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JANINE LIM

REBUILDING THE PLANE WHILE FLYING IT

In July 2011, I joined Andrews University in the midst of the merger of Griggs University with Andrews University. Griggs University is the distance education arm of Seventh-day Adventist education, serving over 6000 students. That month, Griggs University also moved physically from Maryland to Michigan, resulting in a large percentage of staff turnover for Griggs University. That meant many new hires—and I was one of them—and a huge learning curve in the midst of the chaos of the merger.

But I've finally been able to make sense of it all by using a metaphor: we are rebuilding the plane while we are flying it. The plane is Griggs University with all of its online students. It's also Andrews University and all its online students. Oh, and also the off-campus programs of both Griggs and Andrews.



Griggs uses the open enrollment model, which means we always have students registering, finishing, and graduating. There is no way to just “stop” and start over! So while we had moved to Andrews University and were working on merging with Andrews, all the changes needed to be made while we were still serving students. And as we merged with Andrews, we had to consider the “Andrews way,” the “Griggs way,” and create some new way that was most efficient for everyone!

Here’s a brief overview of some of the work on our horizon:

- Merging two student information systems
- Merging two financial systems
- Merging two learning management systems
- Figuring out how to create new processes to support open enrollment students in a primarily semester-based Andrews system
- Taking an inventory of all distance courses of Griggs and Andrews and identifying needed course upgrades
- Determining the needs of Griggs and Andrews faculty to identify needed training and faculty development
- Building an infrastructure and streamlining processes and support technologies to better serve distance students

So how has this metaphor helped me cope as a leader?

The Calming Effect of a Metaphor During Chaotic Change

A metaphor can bring more clarity to a situation and make it easier to see meaning and order in what is happening. It clarifies our thinking and manages expectations.

Clarifying Our Thinking

When you look at the list of major challenges our school had to deal with, keep in mind that my main concern was for our students who were already enrolled in our programs. Before I thought of the “rebuilding the plane” metaphor for our work, it was often difficult to accept the overwhelming complexity of the situation as normal. We all had so many ideas of where we wanted to go—many visions for the future. Yet at the same we were busy with the daily care for our current students. Thus progress on turning those visions into reality sometimes felt really slow. And when the pressures of unsolved problems piled up, before the metaphor, I sometimes felt panicky, wondering how on earth we’d ever get to where we wanted to be.

But when I realized that we were, in fact, rebuilding the plane while

flying it, I calmed down. I was able to be more patient with the process and grasp the value of changing one piece at a time! One day it began to sink in that if we tried to change too many pieces at once, the plane might crash!

The plane metaphor is also useful as I work with my colleagues. It helps us remember that for everything we change, we must consider the long term (rebuilding) and the short term (flying). When we decide to change something for the long term, we also have to think carefully through what that change will break in the short term, and how to work around the broken pieces for a few months.

Before the metaphor, it was easy to get carried away with a sense that everything had to change at once. But the metaphor reminded me that we were still flying the plane and serving our current students. It led us to changing one part of the plane at a time, with careful thought as to how it might affect our current students, while never forgetting the reasons for change and its long-term impact on the future of the program. Thus the metaphor calmed all of us down in the midst of seeming chaos, allowing us to take one step at a time, thoughtfully and carefully.

Managing Expectations

The other value of this metaphor is to manage expectations—expectations across campus, and expectations outside of Andrews University and Griggs University. Sometimes people asked how the merger was going. Too often their questions implied that we were changing too slowly. Since people couldn't see any obvious change, they probably wondered if we were doing anything at all. Not exactly a conversation I used to look forward to.

But when I began to answer their question by explaining that what we were doing was like “rebuilding the plane while we are flying it,” I noticed that it made sense to people. They too realized more of the magnitude and complexity of the work of a merger. And they were more likely to be sympathetic, patient, and understanding.

Metaphors . . .

So, what about you? Have you ever used a metaphor to explain your work? Did it help you? How? For me, the metaphor brought a calming effect and provided an anchor in the middle of a chaotic, complicated change.