Overcoming Adversity: Resilience Development Strategies for Educational Leaders

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Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Georgia Educational Research Association

Savannah, Georgia

October 23, 2010

Abstract

School leadership has never been easy. However, some experts like Garcia (2005) wrote that

current school leaders are facing a variety of difficulties that make sustaining school reform

efforts exceedingly difficult. Collectively, these modern day challenges have the capacity to

form the perfect storm. School leaders need effective strategies to cope with these difficult

circumstances and to continue the thrust toward school reform.   Effective coping mechanisms

and resiliency development strategies that can be used by educational leaders to overcome

adversity include a routine of exercise and healthy diet, a positive life view, a sustained focus on

building bridges between stakeholders, spiritual renewal, a focus on one's personal mission, a

determination to model resilience, and the utilization of supportive professional networks.

Resilience development strategies can be effective in helping school leaders to overcome

adversity and accomplish organizational objectives.

Keywords: adversity, resilience, overcome, coping mechanisms, accomplish, achieve

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Superintendents and principals across many states throughout the country are currently facing unprecedented levels of adversity. Many school leaders currently face some or all of the following challenges:

- Increasing costs
- Flat or decreasing revenue streams
- Decreasing fund balances
- Unfunded mandates
- Increasing accountability
- Decreasing autonomy
- Continued demise of the nuclear family
- Increased poverty
- Changing demographics
- High school board turnover
- Teacher morale issues
- Recruitment and retention issues
- Aging facilities
- Tax payer revolt

It is easy to see how school leaders could allow themselves to become consumed by adversity. Garcia (2005) wrote of the "sustainability crisis" and detailed varied difficulties faced by school leaders as they attempted to sustain school reform efforts. Garcia further wrote of the importance of interpersonal skills and teaching and learning skills for school leaders seeking to sustain school reform efforts in urban school settings. A Fordham Foundation Accountability Report (2008) detailed the challenges that some school leaders faced as a result of state and national political action. Educational leaders facing such daunting challenges stand to benefit from research based steps toward overcoming adversity and developing professional resilience.

When continually confronted with multi-layered adversity, some school leaders develop unhealthy coping mechanisms that are counterproductive both personally and professionally.

Montgomery and Rupp (2005) wrote that the relationship between stress and coping mechanisms is extremely important in preventing burnout.   Healthy coping mechanisms such as a balanced exercise program and healthy diet can serve to simultaneously reduce stress and increase health. Conversely, unhealthy coping mechanisms such as overeating, alcohol or drug abuse, or negative attitudes can lead to negative outcomes, both personally and professionally. Such maladaptive outcomes can be avoided by proactive measures designed to develop resilience and overcome adversity. Whipple, Kinney, and Kattenbraker (2008) found that individuals who maintain healthy levels of exercise had higher levels of self-efficacy than those who did not maintain physical activity routines. They further wrote that the higher levels of self-efficacy made a difference in the actions of the involved individuals. Additional noted benefits of healthy exercise routines included stress reduction and higher levels of self-esteem. The benefits of exercise can be further enhanced by a healthy diet. Larsen and Murry-Davis (2005) found that a healthy diet promoted weight loss and reduced the risk of chronic disease. The researchers recommended a diet "rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, low-fat dairy products, lean meats, poultry, and fish" (p. 25). A moderate exercise routine coupled with a healthy diet can lead to both improved personal health and an expanded leadership capacity.

A positive mental outlook can also be a powerful coping mechanism when facing adversity. McMahon (2006) wrote of the relationship between flexibility, a belief that change is normal, an internal locus of control, and personal resilience. McMahon further wrote that school leaders who develop a capacity to self-right during times of adversity are more likely to overcome obstacles and achieve success. A positive attitude during difficult times can simultaneously promote personal health and serve as a professional example to both colleagues and educational stakeholders alike. Hooper (2009) wrote of the importance of positive

interaction with others during times of adversity. Positive attitudes can help build bridges between divergent points of view. Positive mental outlooks can also help educational leaders to be resilient in the face of adversity. Tait (2008) defined resilience as "a mode of interacting with events in the environment that is activated and nurtured in times of stress" (p. 58). A U.S. Department of Education Report (2007) detailed the resilient actions taken by school leaders in the Gulf Coast region following Hurricane Katrina. School systems and school leaders throughout the Golf Coast region were inundated with challenges following the Hurricane Katrina disaster. While there were certainly leadership disappointments during that challenging time, the U.S. Department of Education Report documented many circumstances in which educational leaders overcame adversity while helping the homeless who were displaced by Katrina.

