

EP 11 - Leading Through Challenging Situations

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:00:12]:

Hello everyone, and welcome to OPC's Leadership Talks podcast. My name is Lawrence DeMaeyer, Professional Learning Advisor at the OPC.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:00:21]:

And my name is Susie Lee-Fernandes, OPC's Director of Professional Learning.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:00:26]:

As co-hosts, we will engage school and system leaders in authentic conversations to explore their passions, experiences and expertise in K to 12 education. OPC is proud to highlight the amazing work that principals and vice principals are doing across this province.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:00:44]:

We hope that Leadership Talks will not only provide you with inspiration, joy, and valuable strategies that will inform your professional practice, but also enhance the learning and well being of those you serve. Enjoy.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:01:01]:

Hi Lawrence, happy to be back with you for another conversation today. We have the pleasure of speaking with Steve Oliver. Steve is a principal with the Halton District School Board. Welcome, Steve. It's great to have you join us.

Steve Oliver [00:01:14]:

Good morning. Thank you. Nice to be here.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:01:16]:

Thanks, Susie. Yeah, it's great to welcome Steve here. And Steve, before we kind of ask you about some of the work that you've been doing, can you tell us a little bit about yourself and maybe your leadership journey? What's brought you to this point?

Steve Oliver [00:01:31]:

Sure. I've been with the school board for 23 years, started like most administrators, as a high school teacher. I worked in special education for a lot of my early years, for eight or nine years, and then I took a board job and I was the program leader for the first e-learning initiatives that we had in Ontario the last about a decade ago. I've been an administrator for ten years in four different schools. And I took my first principalship about midway through last year at a high school in Oakville. And I'm currently now the principal up in Georgetown at Georgetown District High School.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:02:10]:

So, Steve, we know today's topic is about navigating challenging situations. And it's been a few years since I was in the role of principal. And there was no shortage of challenges then, and certainly the landscape and the role has changed significantly. So can you share a little bit about what you'd like to talk about today in this area?

Steve Oliver [00:02:29]:

So I think a lot of what brought this on was my experiences last year. I was at Oakville Trafalgar, and we had an issue that was fairly public, a lot of media attention, a lot of social media attention, a lot of attention on our school and on the particular situation that was not necessarily coming directly from our school community. It became global, it became something that was captured on Fox News, captured on lots of different areas. And so I found as I stepped, not just from the vice principal role into the principal role, that there were exceptional challenges with that situation that I hadn't really ever anticipated or felt like we were ready for. So that was the work that we all had to do throughout that year. From the incredible support I got at the board level and from my colleagues in senior admin with Halton, and particularly the support I got from the Ontario Principals Council and from Protective Services. It was quite exceptional, the work that we were able to do together, but the challenges were really what you would expect. We had hundreds of emails and phone calls a day.

Steve Oliver [00:03:40]:

We had 16 bomb threats, four protests, a number of quite challenging board meetings with security involved. The school was locked up pretty tight for most of the year, so it was a challenge to lead a community of students and teachers with all of that distraction impacting us. So I think there was a lot of things that I learned throughout that process and continue to sort of use in my day to day work at the school I'm at now.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:04:10]:

So, Steve, there's no question, I think, in a modern context with, as you said, social media as it is, and perhaps that leading to more public scrutiny and pressure and so on, and certainly

adding multiple layers of distractions, what have you found to be some of the keys to keeping staff and students engaged and focused on learning?

Steve Oliver [00:04:35]:

I think the first piece is when you're working through things with staff, you need to be transparent and honest with them. They can read the newspaper and follow Twitter just like anyone else. So that's the one piece is just always giving people as much information as you can so that they're aware that you're looking out for them, that you're caring about them, that things are safe, and that we're doing everything we can to support them. The day-to-day was often those kinds of conversations and that kind of walking the halls, checking in with people and focusing on the work, focusing on the kids, focusing on the teaching and the learning. And that was easy for some, more challenging for others. And so recognizing that there was a depth and breadth to the needs of the staff and the students, you had to really be able to respond in a multileveled way. And that would involve making sure that everybody had opportunities to be heard, to be supported. Whether you're bringing in mental health supports for staff from the board level, you're making sure that your students are heard and supported.

