

The Impact of Principals' Work on Their Well-Being

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Abstract

This case examines both Ethan's workload and well-being issues. Ethan is floundering amid the growing demands and challenges associated with his work at Norwood Secondary School, Ontario, Canada. Although Ethan has been seeing a doctor to improve his well-being, he realizes that he needs to create a better work-life balance to successfully manage his school and better his health. This case study has four teaching notes: the first and second activities invite participants to discuss how Ethan's work-related challenges impact his well-being; the third activity looks at misrecognition, while the fourth activity explores the strategies Ethan can use to improve his well-being issues.

Keywords: work, leadership, well-being, work-life balance

Case Narrative

Ethan is back in the doctor's office. He has been experiencing shortness of breath, feelings of unexplained fear and helplessness, low self-efficacy, pain(s) in his neck and shoulders, and overall fatigue throughout the year. A few months ago, Dr. Andrews scheduled a batch of medical tests for Ethan to take and at his last consult so that he could discuss the results with him. The doctor explained that Ethan was as healthy as a horse, except for slightly elevated blood pressure. Furthermore, Dr. Andrews concluded that regular exercise, a proper diet, and good sleeping patterns could eliminate his existing conditions. He reminded Ethan, more than two months ago, that his symptoms pointed to anxiety and work-related stress. Ethan continued to feel poorly physically and mentally exhausted, so he was a bit skeptical in accepting the doctor's diagnosis. However, he admits that, recently his work as a secondary school principal has become increasingly stressful. Ethan does not believe he is managing his professional life very well; in fact, there are days he wished he was not a school principal. As a result, he is back to see Dr. Andrews to explore the diagnosis in greater depth.

Ethan paces the office floor, too nervous to sit. He has a gnawing headache and thoughts of the impending meeting with his superintendent are flooding his mind. Would the school board finally agree to provide an additional vice principal and two paraprofessionals to assist with the growing challenges at the school? If not, what then? He recalls sifting through the volume of emails requiring his attention yesterday and coming across two from the school board that particularly disturbed him. The first message was a response from the superintendent to Ethan's request to schedule a meeting to "discuss your leadership perception and practice with respect to student needs at the school." Ethan did not like the tone of that email. The other email announced that with the new change in provincial government, the plans to finance the long overdue renovations at the school and hire more staff were "under review." Ethan desperately needs more space to accommodate his student population and expand learning programs at the school, but

he is especially troubled that the school is not going to receive the mental health support that the hiring of the two additional school counsellors would have provided. He is certain that with this setback, his constituents—parents, teachers, students, and community stakeholders—would deem him incapable of providing the requisite resources to meet the needs of all groups of students in his care. In particular, he has a few actively involved and influential parents who are also raising concerns about student safety and the quality of student learning in the face of the increased student population.

Ethan felt hopelessly tethered to, and by, the circumstances of his work as principal of Norwood Secondary School and is increasingly frustrated that students are not receiving the best quality of education that Ethan believes is within reach. He is also anxious that the school community—teachers, parents, students, and his superiors—thinks he is incompetent and/or unstable. He blames himself for letting things get this far without intervention, but at the same time is angered by a system that continues to heap more work on school administrators while reducing school resources and personnel. The leadership responsibilities and workload at Norwood Secondary require, in Ethan's opinion, two full-time principals, but he is being made to do with one vice principal. Ethan started as principal three years ago and was immediately surprised by the volume of work. From there, things had only gotten worse. He requested a second vice principal at the start of this school year, citing the 30% increase in student population and growing mental health and learning needs of students, but months later he is still waiting on the board's decision. Ethan feels powerless and emotionally drained. He is rethinking his decision to become a school principal, especially since he thought that, after his first and second year, he would have been more settled in the role. In fact, he thought that the emotional terrain of the principalship was just a phase, a "rite of passage" that principals in their early career must go through. The long hours (extended throughout nights and well over forty hours a week) were compromising time spent with his family, a primary source of his happiness. His wife and children needed him, but he also felt that his students, teachers, parents, and school board required much of his time.

