

Private Victories to Enhance Your Self-Esteem: A Principal's Guide to Success

Dale L. Brubaker

University of North Carolina-Greensboro

Lawrence H. Simon

Elon College

Elon, NC

The authors propose a few straightforward guidelines which can help enable educators in leadership positions deal with the occupational hazard of too much stress. Use of these guidelines can lead to private victories over stress; the processes of consciously choosing healthy ways to think and act that can enhance self-esteem and fend off burnout. Each guideline is illustrated by an actual vignette from an educational leader who has learned how to avoid some thinking fallacies that could erode their self-esteem and leadership effectiveness.

During the last 20 years, we (the authors) have read the professional autobiographies of approximately 500 principals who wrote their life stories for graduate education classes. One-fifth of these students were also observed in doctoral internship experiences (Brubaker, 1995). The advantages of this kind of qualitative research are twofold: (1) the uniqueness of each person's perceptions are

invited and valued, something that Purkey and Novak (1996, p. 126) cite as "...a hallmark of the inviting family school...", and (2) each person's sense of efficacy is acknowledged, a concept identified as "the self as instrument" in the seminal work, *Helping Relationships*, by Combs, Avila and Purkey (1978, p. 5). The advantages cited above are central to invitational theory and practice (Purkey and Novak, 1996).

After reading our graduate students' life stories and observing them in internship experiences, it is clear that their biggest challenge is to have enough stress to keep them on their toes but not so much (dis)stress that they are overwhelmed. Educators who achieve this balance win private victories that enhance their self-esteem. They take out insurance that wards off burnout.

The common denominator held by those who reach this state is their belief that the way they choose to think and act makes the difference. In particular, they largely rid themselves of dysfunctional thinking. They choose healthy ways to think and act. Consider the attitudes and actions they adopt and what the consequences of these conscious decisions are.

First, educators, who consistently experience private victories in relating to stress, focus more on their strengths or talents than on their weaknesses. This is not to say that they deny their weaknesses. Rather, they have learned that it is psychologically healthier to love their strength than to hate their weakness. Psychiatrist David Viscott, author of the best-selling book, *Emotionally Free* (1992), believes that accepting only our weaknesses is a way to avoid responsibility. Our hidden doubts impair us at the very moment when we need to take a risk in order to reach an important goal.

The following anecdote, as others throughout this article, illustrates a key point we wish to make. Anecdotes are taken from the life stories of principals who wrote them.

An elementary school principal in the Southeast describes how she learned to "feed her strengths and starve her weaknesses." She was invited to give a speech at a local civic club's banquet honoring leaders in the community. Her first impulse was to refuse the invitation: "I have an informal style and this appears to me to be a formal setting that calls for a formal speech using a microphone and standing behind a lectern." She quickly reminded herself that this kind of negative thinking would minimize opportunities for advancement and furthermore could cause her to lose sleep because she had sold herself short. She accepted the invitation and prepared a speech during which she would move directly into the audience of approximately 100 people to share her warmth and personality. On the evening of the banquet she acted out her plan and went through the wall of fear approximately five minutes into the speech. Later that evening she gave herself a "B" grade for her performance knowing full well that the next time she could do even better, once again using her informal style that is an expression of her talents. She achieved a private victory that enhanced her self-esteem and helped her sleep better rather than being visited by fear in the darkness of night.

Second, private victories occur when the educational leader thinks and acts in a way that does not put down others in order to build up self. When stress is viewed as a threat to the leader's existence, one's impulse is to strike out at the person or persons posing a threat. This win-lose way of dealing with a difficult situation may feel good in the short run, but it can come back to haunt in the long run.

A new principal was assigned to a school whose former principal's leadership style could best be described as laissez-faire or hands off.

Older faculty members ran the school and resented the newly hired superintendent and the recently appointed principal. The situation was made more difficult because the new principal was different in gender and ethnic background from her predecessor and the older faculty members. At the first faculty meeting of the year, an outspoken member of the faculty confronted the principal by saying that things were just fine in the school before she came and they didn't want anyone telling them what to do. The new principal paused and said: "You and I have the opportunity for a fine relationship because we have something in common. I don't like to be told what to do either." She said this in a calm but self-assured manner, after which the critic sat down and the faculty meeting moved ahead in a smooth and civil manner. The principal chose not to view this situation as win-lose and instead deflected her antagonist.

Psychiatrist David Burns, author of *Feeling Good* (1981), pointed out that we can reliably disarm a critic by finding some way to agree with him or her. One can either agree in principle with the criticism, or find some element of common ground and agree with that, as did this principal. If neither of these options is intellectually honest, we can, as a last resort, acknowledge that we understand why the person is upset because it rightfully squares with the way he or she views things.

