



## Washington State ASCD (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development)

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### [How can we understand our various roles in the face of ever-changing circumstances?](#)

The topic for this month’s Critical Question series was intended to address ‘Sustaining a School Improvement Plan’. Great topic, except that we have all had to recently shift our focus to find ways to support our students while they are home during the Covid-19 school closure. So rather than write about typical school improvement planning, it seems more relevant to write about trying to understand our various roles in the challenge of developing distance learning plans that meet the needs of the wide range of learners across our state.

Each of us have had specific responsibilities in the past under job titles such as superintendent, principal, teacher, director, counselor, coach, paraeducator, etc. Along with those responsibilities and titles we have operated within the framework of not only our job descriptions, but also the unique culture and expectations of the school district and community we live and work in. So, what now? Approaching the current dynamics solely from our default and past point of view seems clunky. Traditionally, a teacher has tangible reference points such as a classroom, a chemistry lab, bulletin boards, etc., and a principal has hallways to roam, and a library or staff room within which to run meetings. So, rather than focus on the tangibles to answer, ‘What now?’, the best approach may be to ask the question, ‘How can I use my experience and talents to contribute to statewide efforts to provide students with a meaningful education during the closure?’ And if you’re like other educators around the state, your brain may be met with confusion as you try to sort this out. I have to admit; I woke up in the middle of the night recently wondering how in the world I can contribute to finding solutions. It seems odd and disorienting not to interact with students each day. It is somewhat unsettling to only meet with teachers and other staff virtually. My school is out there somewhere, but for the time being, it feels intangible. I have to constantly remind myself that my students and staff aren’t characters that exist only in the cloud, they are still the same real people I knew three weeks ago, scattered throughout a neighborhood, unable to come to school, but in need of guidance, direction, and in the case of students, an education.

Although each district has a unique game plan, my guess is that our anxieties are similar as we work to gain traction around a plan for education that students and families find supportive and meaningful. District level leadership continues to pivot and adjust each day to increasingly clear guidance from OSPI and other agencies. Principals, teachers, counselors and other staff look for creative ways to interpret guidance that has been passed on to the building level. Our original job descriptions no longer directly coincide with our current daily responsibilities. But we have to

adapt because no one else is as well equipped to provide students in our communities with a sound education - especially an education relative to critical state standards. There are parents who can pull off outstanding home-school programs, and there are vendors who create excellent software and systems, but for a rich education that is equitable and accessible to all students to become deeply infused into our communities, it will require teachers, principals, and district office leaders to press into the present challenge while discovering new and unique roles and continuing to quickly adapt to frequently changing circumstances.

I recently turned to a brief Fast Company article (Six Tools that are More Powerful than To-Do Lists for Productivity, Stephanie Vozza, April 2, 2020) that may help reset and maintain a fresh point of view. Vozza suggests that our traditional approach to engaging with new circumstances may actually impede our efforts to gain traction around innovation. In our case, that would be traction to advance the education of our students under new circumstances. As a principal, I realized that I typically live by my daily to-do list, for example; and honestly, there have been many days where completing critical items on the list are a struggle. That model barely worked before the closure - it will definitely not work now. Instead, a model similar to the one Vozza suggests seems more suitable. (For such a brief article, she cites a wide range of organizational leaders including Sean Covey, Maura Nevel Thomas, Hillary Rettig, Jones Loflin, Marshall Goldsmith, Lisa Zaslow, and Hamish Mackenzie.)

The components critical to identifying one's role in an overarching effort, and to gain both personal and organizational progress are as follows:

1. Maintain a Personal Mission Statement

This should capture what you are personally all about. Don't lose your personal point of view in the upheaval. It is what makes your contribution important. Within your personal mission, identify your highest priorities and align your daily work with what matters most.

2. Maintain an Energy and Attention Audit

A to-do list doesn't account for the degree of energy and attention each task requires. It's better to group tasks by high-attention and low-attention, and match a task to your available attention level given present circumstances and resources. Don't try to accomplish a high-attention task when you are in low-attention mode, for example.

3. Find someone to help keep you accountable and on task.

Although there apparently are apps available to help with this, it's far better to maintain relationships with colleagues that you can pick up the phone and call, or have a face to face (or Zoom) conversation with about your work.

4. Ask yourself a set of important daily questions

Engage in frequent self-reflection while avoiding self-doubt. For example, ask yourself, “Am I advancing my personal mission? Am I advancing the mission of my school, department, and district?”

5. Maintain a Power Hour

This is exactly what it sounds like. No interruptions for one focused hour each day. Believe it or not, this is often enough to accomplish more than you would expect. Vozza suggests that it’s actually more realistic to carve out one super productive hour than to expect to work at peak performance all day. That doesn’t mean you’re not working the rest of the day, but we all know there are countless important circumstances that need attending to throughout the day. When you find that straight stretch, however, close your door, mute your phone and put the pedal to the metal.

6. Maintain Well-Defined Goals

And, I would add, ensure that your goals are clearly and frequently communicated to your team. Vozza writes that being productive is all about staying focused on what is aligned with your most important goals.

It’s hard to know how long we will be directly impacted by Covid-19. It’s a struggle, both personally and as a system, to rethink our roles. One thing we are learning, however, is that we may be more agile and better equipped to overcome systemic and personal inertia than we previously imagined. Let’s not forget this in the future as we consider innovative solutions to complex situations.

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