

EP 24 CALMfident Leadership: Nurturing principal well being

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:00:11]:

Hello everyone, and welcome to OPC's Leadership Talks podcast. My name is Lawrence DeMaeyer, Professional Learning Consultant at OPC.

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

And my name is Susie Lee Fernandes, Director of Professional Learning and Engagement.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:00:25]:

As co-hosts, we will engage educational leaders and authentic conversations to explore their passions, experiences and expertise in K-12 education. OPC is proud to highlight the diverse journeys and stories of educators and leaders from across this province.

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

We hope that Leadership Talks will not only provide you with inspiration, joy and valuable perspectives and strategies that will inform your professional practice, but also enhance the learning and well being of those you serve. Enjoy.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:00:58]:

Really happy to be back for another episode today and we're really fortunate to have have with us Vinita Mongia, who's a recently retired elementary principal from the Peel District School Board. And Vinita is here today to talk to us a little bit about principal well being, which I know is a topic that we're all very attuned to these days. As the workload and work intensification of principals roles continues to increase and ratchet up over time, principals are very attuned to strategies that they can use to balance their work and their life. So we're really fortunate to have Vinita with us today to share some of her thinking and some of the work that she's done in this area. So welcome Vinita. We're really glad to have you with us today. Tell us a little bit about your leadership journey and what's kind of brought you to this point.

Vinita Mongia [00:01:48]:

Thank you, Lawrence. It's a pleasure to be here and have this opportunity to connect with you and your OPC team. I have had a really rewarding career with the Peel District School Board which is coming up to 30 years of service and was actually also a former student student in

Peel. I led in a variety of roles including elementary and special education teacher, early literacy teacher, literacy coach, vice principal, and then principal. I spent the last 12 years of my career as an administrator where the ability to serve and lead schools as principals was a career highlight for me. One of the best parts of the principal leadership journey for me has been the relationships developed over the years with principal colleagues, colleagues who were mentors, sources of inspiration, and in many cases have become cherished friends. I'm so grateful to be here with you and connect with colleagues across the province through this inspiring podcast. So thank you for having me here.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:02:53]:

Well, it's certainly our pleasure. I don't think this topic needs much validation or justification these days. All principals, I think, are very tuned into their own well being and the impact that the demands of their jobs have on their wellbeing. But what kind of got you interested in this topic and what kinds of work have you been doing in this area recently?

Vinita Mongia [00:03:17]:

So I have recently embarked on a significant pivot in my career and appreciate the opportunity to share a little bit about my journey and engage in open, honest conversations with our principal colleagues about the importance of being aware and taking actionable steps to address job related stress and burnout. I made the recent decision to take an early retirement. And while that wasn't my original timeline or plan, the decision came as part of my own journey navigating burnout. Having to take time away from school was certainly a low point for me, but it was that journey and how things evolved that led me to starting my own mentoring and consulting company, supporting school leaders with wellbeing tools, strategies and resources through mentoring and workshops. And this idea all came about as part of my journey. While I was on leave and you know, in quotes, resting the burnout, I really became aware of how deeply ingrained the stress was for me. And once I had a renewed sense of energy from, you know, the rest that I was able to take, I had that feeling of joy for the job again and was really looking forward to returning to school. And then as it turned out, I sustained an injury which kept me away from school again.

Vinita Mongia [00:04:50]:

And I share that journey because it was part of how this pivot in my life has sort of come to be. And so what surprised me in this next time that I needed to be away from school was the wave of stress that made its way back to me that was aligned with the beginning of the school year and into the fall months. And it was different from the usual back to school jitters that we get. You know, when we hear those back to school commercials or, you know, if you're in Toronto, those *Let's Go to the Ex* commercials, those are always those signals that school was about to start. But this was different. This was like a deeper sense of panic and stress. So it was in that time that I realized that I actually hadn't, in quotes, rested. I'd rested the burnout.

Vinita Mongia [00:05:44]:

I hadn't actually addressed the triggers and what I also like to refer to as the pain points that got me to the place of burnout in the first place. So I share this as my journey as I feel like it's a very

relatable experience for many colleagues who may have also had to take time away to prioritize their health and well being and are or have returned to work and maybe feeling those waves of stress return.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:06:15]:

So I know, Vinita, that you've been doing lots of learning, not only through your own journey, but you've been engaging in lots of learning around how to manage stress and to balance out those factors that cause stress with some of the strategies that help principals to prioritize things that bring them joy and help them refill or replenish the well. So what are, what are some of the things that you learned that could be useful to other principals or vice principals in similar circumstances who are feeling that same kind of overwhelm that you were feeling?

