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LEGACY

TRANSFORMATION IN ACTION

PJ Caposey

**Building a
Positive
Leadership
Mindset for the
New School Year**

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Building a Positive Leadership Mindset for the New School Year

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If someone were to ask my wife to explain all of my negative qualities, she could probably go on for hours. In fact, there's probably nobody more qualified to share my misgivings than her. She could create an amazingly exhaustive list.

At the same time, nobody on Earth loves me more. It is this weird phenomenon that we widely accept. For those we love, we can look past their glaring misgivings because we understand their unique strengths, how they make us feel, and the fact that no person or situation is perfect.

What is also true is that when I reflect on my life—both personal and professional—the things of which I am the most proud were not easy. Hitting a fitness goal takes extraordinary effort. Leading complex change in an organization can be agonizingly difficult. Falling in love is easy; working to remain a great partner is not for the faint of heart.

If you are reading this right now, you may be asking yourself, what the heck does this have to do with education and leadership? The reason for me is clear: it revolves around the mindset shift that I hope many educators will choose to make with their time over the summer to rest, recharge, reflect, and resolve before we enter school in the Fall.

Look, I am not here to hit everyone with a myriad of motivational quips and to tell educators to suck it up. Perhaps the opposite. That said, considering these motivational quotes does reveal that many of them have merit.

"The best things in life don't come easy."

"Nothing worthwhile is ever achieved without effort."

"Success demands sweat and sacrifice."

"Hard work is the key to unlocking greatness."

"Dreams don't work unless you do."

"The road to success is paved with hard work."

"Strive for greatness; work relentlessly."

"Sweat today, shine tomorrow."

"Great achievements require great effort."

The bottom line is that the last few years working through COVID and the post-COVID hangover have been, at best, exhausting for educators. Boundaries have been broken down, new skills were forced by circumstance to be mastered, and

new needs emerged in students that we could not have predicted. Therefore, discussing adult SEL, burnout, and the ever-increasing teacher shortage is an absolutely logical and necessary course of conversation for anyone in the education field.

The issue is that far too much in our industry focuses on the negative. We are looking at everything that is wrong, different, or uncomfortable within our profession and then broadcasting that to the world. To extend the analogy used above, the way the collective conversation around our profession has unfolded is akin to the friend that only shares the absolute worst about their spouse.

Over the summer, I have worked hard on myself and my mindset. I have realized that I need to be much more proactive and intentional about the language I use, the mindset I exhibit, and the behaviors I model. In the words of my mentor and friend, Todd Whitaker, "if the leader sneezes, the whole building catches a cold." Well, collectively as educators, all we have been doing is sneezing.

Education needs champions and cheerleaders right now. We need to remind people of why this is the greatest profession on the planet. Every single day, we have the ability to change the trajectory of a child's life. Moreover, as a leader, I believe that the same opportunity to impact someone in a drastically positive way extends to our interactions with the adults we have the privilege of serving.

This incredible opportunity is a large part of just why the job can be so difficult. That opportunity comes with a massive amount of responsibility. Moreover, it also comes with both internal and external pressures.





Here is the bottom line: No two situations are the same. Some people reading this right now have terrible bosses. Others work in an environment of chaos. Some may be living a charmed professional life but still think it is nearly impossible because they lack context. Still, others understand that they have a great professional working environment and the job is still hard.

If we are going to change the narrative around education in our country, it absolutely must start with us. We cannot blame kids for our unhappiness. We cannot expect politicians to do what is perfectly right for schools. We cannot expect this to ever become easy.

“Every successful person believes in two things. First, the future can be better than the present. Second, they have agency to help make that future a better place. Let’s remember that and have that passion burning in our bellies as we attempt to make the educational world better every single day.”

As someone who attended school in an affluent area, worked in the inner-city, led in an urban area, and now leads a cash-strapped small-town/rural district, I can assure you that every single educational institution has its challenges. No leader is perfect. Every student body presents some level of challenge.

