



Improving life and leadership of assistant principals

Assistant Principal Podcast Show Outline and Process

Show Description:

Developing teachers is important, but it is rarely urgent. When we are proactive, we can plan ahead and do this most important work of developing teachers. However, assistant principals operate in an environment where being reactive is a defining feature. One of the ways to move from being driven by the urgent to being driven by the purposeful is to become strategically reactive. What does that mean? Stay tuned!

Show Intro

Hello colleagues and welcome to the Assistant Principal Podcast. I'm your host Frederick Buskey. The goal of this podcast is to help improve the life and leadership of assistant principals. This podcast compliments APEX, the Assistant Principal Exceleration program, but you certainly don't need to be an APEX member to find value in the podcast.

It's just me today talking about the transition to being driven by the important, instead of the urgent. The beginning of today's show will recap a couple of the frameworks of strategic leaderships. We will then dive into five strategies for being strategically reactive.

Before we do that, I want to celebrate. The first episode of this podcast released in August 2021, with six additional episodes released sporadically prior to the new year. Beginning in mid-January we have released a new episode every Thursday and last week the show topped 1000 total downloads! We have listeners in 41 states and nine countries, so thanks to everyone for becoming a part of this community.

I also need to give a big shoutout to the podcast team, which is a family affair. Editing each episode, uploading it and then working on the website is a lot of work and I could not produce a weekly podcast without Lance Buskey, who assumed all of those duties at the beginning of this year. Lance, your help not only makes this show possible, but the quality of your work brings something else – peace of mind.

If you found this show via the daily email, Instagram, or LinkedIn, then you have Mara Buskey to thank. Mara has been instrumental in helping to spread the word. She brings a creativity and energy to our social media posts that I cannot match. And if you subscribe to our daily leadership email, you can thank Mara for that as well. She is also coordinating a special episode of this podcast that will feature a panel of first-year teachers discussing what they need from their APs, so you'll get to hear her voice soon.

Okay, to today's topic.

Back in episode 1 we talked about the Six Dimensions of organizations:

- Purpose
- People, structures, resources
- External forces
- Internal forces (culture)

The degree of alignment within the organization determines how successful the organization is in fulfilling its purpose.

The work of leaders is to increase organizational alignment. Increasing alignment leads to achieving purpose. It also improves internal forces, or culture.

A fundamental challenge to doing the purposeful work of alignment is the way urgency drives our actions. In episode 14 we talked about the Eisenhower Matrix, which divides tasks into four quadrants:

1: Urgent and Important ----- <i>Must do</i>	2: Not urgent but important ----- <i>Should do</i>
3: Urgent but not important ----- <i>Choose to do</i>	4: Not urgent, not important ----- <i>Should not do</i>

When we are driven by urgency, we focus on quadrants 1 and 3, at the expense of quadrant 2, which is the work of aligning systems and supporting teacher growth.

This brings us to the two most important responsibilities of school administrators:

1. Keep everyone safe
2. Improve outcomes for students by helping teachers grow

And since growth activities are primarily q2, in order for APs to become strategic leaders, they need to be able to escape the treadmill of the urgent.

There are four keys to getting off the treadmill. The first of those is to act with intention on a daily basis. At the end of today's podcast, I'll encourage you to sign up for my daily leadership email, specifically because it helps you to set a leadership intention each day. But I digress.

Ideally being intentional means being proactive, but even when we are reacting, we can become intentional by applying five strategies to become strategically reactive.

Strategic reaction, applied consistently, will help us to slowly recapture some time to devote to quadrant two. More importantly, applying the five strategies conditions us to be intentional.

When forced to react to a situation, you have five options for action. The actions are arranged hierarchically. Think of them as a sorting method. Try to apply the first action. If you can't, move to the second option and so on.

1. **Give it up.** Ask yourself whether this is a necessary task. You may be surprised how many tasks are not important (quadrant 3). If it is not important, let it go. Items in this category include lots of email, especially the FYI types, some meetings, and paperwork. This is also an effective strategy for dealing with requests that appear mundane or capricious.
2. **Give it back.** Some issues are important to others but not to you or the organization. These shouldn't be ignored as they can impact the invested party's motivation. Think of these issues as monkeys. When someone tries to give you their monkey, give it back to them! You don't need to care for other people's monkeys. You can give monkeys back by:
 - a. Acknowledging the concern and emotions of the monkey owner
 - b. Rephrasing the concern as you understand it
 - c. Providing them with a task as a next step. This task could include:
 - i. Further reflection on the root problem
 - ii. Developing a list of options
 - iii. Talking with others
 - iv. Doing some research
 - v. Scheduling a future meeting

These steps help assure the person that you have heard them and validated their concern, but they also put the onus on the person to solve their own problem, or care for their own monkey.

Some people will never bring that monkey back to you again. That's good, because if they aren't willing to work for their own monkey, why should you? Others may spend some energy in the task you asked them to do and come back. That's a sign that they are invested in taking care of their own monkey and you can respond appropriately.

3. **Give it away.** Ideally, you should spend most of your time doing what only you can do. That may mean doing what only you have the skill for, but it can also mean doing only what you have the *unique* responsibility to do. *If the task isn't dependent on your unique talent or position, can you give it (delegate) to someone else?*

This is important as leaders often hang onto or own issues that could be given to others. There are a couple of barriers to giving the issue away that you should be mindful of. Each of these barriers can be dealt with proactively (see below) with some planning and investment. The three barriers to giving away a task are:

- a. They won't do it the way you would do it

- b. They are capable but don't yet have the skills or capacity
- c. The task is complex, and others don't know the process

Developing strong standard operating processes (SOPs) can help others to do things that you don't have to do, and to do them consistently and well.

