Having Real Conversations: Getting to Know My Staff on a Personal Level

By: Dustin Jorgensen, Forest Park Elementary
Contact: jorgendu@clay.k12.in.us

Background That Led to Your Inquiry:

When I took over my building there was a much divided staff. I was a young administrator who came in to the job being told what I needed to do. As the years progressed, the staff dynamic improved tremendously. However, my mentality had failed to evolve with those changes. The approach that I was told to take during the first year should have only lasted the time frame it took to get the staff to come together. As the staff become more collaborative and united, I failed to get to know the individuals in my building. I knew each on a professional level. I knew their teaching strengths and weaknesses. I knew what students they worked best with. However, for someone who grew up in the same small town…I couldn't tell you their kids' names, their hobbies, their interests, and what they like to do on the weekend. Some began to view me as unapproachable or someone who didn't care about my staff. Therefore, the purpose of my action research was to determine if having personal conversations and connections to my staff would improve my leadership capacity.

Statement of Your Wondering:

With this purpose, I wondered if having personal conversations with my staff would improve my leadership capacity.

Methods/Procedures:

To gain insights into my wondering, I began planning to have more personal conversations with my staff. My school has a certified and classified staff of a little over 60. I created a spreadsheet with all of my staff members' names and began tracking the personal conversations I was having. There were a select few, maybe 5-6, that I had personal conversations with on a daily basis. After seeing this, I began planning to have one personal conversation with someone not in that group on a daily basis.

The easiest way for me to integrate these personal conversations and it not seem too bizarre to the staff was to include them in my morning walk of the building. Each morning during the time students are coming to the classrooms from breakfast, I walk through the building and visit each classroom. I usually had conversations with the students during this time. I began integrating a conversation with one staff member each day during this time. When I was done on my building walk, I would record this in my spreadsheet. This allowed me to spread my conversations throughout the building and throughout staff members.

I tracked the data for two months. During the first couple of weeks, the exchanges felt forced and awkward. After I began looking at the data, it made me realize that this was important and something I shouldn't have to force myself to do. The exchanges become easier after the first month and I was starting to have several "real" conversations on a daily basis. When this occurred, I stopped tracking the data. I began connecting with staff members and didn't need to force myself to do this. The data showed the increase in personal conversations over time.

Stating Your Learning and Supporting it with Data:

As a result of analyzing my data, three important things I learned include 1) All people want others to care about them. When they feel this caring, they feel more comfortable sharing work related information rather than just personal stories. 2) Having personal conversations has increased the amount of professional conversations taking place in my building. 3) Staff members have started conversations with me that they would not have had before, thus increasing my "approachability" to the staff.

People began to open up to me after I started asking them questions about their kids and lives. Once they felt that I was genuinely interested in them as a person, they began sharing work issues with me. They would come to me with concerns and questions. In the past, people generally didn't approach me with issues. I would find out through other staff members who had a good relationship with me. Through these conversations, staff members were approaching me themselves.

Once I started having personal conversations with staff, they would start asking me questions as well. These conversations would often help us both feel comfortable and lead to professional conversations. The professional conversations were engaging and rewarding. We would debate and share ideas that greatly impacted our school. These conversations hadn't occurred in my previous years as principal.

My approachability increased via the amount of staff feeling comfortable bringing issues and concerns to me. In the past, these all came through one or two individuals. As these conversations began occurring on a regular basis, many staff members approached me with ideas, concerns, questions, and work related issues that wouldn't have been brought to my attention before. The increase in this direct approach has improved my leadership style.

Providing Concluding Thoughts:

The action research journey was one that helped me grow tremendously as a leader and a person. The action research was meant to just focus on me having more personal conversations. What really happened was something much bigger than that. As I began to connect more to staff members, it helped me regain a part of myself that I had lost when I became an administrator. Prior to my principal position, I was a teacher, high school soccer coach, and elected member of our City Council. When I gave up those things to pursue administration, I gave up the social life and activities that helped bring me great joy. I was told what to do and how to do it. So, I did what I was told. As time passed, I never pursued those things that made me happy. As I began to talk with my staff, it helped remind myself what my passions really are in life. I was able to reconnect with a lot of those things and not just improve my ability as a leader in a school, but improve myself as a person. I was able to find those little joys that can impact you on a deep level and help make each day a wonderful day to wake up. I am so thankful this journey occurred.

As a school leader my passions and beliefs have never really been what I was told to do. This journey allowed me to open up and explore those educational ideas and topics that I find exciting. Once I found myself again, I was able to transfer this to my leadership. As a high poverty/high special education school, I began implementing and exploring more holistic approaches that don't focus so much on standardized testing. The testing aspect of school is what has dragged down my staff the most. We began exploring STEM certification and are working hard and fast to become a STEM certified school. This is a passion. Our students need something different, authentic, and applicable to the real world. This is a way to translate what I really believe our students need into an action that we can all get behind. I would not have had the courage to begin this

with my staff had I not been taking this action research journey. Finding my passions and translating them to real life changing decisions is something I will forever be grateful for. I have the action research cycle to thank.

As I continue to reflect, I must reference the Wallace Foundation's Study in 2013 that found that part of a successful principal is the connections between the principal and the teacher. Reading that allowed me to believe there was more to these connections than just appearance. And, as I explored this topic and had these conversations, I found out the impact this research can have. Having personal connections is imperative in being successful in a school. They help everyone work toward a common goal, they help staff and families solve problems, and they just allow for everyone to understand each other a little bit better. It is easier to talk to family than strangers. When you make your school feel like a family, it makes things much easier.

References:

The Wallace Foundation. (2013). The School Principal as Leader: Guiding Schools to Better Teaching and Learning. (expanded ed). New York, NY