

Taking Down Silos, Building Bridges to Better Communication

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Background That Led to Your Inquiry:

As I entered my second year as Principal of our high school, I wanted to focus on improving communication within our building. While I thought I had established good communication channels with staff in individual, small group, and large group forums, I was aware that staff members didn't always know as much as I felt they should. This involved all aspects of our building's efforts. Therefore, the purpose of my action research would be to assess our needs regarding communication and implement strategies that would lead to a more informed staff.

Statement of Your Wondering:

"How can I improve the way essential information is shared with staff members throughout our building?"

Methods/Procedures:

To gain insights into my wondering, I developed a tool to gather feedback from staff. Rather than choosing to survey the entire staff, I presented these questions to a core group of teachers and building leaders that I trusted. I asked them to give me the feedback I needed to grow in this leadership skill. I developed a survey that involved a small number of questions rating the quality of communication within our building on a Likert scale. I then requested specific suggestions for actions that I could take that would improve communication. Additionally, I met with each team member to discuss their feedback and to gain a better understanding of their suggestions. The analysis that followed helped reveal the areas most in need of improvement as well as some specific actions that I could implement to improve communication.

Stating Your Learning and Supporting it with Data:

As a result of analyzing my data, I learned that 1) Staff members feel confident in my ability to lead focused discussions. 2) Staff members feel confident in my ability to close meetings with a defined course of action. 3) Staff members recognize a need for me to improve the way I establish communication between the individuals and small groups so that all members understand what is going on in our building.

Items 1 and 2 confirmed qualities that I already felt confident in. I have always tried to keep meetings focused on the task at hand, closing these meetings with a clear direction for all involved. Having these feelings validated through the conversations with my leadership team allowed me to move onto other concerns knowing that I at least had the same perceptions that they had. Here is a summary of Likert data related to items 1 and 2:

(Likert Score: 5) Are meetings organized by Mr. Sickbert led in an effective way with essential topics being discussed? Are most all conversations focused on the essential topics of the meeting and non-essential conversations kept to a minimum?

(Likert Score: 4.5) At the conclusion of the meeting, does Mr. Sickbert make certain that the next steps of action have been communicated clearly and each member of the team knows what & how to communicate to his/her representatives?

While item 3 also validated my own concerns, it showed to me that the area we needed to work on the most was to build structures that provided for communication between individuals and small groups who work independently of each other, yet are all parts of the same team. If we were to work as a high-functioning staff, this missing component of communication was critical to our growth.

(Likert Score: 3.8) Overall, what is your perception of most staff members about communication throughout our building? Do they feel well-informed and “kept in the loop?”

While the numerical data was interesting for the purpose of comparison, the most value was derived from the suggestions shared through the survey and follow up conversations with team members. A summary of those suggestions follows:

Suggestions:

- Set up Google Classroom or Team Drive for meeting minutes, etc.
- Move faculty meetings to the end of the day so there is more time.
- Increase communication between departments.
- Create a shared newsletter/staff update
- Could include overall goals, monthly agenda, minutes, data, next steps, action items, etc.
- Bi-weekly?
- Podcast, Screencastify, Hyperdoc
- Principals Whiteboard: Physical or Digital
- Show major objectives
- (Objective, Target Outcome, Roster, Meeting Dates, Action Items, Timeline)
- Plan opportunities for teachers to come together and analyze data
- Parent-Student-Teacher meetings could be arranged for students with D's & F's.
- Share out at meetings about PD (who went where, what did they learn?)
- Departments do not communicate with each other.
- Committees typically do not share minutes with the entire staff.

As a result of my conversations, I chose to implement a weekly principal's newsletter, dubbed the “Monday Memo.” This would be a weekly compilation of my thoughts on issues relevant to the moment, celebrations of things that happened in the previous week, a look at the upcoming calendar of events, a chart with all the initiatives currently underway in the building and updated minutes, and usually included a humorous meme or comment. Other ideas were discussed as well, and may be implemented in the future.

Feedback from staff showed a definite positive impact regarding the flow of communication among staff members. Staff comments indicated that they were more aware of what was going on in the building. Anecdotally, I noticed fewer issues with staff members forgetting about upcoming events and activities. Also, my own efforts to focus on upcoming events helped me to better plan ahead rather than being caught in a last-minute effort to prepare for a meeting or event.

Providing Concluding Thoughts:

While the improved communication that resulted from this process was certainly valuable, it was the process itself and other unintended positive consequences that have been most beneficial. The team of teachers I worked with gained a clearer understanding of how much I value their input in our school processes. It also revealed to those teachers that I am open to analyzing how I can grow to be a better professional. It also helped me to be more deliberate in my planning and organization of staff activities.

Moving forward, I hope to implement this action research model, focusing on a single aspect of leadership, breaking it down into its component parts, and identifying a specific target that I can work on in my path to being a more effective leader. The action research process has been a good reminder of the fact that, in more ways than one, it's not about the destination, but the journey.

References:

N/A