But...education is education, and leadership is leadership. We GET to try and make other people’s lives better and more enriched on a daily basis. This we must never forget—even amidst the chaos of the day.

I am not asking anyone to stop working for progress or to stop boldly identifying the parts of the system that need to be remedied. Heck, that is quite literally my entire life’s work. What I am asking of everyone (including myself) is to remember the parts of the job that made us fall in love with it in the first place. Remember the great opportunity that lies before us. And lastly, remember the great contribution to our society that we get to play as we help to mold the next generation.

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Three To-Do's for Every Leader as the New School Year Begins:

1. Set the Tone with Positive Communication:

As the school year begins, make it a priority to communicate with your staff in a way that is both uplifting and transparent.

1. Recognize the challenges ahead, but also emphasize the opportunities for growth and the positive impact everyone can have on their students and each other.
2. Consider starting each week with a brief message or email that sets a positive tone, highlights successes, and provides encouragement.
3. Make time to check in with individual team members, offering a personal touch to your communication. Whether through an open-door policy (not my personal favorite), regular one-on-one meetings, or simply stopping by classrooms and offices, these personal interactions can build trust and foster a sense of community.
4. Encourage your staff to adopt the same approach with their students and peers, creating a ripple effect of positivity throughout the school. When everyone feels seen and heard, it sets a foundation for a collaborative and supportive environment that can handle any challenges that come your way.

2. Model Resilience and Flexibility:

Resilience is key to leadership, especially in unpredictable times – and every, single day in education is unpredictable. Show your team that while obstacles are inevitable, how you respond to them makes all the difference.

1. Model resilience by remaining calm in the face of challenges, being open to feedback, and adapting to new situations with a solution-oriented mindset. Let your actions demonstrate that setbacks are just setups for future success.
2. Moreover, share your own experiences of overcoming challenges, making it clear that even leaders face difficulties but can emerge stronger.
3. Create a culture where it's okay to make mistakes, as long as those mistakes are used as learning opportunities. I used to hand out cards that said 'Feel Free to Fail' and encourage each person to turn them into me when they tried something new that turned out to be a disaster. After we would meet to debrief, the next week, I put the card back in their mailbox with a note looking forward to our next conversation.
4. Implement reflective practices, such as end-of-week debriefs, where your team can discuss what worked, what didn't, and how to adjust moving forward. This consistent practice of reflection and adaptation will keep your school agile and ready to meet any challenge head-on.

3. Cultivate a Culture of Gratitude and Recognition:

Begin the year by actively recognizing the efforts of your staff and students. Create moments to express gratitude, whether it's through formal recognition programs or informal shout-outs during meetings. Encouraging a culture of appreciation will not only boost morale but will also reinforce the importance of the work being done.

1. Make it a habit to identify and celebrate small wins regularly, keeping the focus on the positive contributions of everyone in the school community.
2. Implement a peer recognition program where staff can nominate each other for their hard work and dedication. This not only spreads the responsibility of recognition but also highlights the diverse strengths within your team.
3. Celebrate not just the end results but the process—the dedication, creativity, and perseverance that your team demonstrates daily. Regularly share these stories of success with the broader school community, including parents and students, to build a collective sense of pride.
4. The more visible and consistent your recognition efforts, the more they will become embedded in your school's culture, making gratitude a central part of your daily operations. This ongoing acknowledgment will help sustain motivation and encourage everyone to continue striving for excellence.

By incorporating these to-do's into your leadership approach, you not only build on the positive mindset needed to lead effectively, but you also create an environment where educators feel valued, supported, and motivated to give their best each day. This proactive and intentional focus on positive leadership will help ensure that as we navigate the complexities of the school year, we do so with a renewed sense of purpose and a commitment to making a difference in the lives of those we serve.



PJ Caposey is the Superintendent of Schools for Meridian and Oregon, Illinois Community Unit School Districts. He is the former Illinois State Superintendent of the Year and a finalist for the National Superintendent of the Year through the American Association of School Administrators. He is a best-selling author of ten books, a dynamic speaker, and a transformational educational leader with an incredible track record of success.  