



4 tips for celebration in the season of leavings

Over the course of my career, I have observed many leavings. Some leavings were prompted by remarkable, promise-filled opportunities for advancement that took advantage of newly developed expertise, new degrees, or ambitious goals. Some leavings were marked by deep respect and homage to a masterful educator who was ready to leave the work to a younger, more energetic, and more technologically savvy generation. Occasionally, there were sad leavings that deeply struck me. These were the departures of exceptionally good and deeply caring educators who committed their professional lives to students' well-being and who fell out of favor with "the system" because the students seemed less important than their scores. Disappointingly, these educators left with bitterness about the educational system and questions about their contributions.

As the time of my own departure from Learning Forward approaches, I ponder how to celebrate those who move on. This year, in more schools than we can count, the number of leavers will be unusually high as a result of budget cuts, changes in school governance, new policies about educator effectiveness, and a justified frustration among teachers about the lack of perceived value they have.

I offer the following tips because I regret not having done so many of them myself over the years as I

experienced and participated in others' leavings. I offer them because I too know many educators whose lives will be altered by school funding shortfalls. Many are brilliant, at the top of their game, and leaving not because it is their first choice, but because it is what they choose to do in hopes of protecting the position of a younger educator somewhere else in their school systems. Some leave because they will simply be unable to do what they know is best for the students, teachers, or principals they aspire to help each day. Some leave because they have a sense of hopelessness about public education. Some leave to contribute to student success in other ways.

Regardless of their reasons for leaving, those departing leave behind some of their DNA. They touched lives in ways that cannot be fully known or measured. Their contributions may differ dramatically. One might model analyzing an issue from multiple perspectives by being the staff's noted devil's advocate. Another might have a special talent to reach the "bubble" students with the extra instruction they need to unlock the secrets of literacy or numeracy. Still others might be the ones who model compassion for families in need by linking them with community resources. No one leaves without a trace.

As the season of leavings comes, coaches and teacher leaders have a special role in modeling and coordinating responses to leavings that

convey deep, heartfelt appreciation. The ideas below offer some principles to follow.

Leavings are deeply personal.

What we might want to do for someone might not be what someone wants for himself or herself. Being sensitive to a person's wishes is important, and some recognition is always appropriate. Some people are so selfless that they will not expect any recognition or want others to be bothered. In these circumstances, the best solution is sensitivity. It is best to think from the person's perspective to understand what he or she wants. Leavings that are entirely unacknowledged linger in uncomfortable ways. I recently experienced such a leaving and am troubled that I didn't read between the lines to understand that the person wanted acknowledgement, but in a private and intimate manner.



Leavings are about creating memories, not about tangible gifts.

I read an article about a world
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traveler who refused to take a camera with him. His notion was that if he tried to capture his experiences through the lens of a camera, he would lose the fullness of the experience and the richness of the details in front of him. He wanted more than snapshots; he wanted to create memories. His memories were embedded in the stories he told about his travel adventures. These stories were drawn from interactions with people, special places he visited, pictures he painted in his mind, smells he noticed, and sounds he could hear again and again in his mind when he chose to replay them. He could close his eyes and recreate his experiences.

Creating memories happens by sharing richly detailed stories of how another person touched us personally and professionally; by identifying the value or attribute we most want to highlight about the person and sharing one small incident that symbolized that value in action; by writing a note in which we convey what we will miss most about the person; or by finding

a humorous, symbolic memento that will remind the person of the relationship we had.

Leavings are for celebration, not sadness.

Leavings are sad times, regardless of the reasons for leaving. Both those leaving and those staying will experience loss, anxiety, and uncertainty. To counter the sadness, celebration is in order — of the contributions, successes, effects, and gifts shared. I recall a symbolic transition from one principal to another. The staff wanted to acknowledge the contributions of the outgoing principal and celebrate the possibilities of the incoming principal. Each department created a page for a book using a children’s writing frame, “We used to be _____, and now we’re _____.” Representatives from each department read their pages at the last faculty meeting of the year and assembled two books, one for each principal. The spirit was playful and respectful. The transition was documented.

Leavings initiate beginnings.

Leavings introduce beginnings. After the period of downtime, new beginnings occur. Rather than dwell on how things used to be, leavings serve as a catalyst for change. Enriched by the contributions and gifts of those who leave, those who stay are encouraged to be open and aware of what is changing and celebrate those changes. Building on the foundation of the past strengthens us, gives us possibilities to reach new heights, and allows us to do what we have not yet done.

Leavings are never easy, yet when they are acknowledged, celebrated, and follow the principles recommended, they become a part of the legacy of who we are and what we are yet to become.

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