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ORIGINAL INTERVIEW

## Dr. Jon Saphier interview: Decades of success in educational leadership

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**Abstract** Dr. Jon Saphier is an international leader in education. His legend remains as he continues to expand on his Boston University's ethnographic dissertation (1980), which later became the best-selling textbook, *The Skillful Teacher* (2008). Dr. Saphier has sustained his leadership position internationally by continuously advocating for best teaching practices worldwide. This paper contains an interview with Jon Saphier and analysis of his leadership practices. Dr. Saphier discusses his core values of leadership, his successful approach to change initiatives, leadership failures, and critical elements of effective leadership. Dr. Saphier continues to be a driving force in educational initiatives worldwide. His humble, yet strong, approach is the foundation of his leadership sustainability. Dr. Saphier continues to mold his legacy as an educational leader by publishing, consulting, researching, developing models of district improvement, creating alliances, keynote speaking, and inspiring future educators. Jon Saphier continues to be a driving force in effective international educational practices.

**Keywords:** Leadership; Change; Failures; Core Values

*“As a leader, be vulnerable and be strong at the same time. Understand there are things you do not understand and ask for help. Be strong by advancing values and organize them to happen. To be vulnerable, you do need to be honest about what you do not know and share your responsibilities of being a risk taker with those you want to lead.”*

– Jon Saphier, 2017

### Background

**D**r. Jon Saphier is an international leader in education. His legend remains as he continues to expand on his Boston University's ethnographic dissertation, which later became the best-selling textbook, *The Skillful Teacher* (2008). Since his Boston University days, Dr. Saphier has sustained his leadership position internationally by continuously advocating for best teaching practices worldwide. Dr. Saphier has continued to mold his legacy as an educational leader by publishing numerous books, consulting, researching, developing models of district improvement, creating alliances, keynote speaking, and inspiring future educators. His enthusiasm towards education is contagious, and many who have had the opportunity to learn from him are renewed and reenergized by the end of the conversation or lecture. Dr. Saphier's passion for education is contagious, and his leadership abilities are authentically humble, yet powerful.

Dr. Saphier is the Founder and President of Research for Better Teaching, Inc. (RBT), an educational consulting association in Acton, Massachusetts that is devoted to improving the quality of teaching and leadership. Since 1979, he has taught professional development programs focused on best educational practices. According to RBT (2017), Dr. Saphier and his RBT team influence hundreds of school districts each year in the United States and other countries. In addition to teaching and consulting for RBT, Dr. Saphier has done on-site

leadership coaching to over 1,000 principals on instructional leadership. He has led district improvement projects with intentions of creating working alliances between superintendents, union leaders, and school boards (RBT, 2017).

Dr. Saphier is actively engaged in public policy efforts to close the United States achievement gaps. He is an annual guest speaker at The Harvard Graduate School of Education's Achievement Gap Institute. Dr. Saphier is in demand for inspirational keynotes and conference presentations across the country. He is a renowned keynote speaker on high-expertise teaching, school leadership, and various other education topics ("Jon Saphier Educational Blog," n.d.).

Dr. Saphier's interview focuses on the key ingredients for leadership sustainability. Dr. Saphier discusses his core values of leadership, his successful approach to change initiatives, leadership failures, and critical elements of effective leadership. Through trial and errors, Dr. Saphier continues to be a driving force in educational initiatives worldwide. His humble yet strong approach is the foundation of his leadership sustainability.

## **Interview**

Dr. Jon Saphier was interviewed at 2:00 on May 2, 2017, in Acton, Massachusetts on location at Research for Better Teaching. The interview was 48 minutes long and consisted of questions based on the foundation of leadership. Many questions led to further leadership discussions and inquiries. Specifically, the big ideas of the interview were based on leadership core values, change, and failures. Dr. Saphier's leadership style is authentically humble and motivating. His words, passion, and dedication to the field of education are inspiring and encouraging. During the interview, Dr. Saphier discussed in depth the core values of leadership. According to Dr. Saphier (2017), the core values of leadership are continuity, service, substance, courage, integrity, and trust. Educational leaders who can build a strong professional relationship have better working cultures. "As a leader, the values I had to manifest go beyond continuity, service, and substance. It is imperative that a leader is trusted" (Saphier, 2017). Dr. Saphier expanded on the concept and importance of trust. According to Dr. Saphier (2017), trust is critical in building strong cultures.

"Trust is keeping promises. Trust is honesty. Trust is productive feedback (good or bad). Trust is recognition for all those doing well. Trust is the stability of being present and proving you will stick around. Build trust to the point you can get some feedback about yourself and find out what you as an educational leader are not so good at."

Trust is the glue that holds strong cultures together. Additionally, trust builds relationships within an organization and makes the potentially difficult conversations and actions more manageable. Trust encourages courage and integrity. "Courage and integrity are important values as a leader. Sometimes you will have to make decisions that are not popular and oppose the external interests. Hopefully, at that point, the trust is already established" (Saphier, 2017). Trust, courage, and integrity are important when leadership has to impose a change that may not be the popular decision of the consensus. Trusting the leadership may make the change process more manageable.

The next topic of discussion was change. Change is a difficult feat within an organization. Dr. Saphier (2017) discusses crucial elements of change within an organization. Change is not an easy task to accomplish. Specifically, many people oppose or fear change. Because of this fear, Dr. Saphier recommends to "call change the improvement process, rather than the change process." People are less opposed to improvements. "Change should not just happen for change sake. Change should happen for improvement purposes." According to Dr. Saphier (2017), when implementing big ideas that have to do with change, you need to be credible. How can you promote creditability in a change process? Dr. Saphier proposes the following:

1. Be authentically humble
2. Be clear on initiative
3. Assess readiness
4. Earn trust before you suggest change
5. Be a good listener
6. Assess needs of others within the organization you are trying to change. Attend to these requirements before seeking to promote your needs and change.

