

MAKE TIME *to* RECHARGE

**GROWTH AND RENEWAL
PLAY KEY ROLES
IN SUSTAINING SCHOOL LEADERS**

**By Ellie Drago-Severson
and Jessica Blum-DeStefano**

“All I need is a little piece of friendship bread — some support to feel renewed and rejuvenated. Even a little piece would allow me to care even more for adults in my building. I find myself giving and giving friendship bread to everyone [in my school] — all the time — to help them grow. And I realize that I need to grow myself, too. I know it’s important. I just need a little bit of time and space to care for my own renewal, too.”

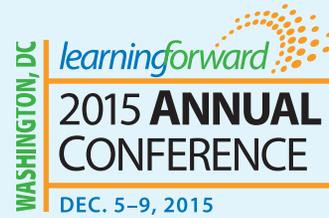
— A school leader

Being a school leader in any role is hard, gratifying, and a gift of love. While it can be enormously satisfying to serve students, teachers, families, and school communities, leaders need to refill themselves in order to continue giving to others. As one dedicated educator emphasized in the quote above, all school leaders need some kind of “friendship bread” to sustain themselves and their work.





Learn more about growth-oriented leadership at Learning Forward's Annual Conference Dec. 5-9 in Washington, D.C.



REFLECTION

Please use these questions to reflect on your own work and leadership.

- What are you doing to care for your renewal? How is this working for you?
- What is one additional thing that you could do for yourself that would feel supportive and restorative?
- What is something that you would like to grow about yourself or your leadership? How might others (e.g. a reflective partner or inquiry group) help you grow and learn in service to this goal?

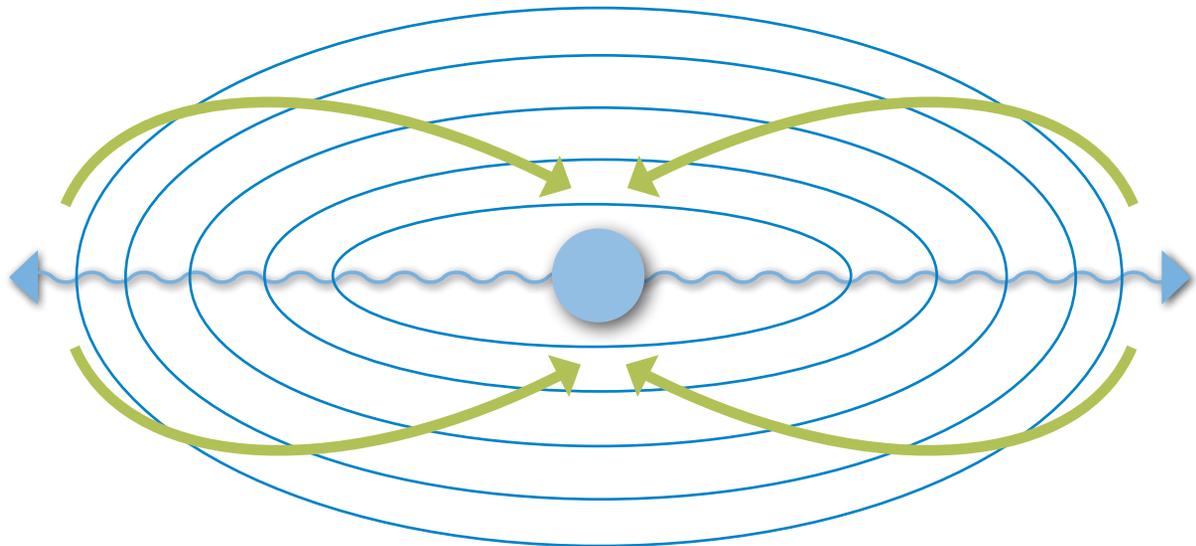
Recently, for example, a middle school principal in New York City confided her fear of burning out after seven rewarding and demanding years on the job. During a professional learning institute, which focused on how to support adult learning and development, this principal shared with us that she doesn't want to leave her school, but needs opportunities to grow and learn — especially given the nonstop demands piling up on her already overflowing plate. “Running without ever stopping,” as she put it, just isn't sustainable.

