

Lessons from the Torah U'Mesorah Pre-Convention

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News

Torah U'Mesorah announced that they have received tremendous interest in teacher coaching, and will be devoting increased resources to that and to the world of educational research.

Mrs. Cheryl Epstein, of Kosloff in Philly, is now working on teacher-coaching (etc.) for Torah U'Mesorah.

A principal at my networking table lamented that teachers used to do all their own prep and research; but now, when prospective teachers come for interviews, they want to know what kind of coaching they will receive; and she doesn't feel it's a healthy expectation.

"Just like we teach the students we have now, instead of the ones we had a generation ago, we work with the teachers we have now," another answered her.

As a millennial (millennials are notorious for wanting constant feedback of all kinds), I found this an interesting perspective.

I wonder whether this principal and others who share her view would be more amenable to the idea if you called it "practical feedback" instead of coaching.

Rabbi Levy facilitated the pre-convention.

Pedagogy lessons from the conference itself

I remember the Torah U'Mesorah convention from years ago as a Disneyland-like experience: chinuch people in chinuch costumes in a chinuch universe with chinuch flyers and chinuch music and chinuch cookies. The pre-convention was quieter (although there was a frosted TU logo on the automatic doors, which was cool); the participants are a relatively small crowd of administrators. But, a similarly amazing experience.

In one great networking-table discussion, we were given a goal at the beginning, and everyone was guaranteed an opportunity to speak by the fact that Mrs. Lidsky (who is lovely) kept time and ended each person's remarks after two minutes.

[Mrs. —, had you been there, you would have scheduled meetings with every woman at the convention by working backwards from an end time...]

A cute term for encouraging students to write down ideas while they wait to share them: "the parking lot."

We all had paper placemats for note-taking.

At the end of one presentation, Rabbi Levy had five volunteers compose thanks at the end highlighting what they learned from it.

I see that this wrap-up exercise is a good way to heighten enthusiasm for a presentation, because it removes the factor of wondering what others in the room are thinking.

"Go to someone in the opposite corner and share your takeaway so far."

Another exercise: brainstorm three minutes, combine ideas for a few more minutes, choose the best ideas, and stick them on a wall.

Mr. Schick paused periodically during his lecture and asked people to raise 1-5 fingers to indicate their level of comprehension.

The most popular comment in one structured discussion group I attended was not a solution to the question that we started with, but a rephrasing of that question as a statement ('This is indeed a very important problem'), with a supporting mekor – which makes me suspect that people badly want hashkafa/inspiration (or, as someone to whom I related this afterward surmised, validation).

Mr. Schick, introducing his presentation: - "These are all simple ideas. If you don't start with simple, you're never going to get to implementation." The model is the aseres hadibros.

Networking table discussing how to encourage students to put in effort

A principal-turned-consultant has created a program to encourage students to put effort into their work, called Tiferes, which combines instruction in the value of effort with grade points for features like neat handwriting, called "Tiferes points."

Names to look up:

- Ron Berger, "Austin's Butterfly."
- Get Ready - Do - Done program
- The Circle School

My contributions to this discussion were a book recommendation (*Why Don't Students Like School?* by Dan Willingham), some instruction methods ("I can" checklists for course objectives;

make challenge feel more accessible by printing borders on pages and easy questions first; I challenge students to do every day one small good thing that they don't feel like doing, as a class project), an observation that there's pressure from society not to elicit effort from children, so this is a problem that needs addressing with parents as well as in the classroom; and that I've found that students are often excited to put in effort when it's requested from them as the outcome of individual attention ("I see that you know how to do A; I would like to challenge you now to try B").

Networking table discussing successful ideas in high school chinuch

To work on your relationship with students, pick four students to focus on.

Averaging out conduct marks to one conduct grade per department (kodesh/chol) prevents students from getting the message that "The math teacher hates me."

One principal in Klausenberg encourages teachers to take attendance at the end of a class period, rather than at the beginning, and without looking up from the class roster, to test themselves: can I tell who is present, without looking?

In this way, they can gauge: did I connect with every girl today?

Before each parent-teacher conference, give each girl a worksheet: *What am I doing well? What can I improve on? What are my goals?* The girls hand this in to the teacher, and then they have a teacher-student conference. Then the teacher can bring this to parents.

When girls ask irrelevant hashkafa questions in class, one principal has them write the question and drop it in a box. Once a month, or between semesters, the girls get a "menu" and go to different workshops with catchy titles, addressing the questions from the box.

