

Principal's Sabbatical Report

The Key Elements of Positive Relationships Between Principal and Staff in Primary Schools

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Purpose

My research sought to identify the aspects of positive relationships between Principal and staff and how that impacts on staff morale and therefore enthusiasm for their job.

Profile

I have been in teaching for nearly forty years, in management positions for over thirty and a Principal at Coatesville Primary School for just over 21 years. The school had a role of 107 when I arrived and grew rapidly to over 300 by the late nineties and with an enrolment scheme has held that level until very recently.

Rationale and Background Information

Since being one of the very first Principals appointed under 'Tomorrow's Schools', the dynamics and importance of Principal – staff relationships have interested me. Particularly in the early years of 'Tomorrow's Schools' when there seemed to be far too frequent media attention on various fractious interpersonal issues in schools, my Board Chair, staff and I often mused as to why such situations came about and in some cases continued and intensified in negative vein.

Programme Outline

After identifying what I considered the key aspects of my inquiry, I developed a series of questions, philosophical, behavioral and practical on which to base discussions and interviews. These were rather 'Starters for Ten', helping me to ensure I covered off aspects I considered relevant. In a number of cases, often at their request for such 'Starters', I emailed these to Principals prior to visiting, enabling them to get their heads around where I was coming from.

Methodology

As I wanted to determine specific, non tangible as well as material aspects of acknowledgement and positive ethos development and continuation, it was obvious I would delve a little into barriers to positive school ethos. Aspects such as who was responsible, how does it happen, how can it be minimised. Some of the questions in my 'Starters for Ten' intimated that.

'Key Elements of Positive Relationships Between Principal and Staff in a Primary School'

(*Starter questions, concepts, ideas neither inclusive nor exclusive...*)

- What level of professional support do you personally or directly give staff?
- What level and type of collegial support is available, directly or indirectly, under your direction?
 - How is the concept, as well as the actuality, of Staff Appraisal received by staff?
- What influence do you have or feel you should have, in staff Professional Development?
- What role do you have in the personal development of staff?
- How important do you think it is for staff to have opportunities to learn and grow, both in school and out?
- Recent New Zealand Council for Education Research (NZCER) data among other things stated teachers need
 - to feel they were being well or fairly treated and that the Principal valued them as a person. (72%). Could you comment on that, why you may agree or disagree and why you think so?
- What level of importance do you place on staff (social) interaction?
- How active or interactive are you with staff from a social perspective?
- What time or financial commitment do you give or consider is important to social activity with or for staff?
- Do you and or the school have specific examples of staff recognition, - awards, rewards?
 - Frequency? Determined by?
- What constraints are there on the /your pastoral care of staff?
- Are there other aspects or elements you consider important to engender productive working relationships
 - between Principal and staff?

Schools – Range and Locations

I met with nine New Zealand Principals of schools in Auckland, Bay of Plenty, Manawatu and Wanganui, covering a range of deciles from 3 to 10; three Principals in Melbourne, Australia and also three in Oxfordshire, England. The schools in Australia and Oxford would probably also have covered a range of deciles, 3 through to 10.

Findings and Key Observations

Professional and Personal Support, including Appraisal:

'Vital' was the word instantly uttered by a Principal when queried about the significance of this, whether it be internal, local, national or international. 'It sets staff up for success', an ideology proffered by all I spoke with, albeit that the ability to follow through was hampered at times. Like ongoing PD, staff appraisal was seen by most as to part of a needs based growth programme rather than a compliance issue by a few principals or schools.

All Principals were keen to create and provide learning opportunities for others to learn and develop; as for the students in their schools, a 'professional learning community'. Role modeling the concept of ongoing growth and learning was noted by a number of principals.

Several Principals, notably in New Zealand, take some staff to conferences and workshops that they themselves attend, as well as having little hesitation sending them to training courses locally or overseas. Generally, the same was not the case in Melbourne or Oxford where there appeared to be not only less travel away and more in-house training.

Piggott-Irvine's comments about Principals being passionate, optimistic and hopeful about their role and that of teaching and learning were reinforced by all principals. This passion was planned and auctioned, and associated with improvement and establishment of high(er) standards. Most of the Principals stressed their pride in their school and staff, pleased with their contribution to the development of student learning through the provision of both personal as well as professional learning. The value placed on personal growth, - non curricula or directly school linked, - was noted as important by several Principals.

