A Quick Note About Motivating Teachers

There is a common theme in the conversations I have with teachers and administrators across the country. Teachers do not feel valued. Morale is at an all-time low. Teachers are losing momentum and are somewhat beleaguered by the constant assault on public education by the media and politicians, the demands on their time, the ever-growing set of standards that must be mastered by all students and new levels of accountability, and the ever-dwindling resources available to public education. Teacher recruitment and retention has become one of the top priorities of school districts, colleges, and state governments as the problem grows with each passing school year.

While I don't deny the reality and severity of these issues, I continue to see progress in student learning. More students are successful in school. In my own district, we have made progress with our students year after year. How can unmotivated, demoralized teachers produce such results? Maybe the answer lies in the degree to which teachers are or can be motivated to be their very best.

In a recent Phi Delta Kappa poll (2014) of 170,000 Americans, 10,000 of which were teachers, teaching was found to be the second most satisfying profession after medicine. The same poll found that in contrast to their overall happiness with their jobs, teachers often rate last or close to the bottom for workplace engagement and happiness.

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In the 2019 poll, half the teachers reported they had seriously considered leaving the profession. With that said, however, the poll also has encouraging news—significant numbers of parents and community members will stand up to support teachers (Phi Delta Kappa International, 2019).

Bolman and Deal (2002) articulate the challenge as the failure of "teacher proofing" reform initiatives. Pink (2009) describes the three important factors for motivation in the workplace: autonomy, mastery, and purpose. It is this last notion, purpose, in which family engagement can play a huge role.

Upon entering their chosen profession, a majority of teachers have a strong sense of purpose. Administrators and families that support teachers will allow a teacher to sustain their purpose in advancing the learning of an increasingly diverse country of learners. Students connect to the person who is teaching, not simply the content being taught. Families react in much the same way. Teachers are motivated by a desire to give. Family engagement can considerably enhance this desire.

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To ignore teacher motivation is almost to cast a death knell on the culture of schools and education. Later, we will learn that culture is made up of the collective beliefs, values, and assumptions of people within the organization. The degree to which people are motivated toward peak performance will go a long way to ensuring a positive and thriving organizational culture.

Research has articulated a great number of positive outcomes when efforts are made to successfully engage families in the academic lives of their children. In a study conducted by Epstein and Becker (1982), a large population of teachers was asked to share what they believed was the largest barrier to their success as a teacher. Interestingly, an overwhelming number of those teachers indicated they wished they had more support from the home for what they were trying to achieve in their classroom.

Family engagement produces a number of positive outcomes for education. One of them is clearly the improved attitudes and morale of teachers. When students do better in school, homework completion rates improve, attendance improves, and student behaviors improve, so does teacher desire and morale (Epstein et al., 2009). When families and teachers are working together on the same page, everybody wins. This collaboration does not happen by itself. It takes a commitment to the idea, reflection on practice, and work toward building trusting relationships with every family.

It's important that we support teachers' efforts to engage families by spending time, energy, and resources to provide effective professional development in the area of family engagement. Teacher satisfaction and

student learning both improve for teachers when family engagement is a priority and when teachers feel supported in creating meaningful relationships with all families (Mapp, Carver, & Lander, 2017).

It has been my honor to conduct workshops for educators for many years. More often than not, some workshop participants will confirm with me that they share the same opinions and values about engaging families but wish their superiors or others in charge felt the same way. In some cases, as unbelievable as this may sound, teachers are discouraged by their own leaders from engaging families. In a workshop, one teacher told me, "My principal said that the last thing we needed were parents running around the school all day long."

A very simple step toward engaging every family is to support those educators who are already convinced that the outcomes of family engagement are worth the effort. As this grows, a tsunami of engagement will occur, and good things will start to happen. It's hard to ignore or cast dispersion over progress.

Many schools have instituted parent liaison and specialist positions. These positions, found commonly in schools receiving Title I funding, are dedicated to creating inroads with every family and bridging the gap between home and school. Used effectively, these liaison positions can create an atmosphere of trust in schools and can also serve as a vehicle to connect families with classroom teachers.

While these positions can be critical to the goal of engaging every family, it is important that they not be used as substitutes for the necessary relationships between teachers and families. In some cases, these positions are used to make discipline phone calls or are asked to serve in utility capacities, such as extra help in the cafeteria, hall duty, and duties at arrival and dismissal. If these positions are relegated to these operational tasks, the desired outcome of engaging every family will be lost. Further, if they are used as substitutes for relationships between classroom teachers and families, teacher motivation can suffer.

THREE KINDS OF TEACHERS: A SLIGHTLY HUMOROUS LOOK

In almost every workshop, conference session, or question-and-answer period, I invariably get this question: How do you get teacher buy-in for family engagement?

It's a great question.

I usually start the answer by sharing my opinion of the types of teachers we have in our schools. Mind you, my comments are not

based on one shred of research but rather are born from my experiences and observations of teachers over time. These descriptions are meant to be humorous, and while people are laughing, they usually nod their head in agreement. That affirmation provides me with the motivation to share with you "the three types of teachers." Every school usually has these three groups, with minor variations.

