

Positive Feedback: It is More Powerful Than You Think!

By: Chris Kane, Silver Creek Elementary

Contact: ckane@westclarkschools.com

Background That Led to Your Inquiry:

When searching for a topic or a focus, I went directly to my own personality. I felt like many positive things were taking place in our building in regards to curriculum and instruction. There were new initiatives taking off, none larger than our transition to standards based report cards. We had fully implemented the PLC model, and were continuing to fine tune our curriculum maps.

All of these positive things left me reflecting on who was involved in each of these things. What I began to realize is that most of these things involved a small amount of teacher leaders. I was not receiving many volunteers or others coming forward. I was relying on the same people for each new thing. I spoke to some trusted members of our leadership team, and they suggested that people were frustrated or may feel unappreciated.

This made me realize that this may be a product of my personality. I am not someone to provide praise very often. I typically do not show emotion, good or bad. I tend to be an introvert in many situations. I often do not provide praise, as I do not require it myself. I began wondering how providing this positive feedback would impact our staff and climate. Therefore, the purpose of my action research was to determine if my positive feedback would impact the climate and output of the staff in a positive manor.

Statement of Your Wondering:

With this purpose, I wondered how my providing of positive, purposeful feedback would impact the professional relationships in our building, as well as staff output.

Methods/Procedures:

To gain insights in to my wondering, I began with a simple process. I began writing thank you notes for specific situations. My goal was to provide one thank you card per teacher in our building during this process. Each thank you was not generic. It sighted a specific situation in which a noticed the teacher doing something positive for students. Sometimes the specific was instructional, and other times it was something that would impact a student personally. To keep track of the notes provided, I simply generated a spread sheet that I could log each note and the date.

I received some immediate feedback. The first thank you I provided generated a response from that teacher. This person sent me a lengthy email, explaining how my note had changed the course of their week. This person was going through some tough times personally, and when they received my note in the morning, it provided some uplifting support.

It was not long before I received other positive feedback. As I visited classrooms, I noticed that the notes I had delivered were being taped to computer monitors, hung with family pictures, or just stashed by their keyboards. I could see that these notes really provided something good for these people, and this simple

gesture was making a difference. I quickly transitioned these notes to go to all staff, not just teachers. I was writing two-three notes each morning, and the impact was tremendous. I began bypassing the notes, and just thanking people face to face for specifics. The dialogue this opened up was overwhelmingly positive. I was talking to staff about their families, vacations, etc., but ultimately, I was engaging in positive relationships with staff.

There were a few things that I had not considered. The first is that staff began to mimic my behavior. I started to see notes written from staff members to other staff members. This became a trend in our building. The biggest impact was that the overall mood in the building seemed to change. Staff members were stepping in to new roles, volunteering to help with building things, as well as each other. Even our assistants were volunteering for things that they were not doing previously. The data was easy to compile, as each committee was filled, with extra people if needed. Staff began asking if they could take on new tasks, rather than the leadership generating the ideas. For this all to take place in roughly three months, I could not have imagined such a great impact.

Stating Your Learning and Supporting it with Data:

As a result of analyzing my data, I learned that my positive, purposeful feedback helps create a positive climate. When staff feel supported and appreciated by the leader, they are more likely to show their support to others, as well as be more willing to assist the leader in different ways.

By simply charting the date of the notes provided, I was able to ensure that each teacher received a thank you card. I was also able to add other staff members to the list, tracking the feedback that they received. Some visual evidence that I was able to gather included seeing the notes I provided displayed in classrooms, as well as receiving responses via email or written notes from those that received a note from me.

I was able to collect data on the amount of teachers and staff that volunteered for our committees and building duties. Traditionally, we were seeing the same names for each assignment, but as I began with this project, I received new names and people for each new need. Our leadership team provided insight on this, as they shared positive feedback they were receiving about my notes in the PLC meetings. People were more willing to step in to new roles and speak up than they had been previously.

Lastly, I began seeing teachers showing support of others. They were providing notes to each other. Notes were being left in mailboxes, on desks, or taped to doors. I did not track these individually, but the trend and mood was evident in the building. There was a sense of generosity and caring that had not been there prior to this project.

Providing Concluding Thoughts:

As a result of this project, I learned that it is critical for a leader to be able to step out of their comfort zone or what is normal to them. In my case, providing this positive praise was not my norm, but it was something that I wanted to try. One would assume that it is common knowledge that providing this positive feedback would have a positive impact. The issue that is not taken into account is that people can sense sincerity. If the feedback is generic and not purposeful, it will not have the desired impact. By me stepping out of my own personality type, I was able to provide staff with sincere thoughts and praise. This generated a positive atmosphere and reciprocity.

While I have always believed in leading by example, I have often feared being uncomfortable. It did not take long for me to see the positive outcomes from my focus. This taught me that I need to attack the obvious, regardless of how it may make me feel. If my own discomfort, while short term, leads to a positive outcome, then the payout is worth it. As a leader, we have to make sacrifices, and what better way than putting your self forward.

Our staff knows my personality, and they knew I was doing something different. It may not be the exact words that caused the outcome, rather the intent. I firmly believe that my effort is what generated the positive outcome. Word of mouth travels fast through buildings, and the topic circulating involved a positive topic. The mood is contagious, and this created a positive climate.

I will certainly continue my targeted feedback. I will not continue to track my notes, but I am creating a climate action team. My goal is to see this behavior trickle to the students and their families. I want the positive feedback to make it to our students' homes. I have seen first hand the positive atmosphere it created among staff, and I want to see this continue for the entire school climate. I could have gone about this in a more conventional method and assigned the duties, but as mentioned, a leader should do so by example. My evidence supports this wondering and findings, as I have proven to myself that these actions have created a positive outcome.

References:

N/A