



FOCUS ON WELLNESS

Julia Mahfouz

MEANING AND PURPOSE ARE KEY TO PRINCIPALS' WELL-BEING

One critical aspect of self-care is intricately linked with what psychologists and sociologists refer to as prosociality — extending our inner selves for others.

Burnout rates among principals are high, largely due to the immense pressure principals face in striving to achieve demanding academic standards for students, while simultaneously adapting to constant changes and effectively collaborating with a diverse range of stakeholders during strenuous times.

Lately, self-care and attending to one's well-being have become a topic of frequent conversation in and outside of schools. Principals are often reminded to prioritize their own well-being by managing their time and setting boundaries, using self-care strategies and stress reduction techniques, maintaining a work-life balance, and attending to their own mental, social, and emotional health.

While these practices are undoubtedly important, the focus on individual well-being can lead to a sense of detachment from the very people principals are serving and away from the core reason and purpose that make their work meaningful. When school leaders feel their job is meaningful, their job satisfaction is higher, which also alleviates emotional exhaustion and, by extension, burnout.

In our pursuit of self-care, we may have inadvertently overlooked a crucial element: ubuntu, a concept deeply rooted in African philosophy (Murithi, 2006), that translates to “I am because we are,” emphasizing the interconnectedness of humanity and the importance of communal well-being. It focuses on the idea that our well-being is closely tied to the well-being of others and that, by supporting and nurturing our communities, we, in turn, nourish ourselves. Ubuntu is about development of one's “fullness of being” through our understanding of how we are “beings with others.” In our Prosocial Leader Lab at the University of Colorado Denver, we consider ubuntu — marked by compassion, mutual support, respect, acceptance, care, and dignity — as one of the pillars of the community culture we try to live by (Nussbaum, 2003).

In the realm of school leadership, ubuntu offers a profound lesson: One critical aspect of self-care is intricately linked with what psychologists and sociologists refer to as prosociality — extending our inner selves for others. Prosociality encompasses three distinct facets: motivation, the individual's desire to promote the welfare of others beyond self-advancement or financial gains; behavior, individual actions intended to help others and the organization flourish without the expectation of being rewarded; and impact, the feeling of making positive difference in the lives of others throughout one's work (Brief & Motowildo, 1986; Grant, 2007, 2008; Grant & Sonnentag, 2010; Organ et al., 2006). Research shows that prosocial competencies, such as collaborating to help others, solve problems, and achieve goals, are an important element of effective school leadership (Benoliel & Somech, 2010; Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Jäppinen et al., 2015), and that teachers highly regard principals who consider themselves servant leaders (Taylor et al., 2007).

This is exactly what my colleagues and I found in our research with the program Soul of Leadership: Courage, Presence, and Integrity. Soul of Leadership is a professional learning program that gives school administrators the opportunity to reflect on their lives and work



Julia Mahfouz (julia.mahfouz@ucdenver.edu) is associate professor in the School of Education & Human Development and director of the Prosocial Leader Lab at the University of Colorado Denver.

through contemplative and reflective practices drawn from the Center for Courage & Renewal and the fields of mindfulness, social and emotional learning, neuroscience, the arts, and the work of Parker J. Palmer, author of *The Courage to Teach* (Massachusetts School Administrators' Association, n.d.; Palmer, 2017). Participating principals shared how principalship can be isolating and draining and emphasized the importance of relationships and networking with other principals who are going through similar experiences. We also found that principals were driven by a strong sense of mission, not by ego, career progress, or the pursuit of self-actualization. The meaningfulness of school leaders' work lies in their role to give back and actively participate in the educational community.

This sense of mission suggests that school leaders can benefit from embracing ubuntu, shifting from isolated self-care to prosociality. Prosocial school leaders actively engage in acts of kindness, gratitude, support, and collaboration. They cultivate a sense of empathy, compassion, and a genuine concern for the well-being of others. They understand that their role extends beyond administrative tasks. They are stewards of a shared vision for the betterment of students, teachers, and society at large.

When school leaders actively engage with the concept of ubuntu, they not only improve their own well-being but also create stronger, more resilient school communities and contribute to the collective success and thriving of the entire school ecosystem. If the

past years' events taught us anything, it is that our ability to navigate uncertainty, adapt to new challenges, and persevere in the face of adversity hinges not just on individual strength, but on our capacity to come together as a community. We've learned that our collective well-being depends on our willingness to extend compassion, empathy, gratitude, and support to one another. Thus, while sustaining one's self is crucial, it is serving our schools and communities that brings meaning and purpose to what we do. This purpose is what keeps us striving for betterment of ourselves and our societies.

REFERENCES

- Benoiel, P. & Somech, A. (2010).** Who benefits from participative management? *Journal of Educational Administration*, 48(3), 285-308.
- Brief, A.P. & Motowidlo, S.J. (1986).** Prosocial organizational behaviors. *Academy of Management Review*, 11(4), 710-725.
- Grant, A.M. (2007).** Relational job design and the motivation to make a prosocial difference. *Academy of Management Review*, 32(2), 393-417.
- Grant, A.M. (2008).** Does intrinsic motivation fuel the prosocial fire? Motivational synergy in predicting persistence, performance, and productivity. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 93(1), 48-58.
- Grant, A.M. & Sonnentag, S. (2010).** Doing good buffers against feeling bad: Prosocial impact compensates for negative task and self-evaluations. *Organizational Behavior and*

Human Decision Processes, 111(1), 13-22.

Hallinger, P. & Heck, R.H. (2010). Leadership for learning: Does collaborative leadership make a difference in school improvement? *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 38(6), 654-678.

Jäppinen, A., Leclerc, M., & Tubin, D. (2015). Collaborativeness as the core of professional learning communities beyond culture and context: Evidence from Canada, Finland, and Israel. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 27(3), 315-332.

Massachusetts School Administrators' Association. (n.d.). *The soul of leadership: Courage, presence, and integrity.* msaa.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/SoL-Flyer-Cohort-6-2023-24.webversion.pdf

Murithi, T. (2006). Practical peacemaking wisdom from Africa: Reflections on Ubuntu. *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, 1(4), 25-34.

Nussbaum, B. (2003). Ubuntu: Reflections of a South African on our common humanity. *Reflections*, 4(4), 21-26.

Organ, D.W., Podsakoff, P.M., & MacKenzie, S.B. (2006). *Organizational citizenship behavior: Its nature, antecedents, and consequences.* SAGE Publications.

Palmer, P.J. (2017). *The courage to teach: Exploring the inner landscape of a teacher's life.* John Wiley & Sons.

Taylor T., Martin, B., Hutchinson, S., & Jinks, M. (2007). Examination of leadership practices of principals identified as servant leaders. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 10(4), 401-419. ■



LEARNING FORWARD

FOUNDATION

foundation.learningforward.org

Visit foundation.learningforward.org to learn more about scholarships, donor opportunities, and more.