The girls complain that so many good topics are offered simultaneously; and their friends catch them up on the workshops they couldn't get to. (I love that this system leaves the girls wanting more, and talking on their own about the content.)

Other contributions to this discussion, which were new for some at the table, included the concept of hall passes; and of offering tests with differentiated sections and allowing girls to complete what they can; and the idea of having girls answer on a test, "What would Yishaya haNavi say about our world today?"

I shared a method for engagement that I use in camp, because my campers said they wished their teachers would do it in school: I start each Navi shiur by asking the girls a question about something in their own lives, and have them write their answers on post-its and set those aside; and at the end of the lesson we take up the post-its again, to discuss what the girls thought at the beginning of the lesson and what we have learned from the Navi about the question, and whether the girls' ideas have changed in light of the content of the Navi; and I wrap up with, "One possible takeaway from this lesson for our lives is..." and leave them with that.

Hall conversations, and discussions during collaborative sessions

-To reassure new teachers who are terrified to speak at their first open house night, one principal frames it thus: “You’re standing in front of the parents and telling them what you do for a living.”

-I asked one assistant principal, who said, “The parents and I are on the same team,” how she brings parents to also view the parent-school relationship as a partnership. She answered, “I tell them.”

-The principal of a chassidish girls’ school relates: to get parents on board with something, it sometimes helps to call in both. The secretary tells them, “This is not scary; we call fathers to come in all the time.” Sometimes when we don’t have a mother on board, it’s because she’s talking to the father at home and he’s saying no.

-One school, to encourage teachers to observe each others’ classes, established that teachers stick a pineapple sign on their doors (since pineapples are a sign of hospitality) when they are comfortable having other staff walk in.

-The principal of a Klausenberg elementary school said that her students enter school speaking only Yiddish, and that by fifth grade the school has caught them up to grade level in English. To the families, who keep no English books at home, it is important that the school furnish their children’s English education.

To me this sounds like everyone’s fantasy of effective education: they take children who receive absolutely none of something at home, and bring them up to grade level in five years. I asked whether any of the methods that they use for teaching English so successfully would transfer to teaching behavior; but she couldn’t think of any.

Someone ought to investigate what the recipe is for teaching English in Klausenberg – apart from it being a value of the parents.

-A lady who’s opening a high school said that she’s thinking of creating an open-ended program that will allow the girls to structure their own school day. I said that I’ve seen that tried in practice, and gave her my address.

TU’s “shoehorn” pitch for the DLI

[The Diverse Learners Initiative program offered by TU is a course training participants to recognize, and coordinate effective efforts to address, learning-related issues such as ADHD, dyslexia, and behavioral disorders. In schools whose administration is interested, TU offers mini-training for classroom teachers, and will send a mentor to help assess and support 20 students; but it is also possible to enroll as an individual, as I did.]

Anecdote from a DLI alumnus: Over several months, a challenging student, who came from a troubled home, was finally persuaded to learn five minutes per (week?) of Mishnayos with a tutor. He was tested on all that he learned in these sessions, and succeeded. His behavior, and

his davening, improved along with his confidence. For his birthday, he switched to Gemara. And had DLI existed a few years earlier, perhaps his older brother could have had the same positive experience.

[TU is encouraging schools to take advantage of the opportunity to enroll in this. I'm happy to answer questions about my experience in it when it starts next week.]

R' Naftoli Horowitz, wealth manager on Wall Street, presentation on effective leadership

-Your organization has its own flavor. When we hire someone into my practice, we spend time explaining the flavor of ours.

-Whether the people want to come to work each day, down to the janitor, depends on you.

-An effective leader is someone who brings out the best in those who work for him.

-In my practice, the worst thing that can happen is that a mistake is covered up. Everyone has to feel comfortable walking into your office and saying, "I really goofed."

-If you want to be the best at anything you do, you should beg people for criticism.

-A **mission statement** expresses lofty goals.

Most of us walk around with no mission statement in life ("to be a good Jew"). You need a personal mission statement as a principal: why do you do what you do, and why only you can do what you do the way you do it, and why people need it done the way only you can do it.

-What legacy do I want? What culture am I looking to create in the school? What do I want to build?

-Never minimize your effect on the students in your school.

Rav Pam wrote a letter to a sick man – "I miss you... your friend, Avraham Pam." For the last two weeks of his life, the man showed it to everyone and said, "I am a friend of Rav Pam." Rav Pam said – how many more letters could I have written?

To somebody, you are the president of the USA. Waving at someone can completely change the way he thinks about himself.

