

Leading with Executive Function:

Five Strategies to Shape Learning
Communities Using the Kaizen Way

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Infinite know how
for school

As I visited various cities during a trip to Japan in 2011, I was introduced to the concept of kaizen—a Japanese business principle of “continuous and incremental improvement.” I found this description particularly interesting because we often think of making improvements only when something needs to be improved. Instead, kaizen lays the foundation for a constant commitment to change. Amidst this pandemic, the kaizen principle can very well be adapted by the leaders of the teaching and learning community as we figure out how to navigate the changing landscape of student success in the time of COVID.

The pandemic and the brain

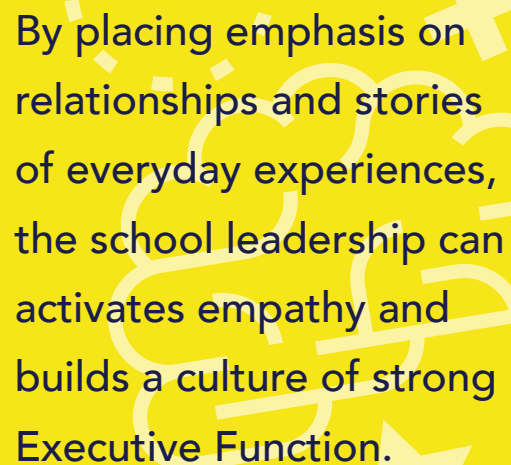
Facing challenges is not new. Humans have endured many challenges prior to the pandemic with the expectation that life is a struggle peppered with joys. Often, we’re able to tackle life’s obstacles with the help of our Executive Function (EF), a set of skills unique to the prefrontal cortex that allows us to manage our thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and actions to achieve our goals, while simultaneously adapting to changing and challenging circumstances. Prior to the pandemic, many of us were used to facing life’s ongoing problems from inside of our comfort zones, with little need for personal or collective innovation. But the pandemic has introduced an unprecedented number of unknowns, pushing our pre-frontal system to evolve further as we learn to make personal and collective changes at a small but continuous pace.

Looking back to move ahead

As we seek new ways for how to educate our children, inspire our teachers, and lead with courage, particularly in a time of such uncertainty and instability, we can look back through history to find hopeful examples of people and communities who have channeled their Executive Function skills to adapt to unforeseen circumstances, shift perspectives, and generate new strategies for success. The following Executive Function principles draw on past stories to shed light on a path forward through this pandemic.

Executive Function Principle #1: Engage in small but meaningful rituals

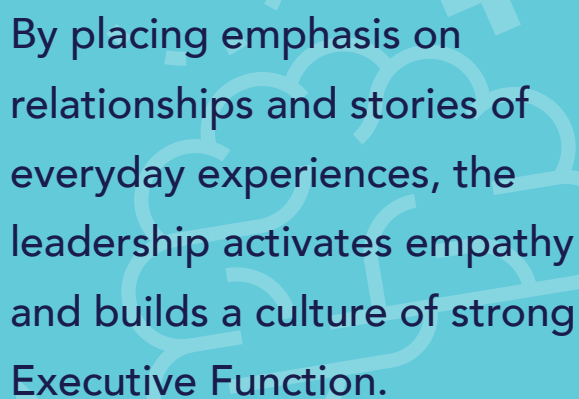
As someone who lived through the Great Depression, when Giggi Besic Cortese was interviewed by [NPR](#) at the age of 81, she talked about a boarder named John Vuk who took the then 10-year-old to see movies. Gigi told the reporter, “Going to the show every Sunday to see Shirley Temple... she was my inspiration to go on living.” The small but hopeful routine of watching a movie on Sundays with a trusted adult worked a little magic for a child living through the hardest time of her life. Amidst unrelenting stress and anxiety, the mind can wander and get lost, and thus it needs to be reined back using predictable yet meaningful rituals. Just as David Brooks says in his book *The Social Animal*, “Freedom without structure is its own slavery.” In our personal lives and in our schools, by placing emphasis on relationships and stories of everyday experiences, the school leadership can activate empathy and build a culture of strong Executive Function.



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EF Principle #2: Develop your own “silver linings playbook”

As part of their interest in studying cognitive adaptation and resilience, [researchers](#) discovered that in spite of the painful experience of having to care for children with terminal illness, mothers of these children reported three distinct benefits of adversity: emotional growth in themselves, deepening of family bonds, and a renewed perspective on life. Even though pain and suffering are undesirable, they can also prove an unlikely but immense source of growth. Cultivating a school culture that compels students, teachers and leadership to introspect, especially in the face of adversity and failure, can facilitate a meaningful shift from a fault-finding attitude into a benefit-finding mindset. A jointly created silver linings playbook, one in which members of the school community reflect on the benefits they’ve gained even in the face of tough situations, should be displayed alongside school trophies that exemplify the extraordinary skills of its extraordinary community.



