Stephen Valentine and Reshan Richards

Why independent school leaders should take a "design pause" before sending that email, calling that meeting or excluding the possibility of collaborating with anyone, anywhere.

INTERVIEW BY LEAH THAYER

Stephen Valentine and **Dr. Reshan Richards** met at Montclair Kimberley Academy, a preK–12 independent school in New Jersey, where their work together inspired them to co-author *Blending Leadership*, a forthcoming book from Wiley/Jossey-Bass. Learn more about the book, and sign up for updates, at *blendingleadership.com*.

Valentine is assistant head of the upper school and director of academic leadership at Montclair Kimberley Academy as well as coordinating editor of *Klingbrief*, a monthly publication from the Klingenstein Center at Teachers College, Columbia University.

After the 2014–2015 school year, Richards left his position as director of educational technology at Montclair Kimberley to focus more on his role as chief learning officer of Explain Everything, which he co-founded. Learn more at *explaineverything.com*. He is also adjunct assistant professor at Teachers College, Columbia University.

The two sat with down *Net Assets* to speak via video chat on Google Hangouts.
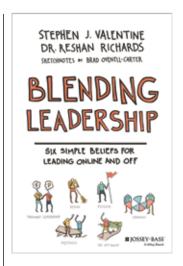
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Q In *Blending Leadership*, you make the case for school leaders to rethink their "default modes" of communicating. What's the urgency behind your message?

A VALENTINE: One of our goals is to describe what we're seeing in schools. But we also want to push leaders beyond their traditional ways of doing business, because there are a lot more options thanks to technology and how networks are connected. We want to remind leaders that they can exercise other options that might be more efficient or impactful.

RICHARDS: The minute a leader at a school sends an email, whether it's the headmaster or a student leader, that's a conscious choice, active or not, among three or four other ways that message could have been communicated. Say the topic is the annual report on the school's health insurance plan. Plenty of people might take 20 minutes of a full staff meeting to deliver that message. Others might email it. For us, it's about thinking deeply about practices that have habitually taken place and realizing that they are all choices. I wouldn't even say that what we call 'blending leadership' is a new approach or methodology—it's a way to make sense of what people are already doing.

VALENTINE: For example, at Montclair Kimberley Academy, the leader of a team I'm on has been 'bringing back' a specialized former employee via conference calls. This may not be revolutionary, but suddenly our meetings have a very different flavor because we have real-time access to an expert who isn't in the room. Also, because she's not in the room, she doesn't need to follow the conventional face-to-face meeting roles. So if the rest of us in the room are talking, she can be doing research to inform the meeting; if she had been there in-person, she might appear to be off-task. Basically, this approach gives her permission to work in an optimal way while simultaneously helping us break out of the notion—often unquestioned—that we have to solve problems only with the usual people and in the usual ways.

Reshan and I practiced what we preach while developing our book. Besides collaborating online using Google Hangouts and the like, we recently interviewed the founder of Fifty-Three, creators of Paper, because we were using their product to build the book. We had a wonderful 30-minute discussion, and all we had

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to do was take three-and-a-half minutes to set up that interview. Sadly, because of technology, we tend to move so fast that we don't take that breath—what we call the "design pause"—to interrogate reality and say, is this the situation we want to be living in, is this the optimal way to be working and collaborating.

RICHARDS: When I was teaching a high school class on entrepreneurism last year, I don't know how many times I walked into the classroom and two students would be Skyping with some business professional they'd "invited" to the room without telling me. For students, it's a type of new instinct to be able to learn that way. And it's what we, as educators and leaders, need to pay attention to.

VALENTINE: It's giving people permission to be more than they thought they could be.

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Q **Why is it important to think of all this as *blending leadership* and learning, as opposed to *blended* or *online*?**

A **RICHARDS:** The first iteration of our book was just called "Leading Online," and then we realized we had totally disregarded the offline component of leadership. That's where our shift to 'blend' happened. As for blended versus blending, we

want to focus on leadership that is active: making decisions about which mode works best for the situation at hand.

VALENTINE: Leadership and followership don't only take place when people are together in a room or looking into one another's eyes. You can take an *online* course where you never actually meet the people you're working with. Blending, on other hand, means actively considering the time, path, place, and mode of your work—all those different components. Take the interaction we're having right now (on Google Hangouts). We're blending this interaction to bring together different people who've never talked before, using modes that combine technology and a face-to-face conversation. Hopefully, it will lead to something useful.

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Q **As a general rule, any technology investment has the risk of becoming outdated or obsolete. How can schools feel confident that they are investing their money, time and resources wisely?**

A **VALENTINE:** In our book, we continuously remind people that the

tools schools invest in could go away tomorrow. The companies that built them could go out of business or they could become outdated. Google and Apple are constantly buying companies and then getting rid of them. So we emphasize focusing on some basic questions: 'What is the thing we're trying to do better? What does the investment offer us now? How will it help us grow the skills of our faculty? And what will we do if the tool disappears?'

