

Be Slacker to be Better

When we mentioned the title of this collection of thoughts to some colleagues, their first reactions were surprised then sceptical:

“What?! You’re taking the p@#s, there’s no way you do the job in forty hours. It just can’t be done!”

and

“You’re joking right? The only time I get things finished inside forty hours is in the holidays and then sometimes it’s a close run deal. Any less would be slack.”

No one wants to be seen as slack. The word implies a degree of laziness, maybe even that you (gasp) don’t care. A slack principal would obviously be a bad principal.

How about this though? How about you substitute the word ‘slack’ for words like energised, creative, progressive, or present? These sound a lot better. They sound like qualities to aspire to and be proud of. They are also very important by-products of creating more slack.

If we throw away the negative connotations, what the word actually implies is pause and space. A dictionary definition when used as a descriptor is, “characterized by a lack of work or activity; quiet”². This is exactly what principals need to both be sustainable in the role and to do their jobs well. Less work and regular quiet times are recurring wishes from most of the principals we have spoken with.

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Professional athletes are great examples of the concept of reducing work to improve performance. They deliberately schedule periods of “deloading” or reduced activity into their lives. This happens within their normal working weeks and across longer periods of time. A great current example is the tennis star Roger Federer. He is nearly 38 years old in a sport that most professionals give up around the 30 year mark. One of the reasons he is so enduring is that over the last 10 years he has greatly reduced both his playing time and training. Deliberate slackness.

Another example very familiar to New Zealanders are the All Black rugby players. In recent times, even these famously ‘tough’ athletes have contracts that allow them to deload and refresh. Coaches and sponsors don’t create these new conditions to be nice, they do it because performance and longevity of the players require it. To maintain performance, they require the ability to slacken off regularly.

Principalship may not be a professional sport (some would argue!), but it is a high profile, demanding role that requires attention to detail but also the ability to be creative and plan strategically – we suggest that very few people can effectively do ‘big picture’ type thinking while spinning their hamster wheel furiously just to keep up.

Throughout this book, we have consistently suggested that you can construct a better version of principalship through changing what you do. This is another “what if” suggestion.

What if you deliberately structured your day, week, and year so that there were unassailable periods of quiet, with a lack of activity?

You could:

- Create 'professional reading' time twice per week. Door shut and zero interruptions
- Plan to arrive late or leave early on set days
- Choose one week per term where you completely change your routine to be less available

It doesn't matter how you achieve this quietness, but it absolutely does matter that it is deliberately scheduled and that your front-line team (admin staff) know when it is happening, so they can support you in achieving it. If you can schedule a meeting that won't be interrupted, it is entirely possible to schedule some slack time in a similar manner.

Before you dismiss the idea as impossible, consider for a moment what the alternative is – probably exactly what your life looks like at the moment. Is this sustainable and/or the best way to serve your school?

And it doesn't look like the cavalry is coming to save you. Neither the Government nor the wider community seem invested in changing the principalship work model. In fact, they seem to want you to do more.

If you feel like you are treading water on a daily basis, consider creating slack. No one will do it for you and it is the only way to move from being a reactive 'fire snuffer' to an effective and sustainable school leader. Be slacker, both you and your school deserve it.

²<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com>