boot. She actually liked oranges better, but who had time to peel one?

Devoted to audio books, Shawna felt that at least she could maintain some modicum of awareness about new professional topics. No principal she knew personally, despite the irony of being leaders in education, had time to actually read. Then, at the end of one long day, the player in her car simply stopped working. Irritated, she tried the radio. It was kaput, too.

After a few miles, to her astonishment, she realized that she actually liked the silence. After about 11 hours of input, the quiet bubble of her car was like a soothing dip in a cool, spring-fed pond. Having no time to take her car anywhere for attention for anything unrelated to the rock-bottom need for safe drivability, the sound system just stayed broken, and Shawna found she arrived at work fresher, and at home less burdened.

As she talked through some of her new insights with a close friend, Shawna decided to try one more strategy to carve out some personal time for herself. She had picked up a copy of Julie Cameron’s classic “The Vein of Gold” in a bookstore, and had been interested enough to read a couple of chapters; although she hadn’t actually bought the book. It was for artists and creative types, not for someone like her.

Cameron suggested a daily morning ritual called Morning Pages. Shawna had few of us seem to be able to find the time or energy for the reflection necessary to lead ourselves, or even care for ourselves physically as we should.
been intrigued enough to try it, but just hadn’t been able to stick with it. She did, however, love the quiet time she gained by waking up about a half hour earlier, and sitting quietly with her coffee.

One chilly morning, she lit a very small fire in the fireplace, and her own morning ritual was born. She learned to estimate almost exactly how many small pieces of wood she needed for a fire that was finished burning by the time she left for work, and the inner quiet of that solitude generally lasted all the way through her morning commute. As the weather got warmer, she substituted a few candles for the fire, and enjoyed the same result.

The morning paper and TV news awaited with their noisy, daily reliability in the staff lounge, and if she happened to miss the latest sensational story because of some classroom emergency, she could be sure that several staff members would mention it in the course of the day, delighted to find someone ignorant of this all-consuming, late-breaking news.

Shawna began to examine other aspects of her leadership, too. She had become proud of the fact that she had actually, finally, learned to delegate. But the 360 results suggested that this might not be as positive as she had believed.

One day, she happened on a brief article that described the difference between distributed leadership and shared leadership. She realized that she was distributing – delegating – some leadership tasks that she should be sharing.

Shared leadership empowers teacher leaders to begin, side-by-side with the principal, to shoulder the responsibilities for significant work toward improving student achievement, through the process of the principal’s modeling, co-planning, co-facilitating, and debriefing leadership experiences. To be sure, delegation is easier, but the level of broad-based teacher ownership and learning is greatly diminished.

Delegation really has its place in lower-level tasks that do not require the same level of learning and importance as responsibilities that should be shared. A leader who is growing in wisdom learns to know the difference.

One principal who had truly fostered her own teachers as leaders remarked, “I’m not the only voice anymore. There are lots of us, all saying the same thing. It’s finally about the kids.” What a relief, to be able to share this paramount leadership responsibility with teachers.

Finally, my composite Shawna also represents our universal, lifelong career struggle as educational leaders to Get Organized. I had hoped to have mastered this by the time I was eligible to retire, but I regret to report that I have failed within that timeline.

I sometimes think I’ve bought every book ever published on the topic. I once bought a small gift book called “Organized Serenity.” Before I could get around to reading it, I lost it forever – probably in some morass of piled files and papers.
My latest find – “How to Get Organized Without Resorting to Arson” – is my favorite so far. I have actually put a few ideas into practice, and they seem to be sticking. I’m trying the Control Folders instead of To Do lists, and Backwardsing Up for projects. (Those familiar with “Understanding By Design” will quickly relate to Backwardsing Up.) The book is written in a wonderful, no-nonsense style as entertaining as the title suggests.

