

Emotionally Intelligent Principals

Addressing the affective demands of newcomers through one-on-one coaching

BY GARY S. BLOOM

"I came to the realization that if I don't balance my job and my family, I'll fail."

"I've learned to take the balcony view, to not be so personally invested in how people react to me."

"Nobody told me I'd be spending so much time on adult issues. Why am I having to check up on grown men?"

"I knew what to do when I was teaching; it was $x + y = z$. Not anymore."

"I can't afford to show emotion or to say the wrong thing at the wrong time. I have to control myself, and to live with unfairness."

— Reflections from first- and second-year principals

It's no secret that school leaders fail not because they lack brains, determination, knowledge and technical skills, but because of what is characterized as "style" or "people skills." Daniel Goleman and his colleagues have helped us to recognize that emotional intelligence is an essential element of leadership.

Goleman, author of several books on the subject, cites his own research and the work of others in arguing that emotional intelligence has at least as much to do with on-the-job success as cognitive intelligence and technical expertise. Goleman defines EI as "the capacity for recognizing our own feelings and those of others, for motivating ourselves and for managing emotions well in ourselves and in our relationships."

Despite research and mountains of anecdotal evidence that call for us to attend to EI, most pre-service

and in-service programs for school leaders ignore these issues.

INTENSIVE INDUCTION

Few jobs present as many challenges to an individual's emotional intelligence as the principalship. An effective principal must master a broad spectrum of educational and management issues, must build and maintain relationships with multiple constituencies and must lead change processes in highly politicized and conservative institutions. No wonder, then, that most principals who do not remain in their positions leave for reasons more related to EI than to their knowledge of reading programs or their ability to construct a master schedule.

For the past five years, the New Teacher Center at University of California, Santa Cruz, has run a program, Coaching Leaders to Attain Student Success or CLASS, providing intensive induction support to first- and second-year principals. At the heart of the program is a 1:1 relationship between an expert principal serving as a coach and the beginning principal.

In our work with beginning principals, it has become clear that issues of EI are at the forefront in adapting to and succeeding in the job. Issues in this domain leave new principals saying, "No one told me that ...," "I had no idea that ...," "I couldn't have understood until I stood in these shoes ..."

Our vision of the principalship and the typical path to the principalship have changed over the past 10 years. We expect today's princi-

pals to be instructional leaders. We expect them to have deep knowledge of teaching and learning. The new generation of principals is now being drawn from the ranks of teacher leaders who are highly experienced in curriculum and instruction. In many cases, these individuals have only limited experience in intermediate leadership roles (such as assistant principal, department chair or athletic director). They find themselves more challenged by the affective demands of the job than by the technical aspects.

EMOTIONAL POTHOLES

While each new principal is an individual with unique strengths and needs, we have noted some commonalities among the emotional potholes that lie in the road during the first months on the job. The following themes emerged from our work with beginning principals, each illustrated by a typical scenario that depicts the role of the coach in helping a novice.

• *Making the transition from "one of us" to "one of them."*

Most new principals have come up through the teaching ranks within their districts, if not at their own sites. Right or wrong, in most school cultures an administrator no longer is regarded by teachers as a colleague. A new principal may feel like the same person she was before donning the administrator hat but will be treated differently by friends, former colleagues and community members. Recognizing and accepting the change in how

one is perceived can be a difficult adjustment.

Scenario: Within the first month of her first principalship, Susan was forced to respond to parent complaints about Jean, a friend and former teacher colleague. Jean expected unquestioning support from Susan, while parents were looking to their new principal to respond to their concerns. Susan was perplexed and torn by this situation, one that radically changed her relationship with a colleague of many years. Susan's coach helped her to monitor her emotional responses to this situation, to analyze Jean's interests and those of the students and parents, and to develop an appropriate action plan. Susan's coach also helped her recognize the need to build a new support network where it was safe to share these difficult problems in confidence.

• *Becoming a supervisor of adults.*

Most new principals have little or no experience as a supervisor and evaluator. It is a long emotional leap for many new principals to be comfortable in establishing clear expectations of staff and in following through on them. Many new principals are asked to supervise staff members who are older and more experienced than themselves. Tough personnel problems demand that principals manage their own emotions like anger, empathy and guilt, deal effectively with the emotional responses of adults and use the personnel systems to serve students' best interests.