Moreover, this principal explained that she wants her teachers to have meaningful and ongoing growing opportunities, too. She worries, though, that the pressures of teaching and leading — of “simply surviving” as an educator in the current high-stakes, accountability-driven climate — leave little room for much else for anyone.

These two leaders are not alone. Dedicated educators (e.g. principals, assistant principals, teacher leaders, and district leaders) everywhere echo similar sentiments. It is difficult, they say, to find and maintain a sustainable balance as both a leader and human being. How, they wonder, can educational leaders attend to their own development while also supporting the learning and growth of students and teachers? Both are essential, as they emphasize.

With this universal need in mind, this article highlights a learning-oriented model of leadership development and capacity building that emphasizes the importance of caring for one's own self-development and renewal while caring for and supporting others (Drago-Severson, 2012a). It also highlights the real-life renewal hopes and strategies of practicing school leaders who have shared their stories

LEARNING-ORIENTED MODEL FOR LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT AND CAPACITY BUILDING



The self of the leader (the central dot in the model) influences the values we hold, the decisions we make, the structures and learning opportunities we facilitate, and more. The arrows, which circle back from the last ring into the center, illuminate the importance of refilling the self in order to continue giving to others.

Source: Drago-Severson, 2012a.

with us in our teaching, consulting, and longitudinal research (Drago-Severson, 2012a; Drago-Severson, Blum-DeStefano, & Asghar, 2013).

The mounting evidence about the critical role of renewal in leadership lends additional urgency to this work. Education leaders need to renew themselves to maintain and improve their productivity (Schwartz, 2013) and better meet the complex challenges at their doorstep (Drago-Severson, 2004, 2009, 2012a; Drago-Severson & Blum-DeStefano, in press; Kegan, 1982, 1994, 2000). And they need to grow and renew to most effectively care for all school participants — and avoid burnout.

THE CENTRAL ROLE OF SELF IN LEADERSHIP

Working to lead and support others is a tremendous expression of self. In fact, a leader's self sits at the very heart of any leadership enterprise and influences every aspect of the work we are able to do with and for others (Drago-Severson, 2012a). While many things make up the selves we bring to leadership — including our personal experiences, relationships, beliefs, and internal capacities — this research-based model for building leadership and organizational capacity (Drago-Severson, 2012a) emphasizes the central role that *who we are* plays in our teaching, learning, and leading.

As the graphic above shows, the self of the leader (the central dot in the model) influences all that we do, culminating in a series of interconnected growth rings that reflect the values we hold, the decisions we make, the structures and learning opportunities we facilitate, and more.

WHAT MAKES UP YOUR CENTRAL DOT?

Use these questions to consider the core elements that make up your own self (the central dot) and how they inform your leadership.

- What values, beliefs, and influences do you think inform your central dot or self?
- What values do you hope others see in your leadership?
- How do you try to share/communicate what is most important to you with others?
- What is something you would like to learn or grow about yourself to further strengthen your leadership?

In other words, what you value most — what you care for and prioritize as a leader and human being — can and should inform your practice in important ways. Authentically growing oneself by building our internal capacities to better manage the complexities of learning and leading today can help us become even more effective in supporting and growing others. In fact, this kind of authentic, transformational learning may be the only kind of professional learning that makes a real difference for students (Guskey, 2000; Murnane & Willet, 2010).

By growth or transformational learning, we mean increases in our cognitive, emotional, interpersonal (how the self relates

to others), and intrapersonal (how the self relates to itself) capacities that enable us to manage better the complexities of leading, learning, teaching, and living (Drago-Severson, 2004, 2009, 2012a; Drago-Severson & Blum-DeStefano, in press; Drago-Severson, Blum-DeStefano, & Asghar, 2013; Drago-Severson, Roy, & von Frank, 2015).

