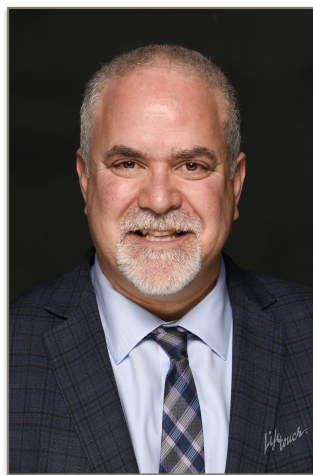


Roundtable News

The Unfinished Leader

We're all unfinished as leaders was the message from Michael Lubelfeld earlier this month as he briefed several dozen Roundtable members on his latest book, *The Unfinished Leader: A School Leadership Framework for Growth and Development*, published in 2021 with co-authors Nick Polyak and PJ Caposey. Lubelfeld serves as superintendent of schools in North Shore School District 112, Highland Park, Illinois.



Michael Lubelfeld

Polyak serves as superintendent in Leyden Community High School District 212 in Illinois, while Caposey leads Illinois' Meridian CUSD 223.

"We are all unfinished," declared Lubelfeld at the outset. "People often speak in terms of being 'the best version of yourself.' There is no such thing as the best version of yourself; there is only the *next version of yourself*."

The idea of the unfinished leader rests on a concept of a humble leader continuously learning how to improve, working simultaneously on six images that interlock like a jigsaw puzzle: empathy, equity, adaptation, development, communication, and recognition of the unfinished agenda for school and district improvement. "Whatever we've done well, let's replicate that," he said, "while learning from whatever mistakes we've made."

Empathy

"We start with empathy," he said. This image rests on the human connections we have. It is not sympathy, he emphasized, which tends to address the distress of friends and colleagues by putting a "silver lining" on the distress while asserting that things could be worse. "Empathy comes into play as a kind of 'sacred space,' where, when someone's in a deep hole, you say, 'I know what it's like down there. You're not alone.'"

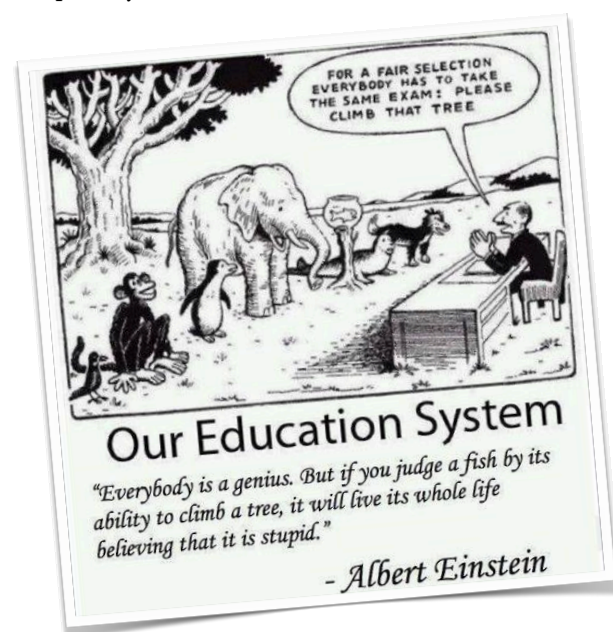
We are suggesting, said Lubelfeld, "that you feel someone else and their reality. It takes the pressure off us as leaders, who sometimes fall into the trap of trying to solve everybody's problems and finish everyone's sentences. Just stop and provide space for people to deal realistically with the challenges they face."

Equity

Empathy is especially important as the three authors, all midwestern white guys, take up the second of the six lenses: equity. "We're white and middle class, blessed with privilege, opportunity, and doors opened to us at critical stages. We get that."

So, we definitely need help from our friends in understanding economic inequity, racial barriers, and, of course, gender inequity. "I may not know what that's like, but as a leader, I need to understand it. We need to open our hearts and minds to the experiences of others."

It's an "oldie but a goodie," noted Lubelfeld, and often attributed to Albert Einstein, but we need to be aware that providing everyone with the same test can "intentionally or unintentionally" create situations in which some groups are marginalized and treated inequitably.



The unfinished mindset, he cautioned, requires us to understand that we have a ways to go to provide an equitable education to every child, every day. We need to get working on the agenda that puts Maslow's hierarchy before Bloom's learning taxonomy. And we need to speed it up, he emphasized. It takes 18 years, right now, for best practice to make it into our schools and classrooms.

Adapt

Third, we need to adapt. "PJ, Nick, and I are suggesting that we need an adaptive frame of leadership. Let's collectively put our heads together and adapt so that we can have equitable educational opportunities for each child. And we can do so with the heart and mind, both together, so it all builds seamlessly."

In this effort, "it is critical and crucial to engage with new points of view." Critical friends can give "honest, unadulterated feedback" to make things better.

"We all matter and when you're a leader, you can create the conditions where everybody feels they belong." It's nearly impossible, he said, to overstate the value of new points of view to any leader. "You can authentically start to partner with others and create the next version of yourself."

Develop

"My favorite framework is the develop lens. What are we doing if we're not helping develop other leaders? We are here to help create the pathways for the future educators of America and the world."

As you work to develop others, you need to worry about developing yourself. In that regard taking care of yourself personally is essential. "My wife will tell you I never took the class in work-life balance!" Some people turn to acupuncture, others do yoga, some run. "Whatever it is, there's more to each of us as leaders than our work." We have to find that balance.

Developing others is critical work. "For example, here in Illinois as elsewhere, there's a shortage of teachers of color." Nick Polyak at Leyden had a brilliant insight. "They said to their students, 'We'd like to create a teacher pathway, and if you come back after college, and you interview for a teaching position, you're guaranteed an interview. A golden ticket to an interview. If Leyden hires

you, you get a \$5,000 signing bonus.' Leyden just wrote their first three checks, hiring three alumni from Leyden High School." Similar creative efforts are needed to develop the next generation of school leaders.

Communicate

"In our profession and in our world, we need to communicate." How do we do that? How do we measure and communicate the quality of our work? Standardized assessments? That's part of it. Growth of students from point A to point B? Yes. Is it through students ability to communicate and speak? "I hope so."

"Tell your story," urged Lubelfeld. "One way to advance your brand is through Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, or other social media. That doesn't mean you have to like social media. But these outlets leverage a leadership strategy to get the message to people no matter how they receive it. And if people receive it on Twitter, then I'm going to use Twitter."

The Unfinished Agenda

Lubelfeld summed up by arguing that, "To be the next version of yourself, you must be driven deeply by something. You must believe that you have an impact to make—and a legacy to leave. You must know that the work will never be done."

Lens six builds on that conviction. It is the recognition that unfinished leaders have an unfinished agenda, made up of three essential elements outlined in the book.

Stop fearing change. "We're living in unprecedented times. What's enduring is the ability to face the future and stop fearing change."

Stop letting others limit you. "Don't let others in the district limit the growth and development that's in the best interests of the district, the school you're serving, or the students you're serving."

Stop letting your organization live in the past. "You need a mindset that you are not going to live in the past, you are going to lead your district into the future."

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