

The Power of Compassionate Leadership: Interviewing Principal Marcy Leonard

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In a reflective conversation with my principal, I uncover how her leadership has supported teaching and learning during a time of crisis.

SHUT UP & LISTEN

When my principal, Marcy Leonard, asks me how I'm doing, I am always honest. I don't say "fine." I can use adjectives like tired or angry or uncertain or hopeful because I'm confident Marcy actually wants to know how I'm really doing. Since our buildings closed in March 2020, Marcy has held regular open office hours in Google Meet. One day a week she is available for staff, one day a week she is available for families, and one day a week she is available for students. People show up and Marcy listens.

Marcy listens authentically, a disposition she's honed in her years of teaching and administration. I go to Marcy with big ideas, petty complaints, serious concerns, and genuine questions; she has been a gracious audience for all of it. Sometimes she answers my questions with questions, sometimes she supplies good advice, and sometimes she just acknowledges the thing I'm putting out into the world. Recently, I reflected with Marcy in an interview about how our school community is managing to hold together during the various national crises that have defined our

lives since March 2020. “We are asking teachers to do the impossible,” Marcy acknowledged. “One of the most important things you can do as a leader is to shut up and listen.”

Teaching conditions at my school specifically and in my district broadly are relatively teacher-friendly. We have been in full-time virtual learning with a modified schedule that reduces our total student load and number of sections. We are not required to report to buildings, but we have building access. We have protected planning time every school day and an entire day with no synchronous instruction to make room for collaboration and grading. It’s not perfect. But it is manageable and the breathing space our schedule creates has been necessary for my mental health this year.

Early on in the crisis, Marcy sought out the voices of the teachers and staff members to learn what their most pressing concerns were. In her words: “We can do all the messaging in the world, but if it’s not aligned to where people’s minds and hearts are, then it’s going to fall on deaf ears.” And so Marcy discovered that in addition to stress about grading and curriculum expectations, many staff members were also carrying the stress of how to teach from home with small children at home. “I don’t have that experience,” Marcy reflected, “but I need to know that experience is a driver for a number of our staff and respond accordingly.” This explains all of the new friendships Marcy has forged with the children of my colleagues over Google Meet this year; knowing that so many of our staff are also caregivers means that Marcy has explicitly welcomed children in our staff Google Meets. And they always want to say hi to Marcy.

SHOUT FROM THE ROOFTOPS

I let go of so much in my classes in 2020: semi-conservative DNA replication, bioinformatics, meiosis, electrophoresis, cellular respiration, and sex-linked inheritance. Some things have been cheerfully thrown out the window; others were hard to part with. More than once, I made a weekly agenda, realized it was asking too much of my students, and decided to remove a biology idea.

I am deeply in love with my content, and I take a lot of pride in how much biology I’m usually able to think about with my students. But this school year robbed me of

time, changed my calendar, disrupted my sleep, and put screens between me and my students. My students were suddenly being asked to do much more on their own, often while supervising or co-existing with siblings, sometimes while sharing devices or dealing with technology barriers, all while navigating the same national crises that were bearing down on my own spirit. I lightened the load for all of us by making my peace with a pared-down curriculum.

Every formal agenda Marcy has made since March 2020 begins with the same bullet point: 'Take care of yourselves and your loved ones first.'

I didn't need Marcy's permission to revise my curriculum for the year. Nonetheless, I felt a great sense of relief when I saw Marcy's slides for our first real staff meeting of the 2020-2021 academic year. In all caps, on one of the first slides, was the clear directive: "DON'T COVER THE CURRICULUM." She reminded us regularly throughout our week of planning time that she did not expect, and in fact did not want, us to cram all of the learning from a normal year into our virtual classrooms in a pandemic.

I didn't need Marcy's permission, but her unambiguous blessing on my curriculum-cutting was a gift of certainty and confidence. I did not need to waste energy wondering whether I'd done the right thing. I did not need to spend any brainpower trying to rationalize the decision to cut content. Marcy's directive did that work for me. I wasn't covering the curriculum, and that was a sound decision, and I could move on with my work.

