

Noteworthy Culture

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Background That Led to Your Inquiry:

During the past four years, my team has experienced a lot of change. Staff members at my two buildings have had to adjust to a new principal, three different assistant principals/ curriculum directors, new secretaries at each building, retirements/new hires, new Indiana standards and assessments, curriculum mapping, adjustments to the new evaluation system, blended learning (1:1), NWEA assessments, renovations and more. They have been handed many unknowns and this has made everyone quite nervous and even a little suspicious.

As I reviewed the IPLI survey data, I noticed that the standard with the largest standard deviation and one of the lowest means was “nurtures and sustains a culture of collaboration, trust, learning, and high expectation”. Therefore the purpose of my action research was to build collaboration and trust between staff members and myself.

Statement of Your Wondering:

With this purpose, I wondered, how can I nurture and sustain a culture of collaboration and trust with every member of my team?

Methods/Procedures:

To gain insight into my wondering, I committed to write notes to each staff member that included specific and authentic recognition and praise. I began by writing each staff member’s name on the envelope of a thank you card. Then I began to be purposefully aware of the positive qualities of my staff. Each weekend, I would choose 4-5 envelopes and write a personalized note to each person and put it in his mailbox the following week. During this time I also reread the book “What Great Principals Do Differently” (Whitaker, 2012) and “School Culture Rewired” (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015).

I created a Google Sheet with the name of every staff member. I tracked the number of positive notes that I wrote, the date, and brief description of what I wrote in the note. I also documented any acknowledgments that I received from staff members (emails, texts, phone calls, comments). During a ten-week time frame I wrote 50 notes to 48 staff members, cooks, and custodians.

Throughout this time, I tracked the responses that I received. Eighteen (18) staff members acknowledged the thank you note in various ways. Several staff members stopped me in the hallway or popped in my office to tell me how much the note meant to them, others sent me an email or text, and some placed anonymous notes/gifts in my mailbox. I have noticed that staff members have their notes on their desks or on a wall/bulletin board.

Stating Your Learning and Supporting it with Data:

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

- 1.) I have to take time to be a relationship builder.
- 2.) I have to be observant.
- 3.) It is possible to find something positive about everyone.
- 4.) Teachers appreciate authentic praise.

I have to be a relationship builder. Some relationships establish themselves easily while others take more time to construct and maintain. As a relationship builder, I have to be observant. In order to write specific and authentic praise for each staff member, I had to be purposefully aware of each person's positive contributions. As my stack of envelopes dwindled, I realized that some notes were difficult to write because the positive praise seemed too generic. I began to seek out these staff members so I could see their positive qualities and write specific praise that would create a positive connection.

The biggest impact this project had on me as a leader was that it reminded me that it is possible to find something positive in every person. I realized that by taking time to reflect on individual staff members I became more appreciative of each person and this helps me to build positive relationships with each individual.

Teachers appreciate positive praise. This data was the most meaningful as I began to see how much impact an encouraging note could have. Some samples of the responses I received are:

- Thank you so much for the kind note! It made my day! :)
- I appreciate and have so much respect for you. Thank you for your encouragement and hard work!
- Thank you so much for the sweet card! It made my day! I'm so blessed to have you in my life.
- Thank you so much for the card. It's so nice to be appreciated!
- Thank you for the card in my mailbox last week. It was so nice of you, and I really appreciate your kind words. Thank you for all you do and for supporting us not only in the classroom but in our personal lives too!

Providing Concluding Thoughts:

As I reflect on this project, I realize that it is important to provide opportunities for staff members to have positive interactions with each other. I plan to continue writing positive notes to staff members, and I want to begin making encouraging phone calls and sending notes to family members of our staff. I also want to continue to promote positive interactions between staff members by providing opportunities at our staff meetings for everyone to encourage each other and recognize positive characteristics in one other. I was able to extend this project to include writing thank you notes to our substitute teachers. I hope to inspire teachers to write encouraging notes to each other and to their students.

During this research project, several staff members bonded during a trip to Escape Evansville and Cheddar's. We also participated in a week long team building exercise that ended with more laughing than I have heard in a long time. Teacher Appreciation Week was packed with fun as we enjoyed special treats and participated in a staff competition. Several teachers have commented that they sense a shift in the attitudes of many of our staff members. I believe this project has helped me to become a more joyful leader who is reflective and looks for the best in everyone.

References:

Gruenert, S. & Whitaker, T. (2015). *School culture rewired: How to define, assess, and transform it*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD. Riffel, L. A. (n.d.).

Whitaker, T. (2012). *What great principals do differently: 18 things that matter most*. New York: Routledge.