As Piggott-Irvine also states as important, the Principals often commented that a good dose of common sense, wisdom and self-awareness were essential – and they thought readily identified by staff. These traits helped them to keep a sense of balance about the enormity of their own role, their interactions with people, their own self worth, well being and competency. They try not to allow it to be just one of those lip service things – they sought to model them continuously.

Social Interaction:

All but three Principals considered this a very important aspect of their positive interactions with teachers. Many joined in all activities, with a couple selecting just a few to 'wave the flag', while two either frequently or selectively absented themselves to allow staff to relax without the boss being in attendance. Two had nothing to do with staff socially other than perhaps one drink or chat a couple of times a year, while another had no contact in a social context.

Several saw the need to maintain the demarcation between Principal and teachers, or need to be detached from staff generally in a social setting. This was particularly so in one school in Melbourne and also in Oxford. A number of others thought not so much the opposite view but sought a balance that had more positive gains than possible complications.

Principal initiatives included a staff lunch and an evening meal for staff once a term, organising a Friday afternoon bbq, a shout at the local at the end of the week or to celebrate a special occasion, to cooking breakfast for the staff, while impromptu morning teas were quite common.

Most schools had a social committee, usually not including the Principal, who organised a range of activities, outings and events for the staff. These may be staff only, or with partners, or family events. The range was impressive and included dress-up days, bike rides, boat trips, kayaking, bowling, clay shooting, wine tours, retreats, movie and theatre performances and picnics as well as dining out. Some of these events were combined with the Board, Governors or School Council, good PR as well as fun, but the majority of activities were as a staff group. These

activities were far more common in most of the New Zealand schools, less so in Melbourne and unusual occurrences in Oxford where Head Teachers were more particular about not blurring the lines between staff and management. Generally, the adage ‘We work hard together, we play hard together’ had traction in most schools, certainly in New Zealand.

Funding for such activities was not an issue at most schools, the Principal having direct access to sufficient funds or readily available through the governing body, be it Board, School Council or Governors. The latter groups were particularly proactive in two or three schools to ensure that the teachers were recognised and acknowledged. There was probably a greater tendency to this attitude in higher decile schools.

Pastoral Care:

From Piggott-Irvine, effective Principals have a high degree of openness in dealing with people, this openness being based on caring not control. They work inclusively and collaboratively with staff, being strongly driven by values of honesty, fairness, consistency, fierce loyalty and confidentiality.

A high degree of trust is a palpable outcome of this openness. This was certainly a general theme with all I talked with. To varying extents, all stated the importance of trust, caring and knowing your staff. This often included personal and family situations, with confidentiality, whereby empathy, understanding and tolerance were able to be expressed by the Principal.

Several Principals expressed the need to be a good listener in all circumstances, to appreciate other people and their points of view, not to be a know all, and to be prepared to take on other people’s ideas and advice. Teachers need to know the Principal thinks they are worthwhile people as well as teachers, that they feel good about themselves, that they are valued as individuals. Similarly, most of the Principals were sure they did in fact convey that image to their teachers.

A number of Principals take classes when necessary to cover for absent teachers, particularly for reason outside sick leave or similar provisions. As Cathy Wyllie states, this is often despite Principals already pressed for time to concentrate on their key role of educational leadership.

Again from Cathy Wyllie’s research and evident in my discussions, Principals often considered one of their main achievements over recent years to be sustaining or improving a positive learning environment, staff quality, professional development provision, teachers working together and student behaviour. Two thirds of teachers rated their morale as good or very good, based in no small part on the provision of such an environment.

NZCER found similarly, that morale was linked to receiving support, having opportunities to learn and grow at their school, being fairly treated and feeling the Principal cared for the teacher

as a person. While they undoubtedly value collegial support, the efforts of the Principal rated highly in their feedback.

Educationist Charles Handy wrote, ‘strong, decisive and firm but fair; protective, generous and lenient but not soft towards loyal subordinates’, a theme noted by a number of those interviewed, - being concerned and responsive to the personal needs and values of others.

A comment offered by one Principal: ‘Know which egos to stroke or massage and which ones need a kick in the backside – and when and how to do each of these things’ bears thinking about.

Rewards and Recognition:

Forms of written and verbal recognition of teachers’ efforts or achievements showed a range of ideas: comment in the newsletter, announcement at school assembly (by Principal or Board chair), at staff meeting, a letter from the Board, or from the Principal, a few newspaper articles. A couple of Principals carried a notebook to jot down positives so they would not forget to acknowledge them.

