

Shining a Light on My Blindspots

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Background That Led to Your Inquiry:

There are many different types of leaders and many different leadership styles. In reflecting on my 12 years in education (as a teacher, coach, athletic director, and administrator), I have worked for many different kinds of leaders. I have worked for leaders who were exceptional, and I have worked for leaders that did not inspire me as much. I have worked for people who are micromanagers, and I have worked for people who told me “I don’t care how you do it – I just want it done.” Personally, I do not work well under leaders who micromanage me. I like to have open, free – flowing conversations about big picture ideas and then let me go and do it the best I can. So when I took over my own building, I swore I would never be a micromanager. My thought has always been to hire great people and let them do their best with guidance from me when needed.

As we learned about blindspots at IPLI, I did a lot of reflecting on my own blindspots as a building-level principal. The more I thought about it, I wondered if I had worried too much about being a micromanager and had become too hands-off with my approach. Maybe there was a happy median that would make me a more effective leader and allow my teachers to be better at their jobs. The feedback I got from my cohort was encouraging: they just worried about the kinds of responses I would get from my teachers and how I would react to it. Therefore, the purpose of my action research was to find out how my teachers view me as a leader and whether or not my leadership style created a climate and culture that allowed them to be successful educators.

Statement of Your Wondering:

Have I worried too much about being a micromanager as the principal that I have become too laissez – faire with my staff?

Methods/Procedures:

To gain insights into my wondering, I talked with my teachers at a staff collaboration one morning. I talked about my wondering, and how they were going to help. I would work with my mentor and my cohort to create a short survey that would accurately collect the information I needed. I was adamant with my teachers: I needed total honesty in their answers. The most important part of the survey turned out to be a recommendation from my mentor: adding an open-ended question at the end for feedback.

I sent out the survey to my teachers and waited for the results. The initial results were very encouraging: the leadership style that my teachers labeled me as was almost identical to the leadership style they felt was the best for them personally. I brought this data to my mentor and the cohort, and they agreed. My teachers appreciated my leadership style and felt it was what was needed in my building. The tough part was analyzing the open-ended feedback about how I could improve as a leader. This is where my AR Project shifted.

When I shared the open-ended answers with my mentor, I had to come to grips with some new realities that shook some assumptions I had about myself. The biggest takeaway was about my communication with my staff. I always thought I did a great job of communicating with my teachers, and some of them agreed with

me. But most of them felt out of the loop and frustrated. After talking to my cohort, mentor, and some other administrators I trusted and respected, I decided to form my Principal's Cabinet.

The Principal's Cabinet would bring one teacher from each department and we would meet once a month for 45 minutes. These were open forums where everyone was allowed to share positives and negatives about the building. They also were allowed to ask any questions they wanted of me. Almost immediately I received positive reviews of the meetings from those in attendance. They felt that they had been heard and that I truly cared about their thoughts and feelings. After three months of meetings, I sent out a simple survey again asking my teachers about the Cabinet meetings and what kind of impact they had. The results were unanimous: everyone loved the meetings, wanted them to continue, and felt like communication amongst the staff was better.

Stating Your Learning and Supporting it with Data:

As a result of analyzing my data, two important things I learned include: 1) I always need to be looking out for my blindspots; and 2) Asking for honest feedback from your staff is important, but following through with the data you receive is more important.

The concept of blindspots was one of the biggest takeaways for me in my first year of IPLI. As a building - level administrator, I do a lot of professional reflection throughout the year. This new information has turned some of my assumptions and beliefs on their ear. My conversations with my staff sound much different than they did months ago. I am challenging my beliefs and opinions on a regular basis and trying to shed light on any blindspots I may still have.

One of the biggest reasons for this is the revelation of my first blindspot from the surveys. I prided myself on my communication with my staff, my honesty and transparency during staff meetings and conversations with teachers, and how much information I passed along to them on a daily basis. As I look back, this blindspot prevented me from being the kind of leader I thought I was. With these self - reflections, I can truly work on bettering myself as an administrator.

I must be honest: I was very nervous to read the open-ended feedback from my staff on the initial survey I sent out. I had pages and pages of comments that went from one end of the spectrum to the other on every aspect of my leadership style. Some comments were very personal, and some had nothing to do with my work as a principal. There were some very positive comments that made my day, but I couldn't stop focusing on the negatives. And I had honest conversations with my own administrative team to get their thoughts. They were good, thought - provoking conversations that led us to some interesting areas. And this whole process led to some personal and professional growth for me.

This request for honest feedback from my staff was twofold: I genuinely wanted to hear their thoughts and I wanted them to know that I valued their input. Approximately 93% of the survey answers matched up between my leadership style and the desired leadership style. This was a huge relief for me on many levels. The confirmation that my leadership style, which is a very personal thing for any educator, was viewed positively by my staff gave me confidence that what I have been doing the past few years has been supported overwhelmingly by my teachers.

Putting that feedback to work and creating the Principal's Cabinet made a world of difference to my teaching staff. They know that I very easily could have looked at the initial responses that showed I was not to hands off with my leadership style and stopped there. "My teachers think I'm great, and they like the way I lead this

building." I would even have the data to prove that I am an effective leader and my teachers want me to continue doing things the way I have always done them. I could also sift through some of the comments and pick out the positive ones and use that for my AR Project to prove how great I am.

But my teachers know that I spent a lot of time going over these results, and I then spent even more time reflecting and working through ways to be a better leader. My teachers were heard, and they know that I spent a lot of time and energy to take their feedback and try to make myself (and this building) better. 100% of the feedback from my teachers said that they appreciated the Cabinet meetings and they wanted them to continue. 100% of my teachers think that communication is better in my building because of this new group. I can't get 100% of my teachers to agree on ANYTHING! But each and every teacher thinks that my building is a better place because of the results of that survey and the actions that came from it.

Providing Concluding Thoughts:

I am leaving Peru High School at the end of this school year to be the new Principal at Greenfield-Central High School. I was very concerned that this fact would cloud the results in my final survey, given how well-received my leadership style was initially. I think it is safe to say that my teachers (for the most part) are sad that I am leaving and they hope that my successor doesn't make any drastic changes to the direction we are going as a school. I was happy to see that the staff's responses to the survey seemed to be genuine, regardless of my future and the future leader of the building. I am also happy to know that my successor will continue to hold Cabinet meetings after I am gone, and my teachers think this makes PHS a better place.

After this experience, I also am happy to know that I am taking this new perspective with me to my new building and that will make me a better leader. I have learned to challenge my beliefs and always ask questions about how I can better. I try to limit my assumptions about myself and the job that I do. Instead, I try and have honest conversations with teachers who may not feel the same way I feel. I will continue to look for my blindspots and try to turn them into strengths. I will continue to try and make myself a better principal and a better person.

References:

N/A