

Mastering the Social-Emotional Side of School Leadership

“The Inner Life of School Leaders” by David Holmes in *Independent School*, Fall 2016
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“School leaders are expected to be visibly in charge, always on top of their game, doing the right things to advance the school, and exuding confidence and command,” says David Holmes (Community School, Idaho) in this article in *Independent School*. But the pressures of the job take their toll, and too many principals have an abbreviated tenure – five or fewer years, which is considered suboptimal. Holmes believes the loneliness of the principalship – not having a chance to share anxieties, insecurities, and fears because it might be taken as a sign of weakness or incompetence – plays a major part in turnover. Not having someone to talk to and/or the social-emotional skills to deal effectively with stresses can lead to:

- Unhealthy habits – poor sleep patterns, insufficient exercise, alcohol abuse;
- Acting out in anger and frustration;
- Developing a pattern of avoidance;
- Not making good use of sources of emotional sustenance like friends, colleagues, and loved ones.

The bottom line, says Holmes, is that what’s healthy for the principal is healthy for the school. He suggests ten rules for school leaders to manage their inner lives and remain effective, confident, enthusiastic, and satisfied with their work:

- *Accept what cannot be changed.* “You need to do this in order to deter a pattern of complaining that is so easy to begin,” says Holmes. “The discipline of dealing with ‘what is,’ not what you wish things to be, is an important principle.”

- *Sometimes you need to vent.* This should be done with someone you can trust and who doesn’t have a direct stake in your work. In almost all cases, this is not your spouse or partner.

- *Don’t take it personally.* It’s easier to handle in-your-face emotional complaints, criticisms, and venting when you believe it’s about the other person, not you.

- *Accept that the job is intense.* School leadership is uniquely demanding, but try to be as healthy as possible, both physically and psychologically. One strategy is to have a non-school “subplot” to your life – for example, writing, mindfulness, or becoming proficient at a sport.

- *Develop friendships with a few trusted colleagues.* “There is nothing like a good laugh,” says Holmes. “Friendships, heart-to-heart discussions, and humor can sideline day-to-day stresses and provide emotional sustenance and enjoyment.”

- *Engage in professional reading and writing.* “Days filled with administrative tasks and problem solving will ultimately wear you down,” says Holmes. The key is to read about what others are doing in the field, put your own stresses and anxieties in a wider frame of reference, and carry those insights into your work.

- *Get enough sleep.* “Whether it is makeup sleep on Sunday morning or a regular schedule of seven hours,” says Holmes, “leaders must play the ‘long game,’ and sleep is fundamental to longevity.”

- *Attend to your family.* “If family life is tension-filled or infused with resentment, you carry this with you every day,” says Holmes, “– and it will affect both your family life and your ability to lead the school.”

- *Adopt a posture of fearlessness.* Rather than allowing yourself to be paralyzed worrying what can go wrong, say to yourself: *I am on the right course; there are inherent risks, but the odds are with me; wise people around me agree with what we are doing; and no matter what happens, I can live with the consequences.*

- *If necessary, get help.* Not all problems can be solved alone, and there are times when a leadership coach, a psychologist, a cardiologist, or an addiction counselor is essential.