

LEADERSHIP LESSONS

*Choosing Courage and
Positivity when the
Unthinkable Happens*

Dr. Charlotte Stingley-Ellis

*Principal on Special Assignment,
Pasco SD*

PRINCIPAL EVALUATION CRITERIA

Creating a Culture, Improving Instruction



FROM GEORGIE (THE DOG) AND WALDO (MY BRAIN TUMOR)

As school leaders, we attend “principal school” where we learn to research best practices and the needed characteristics to become an impactful leader within our organization. This shared experience allows us to collaborate with each other on developing instructional visions, managing budgets, and tending to the daily responsibilities associated with our positions. Being a principal becomes our identity and life – we are an administrator, we are the leader, we shape and mold the lives of hundreds of students. This is our moral purpose.

But what if you suddenly couldn't be a principal or a leader and all of those leadership lessons you have gleaned over the years were gone, and you were left just being you? This idea is scary and unimaginable – until it happens.

A NEW REALITY

The date was Oct. 17, 2016, and the unthinkable happened to me. Within minutes I lost the ability to talk, walk, and even think clearly. I was just beginning my third year as a middle school principal. I was so honored to be the principal at my alma mater, Stevens Middle School in Pasco.

I loved all the aspects of my position and particularly all the crazy that surrounds middle school students. I had also just begun my second year of a three-year doctorate program through UW. My family was well, my two sons were doing amazing, and reflecting back now my life was

“The date was Oct. 17, 2016, and the unthinkable happened to me. Within minutes I lost the ability to talk, walk, and even think clearly.”

really blessed. Then in a flash, all that I knew, all that I believed was true, was gone and I was left with the idea that I would never be me again – my life would forever be changed.

At the age of 43, I experienced at the time what doctors determined was a stroke. Then the doctors examined the CAT scans more intentionally and found the root cause of my symptoms: a tumor, a brain tumor, a tumor in my brain. I still have to say it different ways to fully accept my new reality. The upside to finding the tumor was that the original diagnoses of a stroke was re-coded to a seizure, one which interrupted the multiple functions of the brain, including my ability to walk, talk, think clearly and – more devastating – my ability to be a principal.

This addition to my brain, which we now affectionately call “Waldo,” became the sole focus of my life. Over the next months I began to recover from the initial seizure, recapturing my ability walk, talk, and think with clarity. Finally, after a couple of months of rehab, I was released to return to work. I was free to return to my calling; I was going to lead again.

Unfortunately, my return to the principalship was short-lived. I continued to have seizures and at the end of March, I experienced a particularly significant seizure that put me back into the hospital where the doctors reviewed the size of the tumor. Yep, Waldo had grown. He was

continuing to occupy more space in my brain, thus causing more intensive seizures. I was going to have to seek a different approach to address the seizures as we continued to monitor Waldo and hoped he would stop growing.

The new medication required another leave from my role as a principal. This time I did not take the news very well. Sadness and despair took over my thoughts. I am a leader, I am a principal, I lead and shape the lives of hundreds of students. I was confident those who were now leading the building were more than qualified and would continue to support and put the needs of students first, but I wouldn't be there to see the growth and celebrate the students. My identity was gone and I feared I would forget how to lead. I would no longer be who I was.

ME, GEORGIE & WALDO

The first three days of my second medical leave were tough. I spent the days eating my feelings, watching “Grey's Anatomy” episodes, looking for a quick fix for my situation. Then I would sleep, a lot. On the third day of this pity party my two amazing sons came home from school and engaged in a hard conversation with me as I laid in my bed with an empty bag of cookies and chips next to me. They gently but clearly told me that I had to get up, I had to shower, and – most importantly – I had to get out of

Continued on page 26

the sweats and t-shirt that I had be wearing for at least three days. I cried and agreed to get out of bed, shower, and even cook dinner.

I realized that Waldo had taken control. He was dictating my every move and impacting the quality of my children's life. I was committed to shifting my perspectives. I had some good ideas as to how to do this, and – to my surprise – so did my kids. Their idea: I needed a dog.

We all know that any pet requires work, and I was not in a place to take care of myself, let alone a pet. However, those stubborn children continued to push, looking on different websites until they found

“ But to my amazement, soon after Georgie's arrival, we became inseparable. We established our routine. We would walk at 8 a.m., 12 p.m., and 6 p.m., and of course take a few naps throughout the day.”

the perfect dog at our local Humane Society. I agreed to go look at the ragtag dog, who had the saddest face, whose coat was mangled and dirty, and I could tell his spirit was broken. As soon as I saw this dog locked in a chain-link pen, I connected with him immediately. I looked into his eyes and I saw a reflection of myself; this dog and I were the feeling the same way, both searching for someone to help them change their current reality. We took the dog home, changed his name to Georgie, and that is where my new journey into leadership began.

