



TO MOVE YOUR CAREER FORWARD —
RETREAT

SET ASIDE UNINTERRUPTED TIME TO VIEW YOUR WORK FROM A DISTANCE

By Billie F. Birnie

Maria Cristina Lopez loved her work as a central office coordinator in mathematics, but she realized that she needed to learn more about how to coach effectively. With her supervisor's encouragement, she "apprenticed" herself to the best coach in the district — a coordinator of social studies.

It wasn't long before the classroom teachers she worked with were benefiting from her newly gained insight and guidance. Eager to pass the torch, she shared what she had learned with other coordinators in her office, and math teachers throughout the district improved their practice as a result of the coaching they received from Lopez and her colleagues.

David Graham enjoyed his work in the central office, too. Through careful deliberation, he recognized that, knowledgeable as he was in his subject, he often found himself unable to convey that knowledge effectively. Both his speaking and writing needed attention.

He bought, read, and studied books on effective speaking and writing; he practiced diligently what he learned; and he took advantage of every opportunity that came his way to speak in public and to write for publication. His efforts paid off: He became an accomplished speaker and writer, and he was promoted once, twice, a third time. He finished his career as a successful and satisfied assistant superintendent.

Like Lopez and Graham, no matter what position you hold, you will be more effective and keep your career on track if you step back occasionally to take stock.

It is all too easy in the fast-paced life of the central office to lose sight of things that really matter. Meeting after meet-

BOOKS TO IMPROVE SPEAKING AND WRITING

Carnegie, D. (1990). *The quick and easy way to effective speaking.* New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

Elbow, P. (1981). *Writing with power: Techniques for mastering the writing process.* New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Safire, W. (1992). *Lend me your ears: Great speeches in history.* New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Co.

Strunk Jr., W. & White, E.B. (2005). *The elements of style.* New York, NY: Penguin Press.

ing, deadlines looming, school needs pressing, telephone calls, memos, emails — all take their toll on energy and perspective. That's why every staff member needs to schedule personal retreats.

GAIN PERSPECTIVE

I learned early the value of perspective. My grandmother was an artist, and, as a child, I frequently watched as she painted, standing at her easel with the north light streaming through the window. She worked close to the painting, her brush moving from the palette to the canvas and back again, surely and competently. From time to time, though, she stepped back from her work to view the whole, and in doing so, she regained perspective on the totality of the picture in progress.

That's what a retreat should provide for you — the opportunity to look at your work from a distance to be sure it's becoming the picture you want it to be.

This retreat doesn't have to be long. Thirty minutes will usually do. But it does have to be uninterrupted time when you can focus on your career. Once a month is minimal, every two

weeks is better, and weekly is best of all.

You may want to be alone, or, if you have a close friend whose counsel you trust, you may want to include that person. Such a retreat also works well for two or three colleagues who understand each other's challenges and who are invested in each other's success. If that's the case for you, allow 30 minutes per person.

Whether you retreat alone or with someone, you need to go to a place that is comfortable and quiet. It may be a corner of your home, a parked car, an inviting park — or, if you're fortunate enough to have access, a shady glade or a secluded beach.

If you're meeting with colleagues, you may be tempted to meet over coffee or lunch. Don't. Being in a public place where distractions interfere with thoughtful conversation can sabotage your effort. If you want food or drink, arrange for a private room where you will not be disturbed.

Once there, you will want to answer these questions:

- What contributions do I want to make in my career?
- Is the work that I'm doing now enabling me to make those contributions?
- If it is, what do I need to do to develop my skills and improve my effectiveness?
- If not, what adjustments in course do I need to make? Can I make them within this position, or do I need to consider a major career move?
- Do I need to be preparing myself for another role in the near or distant future? If so, in what ways?
- What are the immediate next steps to take in order to be the best that I can be?
- Am I taking time at work and at home for things that really matter?

The answers to those questions can lead to a variety of decisions, such as the ones Lopez and Graham made.

NEW DIRECTIONS

Charlotte Miller's retreats pushed her in another direction. A consummate teacher, she had been courted tenaciously by the district's director of science, who wanted her to come to the central office so that she could share her talents with other teachers.

Finally persuaded, she succeeded admirably. Principals and teachers rushed to secure her help in their schools, and her professional learning presentations were packed. But she missed the classroom so much that she often went home in tears. After a year in the central office, she returned to teaching. She has never regretted her decision.

Mario Bustamante was discontented in the central office, too, but unlike Miller, he wanted to help more teachers than he could reach in his position. So instead of moving back to the classroom, he resigned from the district and went into consulting, offering his services to schools throughout the country.

He had much to learn. He attended conferences on con-

sulting, learned how to keep books, bought equipment and other resources to support his work, and set up a business. His services were well-received, and he reveled in his newfound independence. He continued to serve the district, too, offering professional learning tailor-made for the schools that he was previously unable to reach.

Other examples illustrate even more paths:

- Fernetta Douglas left her central office post just long enough to complete her doctorate. She returned to a promotion that placed her just where she wanted to be — in charge of reading and language arts for the district.
- Henry Watson pursued and attained a lateral move from a staff to a line position. In his new role, he had the authority to help principals make needed changes in their schools.
- Sharee Landers thought long and hard about what really matters. Then, with her husband's enthusiastic approval, she left her career for five years to be a full-time mother. During that time, she stayed abreast of developments in teaching and learning, and, when the children were in school, she returned to the central office and continued her career.

THE BIG PICTURE

All of those decisions have these factors in common: the willingness to step back from the busyness of the work itself to look at the larger picture; the capacity to answer candidly those probing questions; the ability to imagine alternate pathways and their likely outcomes; and finally, once the best course of action is identified, the courage to act.

The situations here have another important aspect in common. All of the people mentioned were seeking the opportunity to give what they had to offer — not higher salaries, more power, or prestige.

In some cases, their giving resulted in promotions and raises, but those were byproducts of the efforts, not the goals. These people were dedicated to serving teachers and children, to improving schools, to helping others, and, by following the steps discussed here, they succeeded.

Your situation will be different from theirs. Your answers to the questions will be different, and your path will be different. But the process is the same, and it begins with the retreat. You should leave that experience either with renewed commitment to the work at hand or with plans to adjust your priorities or your course. Either way, you will be better prepared to make significant contributions to the district you serve, and you will also be in control of your career.

•

Billie Birnie (bfbirnie@bigbend.net) is a professional learning consultant and author of *A Teacher's Guide to Successful Classroom Management and Differentiated Instruction* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2014). ■