RICHARDS: Whether it's your website, your SIS, your course management system or anything else, independent schools are constantly wrestling with and trying to understand what might be the best fit in their community. It can be a challenge if the platform you commit to disappears. This is where a school's rigidity or fluidity, and the way people approach technology, is incredibly important. The focus should not be on how to use a particular tool—eight clicks here and eight clicks here—as understanding its meaning and purpose, and the types of interactions that it supports, and other ways to find the things that users know are possible with the tool. I think that's the role of the school curricular leaders

and pedagogical leaders who are ultimately behind such implementations. If they're not clear on the *why* and the *what's possible* and *how the what's possible* goes back to *why*, then there is no solution. Even a user-friendly system, like Google classroom, is going to be difficult and not very useful for some people because it's so different from what they used before.

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Q **Is it your premise that school leaders should be as technologically adept and knowledgeable as they are at communicating and leading in person?**

A **VALENTINE:** I don't think senior school leaders need to be technologists, but they do need to know enough about emerging technology to ask the right questions. For example, they need to understand the limitations of Twitter or Instagram if they're using them to showcase what's happening in their schools. A school can't necessarily know the reach of messages on Twitter. So leaders should begin to wonder if there are content marketing solutions that can achieve more of what they want to do, or if there are companies that can help them improve their mailing

list. You don't have to fully understand the technology to ask the right question.

I also think school leaders need to be aware of what's possible. For instance, the headmaster at Montclair Kimberley knows that it's always possible for board members to phone into a board meeting. I watched him run a meeting the other day where someone was Skyping in from another country, and someone was phoning in from another state, and most of the rest of us were there, in the room. The simple fact that he was able to ask for that kind of meeting was wonderful because the people who contributed most to the meeting were not necessarily those who were in the room. By knowing what was possible, getting the support he needed, and making sure the communication tools were tested beforehand, our headmaster was able to generate more participation and more engagement around a critical topic. That's just good leadership, borne of asking the right questions.

RICHARDS: For me, this comes down to institutional mission and the choices a school makes as far as adhering (or not) to certain ways of doing things. If everything a school does connects directly to the mission, which I hope is the case for most independent schools, and in the service of student learning, it's all about the informed choice to do or not to do something. To do or not do something "because it's the only way" is very different from "I've done research, and this is the best way to serve the mission."

VALENTINE: Technological awareness can also happen the hard way, when school leaders live through some kind of media mishap that couldn't exist 10 years ago—a photo gets out or something is recorded in a classroom or on a stage that should not have been. They need to be keyed into how things can go viral or spread, or can be reframed out of context. We're talking about basic risk management to some extent.

I think a blended leader is also somebody who's willing to break down silos—to make sure the school's systems technicians, for example, are fully aware of the school's mission, and to realize that working at a school is different from just working at any other job.

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Q **What are your concerns with regard to independent schools and blending learning?**

A **VALENTINE:** The concern I have is that people won't ask the questions that will push us ahead as schools; that they'll avoid asking questions. Or they'll simply accept limitations that no longer need to exist. That's what drives me every day. As technology advances, there are things we can do that we couldn't do five years ago. I want people to remove limitations and move onto bigger questions.

RICHARDS: One concern I have is that some school leaders will see a buzzword like "blended learning" and pass it off as a trend or fad, not realizing that young people are already living this blended life outside of school walls. I think it can be okay for school leaders to make a choice for practices and cultures in school to not exactly mirror life outside of school, but they must also make sure students fully understand the differences.

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Another concern is that as practices get more blended, or things that were offline get moved online, some leaders might see an opportunity to cram more stuff in because of "newly found time." Ideally, they instead will focus on offline things that take time to develop: human relationships, face-to-face contact. It's not about trying to get more done just because more can be done. It's about saying we don't need one hour for this meeting. Rather, we might need 10 minutes with all of us together, and then I'll walk around and catch each of you in your office for a five-minute one-on-one.

That's just a small example of what I see everywhere—people trying to squeeze more in once they've improved workflow and time efficiency. In the end, what can advance a school is when that "found time" fosters more human and personal growth.

VALENTINE: Yes, technology's efficiencies allow us to reassert the value of face-to-face interactions. We're all so hooked on email, for instance, and that helps us to communicate in ways we never could before email. So go ahead, press send, but don't forget to ask yourself, why are we together in this school? Why are we all in the same building? Remind yourself that school is a construct. Why do we drag ourselves to school—very early most days—and spend most of our lives together in this building?

Here's an answer I've picked up in my work with Reshan: The business of independent schools is human potential. I don't want to end my career only to find that the schools I was working in were somehow getting in the way of the students' education. The question is: How can we as leaders be as awake and alive to the possibilities for learning and understanding as we can be? Being blended is a means of realizing the vastness of your leadership toolkit, the beautiful connections you can make in the world, and the willingness of most people to share what they learn. ■

Learn more about Blending Leadership, *and sign up for updates, at blendingleadership.com.*