

Leading through change, leading with care

By CHELSEA BROOKE YARBOROUGH

In Leadership Development at The Association of Theological Schools (ATS), we are fortunate to know schools through the leaders who serve them. We value the privilege of learning the gifts and areas of growth of our member schools through the workings of different roles that occupy their ecosystems.

As a result, we don't just see the scope of what is particular to each role, but also the trends throughout various roles.

As our steering committees meet to assess current needs, a single thread runs through every conversation: the need for tools that help leaders navigate and sustain themselves through prevailing change on multiple levels. It becomes clear that conversations and resources for strengthening schools are of utmost importance. However, something emerges that is not altogether different but far more prominent this year—the necessity of focusing time and energy on what it means to sustain the self—the people—doing the work supporting our schools.

Tools for sustaining the self

Sometimes “sustaining the self” and “self-care” are dismissed as “soft skills” or habits to tend to as time allows. However soft these skills are, they are pertinent to creating pockets of ease and countering the ways that burnout can occur quickly for leaders. Practices that prioritize sustaining the self within the ecosystem don't just make for healthier leaders, but often make for healthier teams



when a leader is able to create more room for everyone to be human. Across ATS programs, we've noticed that building habits of self-sustenance is a shared priority. It may look different by role, but we believe if this becomes priority across institutions, the team will be stronger and more effective.

The following three practices have emerged as especially vital as leaders think about what helps to sustain them:

1. Determine your emergency.

In leadership, not every challenge is an emergency, though it often feels that way. Urgency is not the same as emergency, and it is important for leaders to parse their own definition and factors before they encounter them. In a self-care workshop at our 2025 Chief Academic Officers' Conference, deans explored the importance of leaders distinguishing true emergencies from situations that simply feel urgent. This concept echoes what pastoral care courses describe as cultivating a non-anxious presence. To embody calm leadership, we must learn to pause long enough to discern what genuinely requires immediate attention—and what can wait. This may seem simple, but the group found it helpful to think about what constitutes an emergency. Once a leader decides, he or she can hold a partner or team conversation to help everyone move forward with more clarity around their priorities.

Participants reported that this shift helped them create space and feel more confident about concluding their work at reasonable times. By agreeing on these definitions, a team establishes stability and trust. Members know what truly warrants a late-night call and what can wait until morning. The result is a shared sense of security and healthier rhythms of response. It also helps a leader communicate priorities transparently; when decisions must be made quickly, the team understands the rationale behind them.

2. Building a team is not the same as hiring someone.

Team development is critical. One of my favorite quotes from my dad is, “You will only be as long as your team is strong.” It’s a reminder that teamwork is a crucial practice of self-care and sustainability as a leader. At the Executive Leadership Intensive held in December 2025, Sarah B. Drummond, founding dean of Andover Newton Seminary at Yale Divinity School, emphasized collaboration as a defining skill for leaders navigating change. She talked about collaboration on many levels, and it certainly exists on the interpersonal level. When you only hire someone, you bring him or her in to complete tasks, which is important. However, the next step of building a team is investing in what that person needs to develop into a team member—commitment to vision, room to develop, and opportunity to integrate into the wider ecosystem.

One key to this collaboration is creating opportunities that help the team understand one another’s roles and the collective stakes. Having a team that has bought into the vision and feels supported and clear on their roles benefits the leader as well as the one setting the vision for the team. Hiring a new person is a step to building the team, but culti-

vating skills and creating room for growth is what allows for the team to move from operational to sustaining. Leaders that steward teams can consider, “What are ways for my team to grow and develop so they feel empowered to bring the best and most well versions of themselves to work?”

3. Know the signs of burnout.

Too often, leaders miss the signs of burnout because there is no baseline inventory. As changes come, it’s easy to keep moving the line of “okay” so that the work can be done. In truth, the line hasn’t moved, but what we are willing to endure has. One practical tool is to identify your personal baseline. Ask yourself, “What does wellness look like for me? How do I recognize when I’m slipping below that line? What are the different categories of wellness, (see [Eight Dimensions of Wellness](#)) and how do I know when I am there?”

Checking in regularly with the markers set by the leader helps to detect burnout. It is important to have a predetermined response for how you might tend to yourself. Burnout doesn’t appear overnight; it builds slowly, often a result of a beautiful commitment to the work. However, a commitment to the work is a commitment to being well.

Moving forward together

Leadership sustainability is a combination of solo practice and collective support. While each leader has his or her role to play, we know that a team is better when its individual pieces are strong, too. We are learning that this work requires tools for sustaining the self and a commitment to do that, even when it is inconvenient. Our sustaining practices might be individual efforts, but they have collective impact.



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