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# Flag the Moment: How School Leaders Can Find Moments of Holiday Joy



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Tips and Tools

“Relax and enjoy your time with family.” This is the message school staff generally hear from leadership as they prepare for the holiday break. While certainly well-meaning, the message can inadvertently set up unreasonable expectations. Not many of us go home to a Norman Rockwell-like scene, with a fire roaring and happy, smiling faces around a perfectly set table.

So if “relax and enjoy” isn’t quite the right message, what is?

Care Solace called up one of our favorite teachers and thinkers, Alex Kajitani, to ask him what school staff most need to hear at this time of the year...

“Leadership ought to look for opportunities to encourage staff to find the right ways to be themselves and express themselves over their holiday break.”

**Care Solace:** Alex, thank you so much for being willing to share your insight with us again. Earlier this year, you did a webinar with us called, “Creating a Culture of Belonging” — can you remind us how you define “culture” and “belonging”?

**Alex Kajitani:** I think defining those terms is a good place to start when talking about schools and the holidays. School culture doesn’t take a break when staff and students do; it surrounds us all year long. I think of culture as “how things are around here.” And belonging has three components: I can be myself, express myself, and challenge myself.

A school culture of belonging ought to recognize that a holiday break is often no break at all for staff. It can be a time when our exhaustion catches up with us, and we get sick. We immediately start serving our families as we step back from serving our students. So leadership ought to look for opportunities to encourage staff to find the right ways to be themselves, express themselves, and challenge themselves over their holiday break.

“Flagging the moment’ means two things: I love and appreciate this moment that we’re in. But I also recognize that this moment is going to end.”

**CS:** And first and foremost, what staff may need to challenge is their *expectations*. Visions of family walking in the door with presents and dishes to share can set up expectations of warm and fuzzy feelings — and a wonderful two weeks off. But the truth might be pretty far from that vision.

**AK:** Those warm and fuzzy moments may happen. But we need to accept that those moments are not going to last. They’re fleeting. They come and go. The happiness of the holidays isn’t a high that lasts two weeks straight. You might have little moments of joy — a half an hour where everything’s going well. But then the next hour, things may fall apart during Christmas dinner.

**CS:** Is there anything school leaders can do to encourage a more mindful approach to the holidays, so staff can make their expectations reasonable *and* positive?

**AK:** I’ll share a Kajitani-family secret that I think everyone could benefit from over the holidays. We call it “Flagging the Moment.” When we’re experiencing a really fun moment, we’ll say, “Flag this!” Flagging the moment means two things: I love and appreciate this moment that we’re in. But I also recognize that this moment is going to end. And so when we think about expectations, “flag this” means that we acknowledge that this is here now — but we let go of the expectation that this is how it’s *always* supposed to be.

**CS:** That is such a simple and powerful practice, Alex.

**AK:** It is! And a flexible one. Everyone in a school community can adopt the practice as part of a healthy school culture. Superintendents can flag moments. Teachers can flag moments. Kids can flag moments. We need to use our voices and say, “Flag this!” out loud. Let’s take note when things are good.

**CS:** You said that the break doesn’t always feel like a real break for school staff. Flagging moments can help us all notice and savor the joyful holiday moments. But what else can staff do to rejuvenate themselves when they’re away from school?

“Consider getting rid of long to-do lists and thoughtfully ‘set the rhythm’ of your vacation days.”

**AK:** I defined culture as “how things are around here.” Before break begins, staff can decide how things are going to be around their homes. Consider getting rid of long to-do lists and thoughtfully “set the rhythm” of your vacation days. For example, my family decides to have slow mornings. No rushing around. Perhaps that might work for you, too, or you could decide on shared activity afternoons (with some reduced or tech-free time), or independent, everybody-do-your-own-thing evenings.

What kind of a vibe do you want in your own home? And how can you protect that vibe?

**CS:** Bringing that kind of intentionality could make a big difference. If you decide mornings are slow, that helps you figure out what to say no to.

**AK:** Exactly. One good question to consider is this: When you look back on this break, what do you want to say about it? Hopefully it’s not that you were constantly checking and responding to school email or catching up on grading. That’s one way that a break stops being a break.

Our slow morning commitment acts as a boundary. School leadership and staff alike need to offer themselves space and grace over the holidays, so these boundaries don’t have to be rigid. Things come up, and you obviously need to respond appropriately.

“Meet cool people, look out the window, and let the trip take you.”

**CS:** So to recap: Flag the Moment and Set the Rhythm. Two strategies for skillfully managing the holiday break.

**AK:** I have one more! I call this “Dad’s Principles of Travel” — I use these with my kids when we go on road trips. School break is a trip away from our everyday lives, so I think the principles apply nicely:

1. Meet cool people.
2. Look out the window.
3. Let the trip take you.

**CS:** So how do you translate the principles so they work for the holidays?

**AK:** Meet new people. Over the holidays, try random acts of kindness to strangers. Compliment someone. Invite a coworker over who may not have family around. If you don’t want to chat up someone you don’t know, maybe pay for the car behind you at the Starbucks’ drive-in.

Look out the window. This is an invitation to unplug and be present. Can you have a family dinner with no phones at the table? Or go for a walk in the snow with your phone at home?

Let the trip take you. This idea ties back into “setting the rhythm.” Unexpected things happen, and we don’t want to get grumpy about changes in plans. Sometimes the things we didn’t plan for are the most beautiful and precious.

**CS:** At Care Solace, we’ll be referring to those principles as “Alex’s Holiday Principles.” Again, very practical and positive. Thank you for your wisdom and generosity, Alex.

**AK:** Always happy to share. I hope these ideas are encouraging to school communities, and I’d love to hear how school communities are flagging the moments over the holidays and beyond!

“Sometimes the things we didn’t plan for are the most beautiful and precious.”

## Alex Kajitani

Author, Speaker, Teacher | 2009 California Teacher of the Year

Alex Kajitani is the author of *Owning It: Proven Strategies for Success in ALL of Your Roles As a Teacher Today*, which was named “Recommended Reading” by the U.S. Department of Education. Alex has a popular TED Talk, has been honored at The White House, and featured in numerous media outlets, including The CBS Evening News with Katie Couric.

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