

Why Recognizing Emotions Is a School Leadership Necessity

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Successful school leaders are keenly aware of the feelings, communication patterns, and attitudes among teachers and other staff members that influence school climate.

If the traditional approach to running schools and districts has emphasized supervisory tasks and duties, our work has shown us that it's time for school leaders to put a priority on awareness of their schools' emotional climates.

Not only will this help with their professional effectiveness, but it can make a positive difference in their relationships with other educators, parents, students, and community members. It can also raise employee morale and affect the success or failure of decisions based on procedural issues.

We have spent the past 20 years working with schools to set up mediation programs and other conflict-resolution procedures, and have been called on to resolve highly emotional disputes concerning many forms of school violence. Our experience has made clear to us the importance of emotional climate in the everyday life of a school. We know that school leaders recognize that school climate is important, but too often it still takes a back seat to priorities such as budget and curriculum.

One principal we worked with was highly organized and believed he had a firm grasp on his leadership responsibilities. However, a subtle climate of bullying permeated the student body—a climate intensified by a lack of action from teachers in the school.

The principal, whom we'll call John, believed in principles such as empowerment, assertiveness, creating trust, and critical thinking. Unfortunately, all these principles drifted into the background as his responsibilities for curriculum, budgets, and other organizational tasks dominated his focus. His lack of attention to emotions in the school allowed bullies to subtly forge a more destructive climate of anxiety and fear.

In John's case, we saw how the emotional environment can pose a quiet yet destructive force even when a school leader has a solid hold on his or her expected responsibilities. School management and supervision do not happen in a vacuum. They take place in a community

filled with feelings that can affect their overall success or failure. Such awareness requires more than human-relationship training. It requires an understanding of emotions from a more holistic perspective.

Counselors, school psychologists, and related professionals have historically addressed the role of emotions in schools, yet responsibility for school climate falls within the domain of school leaders. This becomes even more important when the school is experiencing violence or other forms of crisis. There are far too many examples found in the United States where the emotional condition of a school was not a priority, and violence followed.

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When a school is in crisis, who will recognize and act on the emotions of the moment, those collective feelings that people in schools have about what is happening at any given moment? There are times when the atmosphere is one of hope, and students and educators are excited and motivated to do well. But there are also times when anger, resentment, revenge, jealousy, apathy, or anxiety fills the air.

Our view is that effective school leaders recognize the emotional atmosphere around them, work to understand it, and respond to other tasks—implementing rules, guidelines, or procedures; or carrying out other supervisory duties—while mindful of the feelings around them. It's this conscious action and decision making that makes leaders more effective in resolving conflicts and in intervening during highly charged situations.

If the emotions in schools are the unacknowledged elephant in the room of effective school leadership, a peripheral understanding of them is simply not sufficient.

This is not to suggest that school leaders are replacements for school counselors, psychologists, school mediators, or outside professionals. But those who head schools and districts cannot simply delegate responsibility for climate. It has to be taken into account as part of their leadership role. School leaders who see unhealthy emotions emerging can replace them with a climate of trust, empowerment, assertiveness, and critical thinking. Another principal we worked with realized that two groups of students were polarizing her

high school along racial lines. There was a climate of anger, and resentment that boiled over any time a member of one group entered the other group's "turf" at school.

Recognizing the problem, the principal ordered mediation between the leaders of the two groups, which is where we entered the picture.

During the mediation, it became clear that each group had common ground around issues like racial identity and racial empowerment. In the end, the mediation produced an agreement that the school would undertake activities that promoted (both) racial identity and empowerment.

From there, the school's emotional tone changed from one of anger and resentment to pride in one's identity and a better understanding of individual differences.

We believe that emotions have a dramatic impact on school climate, and therefore leaders need to view emotional well-being as of equal value to budgets, curriculum, and other more visible responsibilities. It is time to recognize emotions as essential ingredients in a successful school climate.

Source:

http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2014/02/19/21blanchfield.h33.html?utm_source=fb&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=mrss&utm_reader=feedly