



I THOUGHT I WAS A STAYER. FOUND OUT I'M A MOVER!

Memphis, TN to Carrollton, TX

Pamela Womack, Administrator

Summary

I served as President of a large Christian school in Memphis, TN for five years. During that time, I worked with three Board Chairs. During the time that each of them served as the Chairman of the Board, I spoke with them about the need for a workable Strategic Plan for the school. The Board was dealing with some difficult decisions concerning whether or not the secondary campus would be moved 22 miles east and whether or not one of our elementary campuses would need to be consolidated due to a declining enrollment. The need to work on a Strategic Plan took a backseat to the other issues. There was, however, an urgent need for the Strategic Plan. The decision was eventually made that the school would stay at its present secondary campus location "for the foreseeable future". There was a general feeling of drifting rather than moving forward for the school. This was, in part, due to the lack of a concrete plan with actionable items that could be used as a template for decision-making affecting the future of the school.

As a way to encourage us to go forward with the Strategic Plan, I applied for and was accepted as a Van Lunen Fellow. My plan was for my project to be the Strategic Plan for our school. I believed it would be a community-building, consensus-building and excitement-building exercise for the school community.

When I returned to work on Monday morning after our Van Lunen Fellows week, the Board Chair and another Board member came to my office to tell me that the Board had decided to change leadership for the school. To say that I was stunned would be a gross understatement. I had never received a performance evaluation during the five years I had been at the school, although I had asked for one repeatedly. The school had struggled with enrollment issues since the 1960s. The economy had made that struggle even more difficult; however, there were dedicated people working diligently to try to turn the enrollment around. We had tried a number of Development Directors during the time I was there.

We knew there were issues and we were working to address them. I had trusted that the Board would come to me to discuss any concerns that they had about my performance as the head of school or to ask what was being done to address any concerns that they had. Instead, they told me that they had decided to change leadership. Since this was on July 19, I asked them if they intended for this change to happen at the end of the school year, at the end of the calendar year, or that day.

They answered, "Today" and I resigned. It was important to me to maintain my dignity and I left campus immediately. I prayed all the way home and asked God to help me deal with the situation in a Christ-like way. I asked Him to help and guide me through whatever was going to happen. He did.

The timing of the resignation meant that there was little or no chance to be hired for the upcoming school year. I thought back to the handout that we had been given in Grand Rapids that showed the Van Lunen Fellows Alumni Outcomes Assessment dealing with whether or not the Fellows had stayed in their position of employment since participating in the Van Lunen Fellows Program or if they were no longer in that position. I remember noting that approximately 1/3 of the Fellows had changed employment (19 had changed, 45 had not). When we were discussing the information that day, we were told that most heads of school will leave after five years in their position or if they are working with the third Board Chair since starting their job. I sat there that day and thought, "That's interesting. I've been at my school for five years and I'm working with the third Board Chair since I started the job, and everything is fine!" I had no idea what was waiting for me when I returned home.

When I got the word that I was moving, I called my mother first, then my daughter, and then Shirley! I told her the situation and asked her advice. I didn't want to let the program down, but I now had no school for which I could complete a project. I felt an obligation to the generosity of the Van Lunen Program and didn't want to waste their money. Shirley's automatic response was one of quiet support. She said, "Once a Van Lunen Fellow, always a Van Lunen Fellow!" She prayed with me that day and gave me suggestions about first steps as I dealt with the newness of the nightmare. Throughout the year, she and Yvonne have offered their support and concern. The other Van Lunen Yellow Fellows and instructors have done the same. It has made a tremendous difference in my life and my ability to weather this storm. The Van Lunen Program has also brought me another unforeseen blessing. One of our classmates, David Culpepper, is now my boss! God is so good! David moved from his position as head of school with a Christian school in Tupelo, MS to become the head of Carrollton Christian Academy in Carrollton, TX and I am the new Elementary Principal at CCA!

What I Have Learned

Right-sizing. Reengineering. Organizational restructuring. Redundancy. Dismissal. Un-hired. Fired. Canned. Laid off. Let go. Regardless of whatever euphemism is used, this process has taught me a number of things. My hope is that another administrator, finding him/herself in a similar situation can glean some help from my experience. The following is a partial list of some of the things I have learned from this experience.

Examine the evidence. Assess why this has happened. In some cases, it has nothing to do with you. If it does, you owe it to yourself to assess the reason why. Learn from it and then move on.

I took time to look at finances, make plans to sell my house and start the process of finding out where God was going to send me next.

Maintain your dignity. Discard resentment and bitterness. It only hurts you and might prevent you from moving forward. If you keep the bitterness, you are still allowing “them” to have power over you. Let go so that you are not locked in the past.

Talk things out with confidants. I am thankful for the Van Lunen Yellow Fellows and staff for the love, support and prayers they have given me over the last year.

The emotional response of job loss is similar to the stages of grief and loss written about by Kubler-Ross. Be forgiving of yourself. Going through strong emotions doesn't mean that your faith isn't where it should be. God understands. He is there to help pull you out of the low times.

Take care of yourself. It can be hard to get up every morning and get dressed in “work clothes” but it helps to maintain your focus and routine

Check your budget. Develop a realistic financial plan. Cut corners, if needed.

Avoid isolation. Surround yourself with positive people who will “pick you up”. Volunteer. Be aware of your family's emotional needs. They are affected, too.

Ask yourself who you were the day before you lost your job and who you are today. Don't be defined by your job assignment. You are more than that.

Audit your online identity. Check your Facebook account. What type of reputation platform have you built? Take control of this first impression.

Read. During the year, I read many books that were helpful. Mary Lynn Pulley has written “Losing Your Job—Reclaiming Your Soul: Stories of Resilience, Renewal, and Hope”. An excellent book! Also, the book “Just Enough Light for the Step I am On” by Stormie Omartian is inspirational.

Get healthy. Take time to re-charge and re-evaluate your life.

Keep the Roloids handy!

Pray without ceasing.

Believe that things will work out and remember that God is in charge. When all of this happened, I had a serious talk with myself about the future. I decided that I had to put together a description of my

dream job. I needed to know where I wanted to focus my energies. At times, over the years, as I thought about the different positions I had held, the one job that I most loved was being an Elementary Principal. There were fun and positive things about all the jobs I have had, but the one that gave me the most joy and satisfaction was being an Elementary Principal. I decided that was the job I would most prefer to pursue. I also wanted to find a job that would put me closer to my daughter, son-in-law, and three grandbabies. They live north of Fort Worth, TX, so I put my sights on that part of the country. It was a priority for me to work in a Christ-centered school. I prayed for these things, but I also prayed that God would put me where He wanted me to be and where I could serve the children and families there. Not surprising, He did that for me. I am now an Elementary Principal in a Christ-centered school, Carrollton Christian Academy. When my house sells in Memphis, I will be buying a house a few doors down from my daughter, son-in-law and grandchildren. Life is good! Praise God for his providence, guidance and love.