I had been a leader, I had been smart, I had been effective, and now I was the sad woman with a brain tumor who adopted a rescue dog. But to my amazement, soon after Georgie's arrival, we became inseparable. We established our routine. We would walk at 8 a.m., 12 p.m., and 6 p.m., and of course take a few naps throughout the day. The days became weeks, and as my mind became clearer I really started to think about my leadership practices and how different I would be if I could just get back to being a principal.





I reopened leadership books I had read in the past, looked online, and talked with my doctoral colleagues. All of these sources were filled with great research and approaches, but I struggled with how to connect all of that knowledge to my current reality. It was just me, Georgie, and Waldo every day hanging out, but I also had this feeling Georgie had something to say. Then one morning, Georgie finally spoke and schooled me on three incredible leadership lessons.

1. SOMETIMES YOU LEAD, SOMETIMES YOU FOLLOW

As principals, we are handed keys to the building and told to go lead, go create, raise those test scores, and keep things off of the superintendent's desk. It is easy for a principal to carry all of these responsibilities alone, especially if you are new. Remember, we are the ones who went to school to become a principal. We applied and accepted the position. People are expecting us to have the answers and when we don't, we have the feeling of inadequacy and doubt in our abilities. (Raise your hand if you have ever doubted that you are a good principal – yep, me too.)

I was pondering this very thought one day as Georgie and I were on our morning walk. As a Type A

person, which many of us principals are, I planned out our daily walking routines almost down to the minute. This day was no different. However, at the point we were to make the traditional right turn to go home, Georgie sat down on the curb and refused to move. I tugged at his leash a time or two. He still refused to move. I went over, got eye-to-eye, and negotiated with him. No movement. I then tried the aggressive stance and words. Still no movement. I finally gave in, having to rely on the trust between us and agreed to turn left.

I was pissed.

I was the leader, and I knew where I was going and this route was uncharted. I didn't know where the landmines of other dogs may be. I was unsure of the roads and worried we would get lost. These thoughts slowly faded away as I was captivated by the landscape of a park that was around the corner. I had lived in my house for years and didn't know there was a park that close. Georgie began to run and jump. He sniffed all the trees and had excitement in his eyes and his tail would not stop wagging.

That day I relearned a basic leadership approach: sometimes you lead, and sometimes you follow. That moment on the corner, I employed a number of leadership moves trying

“ ... I wonder how many times we have left staff on the corner, simply because we didn't understand what they were trying teach us.”

to get Georgie to follow me home. My last option, in my perspective, would have been to simply leave him behind. I would not do that, but I wonder how many times we have left staff on the corner, simply because we didn't understand what they were trying teach us. For months, Georgie let me lead the walks; he trusted me that I would get us home safely. Once that trust was built with him, he needed me to trust him. When I did, I experienced and discovered an entirely different part of the neighborhood, filled with new perspectives and people.

Connect that to your school. What if you built trust with someone who has different viewpoints than you and together you took a walk through your building or the neighborhood around your school? What would the two of you see differently that could influence the development of your school's vision and be a true

Continued on page 28

Continued from page 27

representation of where the school is going? This would put you in a very vulnerable situation and demonstrate an act of courage – but you didn’t take this position because you are wimpy. And besides, Georgie would say, “If you are leading with just your perspective, you are really just walking alone.”

2. WHO’S COACHING WHOM?

A few months into becoming Georgie’s mom, I began to see the adage of “you can’t teach an old dog new tricks” is accurate. Georgie was potty trained when we adopted him, but beyond that, his ability to listen and follow direction was limited. I tried watching online videos to help me coach him into being a friendlier dog towards strangers or coming back home when he wiggled off the leash. However, my skills were inferior to what Georgie needed. The moment I knew I was in real trouble was when I couldn’t find anyone willing to dog sit when I had to travel to Seattle for class at UW because he was “naughty.”

“ I cannot always clean up situations by myself. I need help and support. I need to seek out individuals who can approach situations with different skills and work together to solve problems of practice in service of our students.”

Inadvertently, Georgie was teaching me another leadership lesson: When you need support and help, swallow your pride and ask for help. I accepted that all my coursework and degrees were no match for Georgie and his special training needs. I located our local dog whisperer, Steve, and I assumed we would focus on what Georgie needed to relearn to obey my commands. Well, I was wrong. The coaching was designed for me.