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EF Principle #3: Install a communal white telephone booth

[Itaru Sasaki](#) lived in the small town of Otsuchi in northern Japan. To help himself cope with the loss of his dear cousin, Sasaki put up a white telephone booth in his garden. He had no idea what a place of healing it would become. Soon after, in 2011, a tsunami devastated parts of northern Japan and the damage to the land and people was irreversible. Citizens of Otsuchi turned to the phone inside the white telephone booth to share and surrender their sorrow. It didn’t matter that the phone had no service or that no one was on the receiving end—it simply allowed people to mourn and lament their loss while restoring the sense of continuity to their life. In the same way, school leadership should consider designing a virtual telephone booth for their communities where stressed children, overwhelmed

parents, and stretched-thin faculty can commune to be heard and understood. Not every response to trauma is an internal collapse. In fact, this pandemic calls for leaders who listen, understand, and support its community while also serving as a source of strength. By placing emphasis on relationships and stories of everyday experiences, the leadership activates empathy and builds a culture of strong Executive Function.

EF Principle #4: Reciprocate with the “first-responder” emotion of compassion

In 1989, when the HIV/AIDS crisis was at its peak, disease and death were the primary outcomes. Without any cure in sight, the most vulnerable victims—babies—were viewed as “untouchables.” Even so, [First Lady, Barbara Bush](#), went to visit a home for children with HIV/AIDS in Washington called Grandma’s House. Seeing a tiny helpless baby boy fuss and moan, she quickly picked him up and patted him soothingly on his back. [First Lady Laura Bush](#) recalls this about her mother-in-law’s gesture, “My mother-in-law never viewed her embrace of that fragile child as courageous. She simply saw it as the right thing to do in a world that can be arbitrary, unkind, and even cruel. She, who after the death of her own three-year-old daughter, knew what it was to lose a child and believed that every child is deserving of human kindness, compassion and love.” By recognizing that compassion is not courage requiring special strength but rather is our true nature, school leaders can cultivate a climate of gratitude and empathy for their communities. By prioritizing compassion as a “first responder” emotion, leaders exemplify their personal work of having mastered social-emotional drain or compassion fatigue.

EF Principle #5: Sharpen your erasers, not your pencils

Admitting and learning from mistakes are two key factors that allow problem solving to evolve and prompt innovation. Researcher and professor of leadership and organizational psychology [Ronald Riggio, PhD](#), says, “When it comes to leadership development, leaders tend to learn more from their mistakes than from their successes.” In seeking to learn from mistakes, the after-action review (AAR), a structured debriefing process originally pioneered by the U.S. Army, can serve as an effective template for post-game analysis to evaluate and learn from response to crisis or ongoing challenges. For example, the CDC conducted their [AAR](#) after the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and discovered that their overall strength came through as a “can-do” attitude of CDC leadership and staff, which enabled the agency to provide needed assistance and strategic leadership during and after the hurricane. However, the AAR also revealed that the agency suffered due to many ambiguities, either because mission objectives were poorly defined or plans were enacted by sidelining the protocols that were already in place. School leaders who take the time to evaluate their mistakes, acknowledge potential undesired consequences, and learn from the past can say they have embodied the kaizen principle fully and authentically.

Conclusion: With the pandemic continuing to rage, it’s time to commit to purposefully growing through this crisis. If kept unchecked, a crisis can disconnect our Executive Function skills from our behaviors, making us impulsive, reactionary, fatigued, scattered and uncreative, which might lead to us lose sight of the power in connections and our collective strength as a society. School leadership has an opportunity to look for not only big but also, small wins, in order to recreate and reimagine meaningful learning experiences for students, staff, and school communities. If not carefully supervised, a crisis can lead to an attitude of resignation and depletion of effort—the very last thing people in crisis actually need. Hence, the key is to apply the kaizen principle to build and finesse the set of mental, physical, social, and psychological skills that produce innovative and strategic responses to crisis conditions.

Leaders with well-developed Executive Function skills may foster a community whose members have a strong ability not only to cope with crisis, but also evolve and transform because they have done the work to strengthen and build cognitive and social-emotional skills that allow them to grow and change.



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About the Author:

Sucheta Kamath is a speech-language pathologist, award-winning speech-language pathologist, TEDx speaker, 2015 graduate of Leadership Atlanta, and an entrepreneur whose new software ExQ® just launched in the Ed-Tech space. ExQ®, is a patented research-informed system designed to enhance Executive Function through game-based personalized training. The exclusive ExQ curriculum prompts thinking to ignite processes essential for academic, emotional, and social well-being. Through the strengthening of Executive Functioning, ExQ develops skills core to your student's success in academics, in sports, in the arts, and in relationships. Sucheta's program of interactive games teaches students to learn HOW to learn, empowering the whole child to achieve their maximum potential in school, at home, and in life, and do it with all they've got.

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