Group one is a small group of teachers I call the "happy peppy teachers." They have boundless energy, are creative, and are typically happy morning people. They are the first to offer new ideas and the first to volunteer for just about anything in the school. If there is a sunshine committee, these teachers are on it. If the principal asked them to run naked down the street, they would be shedding clothing as they bolt out the front doors of the school! They are happy, peppy, and full of spirit, energy, and optimism. They never sleep and seem to be at school all the time. Some students believe these teachers are obviously robots and must plug themselves in somewhere to recharge.

Group two is the largest group of teachers; I call them "the wait-and-see-ers." This is a group that does not usually fully commit to doing anything, nor do they refuse to do anything. They simply wait and see. They wait and see if the idea presented will be around in a week or a month. They have seen ideas, practices, procedures, initiatives, and surefire solutions to problems come and go.

They also wait and see if the leadership desiring the action will be around in a week or a month. They have seen them come and go as well.

As a former principal of a school offering the International Baccalaureate (IB) Programme, I once had a teacher say, "I bet you didn't know I was an IB teacher?"

"No," I said, "I didn't know that."

"Yup, *I be* here when you got here and *I be* here when you gone!"

The wait-and-see-ers do just that—they wait and see.

Group three is usually the smallest group of them all, but they pack a powerful punch. I call them the "not-gonna-do-its." No matter what you want, they are simply not going to do it. At meetings, their arms are folded across their chest—that is, at the meetings they actually attend. They can be highly skeptical or, worse yet, negative. No matter what the idea, they will find some way to be critical. The "not-gonna-do-its" are a tough group with which to foster change in an organization.

It is often impossible for leaders to change the mindset of this last small but powerful group of people. The answer lies in changing the culture of the organization. As the genesis of a new culture of

relationships and open communication is created, it forces the "not-gonna-do-its" either to conform to the new norm or, in some more drastic cases, leave the organization altogether.

This humorous look at teachers highlights the fact that in every organization there exists a wide continuum of attitudes and assumptions about change, ideas, or initiatives. However, it is important to remember one salient issue: No teacher *wants* to fail.

We have to take some responsibility with regard to the level of skepticism that exists among the teaching force. We have paraded an awful lot of things that were "guaranteed" either to make their lives easier or improve student learning seemingly by magic. Teachers look upon these ideas as passing fads—here today, gone tomorrow. No wonder most of them "wait and see" if something will stick around for a while.

CAN I GET A COPY OF THAT?

Teachers are always willing to share good, practical ideas for improving instruction and learning. Teachers also gravitate quickly to things that work. They watch each other intently, and when a colleague has success, they are quick to replicate those ideas in their own classroom. Proof-of-concept almost guarantees that most teachers will implement the desired practice or idea in their own classroom. However it occurs, one thing is clear: Good ideas spread among teachers.

The implementation of new ideas and change in an organization is not easy. My best advice is to find that small group of happy, peppy teachers and launch the concept. Their colleagues will watch, hidden behind walls and doors, but they will watch. Slowly but surely, the ideas will take root and over time, almost magically, concepts will permeate the culture of a school.

Forcing change that is not prescribed in law or regulation doesn't usually work very well. Teachers are very compliant people. If you force them to do something, whether they like it or not, they will usually do it. If the change demonstrates the results and desired outcomes, teachers incorporate it into their culture. However, if the change doesn't achieve the desired outcomes, the change doesn't last very long, and before you know it, there is no change at all. While some forced change could be argued as necessary, most of this type of organizational change ends up doing nothing more than further driving motivation and morale to a deeper negative level and has the potential to damage leadership credibility. Leading change means leading *cultural* change.

Planting the seeds of ideas, nurturing those ideas, celebrating and replicating successes, and devoting organizational resources to the change are all important ingredients. This is not a book about change theory; however, when thinking about family engagement as a conduit to organizational improvement, the process of change matters.

MY DUMB IDEA

During my years as a building administrator, I launched a lot of new ideas—some good, some not so good. I remember sharing with the faculty a new piece of technology that would revolutionize communication with families; the skepticism ran high—so high, in fact, that one teacher wrote to me anonymously and said in part, "This is the dumbest idea I have ever heard and I have been here for over 25 years and heard a lot of dumb ideas!"

I knew that if we could implement and prove the concept, sooner or later, most teachers would engage. Years later, I got another note, presumably from the same teacher. Unsigned, the note said,

> Three years ago, I told you your telephone idea was dumb. I want to say for the record that I was wrong. In fact, the ideas that you presented have helped all of us be better teachers and most importantly have helped more students be successful.

It is a mistake to ignore the role of motivation in launching a process to engage every family. Understanding the beliefs and values of people within the organization will help leaders better articulate a successful pathway.

In my opinion, the secrets to motivating teachers are simple. First, believe that teachers want to be successful. Second, understand that until a concept is proven, skepticism will run high. Lastly, understand that when the first two conditions are met, teachers will gravitate toward the desired change. Their timeline may not be your timeline, but with nurturing, nudging, and a little patience, the results will be spectacular.