**CHAPTER 7**

**“The saddest thing in life is wasted talent”**

The leaders I’ve portrayed thus far share some common characteristics; among them, the act of constantly walking the halls of the school and the habit of keeping one’s office door always open. In the case of Noah Angeles, the principal of Yeca (York Early College Academy) in Queens, New York, only the former is true. This, however, does not make him a centralizing manager, unresponsive to the needs of parents, teachers and students. There’s an intention behind the gesture. “The aim is to create a school that runs without me,” he explains.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Another point that makes Angeles’s story different from the principals in the previous chapters is the fact that when he took charge, in 2016, the school was already undergoing a process of positive transformation. In the 2018/2019 evaluation conducted by New York’s Department of Education, the school was considered “excellent” in five and “good” in two of the seven categories analyzed, with 98% of students that successfully completed approved college or career preparatory courses and exams (the city average is 51% and the average of schools with a similar profile is 81%).[[2]](#footnote-2)

The school’s former principal, with whom he had worked as assistant principal, always kept the doors of her office open to everyone. Angeles observed that although this strengthened her relationship with the community, it ended up concentrating too much of the solution in a single person. To further reinforce the development of leadership abilities in his team, Angeles slowly worked to change the former habits, allowing the rest of the administrators and the staff to take on more responsibilities.

Theresa Greer, mother of two and former head of the PTA, says that a lot of people found this new attitude strange at first, but, eventually, they got used to it, as they realized that the issues continued being resolved, just not always by direct action on the principal’s part. “I have to be the last channel for the resolution of these issues,” he maintains.

As we have seen in previous chapters, in order for there to be effective leadership distribution, certain preexisting conditions need to be in place, such as the creation of a culture of shared goals and an atmosphere that encourages the other agents in the school to take on a more proactive role in actions for which they feel both prepared and eager.

The leader’s role in creating common goals is a fixture in training courses for school principals. However, every manager will develop that role according to the conditions of the school and his own personality. In Angeles’s case, one source of inspiration to attain this goal was his experience in the US Army.

Angeles hails from a Jewish-American mother and a Peruvian father. He was born in Brooklyn, but went to high school in Queens. He wasn’t a good student, and this experience – as we shall see – left an enduring mark on his vision regarding his mission at the school. When he was fourteen years old, he began working as a delivery boy, making the same amount of money as the adults, some of whom had just gotten out of jail. He thought: “I don’t want to be doing this when I grow up.” He graduated high school, but his grades weren’t enough to get him into a good university. As is often the case with lower-income youth in the United States, a military career emerged as an attractive alternative. In his office, Angeles still has a photo from the time he served in Kuwait. By the time he returned from his deployment, he had managed to save up a decent amount of money, and was determined to become a teacher. Thus, he made his way through college with military funding.

What Angeles brought to York Early College Academy from his experience in the Army wasn’t its rigid and centralizing hierarchy, but lessons about how one fosters a culture of common values and symbols. “In the Army, there’s also a lot of collaborative team work, in which the interests of the individual, even if he’s a general, are beneath the mission of the group,” he explains.

In the context of education, imposing mandatory targets without talking to all the players involved tends to be a terrible strategy. This is why Angeles, like the other principals portrayed in this book so far, have worked to establish targets everyone could agree with. When he became principal, he asked teachers to discuss with students what they felt were their common goals. Each class wrote out their propositions, which were then discussed as a whole. This process resulted in the definition of the school’s mission and vision: “to develop the next generation of forward thinking, tenacious leaders who are socially responsive to their communities” and “to provide a highly supportive and academically challenging learning environment for traditionally under-served, but strongly motivated students who are committed to college and career success.”

These values can be found on every document intended for parents, teachers and students. They are reiterated at the beginning of every teachers’ meeting, with the request that discussions always consider how the proposals being debated are aligned with school values. The word are also featured prominently on the school website, on the notice boards and even on the stickers surrounding the school pillars.

**Connections**

Working to foster a positive learning environment is another task that features on practically every single principal-training document. Angeles’ decisions in this realm also seem to make more sense after taking into account his personal experience. “I’ve always been contemplative, but I wasn’t a good student. I was always in trouble, arriving late. Kids like me were put into a kind of box that determined that, because of their behavior, they wouldn’t be given access to the best opportunities.”

Young Noah felt he got little support from family, with weak adult supervision to better guide his decisions. To this day he is grateful for the intervention of a teacher who also held the position of Dean of Discipline when he was in the 8th grade and who displayed empathy towards him at a critical moment. After yet another act of insubordination, the dean called him in for a talk. On his desk, he had a folder with reports of the current misdemeanor as well as other instances of indiscipline. The teacher told Angeles that he believed in his talent and, for that reason, he was going to ignore the report – provided he change his behavior from then on out.