Third, leaders who consistently experience private victories in relating to stress learn from the past, plan for the future, but know that what really matters is the present. By doing so they avoid, or at least minimize, a number of destructive pitfalls. They don't romanticize or idealize the past—a behavior that excludes teachers, parents and children who were not a part of this past. And, they don't fall into the traps of mind reading and fortune telling the future, cognitive fallacies that Burns (1981) called "jumping to conclusions." Our fears often fuel mind reading and fortune telling, thus leading us into negative thinking that can become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Principals who live in the present take time to laugh and share who they really are with those they lead. They also delight in the joy of children, teachers and other adults associated with school activities. A side benefit is that people tend to feel relaxed in their company, a tremendous source of power for principals as others tend to want to be around them. The opposite of this is the principal who consistently communicates the stance of a critical parent: "I will accept you *in the future* if you do thus and so." A teacher who worked under such a principal describes such a leader: "Teachers in this school are relieved when they come to school and see a vacant parking place where the principal's car is usually parked. We want our principal to attend meetings away from our school."

Principals, who value the present rather than trying to find relief in the past or future, know that time is the most democratic gift we have received. It is the great equalizer, for each of us has twenty-four hours a day. Time can't be bought or sold and wise leaders know that time is an organization's most important non-human resource. Effective leaders know that they cannot directly control how employees use time, but they can give leadership in the creation of settings that influences how employees use time.

Time can only be managed in the present. No one can redo the way time was spent in the past and no one can spend tomorrow's time today. Time management is part of something far more important—*Self-Management!* When we feel good about ourselves, we manage ourselves better, and when we manage our lives better we feel better about ourselves. Self-management and self-esteem, therefore, are necessarily connected in the lives of creative leaders who experience private victories.

Fourth, elementary school principals, who have learned to use and manage stress to their advantage, recognize there is no sure cause and effect relationship between hard work and success, enthusiasm and success, talent and success, or a positive attitude and success. Hard work, enthusiasm, talent and a positive attitude simply do not automatically assure a person that success will follow. To recognize this without becoming cynical is one of the most difficult lessons in life. A principal shares this learning in his life story: "I was taught as a child that you should be rewarded for all of the good things you do. I was also taught that people who do good things will have few problems. It was a shock to me to find out that bad things really do happen to good people and, in fact, many of the good things you do as a principal may upset some of them. Much of the time, good things you do will not even be noticed. How can you be rewarded for things that are taken for granted?"

The fifth and final characteristic of educators, who consistently experience private victories in relating to stress, is in many ways the most important. Curiosity and the desire to learn are at the core of their leadership. They are motivated by memories of awe, wonder and amazement they had as children turned on to the work around them. They have in many respects retained a childlike innocence for new ideas and better ways to do things. They are particularly curious about how their schools run and how they can be changed to run better. It is this curiosity that not only motivates them, but it also tells others in the school that they enjoy their work and those with whom they work. A related benefit is simply that the leader's natural need for personal status, recognition and ego gratification becomes a non-issue when the leader is absorbed in the learning process. There is no need to manipulate others to recognize the principal's "stardom" because the principal values something far more important—ways in which to improve the school for children and adults.

An elementary school principal shared an experience that illustrates this type of leadership based on curiosity and looking for better ways of doing things: "When I first came to this school from out of state, I held every kind of evening PTA program conceivable to get parents involved with their children's learning. The turnout was always disheartening. After doing some research, I found that over 60% of our kids came from homes headed by a single parent—in most cases, a mother who worked outside the home. They were too tired after work to get to PTA. At first this seemed like a problem with no solution. After all, I couldn't change the students' home situation! My school improvement team and I set out to find some creative ways to manage this problem. After some initial polling to gauge interest, we put together a series of late Saturday morning clinics on 'How to Help Your Child Succeed at School.' My teachers and assistants even offered free refreshments and an on-site child care service for those

willing to come out. We've run these clinics for four years now, and have had great success with them. It just proves what unconventional methods and teamwork can accomplish."

In conclusion, our reading of principals' life stories and our time with them in their schools during their internships gives us hope for the future of schools. Most principals are "can-do persons" who, when doing their best, are "scholars on their feet." They not only want to improve their schools, but they also recognize that in order to do so they must avoid the thinking fallacies that will erode their self-esteem and leadership effectiveness.

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Dale L. Brubaker is professor of educational leadership at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro and Lawrence H. Simon is a professor of education at Elon College. They are co-authors of Teacher as Decision Maker: Real-Life Cases to Hone Your People Skills. Inquiries about this article should be mailed to the first author at the School of Education, UNC-Greensboro, Greensboro, NC 27412.