



Just for the ASKing!

by Bruce Oliver

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Just for the ASKing! is a monthly column that addresses the needs of instructional leaders, particularly building level administrators. Each month, this column provides information, insights, and suggestions that help administrators as they strive to be instructional leaders in schools. This month's focus is on the importance of relationships in building the foundation of a strong school culture.

It's All About Relationships



Bruce facilitating the Leading the Learning workshop.

Recently I addressed a group of prospective teachers at James Madison University. All had been hired for their first teaching job and were finishing up their coursework. The professor, Dr. G. J. Tarazi, in his concluding remarks asked the class what the most important thing they had learned in all of their coursework. Without hesitation, and in unison, the students replied, "It's all about relationships!" On the drive home, I reflected on that response. I thought about the most fulfilling moments and the most vivid memories of my 36 years in public education. Example after example flooded my thoughts. The most successful administrators and teachers were the ones who made it a priority to work with other people in positive and productive ways. These educators were also the happiest and most successful people I knew. The professor had clearly passed on an essential piece of wisdom to those fledgling educators.

Relationship building is the foundation of a strong school culture. A school will either falter or stagnate unless attention is paid to the people who are there to make it all work. Some ways to build that foundation are:

The 300-Pound Gorilla in the Room. Much has been written about the importance of a strong school culture. There is a definite link between the culture in a school and the achievement of its students. Jon Saphier has concluded that "The more disadvantaged and diverse the students, the more important the professional culture becomes." And yet, there are schools where the constituents are discouraged, uncommitted, and disenfranchised because the leaders have paid little or no attention to the culture of the school. They simply ignore the low morale, they disregard the lack of trust in the leadership of the school, and they simply go on each day "pretending that things are okay." Ignoring the problem will only make things worse. It is incumbent upon the leaders of the school to examine the existing culture of the school honestly and fairly, and to take steps to establish a stronger and improved working environment.

It's The Principal of the Thing. There is no one more powerful influence on the culture of the school than the principal. It has been cited again and again in research studies that the principal should be seen as the cohesive source of support and stability for the school. Research has also shown that more successful

principals spend more time focused on curriculum and instruction and promoting these issues through their relationships with teachers. Less successful principals concentrate their time on student discipline and managing the building. It has also been found that successful principals derive great personal satisfaction from regular contact and involvement with teachers, students, and parents on a consistent and frequent basis. In short, they are passionate in their concern for people.

Trust is a Must. A new principal who inherited a school with an unhealthy culture wrote that she knew at the outset that she had her work cut out for her. There was a “we/they” mentality and the leaders were not looked upon very favorably. She wisely concluded that she had to establish a sense of trust among the teaching staff. To this end, she began by meeting some basic teaching needs. She provided funds for instructional supplies, covered classes in order to allow teachers additional planning time, and bought refreshments for staff meetings. None of these practices had been done to any extent in the past. Her actions paid off as she saw the teachers begin to respond in a positive manner. Her supportive demeanor, accessibility, and willingness to engage her staff members in congenial conversations established a necessary trust that enabled her to take the next steps in improving the culture of the school.

Seize the Moment. A principal who is serious about establishing and maintaining a strong school culture seeks opportunities to advance the culture and plans intentionally and deliberately to make the culture as healthy as possible. Ideas can come from unexpected places and seizing the moment to turn inspirations into actions can pay off in big ways. Principals have recently shared additional strategies that have helped them build good rapport with their staffs. One principal has learned to include community builders (getting-to-know-you conversation starters among adults) at faculty meetings in order to promote congeniality. She realized that the animated conversations and friendly interactions provided the groundwork for more serious, professional dialogues that would follow. Another principal wanted her teachers to establish more student-centered classrooms, so he systematically had his faculty members experience a different active learning strategy at each staff meeting. A third administrator concluded that simply creating a master schedule that would allow teachers common planning time to meet together for discussions was not effective. She implemented a process through which the teachers established norms that would guide their work together. She concluded that these norms resulted in her teachers focusing on more serious work and tackling the “hard stuff” when it was required.

Do the Math. In a recent workshop, I overheard a teacher say, “No one takes the time to notice what teachers are doing well.” She went on to discuss the “gotcha” mentality of her leaders. It was not the first time I had heard such a comment and it bothered me to think that some of our leaders ignore the basic tenets of good human relations. A recent survey of teachers found that the relationship that administrators develop with their teachers is often the key ingredient noted by teachers when they are asked what would improve their working environment. The math is simple:

Positive Interactions + Support for Teachers = Improved Morale

Improved Relations + Continued Support = Trust

Trust + Instructional Leadership = Improved Student Learning

Don't Forget the Students and Parents. A school will not make progress unless the leader takes the necessary steps to build relationships with teachers. However, a prudent leader remembers the importance of building solid relationships with parents and students as well. Wise administrators use parent meetings as opportunities to promote a sense of optimism about the school and to project a sense of approachability and friendliness. In addition, it is important for administrators to be seen by the students as positive

supporters and not simply rule enforcers. One high school administrator went out of her way to contact the families of students who had not been successful in middle school in order to make the beginning of the student's high school career a more positive experience. Another principal eased the anxieties of elementary school students in orientation meetings by dispelling the negative myths that are passed on about the middle school experience. An elementary principal routinely wears a "Students First" button and makes it a practice to not just "talk the talk" but also "walk the walk" by spending considerable time in classrooms each and every day. Administrators need to be seen as people who care deeply about all of the groups that comprise the overall school community.

Establish Learning Communities. There is no more crucial role for today's school administrator than to create a culture where teachers can talk honestly about their teaching and the challenges they face. These interactions can take the form of "gripe sessions" or structured conversations that lead to solutions and improved student achievement. One approach that has received considerable attention of late is the concept of learning communities. Michael Fullan calls them "deep learning communities," while Rick DuFour adds the word "professional" to his description of learning communities. Others simply call them learning teams. Regardless of what they are called, when these structures are put in place in schools, the collaboration among teachers can unlock the potential for powerful conversations. Leaders often ask their teachers to involve their students in the best practices of problem solving, active learning, and critical thinking. It is equally important for principals to create conditions for teachers to pursue the same kinds of behavior themselves. When formal processes are put in place for frequent and focused teacher collaboration, the following results may occur:

- Teachers will take greater ownership for their role in student achievement
- They will develop a greater sense of self-efficacy and belief in their ability to solve problems
- There will be less competition between teachers and a reduction in the belief that by withholding information, one teacher will look better than another teacher
- As relationships grow, there will be a de-privatization of practice and an increase in peer observations and instructionally related conversations
- Teachers will see themselves as true leaders who can have a positive impact on the school as a learning community

Procrastination is the Enemy. I recently encountered two conflicting messages. Roland Barth described a sign he saw in a teachers' lounge which read, "We are all in this – alone." In direct conflict is a sign I recently saw in another teachers' lounge which read "Together We Shine." As Barth wrote, "The nature of relationships among the adults within a school has a greater influence on the character and quality of that school and on student accomplishment than anything else." Principals only have so much time and so much energy; but they have a choice. They can either maintain the status quo, or they can use that time and energy to foster relationships which may lead to unimagined results and build a culture where cooperation, generosity, and trust are the hallmarks of the school environment.

It's all about relationships!

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