Steve Oliver [00:05:41]:

There was particular communities that were impacted. Our LGBTQ kids were certainly impacted by some of the...just the hateful messages that the school was getting. So you really had to do a lot of checking in there, too, and being sure that those kids were okay. And then the other part of it, I think, that we sometimes forget is when we're leading schools, we have our six fire drills a year, and we have our two lockdown drills a year, and we make sure we know the evacuation points and we walk through all of those things as a matter of course because it's on a list—we've got to check it off. When you're managing in a crisis and in a crisis that is ongoing and at times unpredictable, those things that you've trained for become very real and they become very, very valuable.

Steve Oliver [00:06:30]:

And so I think the other piece that I've learned is that you do practice those things, because those things do happen in schools. You do need to lock down schools. You do need to go into "hold and secure". You do need to consider where we're evacuating to all of those things I had to do multiple times last year in my school. I valued the time we spent training and practicing. I valued the time we spent debriefing when we discovered that some of our processes maybe weren't as efficient as they could be. And you value that.

Steve Oliver [00:07:04]:

And the staff recognized that that was time well spent because these things were happening and they needed to feel secure in knowing that we were following our protocols, our protocols were working and they were keeping everyone safe. Those are a couple of the initial things, thoughts that come to mind when we're thinking about stuff that I've learned, that's for sure.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:07:24]:

Thanks. Steve. Your points about the drills or the practice and then the debriefing really resonate and certainly are key pieces as we move forward in our actual practice when it happens. And I can imagine maybe not all of us are going to experience the same types of situations or a situation at that crisis level, necessarily, right?

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:07:49]:

Like, they might be rarer, but as you've kind of worked through and done your own learning and having gone through that, are there any essential considerations or steps that you've now built into your management of challenging situations in general that people would benefit from hearing about?

Steve Oliver [00:08:06]:

Yeah. Yes. And I think that's kind of the key point here, is that there was so much all at once that there was a lot of learning there. And that's not a normal situation by any stretch, for sure, to your point. But there are some things I think, like, I'm in a big school now, a big building now, and there's things that you need to be able to do just quicker and faster. You need to be able to communicate quicker and faster with your staff. If we have to lock all the doors in my building. I have 37 outdoor doors right now, and having one custodian do that in the event of a need to lock up would take 45 minutes. That's not fast enough.

Steve Oliver [00:08:39]:

Having, for example, the ability for staff in certain parts of the building to get a message from me quickly through a group chat and say, we're going into hold and secure, lock your door, and then they have the ability to do that now near their building. I think I've learned that we need to communicate with our community as quickly and as transparently as possible. And sometimes the angst that parents rightly feel when there's something going on in their school—and this happens in all schools, this happens. I have three kids in the system, and I get messages from my child's schools when something's going on. I think we need to be sure that we're communicating with our communities as quickly as we can, as transparently as we can, and as honestly as we can, and be able to put people at ease that we've got this. Here's what's happened, here's what we need from you right now, and we'll give more information when we

can. And rightly so. We're concerned with the safety of the students in the building and the staff in the building as the primary point of focus.

Steve Oliver [00:09:45]:

But we often forget that there's a whole community and in my case, I've got 1600 families waiting for an update. That's a key piece, I think, for all of us to remember that and to be sure that the updates they get have some warmth and some care to them. I do think that the language of how we message people is important. They need to feel that the principal of the school is a real person that cares about their kid and is taking care of the problem at hand. So that kind of thing is a huge piece around trust that communities have in our schools and in our school leadership. Oftentimes you may have built up that trust over several years in a community, and oftentimes you may be new and you may have your crisis happen in the first month and that trust is tricky—tricky to establish, but it's an important piece.

Steve Oliver [00:10:40]:

Schools as these key places in our communities, we need to be sure that we're communicating in efficient and clear ways that do have empathy and compassion attached to them, I think.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:10:51]:

Thanks, Steve. And you mentioned wellness there and talking about care for students. And I know that the principal's responsibility extends to the wellness of their staff as well. And certainly here at OPC we've been talking and thinking a lot about wellness of administrators in the midst of the increased levels of responsibility and pressure that may come from some of these kinds of circumstances. So can you talk a little bit about how you keep wellness, both for your students and staff, but also how you maintain your own wellness as you're working through some of these more intense kinds of experiences?

Steve Oliver [00:11:32]:

That's a great question, and I'm a member of Provincial Council as well, so I'm certainly aware of the pressures that my colleagues have here in this board, elementary and secondary, and the pressures that we certainly have provincially with wellness of folks. And we know that statistically we are losing more members and we have challenges with retention in our profession because the job is hard and there's a lot of things attached to it that become quickly out of your control. And that's the piece, I think, for a lot of us in these leadership roles is that we want to be able to control things. We want to be able to have a handle on stuff. And sometimes you have a crisis that you're reacting all the time. You can't lasso it and tie it down. It's got a mind of its own. So we sometimes have to recognize, I think, as school leaders that we

got to do the best that we can with what we've got to work with, and we can't necessarily control everything, and nor are we always responsible for everything.

