



Moving Forward Professionally After Leaving a Destructive School Environment

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“There has been a concern raised.” This statement sent me into a panic. The 2021-2022 school year will be my 16th year as an educator, and I shifted big time. I left my administrator role as an academic dean to start my own education consulting company. It has been one of the best decisions I have made for my career. I have more work than I can take on and had to turn down some opportunities. I felt that life was good. However, when a concern was raised about my equity work at one school due to the recent push back against DEI, CRT, and SEL, I worried if my work was coming to an end before it really got off of the ground.

I had done consulting and coaching part time over the years, but now I'm all in. Hearing there was a concern made me believe I might need to change what I was doing, so I reached out to the administrator who had invited me to do this work to share my thoughts. I was reassured that what I was doing was needed. I did not need to change what I was doing, and I was fully supported. A week after I was reassured, I realized I had a trauma response.

I spent so much time in my last job waiting for another issue to come that I assumed this was all happening again even though this is a different environment and incidents I had previously experienced are not happening. What made this even harder was a text message I received from a former colleague. It was an apology. In part, it said, “I regret the way I handled my interactions with you with ... I played into your trauma at work. I know I was not the co-worker you deserved and I was not an adequate ally and I am sorry for that.” I read that text message every single day for a week because I did not know how I wanted to respond. I would start typing a response and then would delete it. Then I was sent another message from that former colleague about something non-related that I wanted to respond to, but I knew if I responded to that and not the previous message that action could send a message I was not trying to send. Finally, I said, “I appreciate your apology.”

That is not what I wanted to say. I could not understand why I couldn't get a response together when I write almost every day. Why were words failing me? Unfortunately, the apology reminded me of all that had taken place during my time at that school. I mean everything, not only the situations this person was involved in.

My dad died January 2, 2021 from a heart attack. I informed my school shortly after he passed even though I was on medical leave for a surgery I had. Then people in my family needed to quarantine which delayed the funeral. Next, the funeral home was heavily booked. They were conducting funerals Sunday through Saturday. We were not able to have my dad's funeral until January 27, 25 days after my dad had died. While we were trying to figure out when we could get the funeral scheduled, my job kept demanding to know when the funeral was going

to be. I received an email that said, "Let us know by Friday." I kept getting deadlines even though I had no new information. I called them right after I got out of the funeral home and thought that would be it.

I understood that I was an administrator, but I was on leave when my dad died so my duties were already being covered. The pressure that was put on me was unacceptable. The day I returned after my dad's funeral, the principal told me I didn't seem like myself and she wanted the old Shawnta back. She also said I didn't seem loyal to the school and if I could not prove my loyalty, she would post my job. She told me it wasn't personal and had nothing to do with my job performance, but her conversation with me was uncalled for and was inappropriate. All I could say in response was, "My dad died, so I'm not sure when I'll be back to myself." Her response was nothing but silence and then a subject shift.

The initial practitioner building level administrator's license in Indiana is the first license you receive once you pass the admin test. It is a two year license. You can renew it three times before you have to take additional measures to renew it. After two years of administrative experience, the license can be converted to the five year proficient practitioner's license. Even though I had other opportunities that would allow me to leave, I wanted to finish my two years to have my license converted, and I did not want to leave the students and teachers mid-year. When it came time to get my license converted, the principal initially refused to sign the letter with the necessary information needed to prove I had been an administrator for two years. HR had to get involved to force her to sign it. It was the only hold up to my license being converted. My converted license was released within an hour after they finally received the letter.

Although I had effective evaluations every semester for two school years, had no reprimands, or any other negative consequences, this individual attempted to block me from completing this task. Why? I don't know. Honestly, no answer would matter at this point. To be at a place where the leader is like this and is not supportive when issues occur put me in a constant state of making sure I was executing all tasks to the best of my ability and anticipating what could go wrong and preparing for it. That was my plight for two long years. Even though that chapter is closed, I found myself reacting based on what happened to me in the past.

If you are in this place, please know you are not alone. First, I had to acknowledge this was my reality. I had to take a risk and open up to someone. I opened up to my therapist about the impact of the last two years with the death of my dad and a pandemic on top of that. Next, I had to determine how I was going to wrap up the past and move forward. I needed to

acknowledge and accept my colleague's apology to close the chapter and move on. Now, I need to be aware if I am responding to current events based on the destructive environment I left. I know it won't be easy, but I have to remember all of the opportunities I have, believe I deserve them, and that it can be better. Everyone is not out to sabotage me or hurt me. It can be hard to move forward, but moving forward, claiming your peace, and leaving those chains of oppression behind is necessary to enjoy the next step.

I know the pandemic caused many people to reassess their lives and even their job placements. No job is worth your peace. No job is worth sleeping only two-three hours a day. No job is worth sacrificing and giving your all for not much in return. I do not regret having my last job. I was able to persevere and learn how resilient I am. As the song says that I have heard in church many times, "As I look back over my life and I think things over. I can truly say that I've been blessed. I have a testimony." I hope in sharing my story that others are encouraged that it can get better even if you have a trauma response set back.