Scenario: Mike did not expect to spend dozens of hours of his first months in the principalship dealing with the night custodian. But when rooms weren't being cleaned and the cafeteria wasn't set up for assemblies as requested, he knew he had to step in. His initial attempt to lay out his expectations to the

custodian was met with defensiveness and complaints about the lead custodian. Mike's initial reaction to the backlash to his intervention was to back off for fear of hurting feelings and alarming the union and district office. With his coach, Mike talked through his emotional reaction to this state of affairs and built a process of accountability for the night custodian that involved the lead custodian, the district maintenance supervisor and the classified employees union.

• *Living under the spotlight.*

New principals are surprised at the degree to which their every gesture is scrutinized by staff and community. The principalship is a form of celebrity (or notoriety) and requires some surrender of privacy and freedom to be oneself. Principals must learn a new level of automatic metacognition and of impulse control, as every vocalization, decision and act must be filtered through the questions, "How will this be interpreted? How will this serve my desired ends?"

Scenario: Jack was in a meeting with his coach when two parent volunteers entered his office asking for the key to a closet where supplies for the upcoming Halloween carnival were stored. His response to the two mothers was "Please, I'm in a meeting. ... I can't lend you the key, but I'll be out in a half hour or so." It didn't take long for the word to get out among parent volunteers that Jack was rude and unappreciative. Jack's coach helped him to develop a less abrupt style of communication, to express appreciation and to be more attuned to the ways in which people were likely to respond to him.

• *Letting go of emotional responses to problems.*

Principals are assaulted by dozens of problems large and small every

day. In order to manage their personal stress, they must separate themselves from those problems. And in order to effectively lead their sites, they must set aside their gut responses to problems and come at them from a systems perspective.

Scenario: Carlos was the first Latino principal of a school that was in transition from serving a largely African-American student body to a student population that was primarily Asian and Latino. The prior administrator of the school was African-American. It was not unusual for Carlos to be accused of racial bias in his handling of disciplinary matters and personnel problems. In this charged environment, Carlos worked with his coach to set aside his anger at being called a racist, learned to carefully mediate his words and actions and listen carefully to all parties and, perhaps most importantly, worked to build inclusive systems and a culturally proficient staff at his site.

• *Letting go of perfectionism and control.*

Most people end up in principalships because they were competent in their prior positions. They typically come to the principalship from jobs that are much more contained and where they could be much more hands-on. The principalship is more complex than most of the jobs leading up to it and requires delegation, as well as the acceptance of ambiguity and a lack of strict control. Living with this new tension can be very difficult for some new administrators.

Scenario: Elliott describes himself as anal retentive. In his first few months on the job, he panicked over all of the things that were not quite right at his school: staff members who showed up a little late, messy classrooms, teachers who were not teaching the adopted reading program, non-existent

budget records and poor cafeteria supervision. Elliott felt as if these issues and more were all his responsibility and that he was obliged to make things right immediately. Because he lacked confidence in the ability of others to do things to his standards, he hesitated to delegate. Elliott's coach helped him to recognize that he could not turn his school around all at once or alone and that only by living with imperfection and sharing control could the school truly progress. Once Elliott accepted these concepts, he was able to work with his coach to develop plans for delegating tasks and sharing leadership responsibilities.

• *Accepting that the job is never finished.*

Related to the need to let go of perfectionism and control is the requirement that new administrators understand that the principalship is a job with no boundaries other than those that are set by the principal herself.

Scenario: Lucinda could not believe it. She had always worked very hard, but she had been on top of her work, never a procrastinator, always meeting her own high standards. And now she was in a daze, working from 7 in the morning until 9 at night on weekdays and at least one weekend day. She was nagged by the paperwork to be reviewed, the meetings to be planned, the journals to be read. Lucinda worked with her coach to prioritize her work, to delegate tasks to others and to manage her time. One afternoon, she and her coach did nothing but go through the inbox, deciding what could be ignored, what required a personal response and what could be delegated. Finally, Lucinda articulated a set of promises to herself and her family; that she would be home for dinner four nights a week and that she would work no more than two weekend days a month.

• *Taking care of oneself.*

Most people who end up in the principalship are highly dedicated and altruistic. They have a hard time recognizing, let alone taking care of, their own needs for support (from clerical to emotional). To be effective, principals must learn that investing in their own well-being, including interests and relationships outside of school, is important to the well-being of their schools.

Scenario: Julie was a mess. By her own accounts, she was working 80 hours a week. She was not eating regular meals, had stopped exercising and was neglecting her husband and teenage daughter. Her coach helped her to recognize that the patterns she had developed were not sustainable and helped her to develop more effective management systems. Her coach also helped her to give herself permission to block out quiet time to work at home to catch up on thinking and paperwork and to invest time and resources in her own professional development and physical and mental health.

