

# Using Intentionality to Build Relationships: The Benefits of Connecting and Caring Personally

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## **Background That Led to Your Inquiry:**

As I began my second year as principal, a focus of our school was building positive relationships with all students; we saw this as a need based on various discipline data points. We held development sessions with staff focused on strategies to build better relationships, and we shared/reflected on how it impacted classroom management and instruction. In the midst of my second year, I realized there were some staff members I didn't know very well or had not had many opportunities to connect with. I wondered about establishing positive, collaborative relationships with teachers and staff members. I wanted to be sure all staff members knew me as an individual, and that I knew them as well. Therefore, the purpose of my action research was to determine if I could dedicate time to building more positive relationships with staff members.

## **Statement of Your Wondering:**

With this purpose, I wondered if intentionally carving out time in my schedule for relationship-building would create a more collaborative, productive environment.

## **Methods/Procedures:**

To gain insights into my wondering, I began by brainstorming with other principals about strategies they have used to build more positive relationships with staff members. After compiling these ideas, I decided to focus on the intentional scheduling of "connect personally time" as well as reaching out to the spouses/families of staff members (this idea stemmed from the book Kids Deserve It! which provided the notion of sending home positive notes or making positive phone calls to staff members' families, just as we do with students when we want to celebrate their growth or achievements).

I began by adding personal connection time to my calendar 2-3 days per week for 2 months, and intentionally planning out which teams of teachers I would visit. I scheduled these visits in the morning before school and/or during the teachers' prep times. I realized that if not scheduled on my calendar, I was much less likely to actually complete the task of visiting teachers. I did not tell teachers they were "scheduled" on my calendar - rather, I spent the time moving from room to room engaging teachers in casual conversation unrelated to school and instead focused only on them personally. If something came up that prevented me from completing these CP (connect personally) walks, I rescheduled them for another day the same week. Additionally, each week for two months I chose three staff members and sent notes home to their spouses/significant others. In these notes, I highlighted why the teacher or staff member was such a positive part of our team, and thanked the spouse for "sharing" their husband/wife with our staff.

My data collection method was two-fold. First, from a quantitative standpoint, how often did I complete the CP walks/notes home, and how many teachers did I reach? Second, from a qualitative standpoint, how were my interactions impacting my daily relationships with staff members? I wrote reflections on a weekly basis (typically over the weekend) about interactions with staff and other impacts of the CP walks and notes home. In looking back, I analyzed my data by determining how many teachers received notes home, how frequently I

completed the CP walks, and how my journal entries evolved over time - often covering topics outside of the CP walks and notes home but that came about through those morning conversations with staff members.

### **Stating Your Learning and Supporting it with Data:**

As a result of analyzing my data, three important things I learned include: 1) I was not spending enough time connecting with staff members on a personal level prior to engaging in this action research project; 2) staff members value the opportunity to be recognized for their good effort and hard work; 3) the time spent on building positive relationships pays off in various ways that support the improvement and growth of our school!

At the end of the two months (prior to leaving for my maternity leave) I had successfully scheduled in CP time all 8 of the weeks I had attempted, and on all but 2 of the days I had originally set out to engage in it. It became clear very quickly that I hadn't been devoting enough time to making personal connections because numerous teachers made comments such as, "Wow! We never see you around at this time of day!" or "It's so odd that you're not in your office getting ready for the day." Typically, my practice was to sit at my desk, review emails, and listen to district/bus radios in the morning prior to students' entry into the building. The idea of me walking around, visiting teachers as they made copies or drank their coffee, was new for our staff. Many even assumed I was there to "talk business" - asking questions quickly about professional development or upcoming meetings, or explaining things they had "been meaning to email me about." My journal entries show that it took a solid 3-4 weeks before staff members started to understand I was simply there to chat with them and check in, not to discuss school-related agenda items (unless staff members desired to discuss such items). Again, it was clear I hadn't been spending enough time on the personal connection aspect of my role.

I was able to send home 22 notes to staff members' families (roughly 35% of my staff received notes; we have 39 certified staff members and about 25 support staff members). After the first week of sending home notes to staff members' spouses, the response was immediate and overwhelmingly positive! I received emails from teachers thanking me; one teacher even came to my office in tears of gratitude for the kind gesture. I received two emails and one phone call from the spouses of my staff members thanking me for taking the time to recognize the hard work of their spouses.

After a couple of weeks of incorporating CP walks and notes home, I began to understand the true impact of building a solid foundation of positive relationships. As Kim Scott discusses in her book *Radical Candor*, it's vital for any leader (boss) to care personally (dimension one) about his/her employees. Such intense care for one's employees helps build a rapport which can later better withstand challenging conversations about an employee's performance (her second dimension: challenge directly).

In reviewing my journal entries, the CP walks gave me the opportunity to connect with some staff members I had previously not built a solid relationship with, for a variety of reasons. I had a handful of staff members I hadn't connected well with either because of opposite schedules, or lack of comfort/ease of conversation, etc. The CP walks helped those relationships most significantly. By the time I left for maternity leave, I had teachers who previously would never approach me with concerns or questions suddenly emailing me or texting me outside of school hours or on weekends - they felt comfortable enough to do this and to seek guidance on particular issues they were facing.

The CP walks also gave me insights into some key issues/challenges a few teachers were facing: one teacher (who is very private) and his wife are expecting and learned their baby has Down's Syndrome (I'm not sure this teacher would have felt comfortable enough to share this with me if not for the CP walks); another teacher

was having a challenging year due to some personal health issues and again did not share those with me until after a few weeks of CP walks (the issues were ongoing throughout the year - I had previously just assumed she was taking a lot of time off due to being unhappy with her job). I also realized the CP walks served another purpose: allowing me to see who was at work, what they were doing/working on, and how they felt about the upcoming day. I could often get a good "pulse" on the building through my CP walks. Additionally, when issues came up (such as a class not following procedures in the hallway, or a teacher not following the curriculum map) I felt so much more comfortable and confident simply addressing it with the teacher, and they responded better to me than previously because of the more positive, collaborative relationship.

### **Providing Concluding Thoughts:**

A major takeaway for me after completing the action research process is the importance of scheduling events/tasks into my calendar. Even if they have to be moved, I hold myself much more accountable for completing tasks when they are scheduled in advance. Additionally, I have always been a school leader who emphasizes the importance of teachers building strong, positive relationships with their students; I am surprised it took me a year or so to realize this same importance applies from the principal/teacher perspective.

The positive outcomes of my action research have led me to a few conclusions: the need to incorporate more CP time in my calendar throughout next school year; the need to incorporate some CP activities/conversations into our staff meetings/ professional learning opportunities so staff members can connect personally with one another; and the need to ensure all staff members feel valued in our school community. While I knew that relationships are the strong foundation of any successful organization, the action research cycle helped me re-commit to devoting my own time to build personal connections. I plan to share my findings with teachers at the start of next school year and use my own learning to help inspire them to really work on building positive relationships with all students.

Moving forward, I plan to schedule CP time on a weekly basis and continue my practice of sending home positive notes to staff members' families. I also plan to continue practicing and building my own confidence with the critical conversations that leaders often need to have with their employees; as Radical Candor author Katie Scott believes, the foundation of a strong personal connection helps leaders challenge employees when needed and get the results they are looking for in terms of improving or changing a behavior/practice. The action research process in general reminded me that what gets inspected, gets respected; in other words, what we focus on and invest our time in is what improves!

### **References:**

Nesloney, T. & Welcome, A. (2016). Kids Deserve It! San Diego, CA: Dave Burgess Consulting, Inc.  
Scott, K. (2017). Radical Candor. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press.