

RESILIENT LEADERSHIP

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RESILIENT LEADERSHIP

School Leaders Thriving in Adversity
and Crisis

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

*To my wife Ayelet and my twin daughters Eileil and Daria.
You are my source of strength and resilience.
You are my lighthouse of hope and love.*

*To Shlomit, my dear wife, and to my beloved daughters
Noya, Mor and Shirley with love and gratitude for
the warm nest you built for me.*

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PREFACE

“I want my life back!” – Noah’s story.¹

Until my first anxiety attack, I was sure that anxiety is a synonym for fear, ordinary fear that comes and then goes away. No one had ever told me that anxiety is a sort of beast, an octopus whose tentacles surround you and embrace you. And then tighten their embrace. Anxiety squeezes the air out of your lungs, sucks your blood out of your arteries, and freezes you to death. It’s not out to kill you, it really isn’t. It just wants you to wish you were dead.

I had my first anxiety attack when I was 38, the night after I was notified that I’d been appointed principal of a prestigious high school. When I came home and told my wife, she rushed over and gave me a joyous hug, “That’s what you’ve always wanted,” she said happily, “Wow, fantastic, I’m sure you’ll do great.” But I wasn’t happy. Quite the opposite. The choking sensation in my throat grew tighter, and the tightness was accompanied by huge regrets. All of this took me by surprise, because I’d been planning this move for years.

The next day, I met the school principal for a few days of transition. She’d run the school for two years, and the staff made her life miserable. “It’s a vipers’ nest,” she said. “Be careful, especially beware of the quiet ones – they’re the most venomous.” As if this weren’t enough, she continued, “You have to be super strong against parents’ leadership, there are some parents there who want to ruin the school, and use you to gather political clout.” “Pay attention to the school administrator. Mind the petty cash. I can’t be certain but there are irregularities there. It’s possible that he ‘borrows’ money. . . . Don’t go to jail for him.”

I came home devastated. I didn’t sleep a wink. And then she pounced on me, Lady Anxiety. She kept me company for months, showing up in daylight and at night, when I knew she was coming and when I least expected her. She was ubiquitous. She came armed with cold sweat, suffocation, tingling hands, and her most lethal weapon, two short, innocuous words – *What if? What if? WHAT IF?*

¹ All names have been changed to maintain anonymity.

I soon discovered that Lady Anxiety is always accompanied by Sir Obsession, with the devoted Mr Depression forever on their heels.

Then came the first day of school. Everything was difficult. Well, very difficult. I felt like everything was way beyond my reach. I went to the bathroom several times a day to breathe and relax. Those around me didn't notice my crazy inner turmoil. I felt like a radio set to the Distress Signal Station. A month went by, and I could no longer stand it. The nagging thoughts of possible failure, the workload, responsibility, confusion, the strangers who kept on casting their examining eyes on me, the suspicions that "they'll find me out any minute," and other such obsessive ideas made me sick. I spent two days in bed. I told my wife, "I'm not going back. I'm a failure. *I want my life back!* I'll drive a tractor, I'll be a farmer, grow corn, sell furniture, I really don't care what I do – but I won't go back to the principal's office!" My wife panicked and called my friend Jeremy, who told me to just switch from the Horrors Channel to the Natural Tranquility Channel. He also reminded me that I only have nine months to go, and I can deliver myself out of the situation at the end of the school year. I got up and washed my face.

I stayed on until the end of the year. And then, for another six years. There were good times and bad, difficulties and challenges that I overcame with the help of an accompanying principal who guided me and helped me get a better idea of who I am, and a wonderful supervisor who provided endless help. I saw a psychologist to relieve the anxiety and gain a better perspective. I began practicing mindfulness and swam regularly, both of which helped reduce anxiety and build resilience. During my time as principal, the school won awards, and I led it to excellence, created a high-quality school climate, and increased registration. When I look back, I realize how grateful I am to the anxiety. It taught me so much about courage and effort, about facing fear and paralysis, and about being able to embrace the moment and splinters of joy and satisfaction. Anxiety opened up paths into the human soul, and out of it. It transformed me into a sensitive, considerate, and humane educational leader. It is thanks to my anxiety that I'm less fearful, and much less self-judgmental. After all, I climbed up from the lowest emotional point possible, from the darkness of despair to the sunlight of achievement.

