

My Words Matter: Communication is the Key to Our Success

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Background That Led to Your Inquiry:

FTCSC experienced a leadership change in the central office with the hiring of a new superintendent. During the transition he utilized the talent of some of leaders in the buildings elevating them into a central administration role. These promotions created a shift in building leadership providing the remaining building principals a chance to increase their leadership capacity. That transition afforded me the opportunity to move to the larger middle school and begin a new leadership journey. On January 22nd I began my new role at FTMS East.

Statement of Your Wondering:

With this purpose, I wondered how can my communication, and systems of communication, impact the success of developing a positive school culture in a new school?

Methods/Procedures:

To gain insights into my wonderings, I started with reflecting on different types of communication. Knowing communication has a direct impact on the success of a shared vision, I set out to maximize my communication by analyzing the effectiveness of different methods. My first step was to determine the best data for helping determine communication effectiveness. After careful consideration I determined the best means to communication was through teacher interviews, written communication, parent meetings, student meetings, open forum meetings. The following is an outline of each approach:

Interviews

- One--on-one meetings with all office staff (certified and classified).
- Conducted 1,440+ minutes of one-on-on teacher meetings
 - Individual Staff meetings of 20+ minutes each (72 Certified Staff Members).

Parent and Staff Newsletter

- Utilizing SMORE newsletter service I was able to track the amount of parent traffic on our school newsletter. Data showed an increase of parent use over my first 8 weeks compared to the remainder of the school year.
- Provide a weekly communication about the things happening at East
 - THIS WEEK; a weekly staff newsletter that focuses on the happenings for the upcoming week.

Stakeholder Groups

- Student Leadership Lunches (4 weeks 12-15 students per lunch, three lunches per day)
- One statement per student. 40-45 students per week. Over 180 student statements on what makes East great, and how we can improve the school.
- Classroom observation and general conversations with students
- 4 Parent Coffee Each Friday morning during the months of February (4 hours total)

Small Group Discussion

- Utilize staff meetings to identify school needs allowing for collaboration and conversation.
- 4 Round Table discussions with all staff to discuss building concerns (4 hours total).

To better understand the effectiveness of my communication it was determined the most important data to measure would be the qualitative data collected. Qualitative data addressed the need to measure something that couldn't be calculated, a person's feelings and perspectives. It was imperative to observe, reflect, and gain a better understanding of their feelings to gain a better understanding of their communication needs. An additional benefit of these communication initiatives was a greater opportunity to foster relationships with the staff. The collection of this data began the moment I began my new role. From day one I spoke with the staff about the transition plan, which outlined the communication components for the transition. This plan placed a focus on personal communication with parents, students, and teachers. In addition to the qualitative data collected, quantitative data was also collected. This data consisted of measuring time spent communicating, the number of views of newsletters, and the number of parents and teacher visits. It was not until the end of the action research that data analysis was possible. Because of the nature of the quantitative components more impactful information would result from a collection of all data.

Prioritizing which data was most significant was based on several considerations. Because feelings were such a large measure of the effectiveness in communication it was imperative to reflect and analyze the comments and thoughts of the staff. Much of the examination was based on emails, notes taken during meetings, and conversations with staff. These insights held the highest priority in the overall evaluation of effectiveness. The quantitative data provided insight into the time spent and how that time may have impacted communication.

Stating Your Learning and Supporting it with Data:

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

1. Taking time to "just talk" has a tremendous impact
2. Input forums help create buy-in.
3. Make people a priority.
4. Spend time with all stakeholders.

The impact of taking time to "just talk", the input from staff forums helped create buy-in. By giving all teachers a platform to discuss their concerns and thoughts I can create a greater buy-in and commitment. Overwhelmingly, teachers expressed sincere appreciation for taking time to talk about their lives, hear more about their personal needs, and discuss the direction of the school. In follow-up correspondence I asked teachers to answer the following question: "When it's time for me to change something for improvement what do you need from to help you through that process?" Of the 75 teachers interviewed, 70 teachers provided positive feedback about our meetings. Making people a priority was overwhelmingly an important lesson learned. When people know they are the priority their level of interest and support increases. Simply visiting with a teacher gives one a chance to grow relationships and ideas. A great deal of the feedback given by the teachers expressed appreciation for taking time to meet. An example of this appreciation can be seen in the words of Sarah Dunblazier;

"First let me say thank you for taking the time to sit down with each and every one of us. I know you probably don't hear this enough but it really means a lot when you see an administrator go the extra mile to actually learn more about his staff members. I've been teaching for 19 years and in this township now for 17 years

with you being my 7th principal and you are only the third principal that has actually done something like this. So again, it really means a lot, thank you!”