Now, as Ethan listens to Dr. Andrews, words jump out at him: *Anxiety, Mental Health, Work-Life Balances, and Stress*. Dr. Andrews is unequivocal in connecting Ethan's work and his state of mind. Ethan is overwhelmed with the volume of his work, but he is unsettled and cautious in admitting that his work is contributing to his physical symptoms. He has experienced stress in meeting work-related deadlines, as well as juggling multiple and sometimes conflicting responsibilities during his tenure as vice-principal. Indeed, these are the conditions of the job. Yet, he is struggling with the sort of well-being issues that may compromise his overall health and ability to lead and manage his school effectively. Dr. Andrews' advice is not new; Ethan's wife has been telling him he needed to relax and find ways to manage his work and home life better. She had even suggested counselling, but Ethan dismissed it. He is very dedicated to his work and he feels an added pressure as a male administrator to give off the perception of strength and confidence—especially since other principals in the district often solicited his advice. How would it look if he was in therapy? Dr. Andrews suggested that Ethan should fill out a stress worksheet to track the different stressors that trigger different symptoms while undertaking his paid work-related duties. Ethan did not think his hectic work schedule would permit the consistency required to complete such an exercise, but he agreed to try. Dr. Andrews also wants to refer Ethan to a therapist, but Ethan hesitates. Dr. Andrews observed Ethan's reaction and explained that well-being issues can impact anyone regardless of their educational qualifications, profession, gender, age, or position of power/status. Ethan agrees to an initial meeting with a therapist, as he understands he must take the necessary steps to achieve work-life balance. Ethan ponders his work on the drive back to school.

Norwood Secondary School supports a quaint rural community situated in London, Ontario. The school received an increase in diverse student population totalling 950 students within a two-year span. Shifts in population density, and increased internal migration in Ontario have led to demographic changes in the community. Many of the issues requiring Ethan's constant attention are concerned with human relations issues among students, students and teachers, and teachers and parents. These challenges often required resolutions that Ethan handles unilaterally and causes tensions between himself and the school board. He thinks of the multiple responsibilities awaiting his attention and wonders how he will proceed. What about the school board; how much should he disclose to *them*, if at all? On one hand, informing the board about his well-being issues could place his standing as principal in jeopardy, but, on the other hand, disclosing his issues could make the board more open to providing the additional resources needed. What is certain is that Ethan is now faced with a personal crisis. How will he manage/deal with his well-being

issues? If the school board does not support his proposal for additional resources, how will he find the time to follow Dr. Andrews' recommendations in addressing his well-being? How will this situation impact Ethan's family? Ethan is left with the question of whether or not he should be forthright with his staff about his struggles with well-being issues and their impact on his paid work-related duties. One thing is certain: Ethan cannot continue this way.

Teaching Notes

Ethan's experiences and struggles with well-being issues are not unique to principalship roles. Research conducted in Ontario, Canada, and other developed nations, suggest that the intensification of school principals' work can negatively impact their well-being (Armstrong, 2014; Phillips & Sen, 2011; Pollock, Wang, & Hauseman, 2015; Riley, 2014, 2017). Work intensification among school principals is evidenced in their increased workload, work demands, and reliance on new media to communicate and adhere to stringent policy standards to improve student achievement (Pollock, Wang, & Hauseman, 2015). Part of this growing workload is the influence of politics on policy, as changes in government can derail the support school leaders need to execute their core leadership and management duties. As a result, school principals and vice principals are working longer hours, with most averaging 55 hours per week (Phillips & Sen, 2011; Riley, 2017; Pollock & Hauseman, 2015).

Bringing attention to school leaders' well-being without any practical solutions through policy initiatives may seem counter-productive, but research highlighting this issue cannot be discredited. Researchers and other key stakeholders such as the Ontario Principals' Council (OPC) and the Catholic School Board have sought to highlight a call to action to address this issue before the principalship becomes an unattractive position among current and aspiring school leaders. While Ethan understands the constraints with which school leaders carry out their paid work-related duties, he also needs to be aware that he forms part of a vulnerable group, despite being in a position of power. School administrators' vulnerability is linked to their small population numbers when compared to the overall student and teacher population, as evidenced in research exploring the connection between student achievement and the overall well-being of students and teachers.

For many school administrators, like Ethan, achieving work-life balance may seem utopian because they are held accountable for the health and safety of both their students and teachers. Additionally, school administrators often perceive the impact of their workload and work demands on their well-being as normal. This deficit thinking among some school administrators, specifically those in their early and mid-career, can be a signal that some misrecognize their symptoms of early-onset well-being issues, which, when left unattended, often lead to work-related stress, frustration, and anxiety.