Noah's story is the story of many principals at the helm of pedagogical leadership. It is a story of fear and anxiety that are typical of entering a new role or dealing with management crises down the road. It is the story of emotional erosion and insecurity, doubt of one's ability to meet the challenges of the role and at the same time a story of resilience and rising from the crises that engulf school principals at various stages of their career.

Being a Principal: The Challenges and Complexities

Being a school principal is a rough, complex, and challenging role. Countless words have been written about the image of the ultimate principal – the paragon who defines the path or encourages acting in accordance with an inspirational vision. The person who enables their environment to blossom and grow, who sees the teaching staff's strengths, and has an authentic view of the individual. This principal exhibits outstanding people skills, and in turn receives their reverence and loyalty. Indeed, many principals work around the clock to succeed. Their professional objectives, and the optimal professional identity to which they aspire, often fill their internal world, blending with their personality.

However, alongside the challenge, satisfaction, sense of meaning, and the potential for personal and professional growth, there are crises, pressure, loneliness, personal and familial prices to pay, and public criticism. For the most part, it is a package deal. Principals are the axis at the heart of intense activity, a reality that can lead to mental stress, emotional overload, burnout, and even leaving the profession. Therefore, principals must draw on their arsenal of personal resilience.

Resilience is the ability to bounce back after an experience of hardship and distress. Resilience is a shock absorber of sorts. Imagine sitting in a car without a mechanism to absorb the shock – a ride that should have been quiet and enjoyable turns into a rattling experience in which every small pothole is noticed and unnerving. We stumble into potholes in real life, and, sometimes, in extreme conditions, even into large breaches caused by emotional situations that life places along our way. How we experience them, how we react to them, and whether we will grow from them – these are the questions that are the foundation of this book.

Anyone who has ever managed a school will attest to the difficulty and complexity of the job. Indeed, there is a sense of satisfaction and meaning; at times, there is even a sense of mission. But there are also many stressors that threaten the principal's mental and emotional welfare. Overload, responsibility, time pressure, a multitude of details requiring attention, work that invades private life, dealing with the team's lack of support and cooperation, demands on the part of various stakeholders, lack of qualified personnel, funding, or equipment are all the lot of a person who chooses to be a school principal. The principal works within a dynamic reality and is committed to many, varied – and sometimes contradictory – tasks. At times, principals find themselves situated between polarized loyalties to teachers, parents, students, the Ministry of Education, the municipality, superintendents, and other

stakeholders. The situation is fraught with tension, stress, and even anxiety, all playing out under the watchful eye of all stakeholders involved.

The principal's behavior, expression of feelings, and even resilience are visible for everyone to see and examine. People attempt to discern whether the principal's actions are based on seeking honor, or, conversely, from a desire to include the staff in achievements, out of sincere partnership. Does the principal's behavior express faith in the staff, even at the price of losing popularity? Do others feel trusted, that the principal hopes that they are headed to better places, not because of the principal's authority but rather because of his or her personality, manifest professionalism, and interpersonal skills that cause people to believe that things will get better – even much better.

At the same time, it is important to remember that stress and tension are not necessarily negative, because “Stress is the natural reward of a meaningful life” (Jennifer, a high school principal). According to Jennifer, if you want to climb Mount Everest you know it will not be easy, that you'll be on your own, and that there will be difficult nights, rife with cold, fear, and uncertainty. Our ability to take on “scary” challenges, fail, and try again depends, to a great extent, on our level of resilience.

About This Book

Schools are among society's most established and significant foci of knowledge, and play a major role in preparing students for the challenges of adult life. In a school, the principal is one of the most significant and influential figures, perhaps even the person with the most impact on the quality of education (Coelli & Green, 2012). It is the principal who shapes the composition of the school team, fosters the teachers and school climate, and enhances teaching methods, school achievements, and school values (Slater et al., 2018). The principal also affects the teachers' sense of professional belonging, and, by extension, their decision to remain in the profession. Effective school leadership is essential for school development, which is why Sutton and Gong (2021) refer to the principal as a “superhero.”