I was confused for a while, but as I took Steve’s coaching and put the lessons into action, I began leading Georgie with my newly acquired tools. His behavior changed. Steve explained that Georgie responds to my tone and tenor, the level of consistency with which I employ expectations, and my emotions. Groundbreaking ideas! No, not really, but they are ones that are easily forgotten in the frenzy of everyday life. Whatever the leader brings into the room, conversation, or meeting sets the tone and parameters for others’ behavior. I needed to be coached to relearn that concept.

Thankfully Steve and Georgie were up for the task.

As educational leaders, we all have valuable perspectives to share and all want to contribute to the growth of others. Asking for someone to coach you is humbling and opens you up to being vulnerable. You may not always like what they say – I know I don’t, but there is wisdom in experience. And, coaching isn’t just a one-way relationship. I have taught my coaches a couple of things around building equitable systems and recent research and how to program their smartphone.

When do you know you need coaching? With Georgie, I waited too long. I allowed the naughty behavior to continue way past my gut telling me I needed help. In hindsight I would have begun the first day he struggled with communicating and I could see it was going to be a tough road. Principal coaching is



no different. Having someone coach you through your thoughts and actions before you engage is considerably more effective than them coaching you out of a potential mess. As one of my coaches tells me, “That bell has already rung, you cannot unring it.” I long thought that having someone “coach” me meant that I was inadequate or not qualified for the position. I learned quickly that all parties benefit when we are humble enough to ask for help.

3. SOMETIMES YOU NEED HELP CLEANING UP THE MESS

Principaling is hard work and is a profession where you are out front all the time. People are constantly watching your every move, judging, and at times waiting for you to fail. With this pressure comes the desire to never make a mistake and when we do, oftentimes we hurry to try and fix it, hoping no one sees or knows that we are not perfect. I was one of those leaders.

I felt the pressure to be perfect and to run the building with each leadership move precisely planned, to avoid making a mess. As you can guess I didn’t always achieve this goal, and when I did mess up, I sought to rewind the experience, to cover it up alone in the safety of my office.

My thinking shifted one afternoon when my new medication took control of my actions. The dosage of the medication had some interesting side effects, including mood swings. At any given time, I could lose my mind, and then one day it happened to a degree never witnessed before. I wanted a milkshake, a good old fashioned chocolate milkshake. So I loaded up Georgie and we drove to our local McDonald’s and got a



large creamy chocolate milkshake with whipped cream on top. Joy was in my heart, I was so proud of my milkshake. Then the unthinkable happened. As I walked into the kitchen, the milkshake slipped from my hands and landed in a huge chocolate puddle all over the floor. Tears flowed, followed by anger which took over my heart.

Why would this happen – I deserved this milkshake. I planned for the milkshake, I correctly ordered the milkshake. Ugggh ...WHY? I walked away from the kitchen, deciding I was not going to address the mess on the floor. Yes I created the mess, but I didn’t want to clean it up. Then I saw Georgie beginning to clean it up, in his own doggie way. As I watched him clean up my problem of the spilt milkshake, I grabbed paper towels and together, using different approaches, we conquered the milkshake disaster. The lesson embedded in the Great Milkshake Fail is that as a leader, I cannot always clean up situations by myself. I need help and support. I need to seek out individuals who can approach situations with different skills and work together to solve problems of practice in service of our students.

Georgie used his skills and I used mine; moments later the floor was clean and we were in the car, on our way to try again. The funny thing is this lesson continued throughout the day. As we took our last evening walk, Georgie made a mess. And as he tried to clean it up by kicking grass over it, the mess was still there. As I took

the lead, using the poop bag and to clean up his mess, I giggled, thinking we were even for the day. Two messes, cleaned up in different ways, but both done together.

FINDING THE LESSONS WITHIN THE RUBBLE

The first day in the hospital, I never thought I would be thankful for having a brain tumor and that Waldo would have such a positive impact on my educational journey. Georgie and Waldo have continued to provide me with opportunities to learn and grow that I could not have even imagined. Life is full of defining moments and finding Waldo was no exception.

“Every day is a new adventure and I am honored to be a part of an amazing community who serves selflessly for our children.”

Many times I have fallen to my knees and asked, “Why me?” But then Georgie finds me, licks my face, and reminds me of the greater purpose. Waldo and Georgie have both created situations where my only option has been to choose courage, to choose positivity, and to find the lessons within the rubble. Using this strength and that of my family and friends, I was able to complete my doctorate degree with my cohort family, and even plan a wedding!

Every day is a new adventure and I am honored to be a part of an amazing community who serves selflessly for our children. ■