Marcy anticipated that some staff would feel self-imposed pressure to cover their usual curriculum, and she recognized that efforts to do so would not be sustainable for staff or students. Marcy believes that the messages to shout from the rooftops are the ones that defy assumptions and conventions. Teachers might expect their administrators to prioritize "covering curriculum;" Marcy needed to ensure that we all understood her position on the question of curriculum coverage during a

pandemic. “You have to scream it,” Marcy acknowledged, “and you have to sometimes drop a curse word to get people to pay attention and think, ‘Wait, did she say don’t cover the curriculum?’ So that folks take the pressure off of themselves to do things that are not going to be good for them, which means it’s not good for their kids. School leadership needs to make sure that the teachers and the instructional staff, and all of the staff, have the permission and the messaging to take care of the kids in ways that we know are best for kids, because it’s our staff that are the ones doing the direct support for the kids now.”

DO THOSE LITTLE THINGS

Every formal agenda Marcy has made since March 2020 begins with the same bullet point: “Take care of yourselves and your loved ones first.”

Among teachers, self-care is a notoriously elusive ideal. We are used to hearing the phrase thrown around as our professional responsibilities threaten to overwhelm us. Frankly, I’ve never had much cause to listen to an administrator talking about self care; it always seemed to be a perfunctory add-on to the end of a long list of work expectations and problems that needed solving.

I asked Marcy about this bluntly in our conversation: “Including ‘take care of yourself and your family’ on every agenda is potentially really powerful . . . and also potentially really hollow. You can’t tell your folks to take care of themselves and then give them 17 things to worry about. Especially this year, you can’t just put out this kind of performative positivity. I’m curious—how do you think about enacting those bullet points from the agendas?”

“I think you’re right on for that, it becomes very easy for it to be performative,” Marcy answered earnestly. “So I think it’s really the little things . . . [There’s] a Mother Teresa quote: ‘We can do no great things, only small things with great love.’” Marcy has learned that dramatic, flashy gestures tend not to generate meaningful or lasting results. Instead, she focuses her energy on consistency with what she considers “little things.” Little things like specifically directing teachers to power their computers down on Friday afternoon, expressly encouraging staff to make use of available leave to care for family members, holding a position open for a staff member out on medical leave. “It’s got to be everything. All the

messaging all the time needs to align with the priorities and the vision, or it just becomes empty words” Marcy mused.

This school year, I got an additional planning period in my schedule to make time for my formal leadership role in teacher development. I had initially hesitated to accept the extra planning time. Time is, of course, the most valuable commodity a teacher can be offered. I knew that the school year was going to be taxing on everyone, and I worried that accepting the additional planning time would be selfish. After talking in circles for a few minutes, my team leader finally said, “Marcy told me that she wants to see the female leadership in the building advocate more for themselves and their needs. We don’t ever ask for anything. Take the planning period.”

The extra planning time has allowed me to regularly end my work day at a reasonable time while meeting my various responsibilities. I could have done the work without the planning period; I would have worked late, as I have before, and it would have been fine. But Marcy pointing out that the women on our staff are less likely to advocate for what we need made me realize that asking for extra time to take care of my extra responsibilities was reasonable. I don’t need to feel guilty about being able to get my work done during the work day.

In the scheme of a school year, from a principal’s perspective, my schedule is surely a little thing. I’m so grateful Marcy took the time to pester my team leader to pester me about taking the time I need to do meaningful work.

FULL SPEED AHEAD

Here’s a non-exhaustive list of what’s happening at our school during virtual, pandemic instruction:

Staff are participating in one of six different peer-facilitated professional learning pathways, all intentionally focused on equity and racial justice.

A student advisory committee representative of our student body meets regularly with administration to provide input on school policy, propose action steps for school improvement, and share their concerns. These meetings are

facilitated by students.

A team of educators—our Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion Coalition—has created a weekly virtual discussion space for the group Students for Social Justice. These meetings are facilitated by students.

As part of a local restorative justice cohort, many of our staff have been participating in voluntary book clubs focused on racial justice.

I've been marveling at everything our community is doing. So I brought this up with Marcy: "I'm not sure we would have been able to make the same kind of progress without this crisis. Does that resonate with you at all?"

It is a remarkable thing to experience a whole bunch of teachers focusing all of their teacher energy on exactly the issue they find most urgent because their principal agrees that it is most urgent.

"I think we're three to five years ahead of where we would have been . . . because of the pandemic . . . We were slow-playing the restorative justice work last year [2019] in really purposeful ways, and we have had the opportunity to put it on fast forward. Some of that is because we started pushing fast-forward, and people were like, 'Yeah! Let's go.' I think if people's responses had been, 'No, I don't have the bandwidth,' we would have slowed down; we wouldn't have forced it. But people have been responding to the messaging. People have stepped up into leadership roles in amazingly powerful ways. The responses have been so incredibly positive, so, 'Okay, let's keep going.'"