-Anava begins only after a person completely appreciates who he is and the influence he can have on others. 'My mission is to impact personally on every child who walks through my school doors.' And I would spend the rest of my life figuring out how to do that.

-Authority: **you cannot lead while being intimidated** (like a parent intimidated by his children). R' Horowitz's job calls on him to establish an air of authority with billionaires 20-30 years older. If you're intimidated by the owner of a Fortune 500 company who just pulled up in a Rolls Royce, you are useless to him. "He is the patient and I am the doctor. In my room, I am the absolute authority." You are the captain because you have the full view. The teacher and parent do not.

-My car mechanic knows more than I about carburetors; sitting there with greasy hands in his overalls, he doesn't need to boast about it; he is the authority in the room.

-People attack you all day long. You have to stop taking anything personally. It's like when the person in the car behind you honks: **he's not honking at you**, he's honking at his wife, his boss, and if he saw that he knows you he'd feel bad.

People are passionate about their children; and by the time they come to you, they have built up frustration.

-Fear quickly masquerades as anger.

-The person is attacking the problem, not you; and the problem affects the child. With a couple of words it can be defused. "I cannot listen to you in such utter pain; I care too much; I will do whatever it takes to make this better."

-Q. If I were the one in the situation being yelled at, what would I see?

-Your job is one big mess: parents say, "I was abused, my kid's on drugs," etc., etc. – chaos leads people to yeush. But (1) there is absolutely a way out; and (2) **a person outside the problem has the ability to take mush and reduce it to a subset of problems**. When people unburden themselves, take down chapter headings.

Then, "Let me tell you what I've heard – I've heard the following five things... Of these five, which do you think are the first we should tackle?" A child misbehaving in class, at home, fighting, who has low self-esteem – create a list of objectives, prioritize, and create a plan.

-You have to take 100% responsibility for everything that goes wrong in your school. I don't tell a client, 'so-and-so made a mistake.'

-R' Avi Shulman: the greatest detriment to this society is that nobody wants to take responsibility for anything anymore. If there were more money, more staffing, a more appreciative Board, etc., etc., it would be easier – but that's irrelevant.

-The part of a meeting where we blame people is a waste of time – **let's go to the part where we ask, "What can we do about it?"** Self-pity feels good, but nobody gets to the top with that mindset; great leaders don't care how it happened, only what to do to fix it.

-We burn out when we do things that we don't want to do and aren't very good at. We don't burn out from things that are part of our mission.

-Many people at the top are perfectionists, and therefore do everything themselves – but it's not what they enjoy. Look at your day, document what you do, find the things that are sapping you, delegate those, and focus on what gives you energy. This is a very long marathon – klal Yisrael needs you for 30, 35+ years. If you don't get that off your calendar it is inevitable that you will burn out.

-”Fear stagnation, not failure.”

-Just because something was done this way last year doesn't mean it should be done this way this year.

-One principal visits a different school every month. He walks the hall with the menahel and looks at what they're doing. He's never yet come back from a school without a new idea.

-The good tech companies are the ones that stay ahead of the next virus. A great rebbe/principal knows how to recognize anorexia, ADHD, etc. before the parent does. In this way, there is no stagnation. I see young people who are 90 and old people who are 34: the old ones have decided that they do what they do.

-We have no choice – we have to be better mashpiim. We have people who don't know how to get out of anything. There are people walking around not knowing why they are in the world, and they have been through the yeshiva system and can learn a blatt Gemara.

-Q. What is the difference between blame and critical analysis?

A. Critical analysis has no emotional charge to it.

It could be your fault all day long; I'm still the one who has to fix it. Let's look at it constructively.

-If you are in blame mode, you can't hide it; the person will get defensive.

-If there is a critical part of your job that you don't enjoy doing, you either learn to enjoy it (through being innovative about it, by inserting my self, my personality into the situation) or you change jobs.

-Q. What to do with teachers who won't innovate?

A. If I were principal, growth would be mandatory, “We innovate at this school.” It is not optional. There is a standard in my practice. It starts at the top. (The acknowledged difficulty is how to square this with the teacher shortage.)

Q. What if the young mother teachers are too busy?

A. I could bring in trainers for a yom iyun, send home a cheat sheet. I'm not looking for changes that would impact their quality of life. How long does it take for a teacher to call a student who's been out for two days? The problem is that the teacher doesn't realize that they're Rav Pam.

