

# MONDAY MESSAGE

Invest Influence Impact



## Why Do We Get These Results – Respond to the Problem

There are certain moments in life so powerful we remember exactly where we were, what we were doing, who we were with, and maybe even what we were wearing at the time. January 28, 1986 was one of those days for me. I was in the seventh grade and our local school district had called one of those infamous “snow days”. I was sitting on my bed that morning watching a small black and white 13” television just after completing all of my assigned chores. My mother came into my room and sat in the bean bag chair next to my bed to join me in watching NASA put the first teacher into space via the Space Shuttle *Challenger*. It didn’t go as we had hoped and anticipated. I can still see my mother’s facial expression in that moment and I remember the deafening silence between us. My mother and I did eventually talk about the event and we continued to watch all of the live coverage of the tragedy. Years later, I learned it was a preventable

set of circumstances only if leadership had responded to the problem.

NASA knew full well it was a problem so *problem blindness, ownership, and tunneling* were not at play. It was simply a failure to respond, and as a result seven people lost their lives in America’s first fatal in-flight spacecraft accident. This story emits a lesson applicable to schools and districts everywhere and that lesson is fairly simple, but yet once again, not easy. **Leaders who fail to respond to problems soon are responding to a crisis.** In the Challenger incident, NASA had known the O-rings were the problem because they had been told and shown by an engineer by the name of Allan McDonald. NASA knew the O-rings should have been redesigned because they were susceptible to failure due to the cold weather launch. Even a delay in the launch would have likely prevented the tragedy and would have given the engineers more time to design a better piece of the system.

Here are 3 leadership points to ponder in order to be better at responding to problems...

1. **Be courageous and respond, never react** – Believe it or not, most significant problems we face in schools do not require an immediate, in the moment decision. Therefore, a leader should take time to think through the problem at hand and not act out of haste or rash decision making. Most situations can be “slept on” but the key here is not to “sleep through” problem. At some point a great leader will make a decision without too much delay because true leaders are prone to action and recognize the current results or potential results are not satisfactory. They also understand others may be blind or resistant to the problem and that’s exactly why they need courage.
2. **Surround the problem** – A great leader is confident enough to understand it is impossible for one person to have all of the answers to all problems, and it is exactly why they develop a team to surround the problem. The leader also ensures the team is urgent about the problem and keeps other tasks out of their way. The team is not just focused on the issue, but every member on the team has a role and is held accountable to their role. The leader ensures adequate time to work together, promotes discourse among members, and creates plans and timelines to take action. Great teams can, and do, solve complex problems.
3. **Find a Point of Leverage** – Many times a solution is just one small, seemingly insignificant action away. I love the story about [Tony DiVittiro](#) who in 2001 decided to take one step toward the problem of violence among the young men in his high school and city. He started with a small group of adolescent males and the baby steps of curriculum design to build a program called BAM [“Becoming A Man”](#). By 2016, “Tony D” was in the

White House having a conversation with President Barack Obama discussing the incredible impact his program was having on the entire city of Chicago. One man, one leader finding a point of leverage to respond to a problem everyone could see and many were experiencing. That's leadership!

President Ronald Reagan was slated to deliver the state of the union address on the evening of January 28th but due to the morning incident, he changed his plan to instead respond to the crisis of our nation. In a matter of just a few days, I went from reading an article in class from *Weekly Reader* about the Challenger and listening to my seventh grade teacher, Thelma Moore, talk about how she wished she would have been selected as America's first teacher in space to sitting on my living room floor listening to this [speech](#) from President Reagan. I remember being thankful my teacher was not on that flight. Leaders must be willing not only to see problems but demonstrate the courage to respond. Leaders understand their responsibility to the people they serve, the issues they face, the system they work within, and most importantly, their well-being.