Research has shown that good school leadership has substantial influence on school effectiveness, second only to quality teaching in its impact on learning and learners' achievements. Effective principals can improve the quality of teaching, and consequently the quality of learning, while strengthening motivation, commitment, and teaching–learning conditions (Leithwood et al., 2020). Nonetheless, the role is very challenging, and includes a multitude of administrative, pedagogical, and leadership areas that require daily attention. The principal must control all these arenas and exhibit high performance skills upon assuming the role (Sepuru & Mohlakwana, 2020). This

intense reality generates considerable mental and emotional stress for the new principal, which can lead to negative outcomes and even to emotional and personal harm (Stephenson & Bauer, 2010), explaining the high rate of quick quitting – up to 30% of new principals (Bayar, 2016; Goldring & Taie, 2018). At the same time, the number of principals has been declining (Bartanen et al., 2019), which clearly has negative organizational and pedagogical effects on schools (Béteille et al., 2012). First and foremost, resigning after a short time harms the principals themselves – their self-image, professional image, and status in the eyes of others – and also harms the educational institution and could be detrimental to students' achievement. Because of the many details that make up principal's work, and the stress they entail, it is imperative that principals have the *personal resilience* to face challenges (Wells & Klocko, 2018). Thus, the goal of this book is to examine the attributes of resilience, leadership practices, and practices of educational management. We will seek answers to questions raised by the reality we described. For example, how do principals perceive their role with the challenges they face? What are the common forces that undermine principals and therefore require resilience, and which reinforce resilience? What are the attributes of principals' resilience?

This book, based on an extensive study we conducted, is important because it provides new knowledge about the attributes and patterns of resilience in school principals' *emotional practice*. Our findings provide theoretical and practical information about resilience, which will support school leadership, affect training and accompanying, and enhance the managerial abilities required of the sensitive period when they first enter the role, as well as establishing resilience among veteran principals. This information could help principals, professionals, and researchers understand and improve processes that enhance and encourage optimal resilience and uncover processes that hinder it. Furthermore, the results illuminate the reasons for principals' early retirement, or quick quitting, and help identify the causal factors that damage resilience – including pressure, helplessness, a low sense of self-efficacy, and imposter syndrome– and help construct support systems for entry-level principals.

The present research contributes to constructing a model for developing personal resilience among school principals and serves as a basis for formulating an applicable theory of resilience development. It is also a bedrock upon which theoretical thinking about innovative ways for developing school principals' resilience during their training, accompanying, and professional development throughout their years on the job could arise. This study also offers a conceptual and theoretical characterization of the dimensions of resilience, which could

help superintendents and other stakeholders understand the importance of strengthening these dimensions among new and veteran principals.

In the course of our research, we met with 30 new and veteran principals. We held long discussions with them about educational management in an effort to understand the uniqueness of the role, and the challenges and opportunities it offers. It wasn't long before we understood that principals' acquaintance with the emotional aspects of their work and their management of these aspects are the X Force, the most important force for their welfare and level of functioning. We thus learned that all roads lead to emotion. There was not a single conversation in which the emotional aspect did not surface immediately, with barely any prompting. *Joy, anger, hope, fear, disappointment, frustration*, and many other emotions were mentioned frequently, and were part of every discussion about educational and managerial issues. The emotional aspect of work soon became the core of our discourse. The main questions we address include: What are the issues that disturb principals emotionally? How do they manage their emotions? Who helps them maintain equilibrium and emotional well-being? How do they engage emotional issues to improve their effectiveness in school? And perhaps the most important question: How can principals develop emotional resilience and thrive in the complex reality of educational management?

This study emerged from our discourse with principals. In these conversations, we began forming insights that things could be different. We are convinced that principals can change how they deal with complex emotional issues, and that we can build resilience to meet the challenges described below. At the end of each relevant chapter, we raise questions that facilitate a deeper look into the topic and generate self-examination. Although our subject is managers working in education, we maintain that this book could be useful for any curious manager, whether in the public, private, or nonprofit sectors. Most of the issues that interface with the world of resilience are generic, of the types that all managers face. We attempt to provide possible pathways for dealing with the complexity of the job more effectively. Furthermore, most of the emotional phenomena – such as fear, anxiety, confusion, a sense of worthlessness, and more – are also characteristics of teachers, especially at the entry-level, and our recommendations might be beneficial for them, too. We hope that reading this book and understanding the insights presented, will answer the questions outlined here, and help principals gain better control of the complex – and important – reality of their role, which many believe to be the most significant position in the educational system.