-The people who change the world do it with absolute focus. What is your business? I am in the peace of mind business. “Your clients will not remember how much money they made; they will remember how they felt along the way.”

-Q. What do you say to the lay leaders?

A. You have more leverage with those people than you think you do. And they need you more than you need them. And if you're not that indispensable, maybe you should go someplace where you are.

[He related here the story of two schools that fired their principals and are now miserable because they've been looking for principals ever since, to illustrate the point that schools need principals more than the other way round. My question on this story is that the schools fired the principals – does it help that people need you if they don't realize that they need you?]

-At our board meetings, we enjoy each others' company and look for solutions. Sometimes as a principal, you have to, because the board members don't know how to, get everyone on the same side of the table – even literally.

-"A principal is coming in after a whole day of being wrung out by parents, teachers, children; they're a geklapte hoshana..."

"Can I have my president come to my school for one hour and sit in my shoes?" [It occurs to me that a school could do this for Adar...]

Yoni Schick, founding menahel of BY Boston and Mesorah in Dallas, now a nonprofit management consultant, presentation on principal-board relations

The process that follows will work 90% of the time. 10% of the time, there is a level of toxicity that this cannot help.

-Why do board members feel they have a deiah in everything? Because they went to school themselves. [I wonder whether there's a way to bring them behind the scenes to see the really hard questions being discussed.]

-Fundraising tip: if you're making a big ask, you want to go with the board member asking. It makes a big impression.

-"People would rather be heard and understood than agreed with."

-There's only one employee that the board has, and that's the menahel.

The board should consider fundamental questions – like whether to merge with another school – not the dress code. (He shared here a chart of what should be the board's work and what should be the menahel's.) The board should not (as in a counterexample) be telling the menahel whether he can enter the teachers' room.

-Q. How do you convey the content of this presentation to the board? A. You can bring back one ask from the Torah uMesorah convention. **Tell them.**

-The menahel has one boss, and that's the board as a whole. Once a vote is made, the three rich people who voted against it should be ambassadors for it as well: you need to know to whom you are accountable and for what.

-Counterexample of a menahel who returned to his car in a frigid parking garage, and saw two board members conversing casually, with the steam coming out of their mouths, "And I realized that *that* was the board meeting, and everything that had happened upstairs was a performance."

-Story of an elementary principal whose board complained that he kept Beanie Babies in his office, and failed to greet a board member who walked into the school unannounced – that's called an "anecdotal evaluation," performed two weeks before the date because it says in the bylaws that there has to be one, so the board members share fleeting impressions.

There has to be warning before evaluation.

-Solution to the problem of leadership giving "pixie-dust" evaluations: Even if you don't get an ask, you can ask for this. Say, "I want an evaluation."

-Go to the Kaatskills for two days and ask yourself: (a) what are the four big rocks in your work? (b) what are the steps I need to take to reach my goals? (c) how will I know when I get there? (How many touches have I made, not how much money have I raised).

-Leaders (principals as well as boards) **need to communicate from the beginning: what is most important? What is of medium importance? What is nice if you can swing it?**

-Anecdote: a CEO who was a great people-person, who was hired to replace a CEO who had been a great fundraiser but a poor manager, was shocked in her evaluation to be criticized for missing a fundraising soiree that she hadn't been told was important.

-Anecdote: a North Florida nonprofit wanted to fire a fundraiser they had imported from New York because, though she was successful, they found her brash. Solution: give her a coach and train her in Southern culture.

-**"ESAT"**: Create a team: the owner, two board members (or one board member and one member of the Vaad haChinuch), yourself, and one non-board member.

The non-board member can be an alum, or former board member, or retired menahel. Not a yes-man; not your best friend. (The non-board member is your secret ingredient. You need a chacham to say to the board member who's used to getting his way, "No.")

Say, "I want to be evaluated. And here are my four main goals. And this is how I want to be evaluated." And they tweak, fill in your blind spots, and you come to a consensus. Then you get the whole board to ratify it.

You're now transferring power from one person to four.

-Goal-setting. For administrators, you should have up to three goals, plus one schoolwide goal. For teachers, because they have enough on their plates, one personal goal and one schoolwide. For maintenance staff, up to three.

-Schoolwide goal example: 80% of our interactions with students will be positive.

-In every parent survey, you get a few meshuggennas – look at the mean.

[I have just been reading a business book that asserts that efficient practice is to get people who rate their experience at at 7 up to a 10 – not to please the malcontents.]

-Instead of issuing surveys in a crisis, you can say, “We will work on x. We’ll take a baseline survey, and then another at the end of the year, to help with growth.”

