

## EP 10 - Personal Leadership Journey as an Arab Woman

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.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:00:59]:

Hi Susie, really glad to be back with you for another episode of our podcast, and I'm really enjoying this wide range of topics that we're covering in the podcast here. I'm finding it just fascinating how many great stories and experiences that school leaders across the province have to share. So the diversity in the types of stories and the expertise that people have to share is really amazing. So looking forward to today's conversation with Diane Merhy from the Ottawa District School Board, who has a really unique leadership journey and perspective to share with us.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:01:37]:

I couldn't agree with you more, Lawrence. And welcome to you, Diane. It's great to have you so today, without giving too much away into the topic that you're going to be discussing. Personal stories are so powerful and they emphasise that there's no one pathway or set journey in leadership, or in life for that matter. And I know today you're going to be sharing the story of

your journey and how you came to be where you are today. And so could you give a little bit of insights, first on the why of why you've decided to share your story now and maybe more underlining the importance of sharing it now, especially in today's time?

Diane Merhi [00:02:15]:

Well, thank you, Lawrence and Susie. I'm happy to be here. And yes, I think it's important that my perspective is shared just for the fact that there may be a lot of other people that are contemplating whether they're ready for leadership roles or worried about the process of becoming a leader. And I do believe that if you have a skill set that you want to share and you believe it can be beneficial to others and helpful to others, not to be afraid of going through the journey, leaning into the struggle and aspiring to be the best possible version of yourself that you can be.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:03:00]:

Thanks for that, Diane. Can you maybe now just kind of tell us a little bit about your journey and how you ended up in the role and the place that you're in now and some of those things that you learned along the way that you think are going to help some other people in their own journey.

Diane Merhi [00:03:18]:

So I have been with the Ottawa Carleton District School board since 2005. So I'm almost going on my 20 years of service with this board, and my leadership journey did not start actually in being an educator, a teacher. I actually started off with a school board as an office administrator. I was one of those people that went through a school system that didn't fit my needs. I was a first generation immigrant along with my family, so the struggle was real. There was a lot of relevancy in the learning that I wasn't able to access because I wasn't able to draw on a lot of my own lived and learned experiences and my prior knowledge and background information that I had of navigating through these things. So I wasn't able to be that student that was successful in post secondary. I didn't have the grades, I didn't have the academics to perhaps apply to university and start that academic journey.

Diane Merhi [00:04:29]:

So I found myself very limited in some of the career goals that I had. So starting with the school board as an office administrator, I remember regularly wanting to just do more and be more supportive and be more engaging with students. So I used to use my lunch breaks to go sit in a resource room and work one on one with students that needed support at that time. And that motivation and move pushed me actually to go back to school and get a graduate certificate in autism and behavioural science, which helped me pursue becoming an educational assistant in

the same board that I work with. Doing that was very thoroughly rewarding. I thoroughly enjoy working with students and actually, even as a leader now I miss the classroom every single day, but going on and becoming an educational assistant and seeing the impact of my work, but feeling I can do more, I can be more beneficial to my students, to my school community and to my board. I actually at that point decided that I was going to go back to university and get a bachelor's degree in something that I was interested in, which was psychology. And even on top of that, make it even more intentional because I really liked working with the high school students.

Diane Merhi [00:05:53]:

So I knew I needed to make sure I had two teachable designations along with my university degree. But it came to me with a little bit of a challenge because at this point I had three children, I had financial responsibilities. So I was getting through university, working full time and being a parent, and that was successful. I went on and got my teaching degree and I guess the rest is a little bit of history, working in the school board as a teacher and taking on leadership roles of head of ESL, becoming a coach with my board, and inevitably putting my name in the hat to take on an administrative role.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:06:42]:

Thanks so much, Diane. It's clear that you have a lot of gifts that were recognized quite early. And so in reflecting on your identity and your lived experience, how has that impacted or changed? Perhaps maybe your approach to leadership, that maybe goes against the grain of the norm.

Diane Merhi [00:07:03]:

One of the things that I try to do intentionally is really look past what I'm immediately seeing in a person and making sure that I'm super cautious of any underlying biases and valuing what people have to contribute, what their skill sets are, honouring their lived and learned experiences, making sure that representation matters, and I'm helping to nurture and build a workforce that is representative of the students and the staff that we serve and work with alongside. I go back to my own experience where school did not fit me. I didn't feel welcomed in the learning environment, I didn't feel relevant in the learning environment. And all of those struggles really affected how I was effectively able to be successful in that learning environment. So my approach is really to break down barriers, make things more open, make sure that we are all intentionally cultivating a sense of belonging and well being for all members of our school community. So that's something I try to practise and do in my daily work. And we're humans and there's no easy button. We're going to make our own mistakes.

Diane Merhi [00:08:28]:

But I think the really important part is always reflecting on decisions we've made and how it's impacted everybody and to go back and visit those decisions and make sure that we are being really mindful on how we can move forward better next time. Did we serve everybody?

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:08:47]:

Diane, I think some of those comments are really important for school leaders to hear. And can you think of that unique experience that you've known as an office administrator and an educational assistant and a teacher and an administrator, I think gives you such a rich background. And having seen the education process unfold from those different perspectives, what are some key ways or strategies that you think that school leaders can use to broaden their perspective and to make the space in schools more inclusive for different perspectives in the teaching ranks and for students?

