

EP 16 - Working on a Mentally Healthy You: Some actionable steps

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-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 [00:01:01]:

Hi, Susie.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:01:02]:

Great to be back with you again for another conversation. Pretty excited about today's episode as we are going to have a conversation with Michelle Sigmann from the Durham District School Board, and we're going to be talking about wellness and mental health, which I know is a really important topic right now.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:01:20]:

Hi, Lawrence. Welcome, Michelle. It's great to have you with us. We have been having some really intriguing, relevant conversations with different principals, vice principals across the province. And so we're excited for another one with you. To start us off, could you share a little bit about yourself and your leadership journey and what brought you here today?

Michelle Sigmann [00:01:42]:

Yes, thank you both. And I'm very excited to be here. So, part of the reason why I'm here today is actually definitely part of my journey. And I want to just give a little bit of background because when I speak about wellness and mental health and wellbeing, it truly is on a realm of spectrum. And there is a part of that that was a huge part of my journey that led me to many different other parts of my journey. I got into administration eight years ago. Before that, I had taught many different grades and had different leadership opportunities. But when I moved into administration, I moved in early and, you know, I was told that I would be great in that role.

Michelle Sigmann [00:02:30]:

And so I did it. I jumped in. And when I jumped in, I think at that point I felt at that moment that I jumped too fast because my kids were very young and I had a really tough time handling all of the stressors and all of the responsibilities of, not only my job outside of the home, but also at home. And it kind of led me down a little bit of a path that I lost myself a little bit. And so part of my leadership journey has really been how do I, you know, do what I love, which I love being in administration and as a leader, but how do I do that authentically and in a way that is allowing me to show up myself, but also be able to monitor my time and manage my time so that I'm being able to give when I leave my workplace. And that's a very tough, you know, balance for everybody and is truly what, what brought me here. So eight years in administration, and I'm in two years as a principal now in Durham, and every day is a different journey, but I will say that my wellness journey because of getting in so early, has really led me to where I am now with the more confidence, but also being able to balance my time a little bit better, which is allowing me to show up more authentically in my job and as a leader.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:03:57]:

Thanks, Michelle. And as we engage in a conversation about wellness and mental health, I know that school administrators, that conjures a range of reactions from administrators just because, you know, their own responsibilities with regard to supporting the mental health and wellness of the students and staff that they serve is one component. But maintaining their own wellness and balance and mental health while providing that support to their staff and students is a real challenge. And I know that every administrator would acknowledge that as a challenge. But when it comes to sort of actionable strategies, I know that they struggle sometimes to find out or to identify the real ways that they can create some of that balance in their own lives. So, and I know that's the very focus of a lot of your work. So could you maybe just talk to us a little bit about some of the work you've been doing in this regard and, you know, some of your thoughts about how administrators can achieve some of that balance?

Michelle Sigmann [00:05:00]:

You know, education has changed so much and will continue to change, and that's the nature of the work that we do. And when we talk about being able to help our staff and help our students and our community, when it comes to showing up mentally well and giving other tools and strategies, we ourselves need to feel the same way because we know as leaders it's very hard to do the work when we can't do the work ourselves. And that's kind of where it started for me and why I wanted to share that small little piece of my journey. I mean, there's a, I could talk all

day about the steps I had to take, but I knew I had to focus on myself first. So that when I showed up in my building, that I was showing up knowing that I was using these tools and strategies, and then I was being able to give the opportunity to give them back and be able to then start building that mentally well school. And, you know, it starts with our leaders, and then it goes into our teachers in the classroom, and then it trickles down to our students. And when it trickles down to our students, we're hoping that those students bring.

Michelle Sigmann [00:06:10]:

Brings that home and that. And that it comes full circle. So there's many strategies, but one of the very first things that I learned and one of the things that I would say that I tell most people in starting is take control of the first part of your day and be consistent with that. It doesn't need to be perfect. It doesn't need to be this whole full morning routine. It just means start your day with you. And with that, it's giving yourself a statement. So you're recognizing that you're going into a day that might be overwhelmed and stressful.

