Best Practices/Tom Many, EdD

Before Another Minute Goes By…
The Call for Urgent Leadership in Our Schools

Lamenting what he saw as a lack of urgency around improving schools, Erroll B. Davis, the former superintendent of Atlanta Public Schools said, "While some people are looking at the calendar; I'm looking at my watch." (2013)

Davis was right; we need a greater sense of urgency around improving our schools. And, we need it now. How a leader responds to the challenge of improving their school ranges from complacency on one end of the continuum to panic on the other, but in between complacency and panic lies the power of urgent leadership.

"It is easy for an organization [school] to drift into the '*we have arrived*' mode when it has been successful in the pursuit of a challenging goal." -Collins and Porras, (1997)

Complacency is best described as being satisfied with the status quo. Complacent schools are comfortable places. As a visitor you might hear such things as, "we are doing fine" or "if it ain't broke, don't fix it." Ironically, a state of complacency is precipitated by success. While principals and teacher leaders are right to be proud of their success and celebrate past accomplishments, John Kotter warns that, "over time pride [can] easily shift to overconfidence or even arrogance." (Kotter, 2008) If that happens and leaders begin to believe they have all the answers; complacency grows, the sense of urgency declines, and the school becomes more insulated. The chances a leader will look outside the school and recognize potential problems or identify possible solutions become less and less likely with each passing day.

This reluctance to challenge the mindless precedent of past practice is a common characteristic of complacency. Complacent leaders fail to recognize that regardless of how successful their school may have been; past practice represents history, not prophecy and the policies, practices, and procedures that worked before may have little impact on the challenges facing their school today. For example, schools that view the world through the lens of complacency may fail to recognize the impact that changing demographics are having on their school until it's too late.

The insidious nature of complacency makes it difficult to diagnose. Perhaps the biggest blind spot of a complacent leader is the inability (or unwillingness) to acknowledge that a state of complacency even exists! When complacency

sets in, challenges are allowed to become obstacles, obstacles become barriers, and barriers become the excuse or rationale explaining why things are the way they are.

> "A culture of continuous improvement does not require a state of persistent panic." -DuFour et al. (1998)

A state of panic is typically the result of previous failures or extreme, sometimes suffocating levels of accountability. Anxiety over haphazardly designed efforts to raise student achievement, expectations to cover all the standards, or pressure to implement new technology without the proper support all represent the kind of experiences that foster panic in schools.

Unlike their complacent colleagues, leaders operating in persistent state of panic possess a high degree of busyness around professional practice. Their schools look busy—and they are—but the busyness is frenetic, unfocused, and exhausting. There's lots of energy but not much is ever accomplished. Sadly, the products of panic can be just as unproductive as the comforts of complacency.

Leaders who panic often respond to challenge and change by becoming "serial adopters," embracing one new program after the next. Principals and teacher leaders in these schools go to a conference, get energized about a new initiative, and jump on the bandwagon. The hope is that the latest, greatest, cutting edge strategy will make all the difference but the nonstop search for the next 'silver bullet' is rarely successful, almost always exhausting, and when results don't materialize, causes a faculty's best hopes and dreams to disintegrate into feelings of frustration and disappointment.

> "Members of a PLC are action oriented: they move quickly to turn aspirations into action and visions into reality." -DuFour et. al. (2010)

At the heart of urgent leadership is what Rick DuFour describes as, "a persistent disquiet with the status quo." (DuFour et. al., 2010) It is typical for urgent leaders to possess a relentless state of restlessness around their practice, and unlike their complacent counterparts, urgent leaders are a bit impatient with the pace of change. They are not satisfied with the way things are and view the school's current reality as nothing more than the starting place for their improvement efforts.

Another common trait of urgent leaders is that they are learners themselves. Like those operating in a persistent state of panic, urgent leaders are constantly in search of a better way but unlike their frazzled colleagues, they reject the shotgun approach to a laundry list of goals in favor of a laser-like focus on a very limited set of goals. Urgent leaders are tenacious, patient, and determined about improving their schools.

Finally, urgent leaders recognize their practice must never become static. Urgent leaders acknowledge while best practice reflects what we know and are able to do *today*, next practice increases our capacity to do *tomorrow* the things we have never done before. For the urgent leader, best practice is the norm; next practice is the goal.

> "It's simple. We need to change our thinking from 'when the number changes' to 'before the number changes.'" -Dan Pierce (2016)

Pierce describes a way of thinking that, when viewed within the framework of improving schools, puts urgent leadership into the proper perspective. He suggests that, "every time we [the leader] look at the clock, we must learn to feel a sense of urgency. We must learn to realize that 'now' is happening and will very soon be gone. We must look at the digits on the display and be overcome with an urge to do something before those digits change, before 'now' slips through our fingers." ■

....

Dr. Tom Many is an author and consultant. His career in education spans more than 30 years.

Resources

Collins, J. & and Porras, J. (1997). *Built to last: Successful habits of visionary companies*. New York: Harper Business.

Davis, E. (2013). Personal Communication. Atlanta, GA. October 8, 2013.

DuFour, R., DuFour, R., Eaker, R. & Many, T. (2010). *Learning By Doing: A handbook for professional learning communities at work*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.

DuFour, R. & Eaker, R. (1998). *Professional learning communities at work: Best practices for enhancing student achievement*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.

Kotter, J. P. (2008). *A Sense of Urgency*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.

Pierce, D. Retrieved from http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/urgency.

White, J. E. (2016). 5 *Dangerous Warning Signs of Complacency*. Retrieved from http://www.churchleaders.com/pastors/pastor-articles/171241-james-white-dangerous-warning-signs-of-complacency.html.