MODEL CORE VALUES

As a leader, understanding and prioritizing what feels most important and nonnegotiable about one's central values and convictions — what we refer to as the “core elements” of your leadership (Drago-Severson, 2012a) — are key. Moreover, understanding that the ways in which we act, listen, speak, see, and orient to others are always expressions of these values — and also our internal reserves and capacities — helps highlight the importance of intentionally modeling the core elements in our behaviors and relationships. Effective leadership is not just about doing certain things on the surface. It's about modeling and embodying the qualities for which we hope to stand, such as care, trust, and respect.

In this way, school leaders' words and actions take center stage in their work. How we listen, how we welcome and respond to questions, how we connect and build relationships with others, and how we seek out new knowledge and capacities matter and are parts of ourselves that we must continue to explore and develop. As Ralph Waldo Emerson has been quoted as saying, “What you do speaks so loudly that I cannot hear what you say.” For leaders, too, when we aren't intentional about aligning what we do with what we say, it can be hard to establish a trusting foundation on which to build.

REFILL THE SELF

Given the vital importance of your self (or central dot) in your leadership — as the source from which all else springs — the model on p. 40 also circles back to the center and underscores the power of continually growing and refilling oneself as a leader. In addition to more traditional forms of renewal — like time away from work, exercise, reading, traveling, or spending time with family and friends — a learning-oriented conceptualization of refilling also emphasizes the power of seeking out supports to grow oneself.

For example, participation in collaborative pairs and groups builds individual and organizational capacity, and reflecting and engaging in dialogue with others is a proven developmental support. In light of this, the model highlights the power of mentoring and co-mentoring, which involves a mutual exchange of ideas and expertise in support to learning and growth — as well as the powerful benefits of collegial inquiry groups, which can help leaders learn from diverse perspectives and also unearth assumptions that drive thinking and action (Drago-Severson, 2004, 2007, 2009, 2012a).

Ultimately, no matter what form they take, self-develop-

ment and renewal are key to effective leadership, and doing so in the company of others can reduce the isolation of what can be a very lonely job. As one principal recently said, “It's so nice to feel supported, especially when you're supporting others.”

RENEWAL STRATEGIES

Our longitudinal research with leaders who learned about and experienced a version of this model as part of their leadership training illuminates the very real importance of growing and sustaining oneself as a leader (Drago-Severson, 2004, 2007, 2009, 2012a, 2012b; Drago-Severson & Blum-DeStefano, in press; Drago-Severson, Blum-DeStefano, & Asghar, 2013).

We learned through our research that — despite the growing awareness of the importance of renewal and self-development — making space for oneself as a leader is never easy. For instance, the leaders who shared their stories with us still yearn for ongoing support and opportunities to grow. In describing their current renewal strategies, suggestions, and hopes, these leaders emphasized the importance of:

- Prioritizing time for renewal and self-development — and how hard this is for many; and
- Finding and creating opportunities for meaningful collaboration.

FINDING TIME

These leaders emphasized the importance of making the time for self-growth and self-care. This, they explained, was challenging, even though they knew it was essential.

One leader said that his work as a charter school leader — while successful and very meaningful — just “doesn't fit within a 40-hour workweek.” With experience, he came to understand that an important part of his job as a leader involved figuring out “ways to contain it [the job] so that it doesn't become 80 hours or 90 hours a week, like it used to be.”

Stressing the essential importance of nourishing himself as a part of effective leadership, he said, “I've come to realize that our work is incredibly complex, incredibly urgent, incredibly important, and, at the same time, I do really believe in the notion that there has to be work-life balance in order for people to be their best selves in the work. And what I've learned in my own life — and this might sound funny, but it's true—is that the best way to have work-life balance is to have a life outside of work that is just as important as work.”

Other leaders described this balance in terms of connecting with others and finding private time for rest and reflection. For many of the leaders we learned from, this kind of private time took many forms — like journaling, dictating thoughts to a recorder, exercising, watching television, or reading — but the space itself remained a sacred and important part of sustaining themselves and enhancing the work (Drago-Severson, 2012a, 2012b; Drago-Severson, Blum-DeStefano, & Asghar, 2013). Making room in their hectic schedules for renewal required

intentional and ongoing effort, and the strength to put on hold — if even for a moment — the innumerable pressures and demands of leadership and life.