Apart from R units and the equivalent overseas, i-phones, wireless modems, vouchers for restaurants, books, movies and even travel to the value of \$600 were among the rewards handed out in some schools. Again, these tended to be, but not exclusive to, higher decile schools. Chocolate fish, Lotto tickets or a ‘Gnome Award’ for all manner of things such as laugh-of-the-week or boo-boo of the week were rather more light hearted activities. Like some of these actions, shouting a round or two at the local just as readily sits with Pastoral Care as in this area of discussion.

Other factors:

There are a range of attitudes and activities that Principals see as contributing to sound inter-staff relationships, and the extent to which Principals are directly involved. Overall, though, the importance of the Principal in fostering a conducive, positive environment with and for staff is quite apparent from those I talked to. Having said that, the methods and practices employed by Principals vary quite considerably, with nearly all comfortable with what they do, when, and how they do it.

The financial constraints on Principals are notably less stringent in most of the New Zealand schools, somewhat more so in Melbourne and certainly appear tighter in Oxford. This applies to funding for professional development, latitude to accommodate personal (pastoral) situations, social activities or rewards.

While there are some differences in New Zealand schools, generally there is pretty much a hands-on approach and quite a high degree of personal involvement. This is not quite so evident in the Melbourne schools I visited – though this can hardly be deemed a reasonable sampling,

and likewise the small number of Oxfordshire schools where there was, relatively, a rather less personally interactive attitude or approach to fostering staff relationships.

There is no doubt a need to investigate what teachers see as the important factors and practices in the Principal – teacher relationship, indeed to cross-check if teachers in fact agree with what the Principals think is good –effective –practice. The correlation between what Principals think is important and happening, and what the staff think is the school ethos could be revealing also.

Implications

As acclaimed Personality specialist and Motivational speaker Alison Mooney states: ‘There are five ways to show thanks and appreciation – words, touch, acts of service, quality time and gifts.’

The need for considered pastoral care of staff as well as pupils, by the Principal, is widely acknowledged. The old adage of ‘A love of learning comes from a love of teaching’ cannot be overstated – staff must be looked after by the Principal, in the first instance at least. The importance of the Principal’s internal public relations role cannot be overemphasised; this includes ensuring staff always have a voice, preferably directly but at least indirectly to the Principal. He/she must be consultative, listen. Note: perception by the Principal may not always be reality.

Thus positive behaviour can be seen as not just a good PR exercise, but an investment.

That is what my overriding conclusion would be: the pastoral care of staff, albeit it a variety of guises, is the most important aspect a Principal needs to be aware of and address.

Executive summary

While I readily acknowledge I have my own notions of what and how positive Principal Staff relationships are constituted, there appears to be rather conclusive evidence from both the discussions I had with Principals and from research already undertaken that such situations enhance the enthusiasm and thus the productivity of teachers.

This would point strongly towards elements of professional and personal development strategies and provision and pastoral care aspects that embrace both individual empathy and understanding of the personal life of staff members, plus degrees of social interaction and at least provision of opportunities to foster that.

Principals do themselves, their staff and their school a service by embracing at least some aspects of the supportive interactions noted in sections above.

A specific point has to be made of the importance of the school’s governing body, in New Zealand’s case the Boards of Trustees, in being proactive in expressing support and acknowledging the achievements of staff. While this often happens via the actions of the

Principal, albeit with Board approval and often access to funding, initiatives taken directly by the Board to show appreciation of staff efforts and achievements takes on another dimension for teachers.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the support of the Board of Trustees in 2009 for readily agreeing to support my application for Sabbatical Leave and the topic I wished to investigate. As with previous Boards I have worked with, I had always been well supported and in fact enjoyed the relationships we had in maintaining a productive school environment, both physical and relational.

Similarly my staff who were as supportive as ever, not least of all my two Deputy Principals, who capably ran the school in my absence.

Obviously the willingness of Principals, particularly in New Zealand and Melbourne, to give up their time and thoughts to provide me with not only the data I needed, but also to share experiences and an odd wine or two.

The Ministry of Education for granting my sabbatical, but also NZEI and NZPF who were instrumental in getting these opportunities to reflect available in the first place. I would urge those who have not applied for leave to do so.

The sabbatical gave me time to reflect, spend time with family and partner and create space to re-establish myself as an individual away from my Principal's role that I had had for nearly 20 years.

References

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