My most life-changing Get Organized seminar was one I attended with Malachi Pancoast, The Breakthrough Coach. Sharing how this helped me is a challenge without sounding like an ad for Pancoast. His training is specifically designed for site administrators, but even as a county office administrator – more of a “technician” in Malachi’s nomenclature – I found valuable components that worked for me.

I no longer kept files, piles, books or bookcases in my office. In this system, all of these are kept under the authority of the clerical staff. I no longer used a desk. I sat at a long table with a couple of extra chairs for guests, a phone and my laptop. Pancoast urges getting rid of the computer, too, but as a technician – planning and facilitating or presenting staff development – this was a step outside my reach in that position.

I must point out that in order to implement this model, extra file and bookcase space is needed somewhere outside one’s personal office, but after purging significant amounts of paper and files, what remains is greatly reduced.

For many people, the biggest obstacle in the program is following the directive to remove all personal décor items – photos, awards, knickknacks, and personal and professional mementos – from the office. The point is to stop “nesting” in your office. My office had a Zen-like appearance which many visitors noted. I found the empty space to be as mentally and visually liberating as Pancoast promised.

My “hot files” of current working projects were kept on a secretary’s countertop, and for me a true breakthrough was being able to focus on just one at a time, boosting my productivity immensely. All my reference material, program records and older files were housed in a cabinet opposite the secretary’s station. I maintained a pile-free office for the better part of two years, right up until I retired and began working from home.

I believe that this is similar to a weight loss program. If you can go that long without backsliding, it can probably be termed a personal success, and I can say without reservation that both my energy and focus vastly improved as a result.

For principals, the point of Breakthrough training is to get out of the office a minimum of two to three days per week, and into classrooms, and to go home at a reasonable time at the end of the day. This is defined as sans-briefcase, since it almost never gets unpacked anyway.

Pancoast calls these compulsive tote bag/briefcase behaviors, “Giving your stuff a ride.” The data he collects on long-term cli-
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ents – many of whom sign up for more advanced training – suggests that principals and APs who implement what they learn do spend significantly more time in classrooms.

For the sake of the students, educational leaders must not only survive, but thrive. We need every tool and strategy we can find that we can personalize to work for us, especially those that tell us how we’re doing. The value of learning what your followers really think is beyond what I can convey in a few paragraphs.

The Flippen Group – authors and developers of “Capturing Kids’ Hearts” – offers a 360 instrument used in conjunction with its leadership training. Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) has developed an online survey specifically for school principals.

In my principalship, before the time of online tools, my feedback came from paper and pencil surveys, based on a model from a district where I had been a teacher. Out of my staff surveys, perhaps my most valuable lesson was the essential, compelling message of the need for a leader to go within and find time to reflect.

This is a human – not simply a leadership – need; although leadership gurus allude to this when they write about the necessity of reflection. Every spiritual tradition has its teachings on attending to the life within. It is truly a universal human need, sorely neglected in our modern, frantic culture.

I hesitate to use the airline metaphor, because a participant in a group once demanded, “So the plane is going down?” No, I do not believe it is, but the cabin pressure may be a little low from time to time. So please, leaders, put on your own oxygen mask first, before assisting others. Get a read from those you lead. Then adjust your behaviors, using what you learn. Above all, carve out time – somewhere in your day – to reflect.

Author Sarah Ban Breathnach writes: “Usually, when the distractions of daily life deplete our energy, the first thing we eliminate is the thing we need the most: quiet, reflective time. Time to dream, time to contemplate what’s working and what’s not, so that we can make changes for the better.” I hope you will find your own quiet time, so that in these times of rapid change and many challenges, you will be a leader who thrives.

Resources

• The Breakthrough Coach, management development for instructional leaders: www.the-breakthrough-coach.com.
• The Flippen Group, training and other services for leaders in education, business and nonprofit organizations: www.flippen-group.com.
• Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning, Balanced Leadership 360 online assessment of 21 century research-based responsibilities in school leadership: www.mcrel.org.

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