Finally, spending time with other stakeholders gave student leaders and parents a platform to learn more about the new principal. During the first 4 weeks morning meetings were hosted for the parents to learn more about the importance of school and parent partnerships. During the conversations parents were provided with information about my background, family, and initial observations about the school. In addition to these parent meetings, meetings were also held with groups of student leaders (both positive and negative leaders). During these meetings conversations were had about what makes East a great school. These conversations allowed an opportunity to build meaningful relationships with student groups. Developing these relationships was imperative during the time of transition. Many of the connections made during the first 4 weeks greatly impacted the remainder of the semester.

Providing Concluding Thoughts:

During the action research there were many things taken into consideration. Like many instances during research there were moments when the time involved was overwhelming and had limited beneficial. However, continued efforts began to show the benefits of staying committed to the process. Not only were ideas and concepts naturally finding their way into conversations, but the communication helped in gaining the respect and appreciate of the staff. Their appreciation was regularly shared in conversation, and there were numerous words of enthusiasm and encouragement by many staff members.

Perhaps the most significant lesson learned was the power of just being heard. In a job where student/teacher relationships are an enormous part of the equation for student success, often times teacher to administrator relationships are undervalued. By working closely with the East staff respect and trust were quickly gained. These efforts provided the ability to begin conversations about improvements in the building. An additional consideration was how these efforts would provide insight into the most influential staff members at East. The “power players”, as referred to by Gruenert and Whitaker (2015) of the building are essential for the continued growth and improvement. Gruenert and Whitaker affirm this idea stating “As in most cultures, one or two people have a particularly strong influence on the actions of the rest of the group.” (Gruenert, Whitaker, 2015) These conversations identified the power players in the building, and also allowed helped build authentic relationships with teachers. More specifically, listening to their needs identified ways to improve the relationships between the administration and the teachers more quickly.

Consideration must be given to the communication avenues and strategies for next year. It is imperative to find more time for one-to-one conversations. Additionally, finding the ability to personalize communication can lead to greater impact on the school’s progress. By maximizing the conversations teachers will have a greater voice for the improvements and growth of the school.

According to Whitaker (2012) “It is the people, not programs, that determine the quality of the school.” (p. 6) Whitakers thoughts that talent is a vital component of the school’s success is an enormous piece. (Whitaker 2012) Additionally, focusing on communication will have an enormous impact on teachers and consequentially student learning. The action research has also shown that frequent clear communication is the most effective way to communicate. Not only does it allow face to face communication, but it also provides an avenue to effectively communicate the most essential components of one’s vision. Patrick Lencioni emphasizes the importance and potential impact of communicating frequently. Lencioni (2012) states, “The problem is that leaders confuse the mere transfer of information to an audience with the audience’s ability to understand, internalize, and embrace the message that is being communicated. The only

way for people to embrace a message is to hear it over a period of time, in a variety of different situations, and preferably from different people.” (p. 142)

Over communication is not only imperative for relationship development, but it is also imperative for the growth and improvement of the school’s initiatives and focus. Because of this research continued communication with attention to relationship will be essential for daily operations.

Reflecting on my experience as an administrator I’ve realized I have not always spent enough time personalizing my communication. After completing this action research, I was humbled by the support and appreciation afforded to me for taking time to “just talk.” Throughout my career I have always known relationships are important. I would spend “quality time” trying to get to know everyone. Inevitably, I would gravitate only to those who were most like me. The action research experience has shown how impactful conversations can be to the school culture. These conversations will not only build strong relationships, but personal communication will act as a conduit for delivering important information to the staff.

References:

- Gruenert, Steve & Whitaker, Todd. (2015). *School Culture Rewired: How to Define, Assess, and Transform It*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD
- Lencioni, Patrick. (2012). *The Advantage: Why Organizational Health Trumps Everything Else in Business*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass
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