Diane Merhi [00:09:31]:

Well, I think, first and foremost, really recognizing and appreciating everyone's contribution to the educational system, whether you're an office administrator or an educational assistant, I feel really lucky because not only do I appreciate their perspective, I understand their workload I understand their challenges. I understand what some of the things entail and the heavy lifting that they have to do, and I find staff are really responsive to that. It helps build a really respectful and appreciative rapport between myself and my colleagues in the building, because when they're coming to me with issues or things that we need to problem solve together, I have this really unique and fortunate opportunity where I kind of can put my feet in both spots. I could put 1ft in my leadership role, and I could put 1ft in the educational assistance role and appreciate some of the challenges. And I feel that that really lends itself to coming up with really sound problem solving mechanisms and tools in my toolboxes, because I have those varied perspectives. And how that serves students is when we have students needs that we're dealing with, being able to really appreciate the roles that everybody has to play to make sure that we're really centering our conversations, our next steps around that student and that student's need, and being able to see that broad perspective on the roles that we each play.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:11:09]:

Diane, you made the comment, representation matters, and we hear that a lot, and we know that it does matter. So if we go back a little bit to connect to your journey, what would you say to an educator who wants to move towards formal school leadership, but feels for a variety of different reasons that they can't do it, or that there are just too many barriers?

Diane Merhi [00:11:30]:

That's a really good point, because I always say representation matters, and representation matters in all levels of the educational system. We're so fortunate. We live in a country that is a mosaic of different cultures, ethnicities, races, and that needs to be celebrated. But we need to be, I think, as a board, as an educational unit in itself, really more mindful on what representation matters and where people are being represented and at what levels of our educational system. So far too often, I do feel that people of various ethnicities, races, or racialized individuals sometimes don't have the easiest process of getting through the ranks to become a leader. And I think as a board that I currently work for and as an overall incentive for the entire educational system that falls under our province is how are we intentionally making sure that we're making space to show a workforce that is representative of the students we serve, the staff we serve, and being really transparent with what that process looks like. And I think everybody that's ever applied for a job or applied for a competition, there's this automatic header that says we are an equal opportunity workforce and that they intentionally want to make a workforce that's more diverse, but nobody ever digs deep enough to kind of see. So what are the criterias? How are you ranking these candidates? How are you making sure that these candidates are having an equitable level field to apply and go through the process? I know in my building when I'm hiring and when positions are posted and I have an opportunity to interview staff, I'm not shying away from even names that seem complicated to pronounce.

Diane Merhi [00:13:46]:

Or I go out of my way to pull from my list of candidates by diversities of names so that I have an equal amount of candidates with different perspectives, that I'm going to have an opportunity to interview and have them go through the interview process. So I think anybody that wants to go into leadership and knows that they are a marginalised group or a racialized group, the importance is to ask those questions and make senior managements in your organisation actually be accountable to answer them for you and show you their process, and not to be afraid to ask those questions. And don't let the fear of maybe not getting through the first time or the second time deter you from following what you believe is your step and your passion.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:14:39]:

Thanks, Diane. You've given a lot of great sort of strategies there for school leaders to kind of dig into, to create more inclusive spaces and as know listening to your story and your narrative there. Is there a key message from your story or your experience that you would like your colleagues, the listeners, to kind of take away from today's conversation?

Diane Merhi [00:15:03]:

A couple of things. I don't believe there's an easy button. I know that Staples tries to sell that easy button, but that easy button doesn't exist. I think going into leadership is hard work. It's

getting to the process to actually become a leader. You're leaning into a lot of struggles, and you are going to be the one ready and able to do a lot of heavy lifting. And that's just part of the journey and self determination and really wanting to follow your drive, your dream, to be someone that can make a change and create positive outcomes for the students we serve, the families, our school communities. I'm going to go back and say representation does matter.

Diane Merhi [00:15:51]:

And being someone that is racialized or marginalised, your lived experience, your learned experience, really help you connect with a lot of our students and families. And that human connection is really important, that humility is really important. And being conscious of whose voice is missing from the table, whether you're doing a school council meeting or you're doing parent teacher interviews and some parents are not engaging. Their voices matter. And if they're not engaging, then we need to sit back and look at what can we do to make our space more safe, more inviting, more welcoming, and more inclusive to all members of our school community. And I always sit back and reflect on my own leadership journey and the current school that I'm in right now and this current population that we serve. And it gives me great pleasure when I have our racialized families coming in and advocating for their students coming in and asking to meet with me, because that just shows that the work we're doing in inviting our families in creating space where they feel included is working because we're building bridges and parents are buying into that.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:17:12]:

So, Diane, I think we're almost at the end here of our time together. But I wanted to thank you, for especially for sharing a piece of yourself today. When you share your own personal journey, I mean, you're sharing certainly, I think maybe some private elements of how you came to where you are today. And I'm sure your story will resonate and inspire others who are not just working towards principalship, but also those of us who are in the role. And you gave us a lot to reflect on. So thanks again.

Diane Merhi [00:17:42]:

Thank you. It was my pleasure.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:17:46]:

We hope that you have enjoyed this.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:17:47]:

Episode of the Leadership Talks podcast where.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:17:50]:

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Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:17:58]:

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Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:18:07]:

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Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:18:09]:

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