

Influence or IMPACT as an Instructional Leader: How much difference do I really make?

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Background That Led to Your Inquiry:

Over the course of the past 6 + years while serving as the principal of a 5th and 6th grade building, I was continuing to feel inadequate in providing quality instructional feedback to teachers in both formal and informal settings. I had a growing desire to increase my knowledge, confidence and effectiveness as an instructional leader. Specifically, I wanted to be better able to help teachers improve instruction and learning in their classrooms.

My feeling was that my leadership strengths were related to organizing, managing and providing a healthy and pleasant working/learning environment that emphasizes communication and collaboration. However, I felt to be most effective, a school leader also needs to be able to provide feedback, input, structures that relate specifically to the “nuts and bolts” of teaching and learning. I wanted to have more of an impact rather just having some influence.

Therefore the purpose of my action research was to learn how I could improve the effectiveness and impact of my instructional leadership.

Statement of Your Wondering:

With this purpose, I wondered what actions, on my part, would most help me improve my confidence and ability to provide feedback and guidance for teachers to improve the instruction and learning in their classrooms?

Methods/Procedures:

To gain insights into my wondering, for approximately 4 months, from late November through early March, I made a concerted effort to ask more specific, instruction-related questions of teacher during one-on-one meetings and whole team meetings. I made sure at least one “best practice” type item/topic was on every teacher meeting agenda. This allowed me to facilitate discussion about instruction/learning-related topics among the staff. In these more structured settings, such as team meetings and post observation meetings with individual teachers, I was able to listen and learn a lot about their perspectives, concerns and excitement related to instruction and learning. I was also, at times, able to get a sense of what they expected from me as their principal. From these interactions with and observations of teachers I did my best to take notes as a data source.

Along with the the notes I collected from meetings and interactions with teachers I also had them take a survey about where, when and how they best gain knowledge and skills to improve their instructional practices. The survey simply asked what forms of professional development best help them improve their instruction and the learning in their classroom.

A final piece of “data” for me came in the form of the book “Unmistakable Impact” written by Jim Knight. This book provided some very useful “best practice” ideas on instructional coaching and leadership. As appropriate I tried to implement some of them throughout the research cycle.

During and at the conclusion of the research cycle, when it was time to begin drawing some conclusions, I attempted to reflect on the notes I had taken, the comments and questions I had heard from teachers etc... My main purpose was to see when, if ever, did a teacher ask me for help with an instructional/learning situation or happen to put in to practice a suggestion I had made. I also looked closely at the survey results to decide if/when teachers were looking to me for guidance in terms of instruction and learning.

Stating Your Learning and Supporting it with Data:

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

Swayzee teachers....

- View me as a source for material items and a manager for our building.
- Rely on outside sources and each other to provide them with instructional assistance.
- Do not have an expectation that I can/should directly assist them with instruction and learning.

I concluded that the teachers view me as a source for material items and a manager of our building based on the feedback I received during one-on-one post-observation meetings, team meetings and informal, casual conversations held with individual and/or groups of teachers. Whether I asked a question such as “What do you need from me?” or “How can I help you with instruction?” etc.... the teachers’ responses were overwhelmingly related to materials, supplies, furniture and in some cases dealt with discipline and scheduling.

The teachers rely on outside resources and each other to provide them with instructional assistance as we clearly indicated by the survey. When asked to identify, from a list that included “post observation meetings with the principal”, “team meeting discussions” etc...as options, the three forms of professional development or feedback that they feel helps them improve their classroom instruction the most, none of them selected items that involved or included me as the principal. The two most popular answers were Social Media sources and Presenters at workshops and conferences.

Finally, it was relatively straight forward to conclude that the teachers do not have an expectation that I can/should directly assist them with instruction and learning. The data, including notes from meetings and the survey results, support this idea. I do think a key is that they don’t “expect” it, so they aren’t necessarily concerned or disappointed if it isn’t happening. They are happy to have me “manage” and “provide”. And, I believe they are satisfied with the manner and degree to which I fulfill those responsibilities.

Providing Concluding Thoughts:

I continue to recognize and accept that “management”, which does influence instruction and learning, is my natural leadership strength and I need to use it to the best of my ability. But, working at “partnering with” the teachers so together we will positively impact instruction and learning in our classrooms is an area I need to improve upon.

This action research project confirmed some things I believed to be true about myself, the teachers at Swayzee and our expectations of each other. What I believe are my strengths...management, planning, providing a positive working-environment etc....seem to be what the teachers expect and appreciate about/from me. I feel the teachers do a great job and have always worked to show and tell them that I trust what they are doing in terms of instruction and learning. I think they appreciate this approach for the most part.

The areas I feel I am lacking in, such as a instructional leadership and impact, are probably what the teachers would rate me low on if put in a situation to have to determine that. But, they seem okay with that. Maybe there is a certain degree of "insecurity" among the teachers and that is why they don't ask or open up about instructional challenges and student-learning issues. It could be as simple as they don't see themselves as having any real issues or it could be that they don't think I have any good answers for them. Or, maybe part of it is that they don't want me to think they can't handle it.

No matter the reason(s) for the teachers perspective of my role as their principal, the fact is that if I want to have a greater impact on the teaching and learning in our building then I need to take steps to offer, provide, encourage and expect that "best practices" and "innovation" are being used in our classrooms on a daily basis. And, I need to consistently initiate conversations and activities that improve the communication among myself and the teachers so that we're learning and growing together for the sake of students and their education.

References:

Knight, J (2011). Unmistakable impact: a partnership approach for dramatically improving instruction. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.