

Courageous Leadership

By Dr. Tracey Severns, Director of Student Performance, Mount Olive Public Schools



I was in North Plainfield

attending my first Administrators' Ed Camp when the request was made for topics for the day's sessions. Unsure of how it would be received, I decided to toss out the idea that had been following me around for weeks — the role of courage in instructional leadership. Still uncertain about whether it made onto the board as a session due to genuine interest or lack of other options, I was curious to see what would happen.

I got to the assigned room a few minutes early. Three people were already there. For the next 10 minutes a steady stream of people flowed into the room and spilled into the large circle of desks. More chairs were dragged in. The anticipation in the room was palpable.

I knew the one-person-speaks-at-a-time format I had experienced in the other sessions wasn't going to work.

Everyone wanted, needed, to tell their story and hear the stories of others. "Tell the person sitting next to you about a time you had to use courage in your role as a school leader." The room erupted in conversation. After 30 minutes, I tried to shift from one-to-one dialogues to group discussion. They continued to talk. I relented.

Finally, with 10 minutes remaining, I was able to pull the group together. I ended with this: The role of a school leader is to improve what researcher John Hattie refers to as "the learning lives of kids." This requires more than certifications and good intentions. It requires courage: the willingness and ability to act on behalf of the students we serve. Above all else, the greatest responsibility of the school leader is to take on the status quo, to challenge the beliefs and practices that are influencing student outcomes, and to replace them with new

ways of working together that ensures the success of every single student in our care.

Yes, but how? One courageous conversation at a time. Robinson (2009) refers to this as "engaging in constructive problem talk," defined as the ability to name, describe and analyze problems in ways that reveal possibilities for change. Roland Barth characterizes this as discussing the "nondiscussables," the truths that everyone knows but no one will talk about. To change the culture, we must be willing to drag these truths out of the darkness into the light, to name and address the nondiscussables that are infecting the culture and impeding learning.

Initiating the conversation is the role of the leader. Many, however, lack either the skill or the will to risk the repercussions. Why are so many leaders unwilling or unprepared to

take on this work? Two reasons. First, “Leaders are as human as those they lead” (Abrams, 2009). They have the same needs for approval and affiliation as their staff. So for the sake of keeping the peace and preserving their relationships, they shy away from requiring common assessments because the teachers don’t want them, or confronting the faculty member who refuses to participate during PLCs. They avoid doing anything that may result in isolation, conflict or criticism, so they never have to go to a retirement dinner or holiday party knowing they are not welcome. They pick morale over the moral obligation to act. And students pay the price.

Second, there is no courage curriculum in college. And so the skills required to tell a teacher she won’t be renewed, or tell a parent her child won’t be graduating, or inform the superintendent you don’t plan to offer the job to the cousin of a councilman are left unlearned. Lacking the knowledge of how to conduct these kinds of conversations, leaders may choose to avoid having them altogether. Only to suffer the consequences later.

The good news is, “Courage can be learned.” (Saphier). Given a way to clarify the problem, organize one’s thoughts, and conduct the conversation, leaders can gain the confidence and competence necessary to address the issues that are compromising the “learning lives” of their students. I credit Susan Scott’s book, *Fierce Conversations*,

as showing me how. According to Scott, “Fierce conversations are about moral courage, clear requests, and taking action.” An example of a fierce conversation sounds like this:

Mr. _____, last week I talked with you about the importance of using good judgement when addressing students during your lessons. I specifically asked you to refrain from using sarcasm in class because it is hurtful and compromises your relationship with students. I also reminded you that this form of discourse goes against the District’s standards for professional conduct.

This morning, a student reported that when he asked you a question in class, you responded by saying, “Duh.” and then asked the other students if anyone would be willing to “sell him a clue.” I have spoken to several witnesses who have confirmed this exchange.

I am deeply concerned about your ability to serve as a teacher in our school if you are not able to conduct yourself in a respectful and professional manner. I am also concerned about the fact that I addressed this issue with you last week and you disregarded my direction within days of our conversation.

There is a great deal at stake here. If you are going to continue to serve as a teacher in this school, you are going to have to change the way you speak to students.

Perhaps I contributed to the problem by not speaking to you about this sooner.

This is what I want to resolve. How are we going to ensure that all of your verbal interactions with students are appropriate and professional?

I want to understand what is happening from your perspective. Please talk to me about what is going on and how we may resolve this issue.

In just sixty seconds, the issue is clarified and communicated, which allows the rest of the conversation to focus on resolution. This frees the leader up to be fully present during the discussion and makes the process of memorializing the exchange in writing far easier.

The next time you find yourself called to conduct a courageous conversation, try following the steps outlined by Susan Scott. When you know the way, the will may follow, and the students will win.

- Name the issue.
- Select a specific example that illustrates the behavior or situation you want to change.
- Describe your emotions about the issue.
- Clarify what is at stake.
- Identify your contribution to the problem.
- Indicate your wish to resolve the issue.
- Invite the person to respond.

References

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About the Author



Dr. Tracey Severns is currently the Director of Student Performance in Mount Olive and owner of Teach4Results, a company dedicated to helping others improve student outcomes. Previously, she was a special education teacher, vice principal, principal, superintendent, adjunct professor, and the Chief Academic Officer for the New Jersey Department of Education. In 2011, she received the Middle Level Leadership Award and was New Jersey’s Visionary Principal of the Year and a National Distinguished Principal. In 2014, Dr. Severns was named Educator of the Year by the Peace Islands Institute and was awarded an honorary Doctorate in Public Service from Georgian Court University.