The other thing to be aware of is that we often don't let go of things that we enjoy doing even if we shouldn't be doing them. I knew an assistant principal who spent two hours a month doing the bulletin board opposite the main office door. She loved doing the bulletin board and she did a great job. But this AP was too busy to follow-up on her observations of teachers. That was two hours a month, 30 minutes every week, that she selfishly indulged in something she liked to do at the expense of growing teachers.

- 4. **Give it a C.** If you must be the one to do the task, give it your minimal effort and be done with it. Obviously, this doesn't apply to anything that is mission critical, but do you really need to spend three hours preparing a weekly update? This is very difficult for many people, but remember the three epiphanies:
 - a. I can't do everything
 - b. I choose what doesn't get done
 - c. My choices reflect my values

This means that when you choose to spend extra time making sure something is perfect, you are valuing the appearance of your professionalism over investing that time into helping a teacher improve their craft. I'm sorry if that sounds harsh, and you may disagree with me, but be aware next time you are investing precious time into making sure the email is just right or the document formatting is perfect. Yes, you must get the schedule changes out to teachers, but does the table really need to be pretty? Does clip art improve the information? Are the extra paragraphs you have included to justify your thinking necessary?

In the extra minutes you spent being perfect, you could have done a five-minute coaching session. Which one would have a bigger impact on your school?

And there is this: by definition, a C is good enough.

- 5. **Give it a bounce.** If it is complex and requires your attention, take the minimal action that will allow you to bounce it to someone else for the next step. This gets it off your plate so you don't need to worry about it. If it comes back to you later, that's fine. Dealing with small tasks is easier than dealing with big ones and a minimal response may be better than a detailed but delayed response.

The Minimally Viable Approach

I want to focus more on the last two items because they are closely related. How might your job be different if instead of trying to be great, you took an MVP approach to everything? This may sound insane but think about it for a minute.

- Is an MVP newsletter any less valuable than a fancy one?
- Is an email that says “yes” in response to a question any less valuable than one that includes three paragraphs about why the answer is yes? Does anyone even read those three paragraphs?
- Is an MVP report any less valuable than a flowery one?

There are all kinds of short-cuts we can – and should – take. Part of this is becoming more aware of the types of interactions we have with people. If a teacher comes to us with a concern over a scheduling change, we need to understand the purpose of the conversation:

- If they aren’t happy and just want to vent, then we listen.
- If they have a question, then we answer the question.
- If they have an idea, then we listen and process the idea.

Too many times we don’t stop to assess what the person needs from the conversation. We begin explaining, justifying, convincing. This is a problem because if we are doing all the talking then we aren’t really listening. People are more concerned with the answer to the question than the rationale behind the answer. If they want the rationale, they will ask.

I’ll have a copy of these five strategies for being strategically reactive on my website at The Assistant Principal Podcast tab. If you want to put these strategies into practice, try this:

Over the course of the next week, take a few minutes to reflect at the end of each day:

1. Was there anything you did that was unnecessary?
2. Did you accept any monkeys?
3. Did you do things that other people could have done equally as well, or at least good enough?
4. Did you spend more time on something because you wanted it to be “just right”?
5. Did you fixate or delay on something because you wanted it to be better?

Remember, you have two jobs: Keep people safe and help teachers become better. Everything else is a distraction. They may be important, mandatory, or even essential, but they still distract from your core jobs. Put your core responsibilities first, then fill in the rest of your time. Be strategically reactive to help protect the time you invest into teacher development.

Show Outro



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We began the show by celebrating 1,000 downloads. Being a listener makes you a part of this growing community. That's really important because school leadership can be a very isolating job. If you are happy listening to the podcast and that's all you need, then thank you, please subscribe so you don't miss an episode. Consider reviewing and rating the podcast to help other APs find it or recommending it to your contacts.

If you think the podcast is great but would like to become more connected, you can do the following, all for free:

- Look for The Assistant Principal group on LinkedIn and request to join. You can also connect with both Mara and I on LinkedIn and Instagram.
- Subscribe to our daily leadership email – 300 words or less delivered to your inbox every morning at 6. Imagine reading something that will help you set a leadership intention each day. That's how we grow. You can find a link in the show notes or on my website homepage, frederickbuskey.com
- Give me some feedback! Please! I develop shows around topics that the APs I work with talk to me about. As our audience grows beyond my home base of the Carolinas, I need to hear from more people in other places. Please consider dropping me an email to share your thoughts at frederick@frederickbuskey.com.
- If you know an educator who would make a great guest, consider connect us. Just email them and CC me. You can say something like, "Hey, you would be a great guest for this guy's podcast. You could talk about X. I'm copying him on this email."

If you do want to spend money, you can always join APEx. Right now, I'm running a 4-month special (April-July) for \$200. Just use the code "listener" when you check out. Just choose the four-month option as there will be some big changes coming to APEx in August when we kick off the 2022-23 year.

An Apex membership gets you a weekly content email, and access to online webinars and group coaching.

I hope you enjoyed the show and are able to implement these five strategies for being strategically reactive:

1. Give it up
2. Give it back
3. Give it away
4. Give it a C
5. Give it a bounce

That wraps up today's show! I'm Frederick Buskey and I hope you'll join me next time for the Assistant Principal Podcast.



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Links:

My email: frederick@frederickbuskey.com

The Assistant Principal Podcast website: <https://www.frederickbuskey.com/appodcast.html>

Sign up for the daily leadership email: <https://mailchi.mp/c15c68e6df32/specialedition>

Website: www.frederickbuskey.com

Blog: www.frederickbuskey.com/blog (reposts of the daily email)

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/strategicleadershipconsulting/>

The Assistant Principal Group on LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/groups/12562712/>

APEx: <https://www.frederickbuskey.com/apex.html>