

The Impact of Positivity

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Background That Led to Your Inquiry:

I had just completed my first year as an administrator. I was hired to lead a building of 61 staff members, 400 students grades pre-K through six with two sections of students with moderate disabilities and an 85% poverty rate. The school had turned over principals six times in eight years and the previous year a staff member committed suicide after having an affair with the principal. The school had also recently acquired a Fine Arts Magnet status. Throughout that first year I had learned that all of these factors led to a balkanized staff with low morale that lacked trust and direction.

Knowing myself, I tend to appreciate people but rarely offer specific praise and thanks. My feedback is neutral or critical, and in order to assist in fostering a culture of positive relationships, I needed to attend to my communication with all staff members. Therefore, the purpose of my action research was to intentionally provide positive feedback to all staff member in a variety of ways, and to track the outcomes.

Statement of Your Wondering:

With this purpose, I wondered, with a tendency toward critical or neutral feedback, would being intentional about providing positive feedback have an impact on my relationships with staff members? Or on a larger scale, could it impact the climate and culture in an entire building?

Methods/Procedures:

To gain insights into my wonderings, I committed to providing positive feedback to at least three staff members a day through different means. In order to track my progress, I created a monthly spreadsheet in which I listed all of the staff members in rows and titled the columns with each of the ways I could offer praise. The list contained call, email, intentional conversation, card and text. Each time I delivered feedback I wrote a quick descriptive note in the proper space. This allowed me to track my interactions and specifics about the staff member's positive doing.

As I sent out positive messages I noticed that I was receiving "reciprocal" feedback, so I created a folder for tracking. I also journaled as a form of data collection. This allowed me to reflect on how I was feeling as well as my perception of the building's response to the increased positive feedback. This data collection process was ongoing throughout the entire year. I would reference the spreadsheet daily to see how I was progressing.

Stating Your Learning and Supporting it with Data:

As a result of analyzing my data three important things I learned include: 1) I increased my positive interactions with staff members and started naturally looking for and telling others about positives I had witnessed; 2) Staff members started to engage with each other in similar, positive ways; 3) When I had to have a difficult conversation there was already a built in balance with each teacher.

By tracking positive feedback, I was able to have accountability to myself. Before the tracking I am unsure as to the actual amount of positive feedback I was giving. Due to the difficulty I had in giving positive feedback when I starting tracking the data, I know that it was less than I desired and less than the staff and building needed. In the first month I had increased my “tracked” positive feedback to 19 interactions. That did not meet the target. By the last month of school I had increased my positive feedback to 37. That is still less than the target, but an improvement from the start. Each month I achieved an increase in the number of positive feedback interactions. As time went on, offering positive feedback became more and more natural. As I journaled, I found myself attending to positive aspects of staff members work. It was more natural for me to witness the positive and then make sure that I offered that feedback to the staff member.

As time went on, staff members started to engage with each other in positive ways by offering positive feedback to each other. When they sent an email, often times I was being carbon copied so that I could see what was being said. I had several conversations in which a staff member informed me about the positive feedback they had received from another or positive feedback they had given to another. This is an example of an email in which I was copied, “Tisa, I just wanted to say how much I'm enjoying your students. They have all come prepared and ready to go with their book reviews. Some of them only need one take to get our final video for the showcase. This was a great idea. It will be perfect to help with our transition times. Thanks again for all of your hard work.” The climate seemed to be shifting as people were feeling appreciated and the focus was on what was being done right.

As the staff started to notice a positive difference, the leadership team suggested that we implement a “Staff Shout Out” section on the morning announcements. When one staff member wanted to recognize something positive about another, they would email me and that statement would be read on the morning announcements and forwarded to that staff member. It was another way for the building to hear about the positive happenings and shift the focus throughout. Each shout out was unique and meaningful in its own way. Some examples include, “Shout out to Collin for being thorough and questioning in his work to get student services on track!” “ I want to give a shout out to Liz. She has been amazing to work with this year. She is super helpful, gives me great resources so I can help my kids, and has put together all of the field trips this year which is A LOT of work! She is awesome and should be recognized.”

The most unexpected outcome dealt with balance. By genuinely noticing the positives in people, I had built relationships and a bank of “grace” with individuals. When I had to have a conversation that was more difficult (critical or corrective), it was received in an accepting way. Since I had recognized the good leading up to the conversation, staff members were able to hear the critical. The balance of feedback allowed change to happen in a more accelerated way. As staff trusted all types of feedback, because all types were now being given, they were willing to work through areas of their own practice that needed to shift and change. I wrote about several of these interactions as I journaled throughout the process. At one point in a conversation a staff member noted, “...we are able to have these conversations because you have been positive and open to listening to our concerns...” As I reflected on that conversation, I deduced that the mention of being positive was a direct result to the effort of giving genuine, specific positive feedback and not just a statement about my general demeanor.

Monthly positive feedback interactions:

Month	Number of positive interactions
March	19
April	26
May	37

Sample of the chart with interactions included:

x	Note	Call	email	Intentional Conversation	Card	Text
Tracy L			Interaction with CC			
Nicole P				Work with AL from daily and calls to in room all day		
Lindsay W	Meetings with new parent and diligence to do what is best for students					
Sharon A		About impact at school - extra duties, work with difficult students etc.				
Tessa M			RTI thank you			
Liz S			Quality of instruction and thinking through all situations			
Jessica R						Out with baby - missing her interaction with MB

Providing Concluding Thoughts:

Through this action research cycle, I have learned that positive feedback is a critical lever that must be pulled if climate, and ultimately culture, is going to change. As I gave positive feedback, it became more natural. As I received reciprocal feedback telling me how much the comments meant to staff members, I realized that this one "task" had to become a part of the fabric of my interactions with all staff moving forward. This one simple project has grown and gained momentum as staff members are engaging in new ways with each other. My focus started to shift from all of the things that needed attention to all of the people that needed attention. I believe that this shift in thinking will, and already has, allow(ed) me to become a better leader.

I will continue to engage in the practice of giving and tracking positive feedback. I will track the interactions for accountability to myself. For the upcoming year, I am going to challenge the staff to engage in the same behavior; noticing positive in their co-workers and being intentional about telling them.

References:

N/A