The subsequent exercises are for aspiring and current school administrators who may need strategies to cope with the demands of their role. The first teaching note examines the case study and explores the connection between school administrators' work intensification and the effects on their well-being. The second activity elucidates some of the well-being challenges school administrators, like Ethan, experience and perhaps ignore that these experiences can affect their overall health over time. The third teaching note captures the notion of misrecognition, where school administrators' thinking/initial awareness might have been obscured because the workload and work demand has been normalized. The final activity provides evidence of best practices that a school's doctor has recommended to manage well-being issues.

Activity 1: Understanding the Issues

The facilitator/instructor will ask participants to read the case before delving into Armstrong's (2014), Pollock's (2017), Pollock, Wang & Hauseman's (2014) and Riley's (2017) articles. Participants will work in small groups to identify and discuss what they consider to be the key points in the case study. The facilitator/instructor will then apply the K-W-L (Know, Want to Know, Learned) teaching strategy to explore school administrators' understanding of the impact of work intensification on school principals' well-being. In their groups, students will use cartridge paper and markers to create three sections/columns using K-W-L. In the first two columns, they will highlight and discuss what they "Know and Want to Know" about the key terms in the case, such as well-being and work-life balance before exploring these areas and making connections to the case study. In the latter half of the lesson, the facilitator/instructor will ask participants to expand and mix their groups. In the new groups, they will draw on their own experiences

as they probe the additional articles and respond to the following questions:

- What is the central theme in the case study?
- What are the issues that led to Ethan going to the doctor?
- How do policies influence school administrators' workload and work demands? Provide examples to support your answers.
- What are some of the differences between paid and unpaid work? Does unpaid work add more to school principals' workload and work demand? Explain.
- Can Ethan continue his role as principal without the support of the school district?
- Is work-life-balance a utopian ideal given school administrators' workload and work demands?
- Given that there is a greater focus on students' and teachers' well-being, why do you think it is important that school administrators' (such as Ethan) well-being issues are taken seriously? Connect your answer with the definition of well-being and use the Ontario Ministry of Education (2017) document to help shape your response.
- How can Ethan achieve work-life balance? Consider the Ontario Principals' Council (2017) document to articulate applicable solutions.

Reading Resources

- Ontario Ministry of Education. (2017). *Promoting well-being in Ontario's education system*. Retrieved from <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/about/wellbeing2.html>
- Ontario Principals' Council. (2017). *International Symposium White Paper: Principal work-life balance and well-being matters*. Toronto, ON.
- Pollock, K., Wang, F., & Hauseman, C. (2017). The changing nature of vice-principals work: Final report. Retrieved from <https://www.slideshare.net/KNAER-RECRAE/the-changing-nature-of-viceprincipals-work-report-by-dr-katina-pollock>
- Pollock, K., Wang, F., & Hauseman, C. (2014). Complexity and volume: An inquiry into factors that drive principals' work. In K. Leithwood, S. Jingping, & K. Pollock (Eds.), *How school leaders contribute to student success: The four paths framework* (Studies in Educational Leadership Vol. 23, pp. 31–43). Switzerland: Springer International Publishing.
- Riley, P. (2017). New Zealand primary school principals' occupational health and well-being survey 2016 data: Principal health and wellbeing survey. Retrieved from the Principal Health & Wellbeing website: https://www.nzei.org.nz/documents/Principals%20Health%20and%20Well-Being%20Report_20170120SM.pdf

Activity 2: Identifying the Challenges and Solutions

In the second session, the facilitator/instructor will focus on the well-being challenges Ethan experienced, and perhaps ignored, for some time that appeared to be threatening his ability to cope. The facilitator/instructor will ask participants to review the personal leadership resources (PLRs), social, cognitive, and psychological resources and Armstrong's (2014) article. The facilitator/instructor will engage participants in a whole class discussion about the purpose and meaning of each component of the PLRs. After dividing the class into different groups, participants will use the questions below to discuss how Ethan can draw on these PLRs to deal with the issues outlined in the case study, specifically as it relates to the well-being issues Ethan has been struggling with since taking on the role of the principalship. Participants will use a Venn diagram to illustrate the specific subcategories (e.g. resilience and optimism) of the three different PLRs that Ethan can use to resolve his personal and professional challenges.

- What are the internal tensions Ethan appears to be struggling with that have triggered the noted well-being issues?
- How would you, as an administrator, approach the school board about your professional and personal challenges? Refer to the case study, Armstrong article listed below, and use the components of the PLRs to support your response.
- Why is it important for Ethan to get an additional vice-principal and two paraprofessionals? Given that the school has an increasing student population, what are the benefits of having these additional resources?

