



Leadership Development

Anywhere, Anytime

Practical Tips for School Leaders – #41

August 24, 2020

The Power of Being Directionally Correct

“What do you do when you realize you “don’t know what you don’t know”? What do you do? Chuck Swoboda, retired Chairman and CEO of Cree reminds us that “maybe leaders need to stop trying to know everything and start doing something.” Leaders don’t need to know exactly how it’s going to work out, they only need to be directionally correct. Does this remind you of the uncertainty you face as you prepare to lead teachers and staff in the reopening of schools? You are headed in the correct direction yet don’t know how it is going to work out.

Leadership requires innovation. Innovation is complex, it is new. We don’t know the way it will turn out though along the way there will be time to reflect, revise and begin again. The knowledge that there is ambiguity and uncertainty can be a driving force to benefit creativity. No one has all the answers. Mr. Swoboda tells us that leading into the unknown requires being directionally correct. He states that if leaders are directionally correct, they can improve along the journey rather than waiting to act until everything is perfect. Reading the FAQ’s related to schools reopening is a perfect example of an actionable outline to move forward; it is directionally correct.

Pick a direction. Schools will open on August 31, 2020 yet parents have a choice as to whether they will send their children to brick and mortar classrooms, participate in distance learning or enroll in virtual school. We have the confidence to operationalize the plan, yet we don’t know all the answers. The innovative mindset begins with knowing that a problem can be solved that no one else has tackled before.

Take your best idea. Brainstorm ideas, write them down, talk about them, pick a few to implement. This is what the Restart Task Force did. They had a direction; they knew they needed to make an action plan and they recognized they were guiding a pioneering effort. They didn’t have time to wait for the ‘perfect’ plan. They had the courage to know perfect does not exist. They asked each other questions, discussed, reflected and revised before they unveiled the plan. When the plan was shared with a larger audience they responded to questions and continued to rework the plan in preparation of August 31, 2020.

Try it and see what happens. Monday, August 24, 2020, this is where we are. Teachers have come back to the buildings. They are preparing for August 31, 2020 using the information leaders share and learning together along the way. When the doors open next week for learners, the faculty and staff will test the plan and make sure it works for all students. School leaders will observe progress and adjust the plan and make it better. Information gathered along with discussions will inform the next step. Adjustments will be made to respond to needs not yet identified. If we are headed in the right direction the next steps will become clearer.

Plans to address problems do not need to be perfected prior to implementation. In the case of restart, the plan should result in excellent teaching and learning environments for all students and teachers. When the direction is correct, we can take necessary actions to evolve the plan. When Vince Lombardi began coaching the Green Bay Packers, he made the following statement to the team:

“Gentlemen, we are going to relentlessly chase perfection, knowing full well we will not catch it, because nothing is perfect. But we are going to relentlessly chase it, because in the process we will catch excellence. I am not remotely interested in just being good.”

During the final week before the schools open in St Johns County be mindful of the fact that you are being asked to lead in unfamiliar ways in answer to a problem no one has faced before. An innovative mindset is of enormous value when addressing an important problem. Swoboda reminds us:

“Inventions are rather common and often collect dust while innovations change the world. Innovation begins with the belief that you can find a way to solve a problem no one else could, work the action plan and stay true to your beliefs.”

Excerpted from The Power of Being Directionally Correct. Leading Blog, August 24, 2020

The Innovator's Spirit: Discover the Mindset to Pursue the Impossible. Swoboda, Chuck. Fast Company Press, NY, NY. 2020

Paula Steele

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