Difficult Conversations… Should Be Difficult For The RIGHT Person

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Background That Led to Your Inquiry:

Everyone knows that effective communication and relationship building are essential parts of leadership. However, communicating certain information can be really uncomfortable. As educational leaders, others look to us to be fair, compassionate, decisive, and direct. In my 10 years as an educator, I have found that, both personally and professionally, I tend to avoid difficult conversations, over empathize, and place the accountability on myself instead of the person responsible. Therefore, the purpose of my action research was to identify strategies to help me communicate directly and confidently during difficult conversations.

Statement of Your Wondering:

With this purpose, I wondered how can I utilize effective communication strategies to hold others accountable when addressing difficult situations?

Methods/Procedures:

To gain insights into my wondering, I first discussed challenging situations with my cohort and mentor that needed to be addressed directly and took notes on how they have handled some difficult discussions in their careers. I then read a book that I received while participating in INALI - Crucial Conversations: Tools For Talking When Stakes Are High and Dr. White recommended that I read Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most. In Crucial Conversations, there are two surveys, "Style Under Stress" and "Dialogue Skills Assessment", which I completed to have a better understanding of not only how I typically respond to stressful situations, but also to identify which of the 7 dialogue skills I need to improve upon. Over the course of two months, as I encountered uncomfortable situations in which I had to directly speak with a staff member or parent, I documented how I felt about the crucial conversations before, during, & after. Finally, I reflected on each conversation, noting which had positive versus negative outcomes, which strategies I used in the more successful conversations, and noted any follow-up action that needed to be taken if the conversation did not end in the desired result.

Stating Your Learning and Supporting it with Data:

As a result of analyzing my data, three important things I learned include: 1) direct and timely communication is always best; 2) seek first to understand, then to be understood; and 3) move to action.

Direct and timely communication is always best. Although thoughtful responses are necessary, it is very important to address situations in a timely manner and be weary of "beating around the bush". The "Style Under Stress" survey categorized typical responses to stress as either silence or violence. I found that in stressful situations I personally become silent. I tend to avoid or withdraw from the situation as opposed to escalating it by being confrontational or yelling. Avoidance can be just as toxic as violence because often silence is perceived as approval or, left unaddressed, small issues incur a snowball effect and grow into larger,

less manageable problems over time. Another negative side effect of avoidance or withdrawal is that other staff who are looking to the leader to respond may over time lose faith in the leader's ability to resolve situations and keep things running smoothly. I have worked very hard to gain the trust and confidence of my staff and a few uncomfortable situations are not worth jeopardizing all that we have built together as a school community.

Seek first to understand, then to be understood. In sharing my situations, I learned that in order to address uncomfortable situations, I have to start with recognizing and acknowledging my contribution (or lack there of) and not focusing so much on "all" of the possible directions in which the conversation could go. Overanalyzing or trying to predict the other person's response or motive only heightens anxiety over the conversation and takes away from the issue at the heart of the matter. It is extremely important to actively listen, especially in critical conversations, but it is also wise not to over-empathize. If a staff member has become habitually late, although you understand the challenges of getting a family up and out of the house on time or heavy traffic during their daily commute, the ultimate responsibility lies with that staff member to make adjustments to meet the expectation of being punctual. It is not the leader's responsibility to provide wake up calls to staff or drive by their house to pick them up. The person in the wrong needs to be held accountable for their actions. Period. I also found that it is common for most principals, regardless of age or leadership experience, to feel some anxiety and stress about having difficult conversations; however respected and effective leaders approach these conversations head on, which leads to the final take-away... Move to action. This is the one dialogue skill that often struggle with. Beating around the bush to avoid confrontation by nature lends itself to ongoing issues. Being clear about the end result and next steps to address a situation is quite possibly the most important part of effective communication for without action... time has been wasted. Clearly and concisely providing next steps and the expected outcome ensures that all parties are held accountable. Failure to do this often results in having to hold yet another difficult conversation.

Providing Concluding Thoughts:

In conclusion, I have learned that most people appreciate a direct approach and in doing this I can build upon the trust and confidence of my staff in my leadership. Being straightforward, honest and transparent creates stronger relationships than those built on a fear of hurting someone's feelings. As I continue to face difficult conversations, I will be sure to address the situations directly in a respectful and timely manner and establish measurable action steps to assess the true outcome and hold others (as well as myself) accountable for the results.

References:

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