Participants will use the Venn diagram and their responses to the first question to critically examine what components, or overlapping components, of the PLRs that Ethan could have used to deal with his well-being issues proactively. Participants will then apply this information in their response(s) to the second question to illustrate how they would approach the school board about their professional and personal challenges. Participants will connect this information from the second question to support their request for an additional vice-principal and two paraprofessionals.

Reading Resources

- Armstrong, D. (2014). *Transition to the role of principal and vice-principal study*. Toronto, ON: Institute for Education Leadership.
- Ontario Leadership Strategy. (2014). *Exploring the “social” personal leadership resources: Perceiving emotions, managing emotions, and acting in emotionally appropriate ways*. Retrieved from <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/leadership/IdeasIntoActionBulletin7.pdf>
- Ontario Leadership Strategy. (2015-16). *Exploring the “psychological” personal leadership resources: Optimism, self-efficacy, resilience, and proactivity*. Retrieved from http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/leadership/ideas_into_action_bulletin8.pdf
- Ontario Leadership Strategy. (2017-18). *Exploring the “cognitive” personal leadership resources: Problem-solving expertise, role-specific knowledge and systems thinking*. Retrieved from http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/leadership/ideas_into_action_bulletin9.pdf

Activity 3: Being Proactive

The third teaching note addresses the notion of misrecognition. The facilitator/instructor will engage participants in a discussion about why Ethan’s initial awareness of his well-being issues might have been obscured because he seemed to have normalized the negative effects of his workload and work demands on his well-being as part of the principalship. Ethan’s work-life-balance is dependent on his ability to be self-reflective and self-aware, among other skills discussed in the PLRs. The instructor will use this session to begin a discussion around school leaders’ competencies, abilities, and emotional intelligence that are widely used to describe the work of school administrators.

- Participants will use their own professional experiences to explain/share in their groups how they might have misrecognized their workload and work demand as a normal part of their work practice at any phase of their transition from school teacher to vice-principal and vice-principal to the principalship.
- Participants will utilize the same resources in sessions one and two—Armstrong (2014), Ontario Principals’ Council (2017), and the PLRs—to support their group discussion. In pulling this session together, participants in their groups will consider their answers in the second activity to determine how they can best achieve their school goals while maintaining work-life balance.
- The instructor/facilitator will ask participants to use Superville’s (2018) article to further support the steps Ethan, and other school administrators, can proactively take to deal with their well-being issues. Participants will review the 10 points Superville recommends and align them with the PLRs to demonstrate how they can achieve their goals.

Reading Resources

- Superville, D. R. (2018, October 16). Principals under pressure: I want a job and a life: How principals find balance in all consuming work. *Education Week*. Retrieved from <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2018/10/17/i-want-a-job-and-a-life.html>

Activity 4: Identifying and Implementing Best Practices

The final activity focuses on solutions for managing well-being issues. Participants will identify the measures Ethan has employed to manage his well-being issues, and they will be asked to consider why Ethan is still grappling with the identified well-being issues and how such issues may lead to more significant issues such as burnout. Participants will work in groups to develop the strategies. Each group will use

Riley's (2017) and Robinson's (2018) articles as a guide to identify strategies that can be used to support those that Ethan employed in the case study. Participants will use the following questions below as a guide to shape their responses, and they will also be encouraged to innovatively present their work. In this concluding section, participants will use the L in the K-W-L strategy to highlight what they have learned in all four sessions.

- What recommendations from Riley's (2017), and Robinson's (2018) articles would you suggest that school administrators, such as Ethan, in the Ontario context can apply to manage their well-being issues and improve work-life-balance?
- Are there any other strategies Ethan can use to manage his well-being issues?
- Considering Ethan's challenges in maintaining work-life-balance, what leadership practice/approach is most suited to better manage workload and work demands? Explain.
- Include how your recommendations can help resolve the specific well-being issues Ethan is dealing with as a result of his work/practice.

Reading Resources

Riley, P. (2017). *New Zealand primary school principals' occupational health and well-being survey 2016 data: Principal health and wellbeing survey*. Retrieved from the Principal Health & Wellbeing website: https://www.nzei.org.nz/documents/Principals%20Health%20and%20Well-being%20Report_20170120SM.pdf

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