

# Cleaning Up My Act (for Improved Efficiency & Effectiveness)

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## **Background That Led to Your Inquiry:**

In the midst of my 10th year as principal of Western High School, I knew something had to change. Western is a suburban school with a student population of about 850 and a staff of just over 80. It is a very good school that has been very successful on a variety of fronts. The school year had a first semester that presented a number of very difficult challenges to overcome and in the process of doing so certain things became obvious. During my 10 years as principal, I had been displaced from my office due to building projects for two extended (8+ months each time) leaving me with boxes and cabinets filled with an assortment of papers and files.

Additionally, during my tenure, I have the opportunity to work with and train 5 different assistant principals. While I considered myself a fairly organized person, the chaos and clutter of my office was clearly hindering my effectiveness and efficiency. The mess and general disarray in my office left me embarrassed, inefficient, unprofessional, and stressed. I felt as though I was drowning. Therefore, the purpose of my action research was to examine how cleaning and organizing my office and my daily agenda/tracking could improve my overall efficiency and effectiveness.

## **Statement of Your Wondering:**

With this purpose, I wondered if cleaning up my act (in other words, my office) would increase my effectiveness and efficiency as a school leader?

## **Methods/Procedures:**

To gain insights into my wondering(s), I began with finding a better solution to my daily agenda and tracking. I blended information from several different presentations I had heard over the years to create a daily agenda and tracking sheet that allowed me to prioritize my "to do" list, calls to return, and note any meetings or phone calls that occurred. With each agenda item, I would label it with an A, B, or C based on priority. As I started a task, I would circle the letter and then cross it (vertically and horizontally) when completed. If the task carried forward, or in some way was not complete, only horizontal arrow was drawn through it to move it to the next day.

Based on the suggestion of one of the members of my cohort, I downloaded the Google Chrome extension "Momentum." Momentum allows for a motivational picture coupled with a daily focus and easily modifiable "to do" list on any new tab opened in Chrome. This simple add-on helped keep my tasks in focus and accessible whenever and wherever I was with my computer. Various members of the office staff also added Momentum after seeing it on my computer.

The third step and most complicated and complex in the process of cleaning up my act was to tackle the chaos, files, and mounds of paper, boxes, etc. that filled my office. Ten years of my mess had been added to the things I inherited from the previous principal of 27 years. The task seemed overwhelming, so I started small. I tackled one stack, drawer, box at a time. In a relatively short amount of time I found I was making

significant headway. A school weather cancellation provided me with a whole unobstructed day to work on this AR project. I found many things, and disposed of many more. I found my desktop again. I found room in drawers for the important things, and was able to purge a tremendous amount of things that must have seemed important at some point.

Throughout this process I took journal notes as to how I was personally feeling about my progress and its impact. I observed the clarity and direction of my daily agenda and overall comfort in my office. I also took several photos to try to indicate the “before” and “after.” I observed the increase in efficiency and hoped it was also transferring to effectiveness. I noticed the multitude of staff and students who made positive comments regarding the improved state of my office. I became keenly aware of the fact that some staff members were much more comfortable in my office now that it was more organized. Additionally, I conducted a survey among the office staff asking questions such as, “Have you noticed Mr. Davis' office to be cleaner/more organized?”, “Do you think the efforts to gain control over his office organization has improved his efficiency?”, “Do you think the efforts to gain control over his office organization has improved his effectiveness?”, “How would you rate the impact of his more organized office on the overall efficiency and effectiveness of the HS office?”, “Has the more organized office made you feel more at peace or comfortable when in his office?”, and “What have you noticed with regard to Mr. Davis, various interactions, efficiency, effectiveness, etc. as it relates to his office being more organized? In other words, is there anything you would like to add to this discussion and analysis?”

### **Stating Your Learning and Supporting it with Data:**

As a result of analyzing my data, three important things I learned include:

- 1) My efficiency and effectiveness improved,
- 2) I felt significantly less stressed and more professional,
- 3) Others were positively impacted by my efforts.

Analysis of my data clearly indicated I am much more efficient and effective when my office is organized and my daily agenda/tracking system is utilized. I no longer have to search through various stacks of papers to find what I need. I no longer have filing cabinets that are too full to use. I now am much more comfortable discarding things that will not be needed. Being able to break free from clutter and disorganization allowed me to get out of the office more frequently as well. I was better able to adhere to deadlines and respond quickly to various needs and requests. Survey responses such as: “He is able to locate documents quickly and has significantly reduced the turn-around time on items requiring his review and/or signature.” Clearly indicate improvement. To further support this learning, seventy-one percent (71%) of the survey respondents felt I was more efficient and 86% (yes & maybe) felt I was more effective.

Though this action research project, I felt more professional as my office became more organized. From the survey: “An office that is organized adds an air of professionalism and effectiveness. The organizational strategies that he has shared with me increase my desire for organization and effectiveness as well, so it's inspiring to others as an added benefit!” Organization had reduced my stress and I found that when the chaotic times came (and they do as a principal) and the clutter increased, so too did my stress level. The freedom and comfort I was feeling through organization was being stifled as things piled up and I had to pause everything (that could be paused) and spend time getting things back in order. There is a peace that comes with order. I also found that due to my improved organizational strategies I could respond to things much quicker which also reduced stress.