Through these suggested actions the change process becomes less scary and may be welcomed with less resistance. Furthermore, with any leadership position, there are failures to achieve initiatives, failures to make the desired change. It is beneficial to view failures as opportunities to grow and learn.

Failure was the next topic of discussion during Dr. Saphier's interview. Failures are just obstacle to overcome and learning experiences to improve on. According to Dr. Saphier (2017), leadership failure can be categorized. "Leaders can fail by failing to do something or overall failure. I have failed many times. I am a serial failure, but I keep learning." Dr. Saphier shared some of his life lessons based on his learning experiences as an educational leader. The following examples are lessons Dr. Saphier learned from various failures or learning experiences which eventually led to growth and additional success.

1. Build champions at lower levels of an organization. There are benefits of building sustainability at mid-level of an organization. The top of an organization tends to have higher turnover.
2. Mid-level employees tend to move up and need to know and understand the same commitments of those at the top of an organization
3. Keynotes – read an audience, learn who you are addressing at keynotes, build up a background knowledge base before going in to speak, don't make assumptions.

Failures can lead to successes. As in any occupation, educational leadership involves a learning curve. The most important element of failure is your determination to overcome the obstacle and move on.

In conclusion, Dr. Jon Saphier mapped out the elements of effective leadership. According to Dr. Saphier (2017), effective leadership is voice, ownership, and influence. Effective leadership builds relationships and community among staff in an organization. Additionally, effective leadership promotes risk taking. Great leaders make all employees feel safe and make it known that mistakes are ok. "Mistakes are expected, normative, and useful" (Saphier, 2017). Mistakes should be used as an opportunity for learning. Effective leadership promotes influence and ownership of others.

### **Analysis and discussion**

Dr. Saphier proved that his humble yet strong approach to leadership promotes a long lasting successful career as a leader. With his leadership core values, approach to change, ability to learn from failures, he proves leadership sustainability is possible. In an analysis of Dr. Saphier's interview, change, core values, failures, and effective leadership, will be discussed and investigated.

Change was mentioned numerous times throughout the interview. Therefore change is a focus of this interview analysis. According to Heath (2011), leaders who want to change behaviors within an organization need to understand the need for rational outcomes, motivate emotional understanding, and shape the path to change. If you can do all three, you can stimulate dramatic changes. In an analysis of Dr. Saphier's interview and his accomplishments, it is evident that Dr. Saphier can do all three and sustain and promote change within an organization. He has this ability because his leadership style is authentically humble, yet powerful.

Change is a process that involves emotions and rational understanding. According to Heath (2011), lasting change happens when one can effectively direct both the rational and emotional parts of the brain. Dr. Saphier emphasized the importance of relaying his change process by being credible and honest about his vision. His explanation regarding the course of earning credibility was geared to both, rational and emotional understanding. To reach rational understanding, Dr. Saphier made the point that change involves clear initiatives, vision on the outlook, and an assessment of readiness. To increase emotional understanding, Dr. Saphier emphasized the importance of relationship building, trust, being a good listener, and assessing needs of the organization before implementing the change. Dr. Saphier can make his staff feel the need for change by calling the change process the improvement process. Specifically, Dr. Saphier can go beyond the known and make it possible for people to feel the impact. The capacity to do this is powerful. Furthermore, by his authenticity and record of accomplishments, Dr. Saphier proves he has the ability understand the emotions needed to lead others.

Dr. Saphier's approach to change is very adaptive by creating credibility and developing relationships and ownership to enforce the change or improvement process. He states that "you must get leaders within the organization to believe in the change goals or values for the goals for the change process or improvement process to happen" (Saphier, 2017). Dr. Saphier emphasizes the importance of creating allies and solidifying a buy in of others. This is similar to the approach outlined by Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky in *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership* (2009). According to Heifetz et. al. (2009), before you go public with an initiative you need to have support. "Identify which stakeholders are most likely to be interested in supporting your cause. Potential allies have interests and perspectives of the adaptive challenge closely aligned with yours and will gain the most if your intervention succeeds" (Heifetz et. al, 2009, p. 137). Both Saphier and Heifetz, stress the importance of supportive allies or leaders supporting your change initiative. Allies with authority can promote the process and support initiatives.

Additionally, authenticity and trust were another theme of the interview. According to Pfeffer (2015), authentic leadership is rare and hard to achieve. His explanation concludes that leadership is not authentic because people change and grow all the time as a result of their work experiences. This may be true for some leaders, but I would argue this is not the case with Dr. Saphier. According to the analysis of his interview, Dr. Saphier's life experiences of growth, change, and failures have resulted in a very authentic leadership style. Through the years, he realized the value in an authentically humble approach to leadership. He asks for help when needed, admits there have been failures, involves others in decisions and the change process, and he understands there is still so much to learn.

## **Conclusion**

Dr. Saphier's authentically humble approach to leadership demonstrates that he can change behaviors within an organization by directing rational understanding, motivating emotions, and eventually shaping the path. Dr. Saphier can do that and sustain lasting changes within an organization because he is authentic, has allies who support his initiatives, learns from failures, and has his leadership core values he lives by.

Dr. Jon Saphier career defines leadership sustainability. His career in educational leadership has been extensive and productive, and he continues to make changes and advocate for improved schools and education. Since 1980, upon completion of his Boston University Dissertation, to present day consulting, transforming, and keynote speaking, Dr. Saphier continues to make an international impact in the field of education.

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