

Increasing Positive Interactions with Staff by Improving Instructional Practices

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Background That Led to Your Inquiry:

As I entered my 8th year as a principal, I began to notice several trends that my staff seemed to take on each year. There were certain problems that seemed to be beyond my understanding. During the summer, principals who were enrolled in IPLI were asked to give a survey to their staff. The information I gained from the survey catapulted me into the process of becoming a self-evaluative leader.

Through analyzing the data that my staff gave me, it became evident that I had one category lower than others – Instructional Programming. I decided to focus on improving Instructional Programming; however, it needed to be organic by connecting with staff members instead of simply introducing new material for staff to use.

Therefore, the purpose of my action research was to build my self-capacity in the area of curricular instruction in order to guide and model strategies for staff members at my school. By using these strategies, I focused on improving communication with all staff.

Statement of Your Wondering:

With this purpose, I wondered if building self-capacity about curricular and instructional practices allows for more conversations to relay critical and positive feedback to staff.

Methods/Procedures:

To gain insights into my wonderings, I took several actions, starting with building my knowledge of instructional practices. A local service center (Wabash Valley Education Center) offered a workshop titled “What Effective Looks Like in the Classroom”. Through this workshop, I was able to interact with other administrators to discuss and learn best practices when doing walk-throughs in a classroom. Next I helped lead my staff in a book study entitled Five Practices for Orchestrating Productive Mathematics Discussion, by Margaret S. Smith and Mary K. Stein. The book study followed our goal for the year in that we had a new math series and were looking for ways to incorporate higher level thinking into mathematics. Finally, I decided to focus my personal reading and study time on a book we received at an IPLI conference instructed by Jim Knight called Unmistakable Impact.

The data collected for my action research project was all qualitative data. First, I kept track of meaningful conversations with staff members. Next, I made an intentional effort to leave positive notes after walking through a teacher’s classroom. Finally, a pineapple chart was constructed to progress monitor staff growth on the goals laid out during PLC meetings dealing with the Five Practices for Orchestrating Productive Mathematics Discussion.

Stating Your Learning and Supporting it with Data:

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

- I don't always need to be the sage.
- A common language for instructional practices is a must
- The Professional Development I provide is not focused enough

Through both critical and positive conversations with staff members, I quickly realized that I did not need to be the expert in every category that I was discussing. By being intentional with starting those discussions, I was able to lead and guide staff members through questioning and conversation, without feeling I needed to know the topic inside and out. In turn, staff members began to bring solutions to their own problems.

In leading staff members through the book study, it became evident that a common vocabulary for initiative is a must. By focusing on one initiative, I found that it was much easier to enter into conversation based on the weekly PLC topic. Because the Pineapple Chart was not quickly received, a routine of progress monitoring for staff must become a priority in the years to come.

Through my reading of *Unmistakable Impact*, I realized that I must have strong instructional leaders to help guide and influence those staff members who are on the fringe. The nurturing of leaders and taking time to treat them with the proper amount of respect is important in gaining trust for any initiative. Professional development has been of the "popcorn" variety for too long, so honing in on the abilities of my school leaders will be important to focus on the priorities for next school year.

Providing Concluding Thoughts:

I have learned a great deal through my action research journey. First, and maybe most importantly, I learned that action research should be a part of my daily practice. I should be in charge of my own learning and impart that knowledge and willingness to staff members. As Roland Barth said, "The principal need no longer be the 'headmaster' or 'instructional leader', pretending to know all. The more crucial role of the principal is as head learner, engaging in the most important enterprise of the schoolhouse – experiencing, displaying, modeling, and celebrating what is hoped and expected that teachers and pupils will do." (1990)

Specifically, through this action research project I was able to become more at ease with having positive and critical conversations with staff members. The more I studied and learned, the more comfortable I was approaching staff members. Making notes is a critical part of the process for me. Tracking the conversations, who I talked with, and the outcome leads me to my next step.

As I continue my journey I will look for new ways to expand my knowledge of instructional practices such as personal reading of books, blogs, podcasts, etc. I will take my instructional leaders on the journey with me, so that when we have PD it is laser focused on the goals of the school. No more popcorn PD!

References:

- Knight, Jim. (2011). *Unmistakable Impact*. A Joint Publication with Learning Forward.
- Smith, M. S. & Stein, M. K. (2011). *5 Practices For Orchestrating Productive Mathematics Discussions*. The National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, INC.