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What problem do you want?

Being an elementary principal is a hard job. Principals are responsible for the safety, learning, finance and general operation of the entire school. Add to that mix the expectations coming down from the district office, interactions with parents and other stakeholders, and you have the recipe for burning out and succumbing to the tyranny of the urgent.

How many times a day do you hear “Hey, got a minute?” from a student/teacher/staff member/parent/district person? Countless interruptions. It is rare to put together more than 5 minutes at a time without interruption. The paradox here, is that in order to move forward proactively, time to think, plan and prepare is essential to the success of the entire system. The principal should be the one out front, as John Wooden says “carrying the banner”, setting the vision and moving forward. The constant disruptions make this kind of leadership difficult, if not impossible. The goal is not to eliminate all interruptions, but to create a 30 - 40 minute window that is interruption free.

As Greg McKeown writes “The reality is that saying yes to any opportunity by definition requires saying no to several others. We can either make the hard choices for ourselves, or allow others, whether our colleagues, our boss, or our customers - to decide for us.” The word “opportunity” here in our context might mean helping a teacher with a technology issue, meeting with a concerned parent, or dealing with a discipline issue. The reality is that there are no solutions, only trade-offs. Acknowledging this fact is a critical step toward creating the space and time to think, plan and prepare. It requires an acceptance that nobody can “do it all”. It acknowledges that when I chose “A” it leaves less time for, or eliminates “B”.

Being proactive about what trade-off you want requires a question. What problem do I want? Should the concerned parent be asked to make an appointment for later that afternoon, thereby protecting time to plan and prepare, or should the parent be engaged now, knowing that the time to plan and prepare is lost, but the issue is resolved immediately. There are no solutions, only trade-offs, so which problem do you want?

Creating time to think, plan and prepare will have an impact on your success that is exponentially greater than the amount of time it requires. In the scenario described above, the trade-off to protect the planning time will ensure that the PD planned for later that week will be well thought out, well planned, well delivered and more likely to be implemented by teachers.

The trade-off for engaging the concerned parents makes it less likely the PD will be well thought out, well planned and well delivered. It will still happen, just not done as well as it could have been, and less likely to be implemented. A concerned parent is always going to be there. The demands for the attention of the principal are unrelenting and endless. Unless a conscious decision and commitment is made to trade the tyranny of the urgent for time to think, plan and

prepare, you will remain in the cycle of responding to the most urgent things first. Below are 4 first steps that will increase the likelihood that you ensure time for yourself.

First, be explicit about your intention to create some time to think, plan and prepare. Let all staff know that if they are asked by the school secretary to come back later or make an appointment, it isn't personal, you still love them! Acknowledge that it is difficult for you to do this, but it is necessary to ensure you are at your best during the most important times, such as PD, planning for difficult conversations with concerned parents, and thinking about the future direction of the school.

Second, reduce distractions. Do not leave your phone sitting face up on your desk, in your pocket, or anywhere that it is easily accessible. Simply silence it and place it in your jacket pocket that is hanging behind the door, or put it away in a drawer or cupboard, your phone does not get lonely and will not miss your attention. Permanently disable any notification on your phone and computer for email. You do not need to be dinged when you get a new LinkedIn invite.

Third, discuss with your office staff the need you have for protecting your time to think, plan and prepare. Be candid in describing the anxiety it causes you to be "unavailable", yet stress the importance. Be explicit about what situations are worthy of an interruption and which are not. The reality is that 90% of what constitutes an emergency to many could really wait 30 minutes, and in many instances, would be more easily resolved with a little wait time. The student that stole an eraser? It can wait. The teacher that needs you to sign a grant application? It can wait. The concerned parent that would like to discuss a student grade? It can wait.

Fourth, be strategic about what time of day you schedule your time. Often, shortly after school gets started is a good time, for others the last 30 minutes of the day works well. You know your schedule and you know when your busiest times are. Schedule you are least likely to be interrupted. If you are a real morning person, don't schedule it for later afternoon. Never schedule your time to think, plan and prepare, for after everyone has left for the day. This will decrease the effectiveness of the time because you are mentally and physically exhausted from responding to others. Again, there are no solutions, only trade-offs.