Vinita Mongia [00:06:52]:

So I'm glad you asked that question, Lawrence, because while I was in this time and space, I engaged in a whole lot of new learning. And it was as if I was taking—if there was a PQP part three, that's sort of what I was doing. I was a center of my learning that was differentiated to address the various pain points or the triggers that I needed to address in order to lead in times of increasingly complex roles and responsibilities. And I'm not sure, Lawrence, if you recall, this is the time when I was attending, I think, every online session that you were offering and leading through OPC. But in my journey, there was one day where I had that aha moment and recognized that I wanted to take all of this learning journey that I was embarking upon and share it with principal colleagues who have been or may be on the same journey. And so what that led to was creating the CALMfident Leadership Workshop Series and Mentoring Program with wellbeing at the forefront, where I was really able to take a lot of my own learning and journey and create a calm and confidence in our leadership again. So to back to your question, what I did was I created a calm resilience framework that upon reflection, these were the things that I was doing to navigate and steer my learning, which captures four different pillars for learning that is actually also aligned with recent research and recommendations for principals to help manage stress burnout and prioritize well being. Perhaps I can share that calm framework with you.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:08:47]:

That would be great. I think this is the kind of resource that principals and vice principals could really use, right when they're staying in those situations where they're feeling that stress, they need something to fall back on or a touch point to help guide them through those kinds of feelings and circumstances. So, yeah, please do share.

Vinita Mongia [00:09:08]:

Awesome. Okay. So "calm" is a word that I've always loved, I resonated with, and I felt, what better way? What better word to use to help me and help others have at the forefront as we're thinking and navigating, you know, how do I get myself into a better place? So these pillars that I'm going to share with you are things that I actually was doing in my journey and hope that they can be helpful to our principal colleagues. So C is "connect and collaborate" to cultivate support networks. And some connections I can share that were very helpful included creating a group of

principal colleagues in my unit where we set up weekly virtual check in sessions as a place to lean in and offer support and check in on one another. And we all happened to be single admin at the time, so that was a really important network that we all leaned into. And I started listening to principal podcasts for the first time and was amazed at how their stories, their messages resonated with me and their lived experiences made me feel less alone. I took time to explore resources and supports offered by OPC and my board and also engage the support of my family and friends and healthcare providers to start having conversations about how I could lean in to support.

Vinita Mongia [00:10:43]:

And then that takes us to A which is "attitude of gratitude and grace" to create positive thinking patterns. And this learning was aligned with our understanding of how we support students and staff with a growth mindset. I accessed lots of great resources in this learning to help make these shifts. And more importantly, I had a really increased awareness of the way I talked about school and how it had become increasingly negative. And I was missing that excitement that I used to always have about, you know, things that were happening at school. So it was with, you know, daily intentional practice and awareness that I started to shift some of the negative thoughts that would come up over the course of the school day. And I'll share one example that seems to really resonate with principals and that is how often we think, you know, what are we thinking and feeling about all those interruptions and how we can never seem to get the job done as a result. So this would have been something I created a plan for where I would capture the thoughts and feelings I was feeling with all those interruptions and with intention, make some small shifts, which at times could be as simple as making sure I was engaging with a smile and not a look of being interrupted.

Vinita Mongia [00:12:20]:

So the L is "lean into new learning" for personal and professional growth. And as leaders, we are always engaged in new learning. However, we may not be centering ourselves in our learning and of greater importance is centering our well being in our learning. So this is a place where we can take decisive action to engage in new learning, specific to the unique triggers or the pain points we are experiencing. And as an example from my journey, this included learning related to time management, productivity, tools and strategies, and also where I made the decision to work one on one with a leadership mentor. Working with a mentor was like having a personal trainer for physical fitness or a nutritionist for your health goals. And it allowed me to create a learning journey with a supportive partner guiding me along the way and engaging in thoughtful leadership discussions.

Vinita Mongia [00:13:24]:

And then we get to the M, which is "mindful measures for stress management". And this learning taps into those daily habits and routines, both at work and home, that help create healthier patterns for managing stress. So starting with what I call Vitamin Me, the mindful practices to start your day at home and at work is so important. And I'd like to share an example of how we often hear and may have ourselves have principals going through an entire day barely eating or drinking, and there they are at their desk at the end of the day navigating their,

you know, morning yogurt or fruit or all the food that they had intentions of eating and enjoying throughout the day. So taking time to drink that water you packed and eat your lunch is so important as one example of how we need to prioritize well being each and every day. So as part of my overall learning journey, this, like I said, PQP Part Three, if there could be such a thing, is I tapped into professional learning funds that were allocated to principals. In our case, our board allocates a certain amount of professional learning funds for us every year. And I tapped into that for leadership mentoring, learning about mindful practices, and accessing resources such as the CALM app.

