



Regulated: How to Find and Lead from the Eye of the Storm

Learn how emotional intelligence begins with self-awareness

By Adam L. Saenz, PhD

According to the Center for Disease Control, May 11, 2023 “marks the end of the federal COVID-19 PHE declaration.” That’s good news. In many important ways, we have resumed life as we knew it before the world changed in March 2020.

For those of us who work in education, even though the pandemic is officially over, we continue to see its lingering effects as we serve students and families including gaps in academic and social/emotional development. Further, as we wrestle with the task of remediating those gaps, in many districts, we’re forced to do so with an increasingly limited

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teaching force. In sum, the pandemic has left our students dysregulated. Dysregulated students, then, have a dysregulating effect on teachers. Dysregulated teachers, then, have a dysregulating effect on administrators. Dysregulated administrators cannot co-regulate dysregulated teachers, and dysregulated teachers cannot co-regulate dysregulated students. So, yes, the pandemic is over, but we're clearly not yet out of the storm.

As leaders in this dynamic, we are wise to consider the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson, who observed that "the wise [person] in the storm prays to God not for safety from danger, but for deliverance from fear...it's the storm within that endangers, not the storm without." That observation illustrates the powerful truth that we find the greatest professional sustainability by first calming the storm within; in other words, we practice emotional intelligence.

Emotional intelligence begins with self-awareness. What am I thinking? What am I feeling? What are the sources of my stress? What is my personality style? Once I become aware of my thoughts, feelings, stress, and personality style, I can move into the second step of emotional intelligence, which is self-regulation. We cannot regulate what we are not aware of. Once I am regulated, I can move effectively into effective co-regulation with my teachers through empathy (e.g., what are my teachers' thoughts, feelings, stress, and personalities) and social skills.

For the sake of brevity, this article will focus on knowing and regulating stress. Stress is a response to any internal or external storm that we're not sure we can deal with effectively; functionally speaking, to be stressed is to be afraid. Facing those internal and external storms triggers our sympathetic nervous system, resulting in the production of the stress hormones adrenaline, cortisol and norepinephrine. Our bodies then metabolize this neurochemical fuel to activate fight or flight behaviors.

Helpful (Tonic) Fight or Flight Behaviors: Regulated Anticipate. Think ahead to identify tasks, times and relationships that will be particularly demanding. What can we do now to be prepared?

Set boundaries. At some point each evening, we must choose to be unemployed until 7:30 am the next day. We also need to set aside sacred time each weekend that is protected from anything work-related.

Avoid catastrophizing. When we make mountains out of molehills, we make the storm seem much worse than it really is.

Practice self-observation. Reflect on why we are afraid. How might the storm we face be exposing a fear of failure, impostor syndrome or fear of not being perceived as competent?

Hurtful (Toxic) Fight or Flight Behaviors: Dysregulated Attacking and/or blaming. Let's be real: Attacking and blaming can feel good since it provides an immediate release. However, doing so results in damage.

Apathy/withdrawal. If we fail to engage the world appropriately and adaptively around us, others will perceive us as an uncaring leader. This will sabotage trust.

Finding and leading from the eye of the storm is rooted in neuroscience. The mastery of the process, though, is an art form that can take years of practice to perfect.

AUTHOR



Dr. Adam L. Saenz is a licensed psychologist with over 20 years of experience in schools specializing in emotional intelligence. His workshops have empowered teachers, administrators, students and parents across the country to leverage emotional intelligence not just to do better work, but also to do it more sustainably.



Learn more from Dr. Adam L. Saenz at the TEPSA Grow Leadership Conference November 5-6 in Austin. He'll help you create a plan to regulate not just yourself as a leader, but the entire campus as well. Scan the QR code or see page 12 for more information.