

# ■ Lessons from a Principled Leader

by Tom Terez

When it comes to potential chaos, few places rival a grade school. And when it comes to leadership roles, few are as challenging as school principal. Just ask Dr. Fred Burton, principal of Wickliffe Elementary School, who describes the typical workday as “a little like holding hands with a tornado.”

There are phone calls and visits with parents. There are meetings with teachers, support staff, and administrators. There are scheduled and unscheduled get-togethers with union leaders, legislators, community members, and vendors. And there are the children – Wickliffe has 420 students from kindergarten through fifth grade.

Given these tornado conditions, it's easy to imagine Burton whipping around in all directions, managing by Post-It Note and frantically trying to check items off of his to-do list. In reality, he's the picture of calm. And many people credit his thoughtful ways for making Wickliffe one of the happiest, healthiest learning communities around.

Located in Upper Arlington, Ohio, a suburb of Columbus, the school is home to last year's Ohio teacher of the year and music teacher of the year. It has been recognized as an Ohio BEST school, an award given by a major business coalition. And National Public Radio spent an entire day on site, interviewing students and staff for an expanded feature on progressive education.

Yes, this is a story about a principal and a school. But the lessons apply to anyone who leads in a hectic, demanding work environment. Do you have

too many tasks, too many stakeholders, too many customers, and too few hours in the day? Then spend the next few minutes at Wickliffe, and see what you can learn about slowing down.

## STEPPING OUT OF THE RUSH

The bell rings, and the rush begins. Children head straight for the door to the playground, eager for recess. Principal Burton stands in the middle of the hallway, watching, listening, saying hello and smiling warmly to those who pass him.

As the traffic jam moves through the hall, a

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piece of student artwork is accidentally knocked from the wall. It ends up on the floor, about to be crushed – when a first grader sees it, stops, and picks it up. He muscled his way through the crowd, to the wall, and carefully places it back in position. Then he rejoins his friends.

The principal notices. And a few days later, at the weekly school “town meeting,” he tells all the students about the first grader who took time to save someone's precious piece of art. He asks the boy to stand up, and he does so, surprised but smiling. The school responds with a big round of applause.

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## ■ Lessons from a Principled Leader *continued*

### THE KEY: BEING PRESENT

Burton's leadership style can be summed up in two words: being present. No matter how hectic things get, he makes a point of reaching out to absorb all that's happening.

He routinely leaves his office to spend time with students and teachers. He's constantly looking for positive stories (like the one about the artwork rescuer), and he makes a point of telling them again and again. He devoutly follows what he calls the 95% Rule: Spend 95% of your time trying to understand people and 5% making judgments.

He also spends time being present for himself, by dedicating at least ten minutes each morning to personal reflection. He has kept a journal since 1977. "It's amazing all of the inner dialogue that comes out when you simply sit and be quiet," he says.

With his friendly smile and easygoing manner, Burton is always approachable. (Picture a 48-year-old Mr. Rogers.) He often takes his guitar to classes for student sing-alongs – music has a way of bringing people together. He likes to goof around too. When a mouse crept into his office during a serious meeting, the ensuing mayhem started a series of fun pranks. Stuffed-animal mice, planted by Burton and his colleagues in desk drawers and briefcases, kept staff members hopping and laughing.

### THE POWER OF POSITIVE QUESTIONS

The phone rings in Burton's office. It's a concerned parent who feels her child isn't being sufficiently challenged. Burton listens, asks questions, listens some more. He promises to return her call promptly after gathering more information from the teachers.

He meets with the student's teacher as well as a specialist in programs for gifted children. Burton learns more about the situation, and they all agree that a meeting with the parents would be the best

next step. Then they talk about the meeting itself, trying to visualize how it should unfold. The teachers are expecting the worst; they're certain that the parents will be angry and argumentative.

Burton becomes a coach, gently citing the 95% Rule. "What about asking questions?" he suggests. "What would happen if you asked the parents, 'When you see your child fully engaged and positively challenged, what does that look like?'"

As the teachers take in the idea, they leave behind their vision of a confrontation – and begin

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seeing a positive meeting. They start envisioning a dialogue in which they ask questions and involve the parents as partners. In Burton's words, they plan to "be present" instead of being defensive.