MEANINGFUL COLLABORATION

In addition to wanting more time for personal growth and renewal, leaders frequently requested the opportunity to collaborate with other leaders in the field. They recognized that additional opportunities to think, talk, and collaborate with others would be valuable to their work, lives, and leadership. In fact, nearly all of the leaders we spoke to in our different research studies requested this kind of support in the form of:

- Collegial inquiry opportunities;
- Mentoring relationships; and/or
- Networking/communication opportunities with like-minded colleagues.

Perhaps most poignantly, a number of these leaders lamented the loneliness of leadership. Many longed for opportunities to work closely with other administrators so that they could bring their similar and sometimes different experiences to bear in mutual support. As one middle school assistant principal said: “I would love to have more of a connection to the other people ... who have the same background and same knowledge set ... [so I could] find out about how they’re implementing these types of professional development opportunities for their staff and ... [learn more about] the nitty-gritty of helping their teachers become more reflective about their practice and work together more collaboratively.”

These leaders’ reflections confirm the importance and power of creating spaces for aspiring and practicing leaders to support themselves and each other. The fact that this continues to be hard for so many leaders has important implications for both practice and policy as well as for the fundamental ways we think about what it means to lead and serve (Drago-Severson, 2012b, in press).

‘THE MOST IMPORTANT LEARNING’

Findings from our longitudinal study and the takeaways from the leadership development model highlight the critical importance of growing and sustaining oneself as a leader — for its own sake and given the positive link between renewal and productivity (Schwartz, 2013).

As one aspiring principal recently explained, he was excited to attain many skills as he prepared for leadership, but the experience of learning about himself, his development, and the need for renewal was “the most important learning for becoming a school leader.”

REFERENCES

Drago-Severson, E. (2004). *Helping teachers learn: Principal leadership for adult growth and development.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Drago-Severson, E. (2007). Helping teachers learn: Principals as professional development leaders. *Teachers College Record*, 109(1), 70-125.

Drago-Severson, E. (2009). *Leading adult learning: Supporting adult development in our schools.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press & NSDC.

Drago-Severson, E. (2012a). *Helping educators grow: Strategies and practices for leadership development.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

Drago-Severson, E. (2012b). The need for principal renewal: The promise of sustaining principals through principal-to-principal reflective practice. *Teachers College Record*, 114(12), 1-56.

Drago-Severson, E. (in press). Teaching, learning, and leading in today’s complex world: Reaching new heights with a developmental approach. *International Journal of Leadership in Education.*

Drago-Severson, E. & Blum-DeStefano, J. (in press). *Tell me so I can hear you: A developmental approach to feedback for educators.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

Drago-Severson, E., Blum-DeStefano, J., & Asghar, A. (2013). *Learning for leadership: Developmental strategies for building capacity in our schools.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Drago-Severson, E., Roy, P., & von Frank, V. (2015). *Reach the highest standard in professional learning: Learning designs.* Thousand Oaks: Corwin Press & Learning Forward.

Guskey, T.R. (2000). *Evaluating professional development* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Kegan, R. (1982). *The evolving self: Problem and process in human development.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Kegan, R. (1994). *In over our heads: The mental demands of modern life.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Kegan, R. (2000). What “form” transforms? A constructive-developmental approach to transformative learning. In J. Mezirow & Associates (Eds.), *Learning as transformation* (pp. 35-70). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Murnane, R.J. & Willet, J.B. (2010). *Methods matter: Improving causal inference in educational and social science research.* New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Schwartz, T. (2013, February 9). Relax! You’ll be more productive. *The New York Times.* Available at www.nytimes.com/2013/02/10/opinion/sunday/relax-youll-be-more-productive.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

•
Ellie Drago-Severson (drago-severson@tc.edu) is a professor of education leadership and adult learning & leadership and Jessica Blum-DeStefano (jessclum@yahoo.com) is a junior co-instructor in the Summer Principals Academy at Teachers College, Columbia University. ■