

## Mark McGowan, Department Head - Participant of PTC Instructional Supervision 2019



“Over 20 years ago, I left the United States, to begin my international career as an educator. And a friend gave me a book, as a going away gift. On the cover of the book was a quote from Socrates that said, all I know is I know nothing. And, it was a book of blank white pages to be filled in. And in a lot of ways I feel that's what I've been doing this 20 plus years. Just filling in those blank pages with all the things I did know. And I was reminded that quote, with an experience I thought I would share with you, perhaps it gave a slightly different perspective or insight onto a situation you might or might not be familiar with. For the last six years at my school, I've been a member of the works council, which is a teachers union for the school with nothing else to represent the workers and the staff.

And one of the more unfortunate roles that I was given is I had to be present when teachers were dismissed or put on an improvement plan. And you see at our school, every teacher who's going to be disclosed has a right to have a works council member present with them. In those meetings with leadership. My role, my responsibility was simply to take notes during the meeting in case something was missed for that individual and be sort of a trusted friend or important companion. I often met with those individuals before and after those meetings and tried to explain the situation best I could through my eyes and we went over their rights and, also their options. And it was during those meetings that I was reminded of this particular quote, um, because I realized how little I knew about the people I worked with.

For example, one man, his wife had a blood disease, and every month she needed a blood transfusion. So he was quite worried about losing his health care. And another man told me he hadn't slept for 10 nights. When you found out that he was going to be either put on the plan or dismissed and he was the only wage earner in his house. He was afraid to tell his partner what was happening, but he finally did. And he drew a lot of courage from that because the partner said, don't worry, we're going to find a solution. And this not sleeping was a very common comment that I received or the woman's seven, 10 nights. I haven't slept. And she was having heart palpitations. And it was at that moment I realized, like I said, how little I knew. I knew they were teachers, I had basic ideas about them.



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But then I realized that I know nothing about you and your life. And another surprising aspect of that situation is they gave me strength because in these very difficult situations, I was very impressed with the dignity with which they accepted the situation, when they understood and wanted to do things the right way. In fact, the man who had the wife with the blood problem, cause he had a choice. He could've been fired or he could have resigned, and if he was fired, who would've gotten more unemployment money? But he didn't want that on his record as a matter of honor. And he chose to resign instead. So, what did I want to say there? I'm not telling you these stories because I think that these people shouldn't have been dismissed or they shouldn't have been put on the plan.

In fact, in every case, I agreed 100% of the decision that was made. But what I can't tell you is these people didn't see it coming. It didn't matter how you told them for whatever reason, they didn't want to hear it or they didn't want to see it. Um, and luckily, you know, kind of talking them through it, they understood and accepted it and they were very grateful and thankful. And I felt uncomfortable for why, why would you be thanking me? I haven't changed anything. I'm just standing here. But I realized at that moment that they just needed someone to be with them. And I realized how important it is that people aren't alone, you know, those situations, and I know a lot of you, um, will be in those situations in the future if you had that already and you have to make decisions. But I realized if there was any advice on the other side that I could, offer it would be regardless of the circumstances, just treat everybody with dignity. Because the one takeaway I, I came from that the one thought that kept staying in my head is, you know, we're human beings first and everything else is kind of second. And that's just what I wanted to share with you today."