

Community Corner

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The CSA Game Plan: Strategic Leadership Beyond the Operational Grind



The old adage “failing to plan is planning to fail” carries a specific weight for a Superintendent or Chief School Administrator (CSA). In the high-stakes environment of public education, not having a clear roadmap is essentially planning for a lack of efficacy. A well-conceived plan does more than just provide direction; it streamlines operational tasks, affording

more time for the interpersonal relationship-building that is the centerpiece of dynamic leadership.

The laws of authentic leadership have been universally proven throughout human history, whether in education, business, sports, or the military. At different times, we are all called upon to lead: some as parents, others as CEOs, presidents, Superintendents, or managers, and still others as head coaches and elected officials. Whatever form of leadership we’re called to, let’s lead with one core truth: people don’t fail because they want to - they fail because they haven’t yet been shown how to succeed. Authentic, transformational, and servant leadership bring that success to life by sharing proven strategies and modeling those behaviors through consistent, intentional action.

I think we find a reasonable summary in the following anonymous quotation from a military officer:

“I submit to you that leaders will never be more or less than their soldiers’ evaluation of them. This is the true efficiency report. From most of your troops, you can expect courage to match your courage, guts to match your guts, endurance to match your endurance, motivation to match your motivation, esprit to match your esprit, a desire for achievement to match your achievement. You can expect a love of God, a love of country, and a love of duty to match your own. They won’t mind the heat if you sweat with them, and they won’t mind the cold if you shiver with them.”

When I first entered the education field (from the private sector), I was lured to coaching and working with young people. Over the years, as I moved up professionally, I found that I was pulled away from students more and more to manage more mundane tasks and compliance issues. Now, towards the end of my education career, I realized that I needed to get back to “coaching.” In a way, I have always been “coaching,” whether it was in business or education. At the heart of coaching is building relationships with PEOPLE. And the key to education is RELATIONSHIPS.

In any organizational leadership position, the key to success is engaging and inspiring staff, governance boards, and constituent communities; while building a strong culture with a positive climate. This can only happen through visionary leadership and strategic thinking where a vision/mission is constantly communicated, organized, refined, and adapted, executed through cohesive, effective teams/departments. This in turn can bring about advancement and achievement that is rewarding and transformational. Understanding that failure to do this can result in an organization in flux and chaos with no real compass.

I have found that the more organized and streamlined I make operational tasks, the more I can be visible with people in the organization - and this in turn is what moves an organization forward. With the advent of technology—particularly AI—operational tasks are far less time-consuming than they once were. Thus, the “Coach” in me created a “Game Plan” – I call it “The CSA Game Plan,” - but it could be “The CEO Game Plan,” - “The Teacher’s Game Plan,” - etc. In my CSA Game Plan, a chief school administrator (CSA)/superintendent of schools has a leadership guide to strategic success. Any new school district superintendent, future central office administrator, such as principals and supervisors, as well as an up-and-coming organizational leader can utilize such a plan for building relationships and communicating an organizational process for achievement and success with the various communities with which it interacts. From students to parents to staff to administrators to Board Members to general citizenry; all stakeholders have an impact that can help or hinder. Proper engagement and communication can lead to improvement and achievement realizing transformational change.

Let me share some leadership processes that build community consensus needed to promote high expectations that can drive a shared vision to success. They involve streamlining the time-consuming operational tasks to support a leader spending more time with the people in the organization.

The first thing I did when I became a head coach, principal, and superintendent was to prepare and have readily available some simple charts/spreadsheets on basic information. I started this years ago in my business days where I would have a balance sheet, updated inventory turns, monthly sales, analysis, etc. This way I had the information at my fingertips for any meeting. In education, I started a similar practice and kept enrollment numbers, staffing, FTE-to-Student Ratios, budget information, etc., all to be able to reference quickly and easily. Once you have gathered this important information and updated regularly for analysis, you can set many of your daily operational objectives accordingly. I have compartmentalized our objectives to make efficient use of time.

We review these objectives at Board of Education committee meetings. The week prior to our general public Board of Education meeting, we have our BOE committee meetings. I call Board meeting days “game day.” And we, as a central office administrative team, prepare for that meeting just as we would anything else that’s very important. I also prep with the Board Attorney, BOE President and BOE VP. Our central office administrative

team's calendar works from our Board of Education Meeting schedule. We, as a central office administrative team (or some call a "Superintendent's Cabinet") set up "Daily Objectives" (or "DOs"), "Weekly Objectives" ("WOs"), "Monthly Objectives" ("MOs"), "Seasonal Objectives" ("SOs") or Quarterly Objectives, "Yearly Objectives" ("YOs") and our "Strategic Plan Objectives" ("SPOs") both short-term and long-term. All corresponding to our "Board of Education Objectives" or Goals ("BOEs").

Taking these steps enables a leader to focus on goals and objectives that can help move the district forward and improve student performance is at the core of any Chief School Administrator's time and effort. Goals are big-picture landmarks, while objectives are more detailed milestones. But to accomplish this, the CSA needs to foster buy-in with fidelity – and to do this successfully requires building collateral through interpersonal relationships. To help with this endeavor, leaders need to have an efficient and productive process to deal with those mundane transactional tasks necessary. This, in turn, can leave more time to build relationships and hone the skills of being a transformational leader of an organization.

Whether a private-sector corporation, public school district, private school, public agency, governing body, or athletic team, engaging and communicating a shared vision of success to all stakeholders is the key for any organization. It is always about interpersonal relationships first and proven processes; it is always about honed leadership skills and strategic thinking to create processes to forge forward with the strength of their communities to create a solid organization built on shared core values.

With any leadership position, there is always a portion of the job that must address transactional realities. However, true transformational leadership is not defined by how efficiently tasks are completed, but by how effectively people are connected, empowered, and inspired. Lasting success is built on trust—and trust is earned through presence, consistency, and genuine engagement.

If we aspire to lead people, we must first understand them. That requires slowing down long enough to listen, to learn, and to meet individuals where they are. It is through these intentional moments that credibility is established and relationships are strengthened—one interaction at a time.

In any arena—education, business, sports, or life—trust is the gateway to meaningful and sustained transformation. When leaders commit to both strategic clarity and human connection, they move beyond managing systems and begin truly leading people.