

LEADING A SCHOOL COMMUNITY THROUGH A PANDEMIC

with Dr. Jerome Cranston Ph.D

Wednesdays @ 2 pm MDT (Saskatchewan)
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Episode 10 - Well-Being & Mindfulness for School Leaders - June 3, 2020

In this week's episode Dr. Cranston spoke with Dr. Sabre Cherkowski, PhD, an associate professor and the Director of Graduate Programs in the Faculty of Education at the University of British Columbia Okanagan. They discuss Dr. Cherkowski's work on well-being and mindfulness and how that can support school leaders during this pandemic. Below is a summary of their conversation.

Dr. Cranston: In terms of your work, what drew you to it?

Dr. Cherkowski: I think I've always been drawn to understand the human side and life organizations and relationships. Yes we are individuals and yet it happens within these relationships. In terms of school leadership, I've been focused on this idea of relationships and humanity, beyond how we get people to do what we want them to do through various human centered means but more so how do we create opportunities for people to see who they could become through relationships. For me, leadership is about creating opportunities for making those webs visible in ways for people to then decide how they want to navigate and negotiate them. The well-being work started in some research on compassion that I had been looking into and it just snowballed to this idea of how we create conditions for our well-being as the pillar of all our organizational work. Well-being really comes down to understanding humans at our fullness, which includes the shadowed side that we bring to every interaction and relationship. Part of well-being is acknowledging those shadow sides and until we identify them and navigate spaces and relationships more honestly we have a hard time seeing the light in its fullness. I'm really fascinated in creating opportunities for humans to connect in ways that allow the shadows to be opened with opportunities for others to step into a more light filled way. That way of seeing well-being has really opened spaces and places to think about appreciation, valuing, and seeing diversity as opportunities for learning. That has brought me full circle to relational healing and how do we create organizations where we heal each other through our relationships in and through our work.

Dr. Cranston: Focusing on the notion of relationships and human connection, where do you see the opportunities in September after not having that normal human interaction with people because of Covid-19?

Dr. Cherkowski: It's interesting because I'm teaching a grad class online that was supposed to be face to face, with mostly educators where we have a weekly check in and so I have this opportunity to see how they've been living with the various reopening phases we're going through. Some of the opportunities these educators are sharing with me are really paying attention to what matters the most. They can't do everything they want to do or are used to doing, so they have to carefully choose what will make the most impact and create the most opportunities for the students to feel like they are connected with educators, the subject matter, and most importantly with each other. The other piece that I'm noticing from them is that now more than ever we recognize the need to be connected with others who support us. This idea of building a team of people who can pay attention to the important work that teachers do has been really interesting, even if that's just over the internet and keyboards. The challenge especially for school leaders is how do we ensure that we are turning towards each other and not just towards the solutions we think will get us through these times.

Dr. Cranston: What are some of the things your students have found that have worked for them to maintain that connectivity while also maintaining their sense of self?

Dr. Cherkowski: I'll start with the second part because that's something we've been talking about lots. With so many things coming at us all of the time, how do we stay well, how do we stay hopeful, and how do we stay energetic? The idea of boundaries is really important, and specifically the distinction between real boundaries and self-imposed boundaries. It's important to take a look and ask yourself what's really being asked of you during this time and how can you allot yourself in the best ways possible. The teachers I'm working with have some in-class time now with students who have been away from the class for 12 weeks now and they're also doing online teaching, which is really taxing them. What's been working well is ensuring that they are in conversation with each other just to stay connected and so having those learning communities, whether they be new or already established, is really important.

Dr. Cranston: I think that's a great suggestion for people in school leadership roles, for them to create within the new context of what a work day is. Not asking them to do things after hours when they should be connecting with friends, families, and other passions, but rather creating time during the work day for these important connections. From your understanding is that what your students have been doing or are they doing it after hours?

Dr. Cherkowski: I don't have a super clear answer for you on that, but I agree that the system can't assume that "common sense boundaries" are common sense for everyone. As a school principal it's important to suggest opportunities to teachers and other staff to see what a reasonable school day might look like in these extraordinary circumstances.

Dr. Cranston: I think we have to give ourselves permission to create boundaries and I think school leaders have to give permission for others to do that too. You always are such an optimistic person, so as an educator, a parent, and a partner, where are you deriving your own sense of hope and optimism from?

Dr. Cherkowski: It's interesting because hope has been challenging for me in a personal sense. I have kids who are starting university in the fall and we don't know what that will look like. There's lots of new beginnings that we anticipated that are now being pushed back or cancelled, so being the hope bearer at home has been taxing. I think I get most of my hope from my graduate students. They are continuing to investigate and examine possibilities for renewal, that gives me tremendous hope. The book I'm currently reading talks about looking to the past to bolster us in the present when we're feeling pretty defeated. That gives us opportunities to imagine a possibility in the future, even though we may not know what that is. These graduate students give me that every time we connect, because they are working towards what I'm hoping we can all become together.

Dr. Cranston: I think that's a really good place to be. During this pandemic period, the work you do is important because it's that sense of finding those small wins that keep us going. So thank you very much for coming on today and sharing your work and positivity with us.