

ABC's of Critical Conversations: Helping Your Team Be Better not Bitter

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Background That Led to Your Inquiry:

I am such a positive person by nature that I am often afraid that I will hurt someone's feelings if I say something that could be said as negative. In my first role as an administrator I had a very negative experience with some staff members when I tried to have critical conversations. I had no support from the superintendent or the school board. The teachers ran the school and felt they had no room for improvement. I actually had a grade level of teachers come to my office and return a book I had given a first year teacher on classroom management after an observation I did in her classroom. Her "teammates" came into my office, put the book on the desk and said, "Don't give her anything else to read or do. She has enough to do just making her lesson plans. We are her resources. She doesn't need your help." This attitude was allowed and supported by the superintendent and board. It made me doubt myself and question myself as an administrator. I am working on trusting my instincts and feeling "safe and secure" enough to have those critical conversations when needed.

How do I have critical conversations making teachers better not bitter?

I wonder if I will feel more confident about these critical conversations after I read the book "Making Teachers Better Not Bitter: Balancing Evaluation, Supervision, and Reflection for Professional Growth" by Tony Frontier and Paul Mielke if I learn strategies on how to have these conversations to help teachers better. I also wonder if I will feel more confident after I have had more conversations that make teachers better rather than bitter?

Therefore, the purpose of my research was to become more confident in my ability to have critical conversations with members of my team without damaging a relationship.

Statement of Your Wondering:

With this purpose, I wondered how do I have those critical conversations making teachers better not bitter? I wondered if I will feel more confident about these critical conversations after I read the book "Making Teachers Better Not Bitter: Balancing Evaluation, Supervision, and Reflection for Professional Growth" by Tony Frontier and Paul Mielke and learn strategies on how to have these tough conversation to help teachers improve? Finally, I wonder how I can approach difficult conversations in order to make my team better not bitter?

Methods/Procedures:

To gain insight into my wonderings, I read "Making Teachers Better Not Bitter: Balancing Evaluation, Supervision, and Reflection for Professional Growth" by Tony Frontier and Paul Mielke. I reflected upon my reading in a journal. I then began to document my conversations with people over the course of eight weeks. I organized the conversations based upon the content of the conversation into categories of: safety, management, instruction, behavior and growth. I also journaled on how I felt before and after the conversation. Finally, I documented the outcome of the critical conversations I had with teachers/staff,

parents, and administrators. I went through all of the documentation and I colored coordinated the conversations.

- Purple- Conversations with parents
- Green- Conversations with administration
- Blue- Conversations with teachers

This allowed me to visually see who most of my conversations were with. I also bolded key words in my journaling. I began to see words and phrases surface repeatedly in my writing.

Stating Your Learning and Supporting it with Data:

As a result of analyzing my data, I learned that when I really listen and people feel understood, they will trust you and be more receptive to what you have to say and my influence will grow.

As a result of analyzing my data, I learned that asking clarifying questions is less threatening and helps move the conversation along.

As a result of analyzing my data I learned that I learn more when I speak less and listen more.

I also learned as a result of analyzing my data that I have more influence when I listen first.

My Action Research showed me that as a leader In order to help my team become better, I learned to ask questions; be a listener; and communicate without judgement.

An excerpt from my qualitative data comes from my journal that I kept for eight weeks.

January 10 - I had a conversation today with a parent, who happens to also be a board member about their child participating in after school tutoring. The parent did not want her child to miss out on basketball and the parent said she did tutoring last year and did not pass ISTEP. (Purple)

January 12 - Today I had a tough conversation with Mr. Haas about my contract. He wanted to add Corporation Testing Coordinator to my job responsibilities. The thought of this makes me extremely nervous. (Green)

January 20 - Teacher is late. I asked is everything okay because you typically aren't late. Thanked her for calling and letting me know so I could cover her room.(Blue)

January 27 - Art teacher and music teacher came to talk with me following the specials meetings. They said they felt comfortable coming to me and sharing their thoughts. I felt so good about this interaction. It told me they trust me and I am building relationships with them. They know I will listen. (Blue)

January 31 - Grade Level Meetings with 2nd and 5th grade. Again I was not sure how the meeting would go. We had great discussions about NWEA and Go Math. Additionally we discussed the amount of changes this year and the level of stress. I listened. (Blue)

February 2 - RTI meeting with a parent to discuss moving to testing. (Blue)

February 3 - A 6th grade teacher asked to speak to me privately. She was mad at me regarding a situation that happened in the fall. She told me how she felt. I listened. We talked. I listened some more. She apologized. (Blue)

Providing Concluding Thoughts:

As a result of my action research I learned a great deal about myself as a leader. I used to worry about hurting someone's feelings when I gave them constructive criticism. I also felt that I needed to solve people's problems when they came to me. Through this experience I have learned to speak less and listen more. You learn more by listening.

Instead of feeling as if I needed to have all of the answers to be an effective educational leader. I learned that in order to be a more effective leader that I need to seek first to understand, then be understood. I have found that people just want to be heard. When I listen, I gain a better understanding. People often know the answer to their questions if they talk it through.

I have found this experience to be extremely beneficial. As educators we rarely take a moment to reflect upon our practice. My wonderings have given me the opportunity to reflect upon areas that I struggled with. It allowed me the opportunity to look deep within myself to ponder my strengths and challenges and how those affect my leadership. I have grown through this experience. I will continue to use Action Research to improve my abilities as an educational leader.

References:

Frontier, T., & Mielke, P. (2016). Making Teachers Better Not Bitter: Balancing Evaluation, Supervision, and Reflection for Professional Growth.