A few days later, the two teachers meet the two parents. The session unfolds exactly as planned. Positive questions and careful listening make all the difference.

### EFFICIENCY VS. EFFECTIVENESS

Like all leaders and managers, regardless of where they work, Burton faces tremendous demands on his schedule. Rarely are there enough hours in the day for everything that needs to be done. So why does he take the extra time that's required to observe, to ask questions, and to listen?

"Organizations are not machines with precision parts," he says. "They involve people and relationships." When we hurry along our conversations or avoid conversations altogether, people feel dismissed – and might be back with bigger issues and deeper problems. "We pay for our speed later on."

Technology doesn't help. While it's tempting to dash off several quick e-mail messages instead of calling or meeting someone, e-mail is strictly a

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one-way proposition. It gives the sender no opportunity to read nonverbal cues, pose questions, engage in conversation, or make discoveries. “Technology as a whole has increased speed,” Burton says. “And speed is the enemy of quality.”

He recalls a visit from a Russian education administrator who seemed stunned by all the beepers, laptops, and cell phones. “You’re too accessible,” the visitor said, shaking his head. “You can never focus on things that matter.” Indeed, technology increases efficiency at the expense of personal contact, and it intrudes on the alone time we all need for reflection.

### THE RESULTS OF BEING PRESENT

Art class is beginning, and the teacher describes the assignment to her class of fourth and fifth graders: “I’d like each of you to draw a tree.”

“What kind of tree?” a student asks.

“Any kind of tree,” the teacher responds. “You can use any of the materials.”

The children go about their work with impressive efficiency. Some finish the assignment in five minutes. Others take a bit longer. Within 10 minutes, everyone has a tree.

Then the teacher expands the assignment. She leads them outside, and they head to the nearest bank of trees. “I know you’ve all seen trees before,” the teacher says. “But let’s take another, closer look.” The children touch bark and branches. They smell the wood and leaves. Some children lie on the ground to get a different perspective. With the teacher facilitating, they share their observations. It’s clear that many are looking at trees – really looking – for the first time.

After they return to class, the teacher asks them to create another picture of a tree. They get busy again, but this time they take longer, and their creations are entirely different. The drawn and crafted branches leap from the pages. In a later assignment, they write stories involving trees, and again, their work is full of life.

*Continued on the next page.*

## What to do?

### Here are 7 action ideas!

- Reserve some quiet time for yourself each day. Listen to the inner dialogue.
- Walk around, observe, ask questions. Be among the people who do the work.
- Expect to see fascinating things. Then tell stories about what you’ve seen.
- Don’t dismiss the “small” stuff. What you think isn’t important may be very important to someone else. If you don’t have time for them, schedule a time. That way you honor their needs and your needs.
- Remember that all organizations, no matter how bad they appear in the moment, have things that are working. A well-framed question or prompt can lead people to acknowledge and honor what currently works. For example: “Think back to a time in the organization when you were highly engaged, inspired, or effective. What was happening?”
- Recognize that even negative people are trying to say something positive. If someone complains about dull meetings, what they’re saying is that they want better meetings where they can communicate and engage with colleagues. That’s a positive. Always ask, “What’s the positive in this?”
- Strive to live by the 95% Rule: Spend 95% of your time trying to understand and just 5% of your time making judgments.

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What makes the difference? Burton has a theory: “They took their time. By intentionally looking, they created artwork and language that were very rich.”

### WHAT ABOUT YOU?

It doesn't matter whether you work in a school – or in an office, a factory, a restaurant, a store, a hospital, or somewhere else. Every day offers a choice: Will you be present? And while present, will you make a point of spending nearly all your time trying to understand? Or will you be obsessed with efficiency and controlled by your to-do list?

Even after 11 years as a teacher and 15 years as a principal, Burton admits it's still tough to remain attentive. “I'm continually working on it,” he says. “I believe it has to be learned each day. Like most managers, I'm in an environment that does a good

job of distracting me from being present and listening and asking, “What's really going on here?””

The struggle is worth it. Just ask the first grader who saved the artwork, or the artist whose work was saved. Or ask the parents who brought their concerns to the two teachers. Or ask those children who saw a tree for the first time.

Better yet, ask your colleagues in your own workplace.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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