I asked Marcy what parts of our progress she was particularly surprised by or pleased with. "So many things! Including students in decision making and amplifying student voice. I was gonna say building leadership capacity of staff, but I don't think we've done a ton of building the leadership capacity of staff. I think we

just created leadership opportunities for staff and really talented staff members stepped into them and ran with them in really incredible ways. I mean, your work for professional learning has been, I think, revolutionary. [Our School Improvement Co-Chairs] have explained the school improvement process to our staff and engaged them more effectively than I ever have done as an educational leader. Having an entire Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion Coalition, because we had like a dozen people applying for the one position and we needed to do more than just pick one and tell 11 to go pound sand.”

Marcy is clearly on a roll now. “All of the different pieces that we’re doing with having educator leaders—not just teacher leaders, but educator leaders. We’re now trying to bring in that third leg of the stool with getting parent and family participation. I think really the opportunity to think philosophically about, what does it mean to teach a content area? What is covering the curriculum versus mastery of standards? What am I required to teach as a teacher, and who gets to make that decision? And how am I choosing to instruct? Certainly the grading and assessment conversations and changes that are occurring . . .” While Marcy cogently summarizes the whole web of complex questions various teams of staff are tackling this year, I am just astounded that she has such detailed knowledge of so many moving pieces.

And I’m gratified that our work, even the work that is still only in its conversational stages, is noticed and appreciated.

BE READY OR GET OFF THE BUS

I came into our conversation guided by the idea that our school was accomplishing a lot and holding together during a pandemic, and I viewed the pandemic as the catalyst. But Marcy pointed to a different event. “Even more so than the pandemic . . . from George Floyd’s murder on, it was ‘Be ready or get off the bus.’”

“[We are] able to talk not just around diversity, equity and inclusion, but to name racism . . . to name all of the -isms and to really focus hard and specifically on anti-racism and the impact of trauma. That language that wouldn’t have been the language if we were still in the building and if George Floyd hadn’t been murdered.

I would have waited a little longer for people to be ready.”

Marcy has always been forthright about positioning equity and justice as the real drivers of our work. This is not the first year, or the first school community, in which she has explicitly worked on developing anti-racist dispositions and action steps with staff. Among our staff, there has been a contingent of folks working more or less quietly, more or less formally, on these ideas for years. George Floyd’s murder had the effect of galvanizing the staff who were already engaging in anti-racist work. We were desperate for action—and we had a leader desperate for the same action. It is a remarkable thing to experience a whole bunch of teachers focusing all of their teacher energy on exactly the issue they find most urgent because their principal agrees that it is most urgent.

We never needed permission to confront racism in our community and in our classrooms. But we have been able to do a whole lot more, more quickly because our administration prioritizes and emphasizes the work. Centering anti-racism has become a professional expectation in our staff community.

WHEN VISION BECOMES CULTURE

Marcy uses vision much more effectively than most leadership I’ve worked with. Her vision centers on equitable learning, school community, and post-secondary preparation. It’s been remarkably durable messaging, and it actively drives our work. When our school buildings closed in March 2020, the steadiness of Marcy’s vision helped me feel grounded and calm. I knew that whatever school might look like, we would have the same guiding priorities, and they were worthwhile.

School culture—or any organization’s culture—is the way we do things around here. Saying ‘racism doesn’t exist’ isn’t the way we do things around here. It’s not a part of our culture.

Marcy knows full well that simply having a vision doesn’t guarantee progress or community. She is committed to translating vision into culture: “School culture—or any organization’s culture—is the way we do things around here. Saying ‘racism

doesn't exist' isn't the way we do things around here. It's not a part of our culture. A leader can articulate a vision. But if the vision doesn't become a part of the culture, then it's just performative language. Part of what has been incredibly inspiring this year is our vision becoming our culture."

What's been incredibly inspiring this year is having a compassionate leader who makes space for all of us to be human while respecting our professional judgment and knowledge. What's been incredibly inspiring is the explicit permission to take care of myself, and to take care of my students, and the support to make it possible. What's been incredibly inspiring has been participating in a school community where anti-racism is visible at every level of the work.

CITATION

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