
LEADING TRENDS

Courageous Leadership Starts Now



The new school year approaches, at least in the Northern Hemisphere. Ordinarily, this is a time of looking forward with hopeful anticipation to the predictably recursive cycle that a new school year brings. But, this year, things are far from ordinary. In a flight of web sessions with heads of school from various regional associations in North America, Judy Schechtman, Abbi DeLessio, and I hear lots about the angst and agita mixed with hope gripping the school world in the run-up to a COVID-19 school year.

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As heads and board chairs prepare for the usual litany of “firsts” (first administrative team meeting, first faculty meeting, first board meeting, first parent meeting), most likely done online this year, we would like to offer our counsel in terms of seven points to consider. Even if you have already had your first faculty meeting, the relevance of these points will be continuing and can be shared, repeatedly throughout the year.

1. Maslow before Bloom

In a time of global crisis, grief, trauma and instability, keep in the foreground your school community’s need for health, safety, well-being, and belonging (Maslow), before tending to curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment (Bloom). Private, independent schools are humanistic institutions, where Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs must inevitably triumph over Benjamin Bloom’s taxonomy of learning. Bloom is higher up the Maslovian pyramid, so basic needs, those lower in Maslow’s hierarchy, should take precedence.

To do: Prioritize, in all that you do, the **health, safety, and well-being of everyone** in your community; remember, Maslow before Bloom.

2. Take Bold Action

More than ever, perfection is the enemy of progress. Forget elaborate projects that will take months or years to complete. During a crisis, leaders need to act quickly and decisively, even when this is

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hard, because advantage accrues to the “first mover.” A wealth of studies show that organizations that act boldly in a crisis are more likely to emerge stronger, even when controlling for pre-existing conditions such as endowment and debt load. Michael Ryan, Executive Director of the World Health Organization, sums it up: [in a crisis] “everyone is afraid of the consequence of error, but the greatest error is not to move at all.”

To do: Identify the **bold steps** needed for your school to emerge from COVID-19 stronger than before.

3. Raise the Bar

Collaboration among leadership team members must be stellar, or else you are in deep trouble amid this crisis. Internecine feuds and intra-team rivalries must be put aside because senior leaders simply cannot be working against each other or

defending their interests. Put concisely, the senior team is the most critical driver of everything that happens next. Call in expert facilitation if you need to, but make sure that your team performs as it should.

To do: Despite the tyranny of the urgent, **devote time (and resources) to the health of your team.** Now. And throughout the year. Without paying attention to this, burnout will happen before you arrive at Thanksgiving.

4. Model the Culture

Crises provide a unique opportunity to examine organizational culture. Reinforce cultural elements that are essential and enduring, and that serve the school and its mission well. However, if there are parts of the culture that were never helpful, or are long past their sell-by date, now is the moment to stay so and make a change. Insist on new behaviors that align with what will make your school emerge from COVID-19 stronger and contribute to a more viable future. None of this matters unless the leaders—board and administration alike—model that which they ask others to do.

To do: Identify the aspects of culture that help and those that hinder; point the way toward change while asking those in leadership with you to **model what is needed in the future**, not necessarily what lingers from the past.

5. Respond with Empathy to Everyone

COVID-19, racial injustice and equity issues, and the extraordinarily polarizing political moment in the USA will have a real impact on the people in your school. Teachers are working through the intensity of the crisis while dealing with their own feelings of fear and frustration. They did not sign up to be first responders, yet here they are on the front lines with little PPE between them and the virus. Parents never thought they would be worried about their children losing years of cognitive growth because of a disruption to school, yet here they are anxious over what they see as their children learn remotely. Everyone is on edge and simply recognizing this from the front of the room (or the top of Zoom) goes a long way to take the edge off.

To do: Empathize with the unique emotional state(s) of every group and individual you meet, especially those who seem more agitated and challenging of what the school is trying to do; remember, you don't have to agree with what someone says to understand the emotion that lurks beneath.

6. Have a Singular Focus

There is only one goal now: navigate through the crises to emerge stronger on the other side. Every strategic plan must be re-thought in light of COVID-19 and institutional racism, and strategies will need ongoing adjustment as new information becomes available. Attention spans contract in crisis, so it is paramount that you stay on-message and on-task to navigate through and emerge stronger. Avoid the myriad distractions that tug at you all through the day (e.g., delegate to someone else the job of monitoring social media).

To do: Identify the three factors most salient to your school emerging stronger and **stay firmly on-message all the time.**

7. Show You Are Human

Sure, leaders have to maintain an “I’ve got this” mien in public, but from time to time people must observe you experiencing the crises as a person, too. “Having this” doesn’t require being cold and calculating. Do not be afraid to show some vulnerability, especially when the issue at hand is emotionally evocative. Model how intense feelings of fear and loss can turn into action, so others see a way to handle their own strong emotions without paralysis.

To do: Talk about and **show emotions appropriate to the context** even while maintaining forward momentum. It’s okay to show vulnerability.

Keep in touch! Know that we are here to help if you need us.

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Thanks, and feel free to [contact us](#). We hope to work with you soon.