

A Death in the Family

Recently, I started a new folder and called it death. As I put it in my file cabinet, I hoped not to refer to it again and knew that even if I did, it probably wouldn't be all that helpful. If I've learned little else as a school principal, it is that every situation is different. Formulaic responses do not work. They need to come from the heart and the gut—and be executed using both.

A New Challenge

I was called out of an administrative council meeting to be told by the adult son of one of my teachers that his mother had died. I remember having the presence of mind to tell him what I was thinking, which was that the news took my breath away. His mother, Susan Sullivan, was on medical leave while undergoing cancer treatment. Although I was aware that this course might not have a positive ending, no one expected her to die so soon.

That conversation marked the beginning of a new challenge for me as the principal of a close-knit elementary school. The situation was another example of how the emotional toll of this job—which I had taken four years earlier after being a university professor—surprised me. As principal, I was the person who heard bad news first and with the greatest degree of detail. This was to be the first time I was entrusted with managing others' sadness due to a respected and beloved colleague's sudden death.

After consoling Susan's son as best as I could, I informed the superintendent and drove back to my school, crying in the car. I put on my game face and made a beeline for the office. I called other principals for advice and sample resources, then walked into every classroom during the two hours between my return to the building and the end of the school day. Seeing the students and teachers at work centered me and steeled me for what I had to do.

At the end of that school day, I held a special faculty meeting and told everyone the news at once. I absorbed their grief as I noted who needed special support and attention. I shared all that I had decided thus far: I would be sending letters home the next day to the parent

community and a slightly different letter to the parents of those students with whom Susan worked. I had learned from past experience that parents appreciate being sent such adult news in sealed envelopes so they can speak with their children in ways most consistent with their family's values. This strategy allowed faculty to begin conversations with students, asking them for example, "How many of you spoke to your parents last night about Mrs. Sullivan?" In classrooms in which Susan was known, teachers spoke with their students the following morning; in all other instances, the teachers waited for inquiries and responded accordingly.

Pulling Together

I canceled our upcoming holiday party and called the school district's consulting psychologist, inviting him to come to the school, just as I had called him to come when Susan first announced her illness. He made himself available in case anyone wanted to speak with him. The PTO president offered her assistance, and I asked her to bring in lunch for the staff.


These acts helped, but as was to be expected, there remained a general malaise and profound sadness throughout the building. The funeral was the following day, but because it was to be held at Susan's family farm eight hours away and scheduled during a predicted snowstorm, no one from the faculty was attending. I realized that I would have to organize a memorial service because this is what my teachers needed.

I called the superintendent because there was no precedent for the school district taking responsibility for such an event. She agreed that this situation needed a strong leader and I filled

that role. First, I called a parent who had offered to help and asked her to mobilize other parents to lend a hand. She offered to take care of the flowers, the guest book, and the food, and I was happy to let her. I then sent an e-mail message to the faculty inviting anyone interested in helping to plan a memorial service to join me in the library after school. Ten teachers showed up and offered to speak at the service, inform former faculty members about the service, work with the custodians to set up, and collect photos for a slide show. The music teachers arranged to perform together and the art teacher volunteered to design the program. Teachers also offered to greet guests and usher them into the gym where we decided to hold the service, which would occur the following Thursday after school.

Over the weekend, I invited speakers, wrote the program, prepared my own speech, informed Susan's family, contacted principals at the local middle and high school, and answered questions from all constituencies regarding the preparations. When I walked into school on Monday morning, although still very sad, there was a palpable sense of shared purpose. The school became a place of mourning where fruit baskets and condolence cards were sent.

On Friday afternoon after the service, as is my wont, I sent an e-mail to the staff. Ordinarily, I comment on many different aspects of the week. Instead, I limited my comments to the one event:

"I have rarely experienced the degree of cooperation, warmth, and professionalism that led to last night's memorial service. By any measure, it was perfect. It very much reflected the person we were honoring in that it was simple, elegant, authentic, and from the heart. I can't recall ever feeling more proud of the work I do or the people with whom I do it. The saddest of circumstances brought us to the rarest of opportunities, and this faculty did not disappoint." 

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