Most of the challenges that school leaders face are not the results of natural disasters. Rather, the frequent challenges result from politically positioned individuals in competition for scarce resources or power. Bolman and Deal (2010) wrote of the importance of relationships when facing adversity. Building bridges between divergent positions is an excellent skill that can be used to overcome adversity. Bolman and Deal further emphasized the importance of open communication between opposing parties. When educational leaders openly communicate about differences of opinion while solving problems, they increase the likelihood of problem resolution. Noonan, Walker, and Kutsyuruba (2008) found trust to be a socially relevant factor between educational leaders and educational stakeholders. Trust is an essential ingredient in the relationship building necessary to bridge opposing positions. Establishing trust and then communicating to find potential areas of consensus among problem stakeholders can lead to negotiation and the building of bridges between divergent positions.

It is also important for educational leaders to take time away from the immediate problems to renew their energy. Covey (1989) wrote of the importance of spiritual renewal. Covey emphasized the role that spiritual renewal can play in reconnecting with one's core values. Such practice can help educational leaders remove themselves from the often emotionally charged immediacy of daily problems and refocus energy toward one's personal mission. Trujillo (2007) wrote that individuals can benefit from looking outside of their immediate context for information that feeds their self-concept. Johnson (2007) found that human interaction with nature produced healthy benefits. Whether conducted in a house of worship, a place of meditation, or in a natural environment, spiritual renewal as a practice can help educational leaders relieve stress and refocus on the overarching mission. Furthermore, it can replenish the reservoir of the positive thoughts that lead to purposeful actions.

Educational leaders increase their chances of overcoming adversity by linking their positive thoughts and purposeful actions to their personal missions. Rozycki (2004) wrote of the importance of a high quality mission as a driver and motivator of educational leaders. The mission of the educator needs to be assigned such a high value and priority that it transcends the obstacles and impediments that form adversity. Meacham and Gaff (2006) wrote of the importance of educational leaders having integrity to the mission. Such a sustained resilience even under conditions of adversity helps educational leaders remain focused on the mission and the accomplishment of organizational objectives. Simply put, maintaining a focus on the mission helps educational leaders keep their "eyes on the ball" rather than on the obstacles. Weiss (2009) wrote of how a focus on the mission creates a renewed commitment to the organization. A disciplined, sustained focus on one's personal mission refocuses thoughts and actions away from obstacles and toward objectives.

A determination to model resilience can also be a healthy coping mechanism. Sommers (2009) wrote of the importance of leadership modeling and demonstrated commitment to the mission. Determination to model resilience in the face of adversity can be a power tool of self-motivation. Warner and Esposito (2009) wrote how modeling allows observers to learn from actions rather than listen to words. Adversity provides educational leaders with the opportunity to model in context the very behaviors that they seek to develop in their subordinates. Obstacles can be made into educational objects that are used to demonstrate resilience and thereby allow the educational leader to earn authentic respect from organizational stakeholders. McCormick (2008) wrote that modeling can be used to establish norms for behavior. Few behaviors can be more valuable to the organization than a determination to model resilience while facing difficulty and hardship.

Supportive professional networks can also serve as healthy coping mechanisms and builders of resiliency. Lawson (2008) wrote that the balance of work and family demands can be extremely challenging for women administrators. Lawson further wrote of the importance of reflection and dialogue to women administrators. The reflection, dialogue, and mentoring associated with supportive professional networks can be a beneficial coping mechanism for many educational leaders regardless of gender or race. Alsbury and Hackmann (2006) wrote that novice principals and superintendents benefitted from effective mentoring programs that socialized the novice educational leaders to the changing norms of educational leadership. Alsbury and Hackmann further wrote that supportive professional networks which included professional reflection and introspection as part of the mentoring experience were especially effective to novice educational leaders. Mullen (2009) wrote of the role that mentoring programs and professional networks can have on the socialization of novice administrators. The utilization

of professional networks for mentoring opportunities can be a healthy coping mechanism for

individual educational leaders, and a tool of human resource development and retention for

educational institutions.

By developing healthy coping mechanisms, educational leaders can increase their

chances of both overcoming adversity and promoting personal health. Examples of healthy

coping mechanisms follow:

- A routine of exercise and healthy diet
- A positive life view
- A sustained focus on building bridges between stakeholders
- Spiritual renewal
- A focus on one's personal mission
- A determination to model resilience
- Utilization of supportive professional networks

By employing healthy coping mechanisms, school leaders can model positive adaptations to

difficult circumstances during times of adversity. Current school leaders certainly face

tremendous challenges. However, school leadership has never been easy. The incorporation of

healthy coping mechanisms into a balanced lifestyle can lead to both positive health benefits and

more effective leadership. By utilizing these healthy coping mechanisms as part of their daily

life, school leaders are more likely to overcome adversity and accomplish organizational

objectives. School leaders employing these healthy coping mechanisms have an increased

likelihood of mental, physical, and social vigor. Through the effective use of healthy coping

mechanisms, school leaders develop resilience skills and increase their capacity to overcome

adversity.

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