

Groundhog Day: Rediscovering Purpose Through Mindful Practice

Brian Orkis

Principal, North Judson-San Pierre High School

Email: borkis@njsp.k12.in.us

Background

As a school administrator with over 14 years of experience, with 11 of them as a building principal in both suburban and rural settings. I found myself confronting an internal struggle that many long-time leaders encounter: a loss of connection to my core purpose. The routines of leadership, daily demands, and a constant drive to serve others had left me feeling stuck in a rut and emotionally depleted. I was increasingly aware of a growing distance from the passion that once fueled my work and conversely my “why.”

Inspired by the reflective leadership approaches advocated in recent research and professional development through IPLI, I became intrigued by the potential of mindfulness and spiritual reflection as tools for personal renewal.

Therefore, the purpose of my action research was to develop a reflective and spiritually mindful practice that could help me rediscover my personal and professional purpose, with the hope that this renewed sense of purpose would lead to greater emotional well-being and more effective leadership.

Statement of My Wondering

With this purpose, I wondered:

Would regular, purposeful, and introspective reflection time bring about a renewed sense of purpose that has seemed to wane over time? Would adding a spiritual component lead to a more profound experience?

Methods/Procedures

To gain insights into my wonderings, I initiated a structured and intentional reflective practice during the school day. I created time and space for introspection by setting aside 25–30 minutes each day, only on days school was in session, to step away from the routine demands of leadership.

Each reflection session involved three specific components:

1. Writing a short personal reflection in a journal.
2. Assigning an emoji to summarize my emotional state for the day.
3. Reading and recording a relevant Bible verse to tie in a spiritual dimension.

This data was systematically recorded in a spreadsheet that captured daily reflections, mood emojis, and Bible verses. I collected data over the span of 54 school days, which provided a consistent and manageable dataset to analyze for trends and insights.

To assess changes in emotional state and patterns over time, I categorized each day's mood into three color-coded categories:

- **Green** for positive
- **Yellow** for neutral
- **Red** for negative

This classification provided an easily visualized system for tracking my overall well-being.

Findings

As a result of analyzing my data, three important things I learned include:

1. ***Intentional reflection helped reconnect me to my core “why.”***
Out of the 54 recorded days, 44 were coded as “positive” (green). This was more than I had expected at the outset and indicated that even amid a demanding schedule, taking time for reflection helped me refocus on the meaningful aspects of my role. It brought clarity and purpose back into my daily work.
2. ***Mindful and spiritual introspection fostered emotional balance.***
Only 4 days were classified as “negative” (red), and I observed that on these days my behavior patterns shifted — notably, I changed my audio selections, indicating a search for comfort or grounding. The spiritual component, particularly through Bible verse reading, seemed to provide emotional grounding that improved my overall demeanor.
3. ***Reflective journaling rekindled personal and professional relationships.***
Regular reflections reminded me of overlooked positive moments and rekindled my awareness of the value in my mentor relationships. A pivotal moment came during a mentoring conversation when I was asked, “Are you being challenged?” That question served as a catalyst for deeper reflection and signaled the importance of continued personal growth.

Conclusions

This action research cycle reaffirmed the importance of nurturing the inner life of a school leader. I've learned that purposeful, daily reflection, especially when combined with spiritual engagement is not a luxury, but rather a necessity. It allowed me to slow down, recalibrate, and lead with greater clarity and compassion.

The experience reminded me that emotional and spiritual well-being are closely linked to effective leadership. As a result of this process, I now place intentional reflection time on my daily schedule and plan to model this practice for staff as a tool for emotional regulation and professional renewal.

Looking ahead, I am curious to explore whether expanding this practice to include home life and personal routines might bring about a more holistic and sustainable life balance. I am also interested in guiding other administrators in building similar reflective practices into their leadership routines.

In the broader context of educational leadership, this experience underscores the idea that taking care of the self is a prerequisite for effectively serving others. I hope this work inspires fellow leaders to pause, reflect, and re-center as a pathway to long-term leadership sustainability.

GROUNDHOG DAY: REDISCOVERING PURPOSE THROUGH MINDFUL PRACTICE

NORTH JUDSON-SAN PIERRE HIGH SCHOOL

BRIAN ORKIS
BORKIS@NJSP.K12.IN.US
BRIAN.ORKIS@YAHOO.COM

BACKGROUND LEADING TO THIS INQUIRY

- Administrator (14 years)
- Principal (11 years - Suburban / Urban Fringe & Rural)
- Always on the go....
- Stuck in a rut.....
- Struggling to find / rediscover the “Why”....

PURPOSE OF THIS INQUIRY

- The overall purpose of this inquiry was to develop a practice or strategy to help me rediscover my “Why” and in doing so hopefully it would also lead to significant changes in my overall attitude, demeanor and emotional well-being.
- Become a better leader, husband, father & friend

MY WONDERING

- Would regular, purposeful and introspective reflection time bring about a renewed sense of purpose that has seemed to wane over time?
- Would adding a spiritual component lead to a more profound experience?

