TASA’s Breakaway Leadership program supports school leaders’ health and wellness
Super Bowl winning coach Tony Dungy once said, “The first step toward creating an improved future is developing the ability to envision it … Only vision allows us to transform dreams of greatness into the reality of achievement through human action.”

Like a new coach taking over a team, his words align perfectly with the goal of a successful school district leadership transition. The first 100 days for a new superintendent should focus on developing a shared community vision of success.

Over the last two decades I have had the opportunity to work under and alongside many great educational leaders in Texas. From Central to North Texas and my hometown of El Paso, I have been blessed to work in four large districts spanning our great state.

During this time, I experienced and helped support multiple leadership transitions. While none were without their challenges, the successful ones focused heavily on community engagement and team building. The ones that weren't so successful help solidify the importance of putting people first to build buy-in and a strong foundation that can lead to sustained success.

Following these principles and adapting them to one's local community can help prove Coach Dungy right. Working together with the community to establish and pursue a unified vision for the future can lead to years of success.

From day one, a new leader needs to hit the ground learning, studying the district's strengths, needs, and challenges; reviewing data and assessing district services; and developing strategic actions to move the district forward.

A great resource to get an overall objective viewpoint is a districtwide climate survey which ensures all stakeholders (including elementary students, secondary students, parents and employees) are given a voice to express their perceptions on the strengths and areas in need of improvement in the district.

The superintendent and district should also go to great lengths to engage individuals from the entire school community to assess the current state of the school district and collaboratively build the district's strategic direction, a shared vision inspiring all stakeholders to work together as a team to achieve new levels of success.

During the first 100 days, the new superintendent should personally:

Visit all district campuses multiple times (obviously this may vary depending on size of the system)

- Meet with principals, teachers, staff, parents and students
- Attend and participate in various school/district events and celebrations
• Meet with district leadership teams
• Meet with professional and auxiliary staff members
• Meet with internal auditors
• Meet with employee association leaders
• Meet with business and political leaders
• Meet with district advisory committees (students, parents, employees)
• Meet with district foundation board
• Meet with partners in education
• Meet with representatives of the faith-based community
• Meet with regional district leaders
• Host public open house meetings inviting community at-large
• Solicit feedback on district website with direct email link
• Maintain an open-door policy with entire school community

In addition to learning from members of the community, the superintendent should also focus on the collection and analysis of data to better understand the strengths and challenges of individual schools, students, and the district as a whole. From attendance, discipline, safety, campus climate and academic achievement to how the district spends its money, the comprehensive review of data will reveal areas of strength as well as areas in need of additional support.

A thorough analysis of the formal and informal data gathered should reveal a set of consistent priorities that represent the needs and wants of the community, which should be utilized in establishing the district’s strategic direction.

By ensuring that every voice counts in setting, communicating, and pursuing a clear vision, the superintendent and district have a higher chance of attaining true buy-in and unifying the community on the path to “transform dreams of greatness into the reality of achievement through human action.”

Easy enough, right?

Unfortunately, the application of these principles isn’t always straightforward. All our situations are different. No two leaders are dealt the same hand, even within the same district. Especially in today’s world, there are too many variables, seemingly in constant flux, for one game plan to work for all.

The transition period cannot be phoned in, or simply a task to check off. Each new leader must invest the time to genuinely get to know their district community. No assumptions or generalizations can be made. Stakeholders need to feel valued and listened to. If their new superintendent does not fully engage with them or has a position that he/she already knows what’s best for their community, they will have a hard time building lasting support.
I will never forget the time many years ago when my superintendent sat in my office and shared that he and the board had agreed to end his contract, less than a year after being appointed.

“I didn’t take the time to find out who built the fences around this place before I sought to move them,” he told me.

This was a well-accomplished, veteran school leader. He had led successful districts and was a great educator. He simply got ahead of himself doing what he felt was best and operated as he had in his previous district, without first understanding the lay of the land.

He hadn’t learned enough about the nuances of the district or built enough support before making changes.

Not only is it important for new superintendents to be thoughtful and deliberate in their entry into a new system, the same is incumbent of the district’s executive leadership team preparing to receive and support the vision of their new leader.

This spring my district will welcome a new superintendent, the third in my tenure here (fifth if you count interims). How simple it would be to dust off my plans and materials from the last time around and be done. However, 10 years have passed, and it wouldn’t be in our new leader’s nor our district’s best interest to simply paint her/him with the same brush as any of our exes.

Every new leader deserves their own light, their own brand that will help them share and build support for their vision of an improved future for their school community and its stakeholders.

That will be our goal as we welcome our new leader. We will be open-minded and flexible and seek to learn more about the current state of our community alongside her/him. We will provide insight and historical context while being careful of bias and avoiding the pitfall of inserting ourselves into the equation.

We will provide support and service and look forward to the continued growth and success of our great Socorro ISD school community.

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