-You can give the board a retreat, or an orientation, to convey all of the above.

Mr. Schick, presentation on strategic planning

-First step: brainstorming goals.

Three years from now, *Mishpacha* or *Hamodia* magazine is coming to do a feature story on your school. What features of the school do you want to be sure to show the reporters? What is your edge, and what differences are you making? How is information accessed and shared in the school? What new roles are people playing? What stories are being told about the school? Kitzur, **where do you want to be as a school three years from now?**

[Not being an administrator, I was thinking about something Rebbetzin Heller once said, that many girls’ high schools in this country take in girls who are strong, and they leave strong; but Temima – at that time under Rebbetzin Feldman, who has since retired – in Atlanta is uniquely transformative. Certainly, in meeting Temima alumnae, I can identify a “Temima product”: they are all confident, empathic, capable of inspiring themselves. My question is what a definable product of our school would be: not, are we allowing the girls to graduate strong, but, what should a girl in our school become, through her experience in our school? When we formed groups to combine goals, this sparked some interesting discussion at my table of all-chassidish schools of whether it’s necessary for a school to be a transformative experience or if having girls graduate strong is enough of a mission.]

To set these goals as a school, you can ask this question to administration, some staff, some students if you are a high school.

Write all the goals on cards; stick the cards on the wall; and group them under 6-8 categories, like a Jeopardy wall.

Now, re-ask the question: where do we want to be as a school in three years?

-Second step: After you define the goals, ask: what are the blocks?

If water stops while you water your lawn, you don't say, "There's no water" – you check for kinks in the hose.

Don't say, "There's not enough staff/money/time" – check for where the kinks are in the hose.

Don't say, "lack of." Ask, what are we doing that is preventing us from meeting this goal
– even if it's something we've been doing for decades?

MLK Jr.: "We are not the creators of tension... We bring it out in the open, where it can be seen and dealt with."

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-There occurred at this point an exchange that I found fascinating.

Mr. Schick was eliciting examples of goals and blocks from the audience – e.g., attracting and retaining teachers. "What are the blocks in attracting and retaining teachers?" he asked.

The first answers suggested were financial. Mr. Schick proposed looking at whether a school's fundraising is in disarray; or, if you can't do anything about that, looking at whether you are advocating for your teachers.

But what else? he asked. What else blocks retaining teachers?

The women principals raised their hands and observed that teachers leave because of family demands.

Mr. Schick proposed that offering on-site childcare could help with that.

"Or cleaning help," suggested one principal in front of me, to enthusiastic nods.

"What else?" asked Mr. Schick.

I raised my hand and observed that last winter, for its "Now" campaign, TU conducted a survey asking teachers why they leave the profession. Even with a video encouraging answers about low salaries, the answers that came in from teachers said, one after the other, "I don't feel appreciated... I don't feel appreciated... I don't feel appreciated."

"That's the answer I was waiting for!" exclaimed Mr. Schick.

In front of me, shifting in seats.

One principal raised her hand. "I *do* appreciate my teachers!"

Much enthusiastic nodding from other principals.

This to me is a fascinating disconnect. The teachers are saying they don't feel appreciated; the principals are saying that they *do* appreciate their teachers.

Obviously, there needs to be a conversation about what we all mean when we talk about appreciation.

My guess is that principals are expressing appreciation for teachers' general mesirus nefesh and dedication, when what teachers want is recognition that, as individuals, they are successful. (One principal I know in NJ who is great at this will say, 'this took [x personal quality]; we are so lucky to have you in our school!')

But, that is just my guess. I suspect that asking teachers what form of appreciation they want, and asking administrators how they show appreciation, could go a long way toward **addressing the teacher shortage**.

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Third step: Identify practical steps to take.

-A Harvard study: 85% of people had no written goals in their jobs. 12% had written goals but no practical steps. 3% had both, and outperformed the 85% completely (measured in earning power).

-The discussion narrows as you go: you identify 6-8 visions, 6 roadblocks, and now narrow to 4 plans ("strategic directions").

-You can't do longer than a three-year strategic plan. Longer than that, things change too rapidly.

Every year, you should revisit and revise it, e.g. at a retreat.

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Thanks for reading!

And huge thanks to Torah U'Mesorah for the pre-convention, and to those who made it possible for me to attend!

All errors here are my own; and I apologize to anyone whom I have misrepresented, or quoted without credit. Feel free to let me know: skookum613@gmail.com.

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