

The Media Center: Axioms, Maxims, and Other Advice

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You can eat an entire elephant if you cut it into small enough pieces. That well-worn advice is worth remembering; it helps us through those times of feeling overwhelmed. A collection of small elephants decorates my office. They inspired me as we moved into a new media center, implemented a new automation system district-wide, and worked towards other program changes.

Well, make it a non-print place. Good advice a friend when I described the very traditional media center I inherited more than 20 years ago. The first changes were replacing a typewriter with the media center's first computer, throwing out anything that suggested "old fashioned" and gradually adding audiovisual materials and equipment. Small physical changes and speaking a new language fostered changed perceptions and expectations, paving the way for more. The media center soon had its first of three computer labs and an automation system. Programmatic change followed. Consider the impact of physical changes and an updated appearance you are in a similar situation. Today Frank would talk about e-books, multimedia/collaborative production facilities, and a cool atmosphere for today's multitasking, downloading, visually stimulated kids. There are still plenty of media centers and program that need change. There are many opportunities to be the person who can impact change.

You can have any kind of media program you want to have—or any kind of media program you and your principal want to have. . . My principal wanted that traditional media center to change. He wanted it to be a place that kids wanted to be; he supported both physical and programmatic changes. He trusted me to do what needed to be done, "that's why we hired you." Principals are our powerful partners. Keep them in the loop on what you do and are thinking. No matter how supportive and interested they are, never assume he or she cannot fully understand what the program and your job are all about. Everyone views what needs to be done through a different lens. Tell your story often. Educate your principal so you can work together.

Teachers will be happy to get rid of the schedule; they'll love the improved access. Yes, it can happen. Teachers can be gradually weaned from a rigid schedule and become partners who work with you in a collaborative learning environment. Start with those who want to see change; those who get excited about new ideas and want to play with you. Bend over backwards to help them and their students have successful experiences using the media center and technology. Small successes will take you far.

It's all about relationships. The often-offered advice about getting to know the school maintenance and secretarial staff is repeated frequently for a reason. It's good advice; relationships are often the toughest part of a media specialists' job. It's natural to think of the importance of fostering relationships with teachers, students and parents but we work with a much broader range of people. A fun and interesting mental activity—one you can complete with a graphic organizer—is to think about the diversity of people you interact with and depend on to run a successful program. Your visual may include technical support staff, the School Board, other education specialists, advisory boards, Community Education, higher education, and museum; civic groups, vendors and local businesses—all people you depend on for program support and success. You'll be amazed at how many people you interact with! Think about what you can do for them and what they can do for your media program.

People perceive our job as the portion of the job they see you doing. "If I walk into a media center and see a media specialist checking out books I will think that's what their job is." Each person you interact with sees you in a different way. To some you are the tech guru, to others a person to go to research assistance, and, to others a staff developer. This superintendent wanted to see an education leader. Think about what people see you doing and what they hear you saying. Adjust your lens to see what they see or hear what they hear. Acquire a repertoire of sound bites and information to share with different people. What do you *want* people to see you doing? What do you *want* people hear you saying? And finally, what do people see you wearing? I asked an administrator why he was dressed up on a workshop day, a day when Friday casual is common. He explained, "You never know when the press might show up." More good advice.

Join a professional organization. Get involved. The expertise you acquire in college is only the beginning of professional learning. You will meet people that have a profound influence on you and your career. How else can you keep up with change? Where else do you meet people with the same job as you? Whether it's joining a committee, assuming a leadership position or doing small tasks, professional organization membership leads to improved professional self-confidence, abilities, and to future professional opportunities you may never have even imagined. Give back to your professional organization; you will benefit by giving what you can of your time and expertise. Take advantage of the opportunities that lead to professional growth. Trust yourself to do well and succeed.

Negative experiences can be a tremendous catalyst. Have you vowed to “never be like” or “never do?” Negative influences and experiences can create positive actions. Media specialists are often influenced by situations such as hearing about practices of their predecessor from others. The stories often have to do with a media specialist who did not help staff and students with technology, who did not collaborate, was inflexible, or did not provide a welcoming environment conducive to learning. Learning from what you hear can be positive influence. Observe and reflect on the “not so best practices” in our profession – and yourself. Learn from them to turn negatives into positives.

Become what will replace you.... A thought-provoking comment from a perceptive media specialist. “Google has won. An understanding of library organization systems is not what our students need for their learning...the percentage of time spend on Dewey, definitions of fiction and non-fiction (which are only about organization, not truth and untruth) should take up less and less time. Good questions, good search terms, good evaluation of sources and drawing conclusions based on information should be where we spend 80% of our time.” We “are not the leaders in innovation when it comes to information search. We are simply adopters. What or who will replace us? Tech support, tech integrationists, tech savvy curriculum coordinators, instructional material managers (who are not shy about managing textbooks), coffee shop owners who offer a safe and subdued place to study? tech savvy counselors? Who stays when the budget ax falls? Essential services....”

Everyone needs a catch phrase to help them get through the tough times and the demands of managing changing and evolving media programs. Everyone needs a friend and mentor to help to help you think through challenges so you can be successful. If you haven't already, find a mentor or friend who you trust and can help you when you need help. When it's your turn, share the wisdom.

One of the nicest things about education is that each year is a new beginning. There are new students, new staff to work with, new goals and quite likely a new project waiting for us. What good advice and favorite words of wisdom help you?

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