Vinita Mongia [00:14:58]:

So hopefully that CALM framework that I shared is something that principals can maybe reflect upon and begin to tap into as they're navigating their work toward well being.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:15:15]:

Thanks, Vinita. That seems like a very powerful framework you have there. And I'm thinking about, you know, those elements and how crucial those are for creating that environment where principals can manage their wellness. If this information is available for folks right now to pick up and kind of use in their daily practice, what do you think some of the barriers are that principals face to engaging in this kind of a framework?

Vinita Mongia [00:15:43]:

Well, I think one of the barriers is maybe feeling that they're not doing a good job if they have to tap into resources that are helping them actually be successful in their job. And that is something that we need to support each other with, that prioritizing your own learning is part of what a good leader does is, you know, reflect on: Okay, now I've got a few years under my belt as a principal. I feel like I understand the rhythm of the role and, you know, the busier times and the quieter times and some of the things that might come up. And it is okay to actually then stop and pause and reflect on how they can use their years of experience and create opportunities for learning for themselves that will help them continue to be inspired and amazing leaders. And I think the role of principal is to nurture and support your school to achieve the best possible outcomes for students, educators, and families, but recognizing that building our own capacity as a leader is what helps our school communities thrive. So the more we can have conversations around personal principal development, I think the easier it will be in time to break down some of those barriers.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:17:16]:

So it sounds like we need a little bit of a culture shift around how principals perceive, you know, evidence of their resilience, so it's not about sort of toughing it out and not paying attention to your own needs. It's actually more effective, or you can be more effective as a school administrator if you were to create a system where you do prioritize your own needs at some times.

Vinita Mongia [00:17:41]:

Absolutely, Lawrence. And aligned with that, the one statement that I think we really need to put out there loud and clear is that you are not alone. And, you know, this very podcast that you have that OPC has started to offer is one example of creating a culture and a community of awareness, that principals can be at the center of the conversation, whatever the learning journey is that you're involved in. And that is okay, because we are, I often say, as leaders of a school, we are like a CEO of a company. And it's well known and documented how CEOs and leaders of big companies, they invest in themselves, they invest in their leadership, they invest in ongoing learning and growth and development.

Vinita Mongia [00:18:37]:

And the more we can have conversations about the importance of that, whether it be through our associations within our boards, maybe even perhaps through superintendent meetings, or through the conferences and things and publications that we are at the center of, I think that can make a really big difference in creating that culture shift.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:19:05]:

Thanks for that, Vinita. So I know we could spend a lot more time talking about this, but for today at least, or this session, if there was sort of one thing that you could leave with your principal colleagues to think about with regards to managing their wellness, what would your sort of key takeaway for today be?

Vinita Mongia [00:19:26]:

Well, I actually have four, because I was really thinking about this, four what I call calls to action that I think could make a significant difference and that were part of my own professional learning journey as well. The first being to be informed about recent relevant research about principal well being that is happening in Ontario. A lot of that research is available on the OPC website and the importance of that is to be able to become an advocate for yourself and colleagues of the importance of well-being initiatives and supports for principals. The next would be to invest in yourself as a leader. So regardless of your level of experience, the benefits of working with a supportive partner are amazing. Like many, I had a mentor when I first became a principal and I stayed in touch with her. I still meet with her regularly for breakfast meetings. So that partnership can be really incredibly valuable.

Vinita Mongia [00:20:35]:

I would encourage people to access their professional learning funds to personalize their learning and find out what might be available to them. Different boards have different offerings, I think, for principals so that they're not just surviving the role, that they can start to thrive in the role once again. And the last and most important is to pay attention to stress, the physical, the mental indicators that they're experiencing. Just really not ignoring them and not being afraid to talk openly about them with your family, your healthcare providers and your colleagues and your associations. Because I think together, everyone wants, we want our principals to be well. We want our principals to be in school and our well being is so, so, so important. So those would be my four takeaways.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:21:36]:

Well, those are words of wisdom for sure. Vinita, I really appreciate you sharing those. Those are truly very important and critical messages for principals, indeed. And I want to thank you so much for spending some time with us today to talk through some of these things. I'm sure that at some point in the future we'll have you back to maybe go deeper and unpack these a little bit more, but I really appreciate you sharing your framework and some of your thoughts about principal wellness and how to maintain that. Much appreciated.

Vinita Mongia [00:22:08]:

Thank you so much. It was a pleasure.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:19:10]:

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 [00:19:22]:

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.