Michelle Sigmann [00:06:47]:

Identify that and give yourself five to ten minutes to really sit there and say, this is what I'm doing. I've got this. And give yourself. And I like to call them power statements. And it's funny, wellness sometimes can get this, you know, this fluffiness to it, and, you know, there's lots of different things we can do with wellness. But when it comes to wellness, and truly what I believe and the work that I've had to do for myself is, it is in your mind and wellness, strengthening our mind and building that self confidence and that self worth is actually where wellness comes from. And so when we give ourselves a statement, and that statement can be many different things, but it's really allowing us to take control of those thoughts going into our day. And one of the things that I will always tell vice principals, because as vice principals, we had the portfolio of supply teachers.

Michelle Sigmann [00:07:39]:

And so we're very quick to pick up our phone the first thing in the morning to make sure we get those supply teachers. So I trained myself because when I was in this downward spiral, I was a vice principal, a new vice principal, and so I committed to that five to ten minutes before picking up my phone. If you start your day with you in mind, then you're more apt to spend the rest of your day feeling more in control. And when we feel more in control, we think about all the different science behind the stressors and the decision making. And so it's not meaning that we need to control all situations. It means that we're in control of our thoughts. And so that would be my number one strategy. I don't know if there's a follow up question to that before I move on to my next, but that is one of the key first strategies, for sure.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:08:28]:

We really appreciate you sharing parts of your personal story so that people don't feel like they're alone. I find sometimes the whole stigma sometimes about mental health, well being, where we don't really talk about some of our struggles and challenges the way that we probably should. So this message about showing up for work, but also showing up, how we show up after work to be there for our family, our friends and ourselves, is so important. So are there. And

maybe this is connected to other strategies I was curious about, if you have found that building up certain supports and networks is also really valuable in approaching wellness with a positive outlook.

Michelle Sigmann [00:09:08]:

Yeah, absolutely. And the reason I do like to share my story is for that exact reason, to let people know that, you know, I might have gone these eight years working really hard, and someone might see me now or hear what I do now and be like, there's no way. Like, this is just a nice poster on a wall. But the struggles that I had to get to, to get to the place where I am now, where I feel more in control of my days, and I feel confident to make decisions in a calm way, but also to prioritize and give myself the time management that's giving to my family and my kids, but also being able to be a leader. And so that network, it takes people being vulnerable and being okay, because as leaders, we naturally want to have all the answers. And especially, I find even in this role, and I still struggle with it. But you always want to be the person that can fix everything. And when it comes to you identifying your strengths and you identifying those pieces that might trigger your stressors, it's looking around and looking at, how can I build that network to help me with those? So it's funny you brought that up, because my second strategy is the identifying of the stressors, which can then encompass reaching out to those people that can help.

Michelle Sigmann [00:10:32]:

But I always find that there's multiple things that are thrown at us as leaders and just as people in this world. So whether you have a family and you have little ones, as well as being a principal or vice principal, or whether you are just being a caregiver outside whatever it is that you're doing within your job and within your workplace, but also at home, we have lots of these different things that are thrown at us at all times. And we have to then take those and we then have to figure out, okay, how do I navigate them? And not only how do I navigate them, but how do I prioritize and figure out which one do I start with? When can I put an end to it? So that I can go home and do the other things. And there can be so many stressors in your day. I remember going home one day and I remember my husband saying to me, you always bring stuff home. Like, you can feel it in stress. Not that I'm talking about it, but those stressors. So I had to figure out how can I navigate my day and be able to effectively feel like I can run through my day and make decisions, but also then shut it down and how do I stop it? And one of the first things was identifying some of those stressors you have.

Michelle Sigmann [00:11:48]:

So I say that you— and you can do this. And so I'm going to just give you some examples of how you can do it because I really want you to be able to walk away with some concrete things that you can do right away. And there are so many things. Like I said, we could talk for hours, but I wanted to give two of the key things that I feel are very easy takeaways that you can, you can use right away. But with identifying the stressors, it's kind of going through your day and anytime you feel yourself become agitated or overwhelmed or frustrated, you can do this both in your workplace and at home, you write it down. And so it takes time. Everything.