Because this was such a striking episode in his life story, which had so much influence on his choices as a principal, I asked Angeles to try getting in touch with this former teacher. A few days later, the three of us sat down at a restaurant in Queens, near his old school. I wanted Jim King to describe, from his own perspective, the same scene that took place over twenty years ago, and to explain what had motivated him to do what he did.

King didn’t recall precisely what he had said that day, but he did confirm the story: “It was something I often did.” He went on to explain that he was inspired by a line from the play *A Bronx Tale*: “The saddest thing in life is wasted talent.” The play – which went on to become a movie as well as a Broadway musical – tells the story of a kid that grows up in a violent environment, making decisions that always put him on the brink of criminal involvement. As I observed their conversation, filled with stories of former students who were in prison and others who managed to avoid that fate, it dawned on me how many stories in Angeles’ and his friends’ lives could be summed up that way.

In fact, Noah’s trajectory as a teacher began at a high school in the Bronx. The school was considered one of the most dangerous in the city, to the point in which metal detectors had been installed at the entrance. Although Angeles had been hired as a substitute teacher, the assistant principal , upon observing him teach, noticed that the students respected him. After a short while, he was invited to join the staff. “When I went there for the first time, I had no idea that it was such a problematic school. But I think the students felt connected to me because of my background.” A year after he had been hired, we was offered the position of Dean of Discipline. He was still green and chose not to conceal his inexperience. On his first day at the new job, he told his colleagues he would need their help. “You can’t be afraid to ask for help, to admit that you can’t do everything on your own,” he says.

To solve discipline-related issues, he bet on increasing the opportunities for connection between students and teachers. He proposed extracurricular activities to bring kids and adults closer together outside of regular school hours. The initiative worked and, in 2006, he was invited to occupy the same position at York Early College Academy, where, ten years later, he would take on the role of principal.

The preoccupation in creating opportunities for connection between kids and school staff is remarkable in Angele’s administration. In order to achieve that, he recruited, among the teachers on his team, adults who could provide extracurricular activities for students, such as thematic field trips and lessons in rock-climbing, art or cricket (a popular sport in Guyana, from where a sizable percentage of families in the area hail). “Students may not get to meet up with each other in class, but they will feel connected to the school through these activities, and this will benefit them in the classroom,” the principal explains.

Kayla Morrison, a teacher at Yeca, claims that these events also help the teachers, and tells of an experience on a trip in which she was able to interact with students in a way that, according to her, would never have been possible on school building. “The students began to see me not just as a teacher, but as someone with feelings, someone who cares about them.” As for the students, they’re also aware of this connection, which goes beyond academic concerns. “When my mother had cancer, teachers would ask me how she was doing, how I was feeling. I felt much more like a human being, and not just as a student,” says Sofia Ramos, a 6th grader in 2018, and daughter of a Puerto Rican mother and a Venezuelan father.

Angeles’s personal background has also influenced other management decisions he has made. One of them is the decision to not give continuity to programs intended only for the more gifted students, which are commonplace in many American schools. The memory of having been excluded from these opportunities because of his behavior has led him to try to ensure that every student will have access to these activities. “We exclude kids that fail at school when we should be supporting them. We cannot put a label on them. The more we take things away, the more we restrict them. We have to work under the assumption that every kid in here will get into college and may exceed expectations.”

Theresa Greer, the former PTA chair, took note of this. “In other schools, it’s common for the more gifted or more problematic kids to get the most attention. Those in the middle are usually forgotten. I feel that doesn’t happen here.”

The no-exclusions logic is also applied when it comes to programs that, in theory, would be exclusively for under-privileged kids and teens. Summer school, for example, which is common in American schools, offers classes whose goal is to reduce a phenomenon know as the “summer gap”, that is, the increased distance between rich and poor students due to the fact that the former have more opportunities to engage in cultural and leisure activities during vacation than the latter. For Angeles, any kind of rule that divides those who can and those who can’t access a given activity should be avoided.

Another feature of the school related to Angeles’s childhood experiences is the suspension policy. “Kids here will do stupid things, like all kids their age. It’s important we offer them support,” he says. In this regard, Angeles’s vision matches a policy that gained ground in the Obama administration, but which lost favor after Trump’s tenure: that of changing the rules for the suspension of students. The argument in favor of a less punitive approach is based on evidence that these rules disproportionately affect black and Latino students – even when the act that led to suspension is equal to something done by white students –, increasing the risk of future criminal involvement and negatively affecting academic performance.[[3]](#footnote-3)

At York Early College Academy, this less punitive approach is clear from the first visit to the Dean’s office. Instead of just being a place where students get sent when they’re in trouble, the space itself is aimed at minimizing stress, with musical instruments, a giant teddy bear, board games and other objects for that purpose. The aim of the school became to understand what could be making the students act out in such a way.

