



Leadership Development

Anywhere, Anytime

Practical Tips for School Leaders – #17

May 28, 2020

How to Prevail with Mental Toughness for the Long Haul

The spring semester of 2020 has certainly been one to remember. It has been a time for all of us to deal with many things we did not anticipate as we celebrated the new year. I have heard it said that mental toughness is no longer a demand only for high performing athletes, professional artists or intellectual genius, it is needed for everyone in leadership positions during unprecedented times. I think about the first responders, those in the trenches managing the extraordinary needs in hospitals, communities and the service industry to make sure others needs were met. We owe a debt of gratitude to them. How did they accomplish what they did with no detailed checklist? How did the school and district leaders in SJCS D quickly, efficiently and effectively manage the demands of the temporary new normal? The skills required to face the unknown with mental toughness triumphed. Managing the unknown requires:

A shift in thinking – A study from the Harvard Business Review found that people who had ‘stress-is-enhancing mindsets’ reported better health. Cortisol produced when facing stress can be healthy if channeled correctly, too much or too little may be harmful. Reflect on the following: How realistic are your worries? Do you watch too much news? Do the people you interact with give you positive energy? Try to focus on what is going right instead of being derailed by the things that are out of your control. In the schools so many strategies have been effectively implemented to address the needs of students and teachers. Take time to celebrate the accomplishments.

Pushing through limits – We have all learned how to push through the unexpected. Just when we think we can’t do anymore we are able to find a way. Solving problems, managing student safety, responding to parents, or resolving a student conflict requires the ability to challenge the limits of our thinking. We need to satisfactorily decide and move on. The most exciting thing about serving as a school administrator is the unknown and the challenges it brings. It requires a certain level of reflection, and the skills necessary to mitigate situations faced daily. The demands are never exactly the same. “We cannot grow if we don’t move out of the center where it is safe and well-lit.”

Confronting the beast – It is so simple to avoid the ‘beast’ though at some moment we must face the unimaginable and work through our fears. Yale psychologist, Andy Morgan, believes two factors influence our ability to confront a crisis. First, training: special forces learn to handle stressful situations by acknowledging how difficult a given condition is and then tell themselves they are able to handle the predicament. Second, childhood: surveys conducted indicate a person’s capacity to praise themselves for getting through trauma or abuse rather than thinking of themselves as victims helps develop abilities to face challenges. Developing the resiliency to face unwarranted criticism has been a lesson for me. I was unprepared for the cruelty some people resorted to. Once I learned to take a deep breath and not respond defensively, I was able to grow as a professional. How do we teach children to endure a hardship and build something from the disaster?

Pursue lifelong learning – Spend time building your own capacity. The world is not made up of winners and losers, instead learners and non-learners. Learners are readers. They share with colleagues/coaches/mentors and engage in rich discussions around what they learn and implement. Mental toughness relies on learning new skills and new thought patterns. We should constantly be seeking ways to expand our outlook and improve ourselves. Handling crisis requires a certain level of scrappiness; pulling on all of our intelligence, skills and tools to tame the unknown. We don’t have all the answers or know what is around the corner. Navigating an uncharted journey is stressful and requires mental toughness and patience for the long-haul.

Take care of yourself so you may take care of others.

Smart Brief. LaRay Quay. May 20, 2020