

Principles for Principals March

For questions or comments, please contact LouisianaLeaders@la.gov.

March's Topic: Instructional Leadership/Instructional Focus

"When everything is a priority, nothing is a priority." Frank Sonnenberg

This month's principal, "**Prioritize your Priorities,**" is best summed up in the quote above, or can warrant a deeper dive as Brandon Smith does in his book *The Hot Sauce Principle: How to Live and Lead in a World Where Everything Is Urgent All of the Time*.

Overview of "The Hot Sauce Principle"

The Hot Sauce Principle is explained through a food metaphor. If we equate urgency with hot sauce, then, just as a few dashes of hot sauce can enhance and expand the flavors of food, a few small dashes of urgency can enhance and expand the outcomes of our work. However, too much hot sauce makes the food an inedible mess; too much urgency placed on too many things makes our work an untenable mess as well.

Central to the metaphor is not just the idea of hot sauce and its equivalence to urgency, but also how frequently employees are tasked with eating peppers that not only increase in number but also in heat. While The Hot Sauce Principle spends plenty of pages defining and articulating what constitutes these different "peppers", what is important for this summary is a focus on what leaders can do to reduce the number of peppers thrown at those they manage.



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My 3 Three Things

1. **One thing I wish I would have done differently my first year:** In my first year as Principal, I wish I would have slowed down and clearly communicated my plan of action to my staff.
2. **One thing I was glad I did my first year:** I was glad I survived my first year without my Assistant Principal who was out sick for the majority of the year.
3. **One thing every principal should know/do:** Every principal should plan as much as or more than a teacher because you are no longer planning for a class but an entire school.

What Can You Do as a Leader to Decrease the Heat

1. Understand What Urgency is:

- a. Urgency is pain designed to impact change. Essentially, when leadership uses urgency, they are communicating - “things are not what they are supposed to be, and I am going to make you uncomfortable until you help get these things done.”
- b. If we constantly communicate the urgency of the work, we also communicate pain and discomfort to our employees.

2. Prioritize:

- a. Mastering urgency comes down to clearly articulating the tasks that matter and how much they should matter to subordinates. This is especially true for new school leaders. When entering a new school, leaders may see many issues and feel that everything must change all at once. And everything may have to change, but changing it all at once risks burning out staff and achieving no real change because no real focus is given to each item. \
- b. Think of your coaching plans. We select one descriptor from one indicator within one domain on the Louisiana Educator Rubric, using leverage to determine the selection. We should do the same with the challenges facing us in school. Even when everything must change, prioritize expectations around changes that will impact the most areas of the school that need to grow, and communicate those changes as focused on creating the greatest possible impact.

3. Control Your Emotions:

- a. Emotions are contagious, and negative emotions are the most contagious. We cannot change our emotions, but being aware of them and taking specific actions to manage them can go a long way to limiting the “pain of urgency” we experience and inflict.
- b. Questions we can use to understand and manage our emotions, as well as, gauge and understand our staff’s emotions (pg. 94):
 - i. *On a scale of 1 -10, how anxious are you feeling about the future as it relates to our school?*
 - ii. *Where is your anxiety coming from? How influential should those sources be in our decision-making?*
 - iii. *How did you arrive today? How are you feeling right now?*
- c. Ultimately, leadership is about “processing all of the noise” and filtering out what doesn’t matter or doesn’t matter as much to help those they lead focus on what matters most.

4. Focus on Intent

- a. Subordinates often accuse their supervisors of “micromanaging” when the supervisor habitually communicates the “how” of an action or plan. Smith recommends following the U.S. Army’s “*Commander’s Intent*” protocol (p. 97).
- b. In the Army, leaders pull their subordinates and communicate “the **why** of the mission, the **what** of the mission, and the **when** of the mission,” but leave the **how** to those who will actually be doing the mission.
- c. In this way, the subordinate’s abilities, skills, and knowledge is respected, while the leader can be assured that the expectations and outcomes have been communicated.

In Summary

With a shift in how schools are evaluated and the rapidly approaching crunch of testing and end-of-year activities, everyone is feeling the pressure to improve student outcomes. Leaders face a specific challenge: managing that heat and using it to move schools forward productively. While the actions defined here may feel uncomfortable for leaders or cause hesitation to implement, what is not up for discussion is that something must be done to address the pressures of rising student achievement. Ultimately, as school leaders, we have a responsibility to reflect, consider, and, where necessary, adjust or amend our approaches to support our teachers in prioritizing and focusing on the actions that matter most for our students.

Questions for Reflection:

Based on this month's topic.

1. Reflecting on the hot sauce metaphor, how might overusing urgency in your school leadership create an "inedible mess" for your staff, and what specific strategies could you implement to ensure urgency enhances rather than overwhelms productivity?
2. In what ways does viewing urgency as a form of "pain designed to impact change" shift your approach to communicating priorities with teachers, and how can you balance this to foster motivation without causing discomfort or burnout?
3. Considering that emotions are contagious, particularly negative ones, how can school leaders use the suggested questions (e.g., rating anxiety on a 1-10 scale) in team meetings to better gauge and manage collective emotional states, and what personal practices might help you process "noise" before it affects your staff?
4. How does adopting the "Commander's Intent" protocol — focusing on the why, what, and when while leaving the how to your team — challenge or align with your current leadership style, and what potential risks or benefits do you foresee in empowering teachers this way during high-pressure periods like testing season?
5. Drawing from the article's emphasis on filtering out what doesn't matter, how might you audit your current school initiatives to identify and eliminate low-impact tasks, and what conversations with your leadership team could facilitate this process?

Resources

Smith, B.M. (2020). *The Hot Sauce Principle: How to Live and Lead in a World Where Everything is Urgent All of the Time*. Indie Books International.