Michelle Sigmann [00:12:31]:

I'm a big believer of habits and consistency, and so you have to do something over and over again before you can actually feel like you're seeing the, the benefits of it. But, but I want you to write it down. And then once you kind of go through a week and you have these things down, look at them and say, okay, which, which things can I control? What can I change about this? And, and then from there, that's when you can attach an action to it. So, you know, one of the things that I had to do, so I had to prioritize. So the beginning of every one of the day, things that I had to make sure that I got done, I got those three things done. And after those things were done, whatever else was left, I shut that down and I would save it for the next day. But I had to work through these different time management strategies to get there. But we need to identify first those stressors, those overwhelms, what it is that is causing us to feel maybe less well.

Michelle Sigmann [00:13:30]:

So that less well could mean that you, you feel stressed and overwhelmed and you don't have anything left to give when you get home. It could mean that, how do I keep up with the multiple emails? It could be that I'm too tired to take care of myself in the morning. I want to exercise. I want to do this. It could mean multiple things, but we first need to identify what it is in our day that's causing those stressors to stop us from doing something else.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:13:58]:

So, thanks, Michelle. And I know that we could talk about strategies, as you said, for quite some time because there are perhaps lots of ways to think about creating balance and wellness for ourselves. But if there was one more message that you would leave for your colleagues to think about, what might that be?

Michelle Sigmann [00:14:19]:

So the number one thing is, when you start trying different tools and strategies, be patient with yourself and know that, like, I am still not in a place, like the best place that I want to be in, but I am so much further along and that's, that's, you know, seven, eight years. But every step you take, and I always talk about that 1% every day. So starting small. So when I literally said, take five to ten minutes in your morning, that can be one small step that you're taking every day and finding that five minutes in your day, I know you can make that happen and just be able to know that everything that we do, so any action that we put in place and we can talk about it as a habit. So saying chunking that five minutes to start our day the way we want to start it before we check our phone or emails, that's a habit. And we have to do that every day consistently in order for it to be ingrained in us, where we do it without even thinking. And once we get to the fact where we've now, we've embedded that morning routine, that five to ten minutes, and we feel like we're doing it without even thinking, that's when you can move to something else. And maybe that next step is that second strategy I said, and you continue to build, because what you're doing with that is as you're implementing these small habits and these small actions at the same time, you're actually strengthening your mind and you're building more self confidence and self worth while you're doing it.

Michelle Sigmann [00:15:54]:

And you're doing that without even knowing you're doing it. But that's the part of taking back that small little bit of control. And then it becomes a positive spiral and it's not going to be perfect every day. And you're going to have these spirals where you're saying, you know, I, you know, I just, I failed this week. And I want you to think about it as not as failure, as learning from it and changing it and shifting it, but because if you wake up every day with the intention to do that little bit more. I promise you that as you continue to move forward, you're going to start to see the change on how you can show up at work feeling a little bit more authentic in the work you do and being able to give back, but also being able to prioritize and be able to balance your, your home and work. And so, yeah, patience. And know that it does take time.

Michelle Sigmann [00:16:46]:

But, but as you're doing it, you're, you're building that confidence in yourself and you'll start to.—you'll start to feel so much better, but go slow and small steps.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:16:57]:

Thanks so much for sharing again, Michelle. It's so true that every day is different. We're not always feeling the same way, and certainly every day throws lots of different curveballs at us. So just again, thanks for sharing from such an authentic place. And ultimately, we hope that this conversation leads to many more conversations about mental health and wellness in a really regular and intentional way. So it was great to have you with us.

Michelle Sigmann [00:17:24]:

Thank you so much.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:17:28]:

We hope that you have enjoyed this episode of the Leadership Talks podcast where we engage in authentic conversations with school leaders. Please share with your friends and colleagues and we hope you will join us again.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:17:41]:

If you have a passion or story to share as an educational leader or would like to find out more about the other amazing professional learning opportunities offered by the OPC, please visit our website by clicking on the link in the show notes.