Dean of Discipline Michael Gross says that one of the most noteworthy changes was that, once students realized a less punitive approach was in place, they began to inform the school about problems that up until then had been concealed. “They often held back from reporting something important that was going on for fear of being punished or of seeing their classmates punished because of what they’d said. Now, it’s common for them to come in and say: ‘I’m worried because my friend might start a fight.’ This gives us the chance to intervene early on. I think they feel there’s a lot more trust now, and they know that our first approach won’t be to issue a suspension order.” This new way of handling the situation, in addition to other policies that were implemented in a similar direction,[[4]](#footnote-4) led the number of suspensions to drop from 100 in 2015 to 65 in 2016, 59 in 2017 and to only 21 in 2018.

**Trust relationships**

The measures Angeles implemented as York Early College Academy’s principal were, in part, motivated by his personality and background, but it wasn’t all intuition. During the period I accompanied him at the school, I asked him several times what had led him to focus on those precise goals and what he effectively did in order to make them a reality. The way he built relationships based on trust with his team is an example of this. As we shall see in the next chapter, this is an aspect that is integral to training policies, support and evaluation of every school principal in New York City. In fact, it’s monitored by way of a questionnaire answered by teachers, parents and students. Every public school in the city is assessed in regards to trust, student achievement, school leadership, family-community ties, supportive environment, collaborative teachers and rigorous instruction. The results guide managers towards finding means to better meet their goals.

As mentioned earlier, Angeles took charge of a school that was already in the process of improving. This undoubtedly made his job easier, but it also presented challenges, because he was stepping in to replace a principal that had delivered good results. Since he knew that earning trust was an important aspect of his job, and that he’d be evaluated on that, he made use of some protocols recommended by colleagues or by training courses provided by New York’s Board of Education. One such protocol is known as “Fears and Hopes.”[[5]](#footnote-5) It’s a suggested activity in which members of a group are encouraged to share with each other one fear and one hope they have when it comes to any given change.

For Brazilians, the word “protocol”, in the most common understanding of the word, suggests a rigid and mandatory procedure, but the way Angeles and some of his colleagues see it, these documents are activity guides that can be adapted to one’s context. Alan Dichter, one of the coauthors of the book *The power of protocols: an educator’s guide to better practices*,[[6]](#footnote-6) prefers the meaning most often used in the diplomatic context, in which rules are established to facilitate a conversation concerning a common goal.[[7]](#footnote-7)

As soon as he became principal in 2016, Angeles was inspired by “Fears and Hopes,” following a tip from a colleague, which is based on the premise that any change triggers fears and hopes in people. Even though he was already a member of the management team, he felt the need to speak to the entire staff to reinforce trust relationships. The protocol describes a group activity, but Angeles preferred to adapt it to one-on-one meetings, in which he asked the person to tell him of both positive and negative experiences he or she had had with him in the past. “People told me about situations in which they’d been upset with me, and I had no idea. But, in order for it to work, the dialogue has to be open and honest. You have to be willing to listen without judging,” he says.

References to other protocols are very common in the conversations I witnessed during my visits to the school. One of the most popular protocols among New York educators recommends peer feedback,[[8]](#footnote-8) which can be grouped into three categories: warm, cool and hard. For each category, suggestions are made regarding how to give feedback, with examples of situations in which things could have been handled better.

The recommendation is that warm feedback always be used, as it helps to build trust in the group by highlighting points that deserve praise. Users are urged to restrict cool feedback to groups with a higher level of trust, due to its more critical nature. Hard feedback, as the name suggests, introduces graver considerations to whatever is being assessed, and is only recommended in cases in which there is a lot of trust in the group and only if everyone is aware that the level of criticism can get high. Even so, the document suggests using questions that frame the issue at hand in a more respectful way. Instead of simply saying that something is wrong, the recommendation is to use open-ended questions, such as: “How is this activity really meeting the suggested goals?” The aim is to contribute to the task of getting teachers to work beyond their comfort zones, but without disrupting the trust relationships.

In one activity with school principals, I was able to observe how this protocol is used in practice in conversations between educators. Noah is part of a group of principals that get together at least four times a year, with the support of a team of experts, to evaluate ongoing projects and share experiences. York Early College Academy had an ongoing project that encouraged teachers to work together, planning the same lesson and acting in non-hierarchical pairs to better meet students’ needs. Getting this to work smoothly is an enormous challenge, requiring a great deal of planning and trust among pairs. The group of principals visited four classrooms and took notes to share with Noah and his team later on.