MY ACTIONS

- Set aside time during the school day to remove myself from the action of the day
- 25-30 minute timeframe
- Journal a short reflection
- Assign a emoji to capture the corresponding feeling / mood
- Read a corresponding Bible verse

DATA COLLECTION

- Data was collected on a daily basis during the duration of this action research.
- Data was collected only on days in which school was in session (In-Person, Asynchronous, Synchronous).
- Data was input on a spreadsheet (Reflection, Mood, Verse)

MY DATA

Date	Reflection	Mood	Bible Verse	
12/2/24	Be honest with myself...What am I doing and why am I doing it?	👍	Jeremiah 29:11	
12/3/24	A student thanked me today. I felt a glimpse of my purpose.	👍	Matthew 5:16	
12/4/24	Balancing discipline with compassion is harder than people realize.	😞	Micah 6:8	
12/5/24	Today, I realized that patience is a tool, not a burden.	😞	Romans 12:12	
12/6/24	Reflecting on why God placed me here. A sense of peace followed.	😞	Psalms 46:10	
12/9/24	Tension drained me today. Leadership is lonely sometimes.	😞	Isaiah 40:31	
12/10/24	A student opened up about their struggles. A positive breakthrough!	😞	Galatians 6:9	
12/11/24	I doubted my impact today, but a small win reminded me to keep going.	😞	2 Corinthians 5:7	
12/12/24	Students watch my example. How am I leading them personally, professionally and spiritually?	👍	1 Timothy 4:14	
12/13/24	Grateful for my leadership team. I don't have to do this alone.	😞	Ecclesiastes 4:9	
12/16/24	I let stress cloud my judgment. Seeking God's wisdom more intentionally.	😞	Philippians 4:6	
12/17/24	I'm beginning to see how my daily choices can impact culture.	👍	Colossians 3:23	
12/18/24	A confrontation drained my energy. Leadership is servanthood.	😡	Mark 10:45	
12/19/24	A student's resilience reminded me why I do this work.	👍	Romans 8:28	
12/20/24	I feel God shifting my focus to being present, not just productive.	😞	Psalms 37:23	
1/6/25	Tough love is still love. Leadership requires truth-telling.	👍	Ephesians 4:15	
1/7/25	I'm learning to surrender control.	😞	Matthew 11:28-30	
1/8/25	A setback really tested my patience.	😡	Psalms 27:14	
1/9/25	Am I living or L-I-V-I-N	👍	Proverbs 16:9	
1/10/25	Students can really teach you more than you can teach them at times	😞	1 Timothy 4:12	
1/13/25	Had to ride my elevator to the top floor today...still a little draining, but felt progress	👍	Proverbs 12:25	
1/14/25	Leadership as discipleship....interesting thoughts today	👍	John 13:13-15	
1/15/25	A mentor reminded me: Leadership is about faithfulness, not perfection.	👍	Proverbs 13:20	
1/16/25	This process may not be about discovering my 'Why,' but trusting God's 'Why' for me.	👍	2 Timothy 4:7	
1/17/25	I had a powerful conversation with a struggling student. Sometimes, listening is the greatest leadership skill.	😞	James 1:19	
1/20/25	A teacher expressed gratitude for my support. Small moments like these remind me of my impact.	😞	Hebrews 10:24-25	
1/21/25	Felt drained today, need to take some time.	😡	Exodus 33:14	
1/22/25	I caught myself focusing too much on outcomes instead of relationships. Re-centering on what matters.	👍	1 Samuel 16:7	
1/23/25	A student told me I inspire them. That was humbling. Am I living up to that responsibility?	😞	Luke 12:48	

MY DATA

- 54 Total Days
- 44 Positive (Green) Days
- 6 Neutral (Yellow) Days
- 4 Negative (Red) Days
- The 44 positive were more than I anticipated at the onset.
- ***Interesting Observation*** - Audio selection changed on days that were negative.

MY DISCOVERIES

- Intentional reflection was critical in helping rediscover the core “Why” of my educational leadership journey.
- Mindful introspection can be a powerful tool for professional and personal growth as a school administrator, which leads a more effective and rewarding leadership experience.
- Regular reflections helped highlight overlooked positive experiences (then & now) and also contributed to revive mentor relationships.

WHERE AM I HEADING NEXT

- When you know the why, you tend to know the way.
- As we think we become our thoughts and our thoughts drive our mindsets and behaviors.
- Challenge yourself....Biggest ah-ha moment came after a mentor meeting and reflecting on a question posed to me....Are you being challenged?
- Wondering....Would expanding this practice to daily life bring about an even more powerful holistic change?