Finally, and most surprising to me was the positive impact cleaning up my act had on others. I didn't realize how the chaos and clutter made others feel uncomfortable. Staff members felt more at ease in my office. Seventy-one percent (71%) indicated they felt more at peace/ease in my office. There was an increased calming effect on those who entered, maybe as a reflection of my reduced stress, or maybe it was more atmospheric. As my organization increased, so too did the effectiveness and efficiency of my office staff. I was surprised to find that I was actually able to delegate more to my secretary because of the increased organization.

### **Providing Concluding Thoughts:**

For this action research project, I focused on something I felt I needed and in return found that through my efforts focused on my needs, it had a positive impact on others, the office, and the school as a whole. This really brought home the interconnectedness of things in a school setting. I learned that I am to some degree responsible for my own stress level and that of others through the painfully straightforward process of staying organized. I learned that it is easy to fall back into old habits and that systems are important for staying on task and focused.

It really surprised me how much the clutter of my office impacted others. From job candidates, to parents, to students, to staff, all are directly or indirectly influenced or impacted emotionally from the presentation of my office. Clutter and disarray indicates that I may be cluttered in my actions. A messy office may send the signal to some that I accept messes and do little about them in the school as a whole. I found that I have a responsibility not just in action and presentation of self, but also in my home base or office. I expect the school to be clean and to look nice, at a minimum; I need to expect the same of myself.

I found I like having a clean and organized office for the obvious reasons shared. I found that others benefited as well from this process. I found that I do not need to hold onto everything just in case I might need it in the future. I know I still have a ways to go to be fully in control of this clutter beast as the demands of the principalship is often very chaotic and can easily throw one off kilter. I am excited to have time to further clean up my act and make my office not just organized, but also reflective of me and my personality. It needs to tell the story of who I am and who I strive to be.

As I move forward, I want to further define and hold dear to the processes for staying organized. I want to further delegate to my staff things that they are fully capable of doing to empower them. I want to get to the point that my office structure, organization, and daily agenda/tracking allow me to maintain a lower stress level and improved efficiency and effectiveness. I also wonder as I continue down this path, how organizational processes and systems can positively influence my routine tasks and documentation of meetings and calls.

### **References:**

N/A

## Action Research Summary Document

### Cleaning Up My Act (for Improved Efficiency & Effectiveness)

#### Rick Davis - IPLI Cohort #4

Photos:

BEFORE



DURING

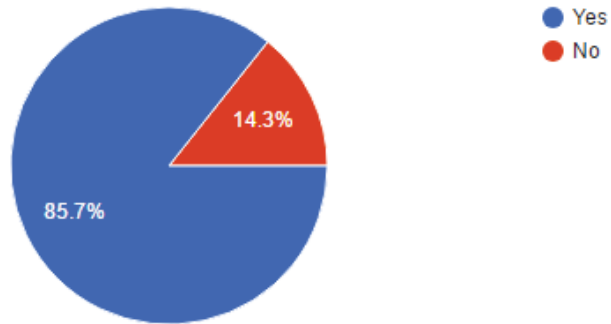


AFTER (CONTINUING)



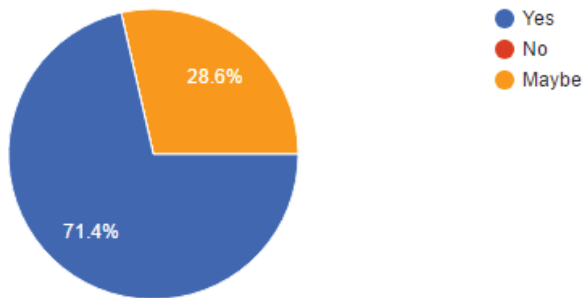
DATA GRAPHS

Have you noticed Mr. Davis' office to be cleaner/more organized?

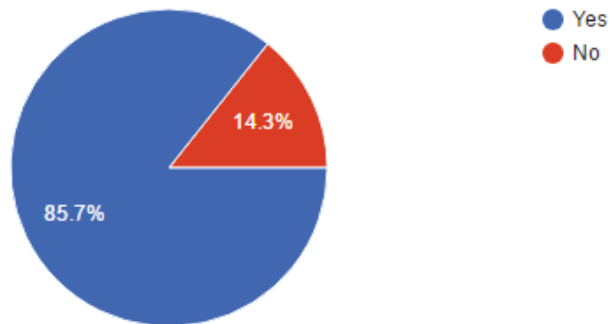


Do you think the efforts to gain control over his office organization has improved his efficiency?

(7 responses)

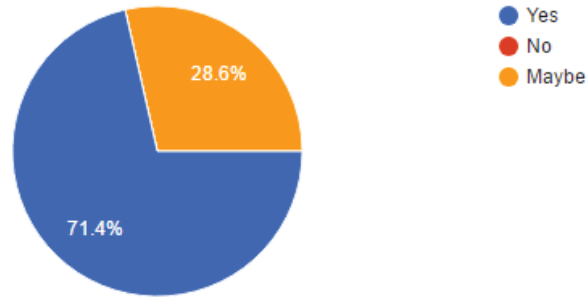


Have you noticed Mr. Davis' office to be cleaner/more organized?



Do you think the efforts to gain control over his office organization has improved his efficiency?

(7 responses)



How would you rate the impact of his more organized office on the overall efficiency and effectiveness of the HS office

(7 responses)

