

**“You can’t lead where you won’t go.”
Roland Barth**

LEAD THE WAY

“The most important responsibility of every educator is to provide the conditions under which people’s learning curves go off the charts,” writes Roland Barth in an *Education Week* article.

Barth, the founding director of the Principals’ Center at Harvard University, says the most vital work for any educator or any parent is promoting human learning. To paraphrase Vince Lombardi, “In schools, learning isn’t everything, learning is the *only* thing.” But Barth also knows the obstacles that [educators] encounter for their own learning.

“To be a learner is to admit imperfection. [Educators] suffer from a burden of ascribed omniscience. The world thinks you know how to do it all... Indeed, many fall into the trap of pretending to. But who inspires more confidence, who is the better leader? The [educator] who is learn-ed and wise or the [educator] who is a lifelong insatiable learner?”

Drawing from his work with a New Jersey Principals’ Institute over the past four years, Barth describes the conditions that enable school leaders to surmount the considerable obstacles to their own learning.

Here’s what he had to say in the *Education Week* article.

Recognition

Too few [educators] are recognized for what they know and already do. With recognition came responsibility, “so participants were further encouraged to plan their course of study and to write about it. The message was that ‘what you have to say, your craft knowledge, is significant, and needs to be shouted from the mountaintops.’”

[Leader] Centered

Participants chose what they wanted to know or to learn more about, based on what they cared most passionately about. They all reflected upon themselves as leaders and determined just what it was, at this stage in their careers, that they wanted to explore in depth and where they wanted to allocate precious resources.”

A Culture of Playfulness

“We learned in this experience that when the playful me shows up, I am ready to be a serious learner.” During the final day spent “celebrating learning,” groups were given an hour to create a Thomas Hart Benton mural, an Alexander Calder stabile, a Pablo Picasso collage, or place settings for Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party.

“There is something in our soul that cries out for playful experiences – for fun. And there is something in most school cultures and within school systems that is toxic to playfulness, particularly for administrators,” he writes.

Risk Taking

“Failure is less debilitating than the fear of failure. There is no learning in the fear of failure. Zero. There can be tremendous learning in risking, even in failing, Barth writes.

Learning as a Priority

“That one is learning, for an educator, may be every bit as important as what one is learning. As we all know, a precondition for anyone’s learning anything is that they first be ignited by learning itself. Then, and only then, can they successfully bring themselves to a host of new subjects or questions as inquirers,” he writes.

Constructing One’s Own Knowledge

It was apparent from their stories that these [educators] had assembled over several months, brick by brick, piece by piece, their own hard—won insights. Rather than merely being taught, rather than placing the burden on another to teach them, they took responsibility for constructing their own knowledge about whatever it was they had set about to learn,” he writes.

Inventive Irreverence

“They made choices and pursued learning unimpeded by convention. They discovered that challenging authority, pushing limits, breaking the frame and “being yourself” in inventive, responsible ways, often accompanied by considerable risk, contributed to profound learning, if not order and comfort, for everyone,” he said.

Collegiality

“Participants in the New Jersey program created something quite different from the typical school relationships which tend to be independent, isolated and fearful, or adversarial, competitive, distrustful. One participant called it ‘contagious energy.’ Most came to realize that isolation and competition are inhospitable to learning. Talking about practice, observing one another engaged in practice, sharing craft knowledge with one another – all of those would help each of them become better and help them push learning to new heights. “Working in schools is depleting. Working alone in schools is even more depleting. Working and learning together in schools can be replenishing.”

Reflection

“The reflective practitioner is, above all, a learning practitioner. Consequently, determining what conditions seem to allow and promote reflection, on practice and within practice, and how to prolong these conditions for oneself, became an important issue for the New Jersey participants,” Barth writes.

Merging Personal and Professional

“Learning is holistic. As learners, we need not be lobotomized into two neat hemispheres, one called professional development and one called personal development. Until we

acknowledge and honor a large element of personal growth in our learning activities, there won't be much professional growth." He said.

Source: "The Leader as Learner" by Roland Barth in Education Week, March 5, 1997.
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