• *Developing new relationships with authority.*

Many new principals enter the job intimidated by superintendents, board members and other higher-level administrators. They must learn quickly to manage these relationships comfortably and must learn to manipulate the system to ensure that personal and site needs are met. In many districts they also must learn which of the overwhelming top-down mandates and expectations must be heeded and which can be safely ignored. They must learn to assess their own power and authority, which grows as they gain trust and earn the confidence of staff and community.

Scenario: One reason Roxanne was hired as a principal was that she was a loyal and committed teacher. When the district told her

of its plans to transfer two veteran teachers with histories of unsatisfactory performance to her site, she was torn between advocating for her site and being a "good soldier." She felt the district was exploiting her, but she was afraid to assert herself. With her coach, Roxanne developed a strategy for advocating for her school and roleplayed the conversations she planned on having with the superintendent.

• *Balancing relationships against productivity.*

New principals are often frustrated because they find that they don't have enough time for people. To survive in their jobs, they must learn to become more efficient in their relationships. They must learn to manage their conversations so they are short yet still meet the emotional needs of the participants. There can be a painful tension between the desire to be relaxed and friendly and the need to be task oriented.

Scenario: Edward loved people and was in danger of becoming the most popular but least effective principal in the history of the Madrone school. He would listen to parent and teacher concerns for hours on end. He would chat about family and sports with custodians and trustees without regard to other demands. He was building strong relationships but was not attending to other responsibilities nor was he invested in a vision for his school. As Edward's coach shadowed him for a full day, Edward practiced keeping his conversations short, positive and productive. Edward learned to use his daily calendar and tickler files as tools for following through. As Edward articulated his vision for his school, the strong relationships he had built with his staff would serve as a powerful base for school improvement.

• *Developing cross-cultural competence.*

Most new principals are comfortable working with teachers and parents. In this new role, however, they must learn to navigate the often unforgiving cultural and emotional landscapes of custodians, bus drivers, superintendents and diverse parent and community groups. Encounters with new groups and situations demand that principals be good listeners, observers of emotional response and mediators of their prejudices and communication.

Scenario: Jack had worked his entire career in schools in low-income communities with relatively young staffs, moderate turnover and a fair degree of openness to change. His new assignment was in a middle-class community with declining enrollment and a senior staff, the majority of whom had been at the site for 10 or more years. Jack slammed head-first into a resistant school culture dominated by veteran teachers who had no interest in cooperating with a new ambitious leader who they felt was bound to be a short-timer. Jack's coach helped him plan staff meetings and then observed Jack facilitating those meetings, with an eye toward identifying ways in which Jack could make inroads into the established school culture.

• *Not taking it personally.*

Anyone who has been in the school leadership business long will talk about how they have grown a "thick skin." Learning to manage emotional responses to criticism and conflict is essential to

managing personal stress and to being an effective problem solver.

Scenario: José called his coach late on a Friday night. His supervisor had told him that the superintendent had been receiving parent and teacher complaints about him and that as a result the superintendent would be conducting a survey and meeting with staff members to assess his performance. José felt attacked, angry and devastated.



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But as José discussed this situation with his coach, he came to realize that all of this was a result of his willingness to take on the school's dysfunctional culture and that if he mediated his emotions and worked with the superintendent, he could view this review process as an opportunity to expose the school's problems, consolidate his support and build a mandate for change.

READY TO RUMBLE

These are just a few of the typical challenges and situations that beginning principals confront. A pre-service program can do little to prepare future principals for most of these realities. One-on-one coaching, though, can support beginning principals in learning through these experiences and in building the emotional intelligence that is a prerequisite to effective school leadership.

Coaches trained through our center in Santa Cruz support new administrators as they work through the emotional challenges of the job and grapple with change agency. They meet regularly to discuss support strategies and work through case studies.

We see the work paying off. Our research indicates that as beginning principals begin to master the managerial and emotional demands of the principalship, they are able to emerge as instructional leaders.

One of our participants, reflecting on her first year as a principal, summed things up this way: "I finally feel ready to lead the school. I've survived everything the job threw at me this year and now, at last, I'm ready to begin to play seriously with that vision that I came here with last September."

Gary Bloom is associate director at the New Teacher Center at the University of California Santa Cruz, 725 Front St., Suite 400, Santa Cruz CA 95060.
E-mail: gsbloom@ucsc.edu

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