Before beginning the feedback session, one of the principals asked if they should stick to the warm feedback or if they could go ahead with the protocol at the cool and hard levels. He told the group about an unsuccessful experience with a assistant principal at his school, who had not reacted well to harsher criticism. Angeles asked them to be frank with him and with the assistant principal responsible for the project. “We can handle it, we’re big boys. No ego. We want to know how we can improve.”

After the peers had reached this agreement, there was a round of commentary on what each principal considered positive (warm feedback) and another round of critiques. In one situation, they had observed that one of the teachers had appeared to adopt a hierarchical position in relation to his colleague, which was not part of the project’s goals; in another, they criticized the way a teacher answered a student’s question. They praised the fact that the teachers appeared to be comfortable receiving visitors and being observed, and compared classrooms in which the project seemed to be working with those that needed to be adjusted.

At the end of the session, Angeles asked to speak. He said words of praise to each individual participant – even this reporter was rewarded with a friendly word – but, most importantly, he reiterated his trust in his team.

**“There’s a strong village in this school”**

It isn’t just school principals that are encouraged to share experience among themselves. At York Early College Academy, once a week, an entire afternoon is dedicated exclusively to collaborative activities between teachers. When I sat in on a session, it began with a yoga practice. After that, the teachers saw a video of an activity in which the math teacher got the kids to teach classes about certain topics, under supervision, with interventions, if needed. The teachers then discussed if the idea could be adapted to their context and whether it was aligned with the school’s mission.

Angeles said a few words at the beginning of the session and then sat down in the back of the class. The entire activity was conducted by one of the assistant principals. He says that letting other people on the team take on leadership positions is part of his strategy. Besides, he’s the first to admit that the assistant principal, who used to be a math teacher herself, has greater expertise in the topic than he does – and he has no problem with that. “My job is to help my team do the best work possible. A leader who does not recognize his weaknesses and who doesn’t allow others to grow in the organization is immature.”

In contrast to the way things work in Brazil and the rest of Latin America, in the United States, directors have much more autonomy to select the teachers and assistants on their teams. Consequently, an important aspect of a manager’s job is to attract more talent to his school, identifying gaps in skills or characteristics that could be filled by other professionals. “I try to find the best person for every job,” Angeles explains.

The notion that leadership should be spread out among more people, when adequately executed, helps school principals meet ever more complex and challenging expectations on the part of the educational system. In this scenario, the figure of the leader that has all the answers consistently loses value over the one who is able to distribute leadership. In the words of Canadian researcher Michael Fullan, “the principal should not be expected to do everything, but should ensure that key tasks are done well.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

Dorrit Coombs, a teacher at York Early College Academy with 25 years of experience, says that one of the school’s most striking characteristics is how everyone who works there works collaboratively. “In some schools I’ve worked at, there was a ‘don’t ask, it’s none of your business’ culture, which would never happen here.” Drama teacher Christel Monestine sums it up with a reference to the African proverb that says it takes a village to raise a child: “There’s a strong village in this school.”

Noah Angeles is clearly a person with charisma and leadership capacity. The teacher who changed his life by believing in him says he could already see these qualities when Angeles was still a kid in middle school. Given his personal characteristics, he would probably have succeeded if he had assumed the position of principal in other contexts. However, he was inserted in a system, as we will see in the next chapter, much more committed – compared to the other systems analyzed in previous chapters – to identifying teachers with leadership potential and giving them proper training, support and resources for professional development.

The saddest thing in life is wasted talent. Fortunately, this wasn’t Noah’s fate.

1. Interviews conducted during the Spring 2018 semester. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Data from the School Quality Snapshop 2018-2019, a ccessed May 11 2020; <https://tools.nycenet.edu/snapshot/2019/28Q284/HS/#SA> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. A mudança no direcionamento da política de suspensão levou a Associação Americana de Pesquisas Educacionais a divulgar uma nota, em dezembro de 2018, listando um conjunto de evidências sobre como regras mais punitivas castigavam mais fortemente alunos negros e latinos e não traziam benefícios acadêmicos.
See: AERA statement on School Safety Commission’s recommendation to repeal federal guidance on reducing racial discipline gaps. *Aera*, Dec. 2018, accessed March 23 2020; <<https://bit.ly/2KqFRk6> > [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. One such program is the Positive Behavioral Intervention & Supports program, available on <[www.pbis.org](http://www.pbis.org)> accessed March 23, 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The protocol is available on <http://www.schoolreforminitiative.org/doc/fears\_hopes.pdf> accessed March 23, 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. MCDONALD, Joseph P. *The* power *of* protocols: an educator’s guidetobetter practice*.* New York: Teachers College Press, 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Interview conducted in March 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See: <http://schoolreforminitiative.org/doc/warm\_cool\_hard.pdf> accessed March 23 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. FULLAN, Michael. *The principal*: three keys to maximizing impact. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)