Steve Oliver [00:10:39]:

And we got to give ourselves a break sometimes on what we can control and what we can worry about and lose sleep over. One of my strengths, I'm pretty good with people, and I put a lot of my energy into the wellness of my own admin team—I've got three vice principals with me at this school—and we do a lot of the daily check ins and we do a lot of the daily walkthroughs and talking and making yourself available to that. And then the same with the staff. I'm out. I'm with the people. I've come into this school this year, but they had a difficult crisis last year, later in the year that staff are still working through emotionally. And so sometimes as a school leader, you come into a building where you have to be aware that there could be preexisting trauma in your building that you didn't experience, but your staff did.

Steve Oliver [00:13:20]:

And you really have to honor and respect that as well and be aware of that, know the history of the building when you come into it because you need to be sensitive to those people. So those things are kind of nuts and bolts stuff my personal wellness is tied to...I've got a new hobby. I play guitar and I've got three kids. So I kind of focus on and I try to separate work and life. I try to stay healthy with the gym and all that kind of thing, but we really have to go after it, I think, with our own people. I found for also my support, some of the health and wellness resources that are available through OPC were really helpful.

Steve Oliver [00:13:59]:

Some of the talk-throughs that I had with the OPC Protective Services staff were really helpful just to keep me grounded and keep me mindful of what you can control and what you can't control. That was important learning for me because you can't control a lot of things. You can be sure that you follow the mantra of "when you knew what did you do?" sort of thing is how I always look at it. But you really have to be sure that you're paying attention to your people, I think, and being responsive to them.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:14:34]:

Is there one key takeaway or a couple of things that you think would be the messaging you'd want our listeners to walk away with? There's so many different possibilities and situations. But what would you say would be your best advice from all your learning?

Steve Oliver [00:14:33]:

The best advice is you're not alone. You're not alone as a school leader, principal, vice principal, you are not alone. You have not only your own personal phone and friend relationships, you have a whole team of people at the board level that can help you. You have your superintendent, you have your safe schools people, you have your wellness people. You've got all of that. And so recognizing that within your own organization, you've got people that you can lean on and you should lean on. And it's not a sign of weakness to ask for help. And it's not a sign of weakness to say, I don't know what to do right now.

Steve Oliver [00:15:25]:

And you've got an OPC for that as well, that you can ask. So that would be the first piece. There's a chance that whatever you're going through, someone else has gone through and someone else has some advice for you and someone else can help you walk through it. And the second piece that we have to remember, I think when we have crisis come at us, is that this too shall pass. This is a crisis now. We have to react. We have to do the best that we can with it, but it will end. And when it does end, you've still got a staff and you've still got kids and you've still got a community that you need to work with and you need to continue to lead.

Steve Oliver [00:16:06]:

And so I think we have to remember, I mean, it's much like we say when there's job action, and we don't want job action with our teachers to damage our relationships long term. So we work really hard to maintain those relationships because we know that this will pass and we have to move on to normalcy again. And that's the same with the crisis. We need to remember that. But the big piece is really, and I had to learn that. I had to learn who to call and what to do when things came at me pretty quickly. And I still take advantage of that now, as a principal in a big, busy school, I call colleagues two or three times a week easily to ask for advice. I talk to my superintendent all the time as a regular type of thing.

Steve Oliver [00:16:50]:

I have monthly breakfast meetings just with other principals, just to talk through things and really make use of that professional network because there's a world of experience and knowledge there for all of us to take advantage of.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:17:05]:

That's really great advice. Thanks, Steve.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:17:07]:

Well, Steve, I think this is a topic, obviously, we could spend, I think, a lot more time unpacking this and thinking about it. But I think you've shared with us some really great examples of ways

to navigate through these more challenging situations. So I really want to thank you for spending some time with us today and for sharing some of your experience and your learning with us. It's much appreciated.

Steve Oliver [00:17:30]:

Thanks for having me. I enjoy talking about this and I do try to continue to help support colleagues whenever I can.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:17:37]:

We hope that you have enjoyed this episode of the Leadership Talks podcast where we engage in authentic conversations with school leaders. Please share with your friends and colleagues and we hope you will join us again.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:17:49]:

If you have a passion or story.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:17:51]:

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