Improving Faculty Conversations

Encouraging the airing of diverse views, participation in decision making, and challenges to unexamined assumptions will help a school community become stronger and healthier.

Barbara Kohm

In the work of education leadership, what we don't know *can* hurt us. When we assume more agreement than actually exists, receive polite but incomplete feedback, and operate on unexamined assumptions, we are in danger of being blindsided by unanticipated events.

But by allowing hidden information to bubble up to the surface and find expression in legitimate forums, we can create meaningful, sustainable change.

Photo by Chris Tennill

A discussion group at Ralph M. Captain Elementary School in Clayton, Missouri, explores instructional issues that affect the school's approach to student learning.

Sometimes a small change can have a big effect. The key is finding the right leverage point. During my 14 years as an elementary school principal, staff members and I found that modifying some existing structures and creating new ones could reduce the amount of information we, individually and collectively, didn't know. These changes included restructuring faculty meetings, developing an inclusive planning process, and creating study groups where we could expose and challenge the assumptions on which we based our practice.

Restructuring Faculty Meetings

In some schools, teachers think of faculty meetings as an intrusion on their work. In others, they share information that enhances their work and the work of the school. The difference lies in the structure of the meetings and how often they take place.

Harold Blackman,[1] the principal of a St. Louis (Missouri) county middle school, reduced the number of scheduled leadership council meetings in response to council members' request that they meet only when an important issue arose. Because there were few major problems, the leadership council had fewer and fewer meetings. The less they met, the fewer reasons they could find to meet. As a result, they failed to build the trust that they needed to discuss difficult issues honestly and fully. They began to do more problem solving and less planning. By waiting to deal with a problem until emotions were high, the council developed a crisis mentality, coping with problems only after they had grown large and difficult to solve. Worst of all, teachers began to have important conversations in the teachers' lounge and the parking lot. Instead of talking with the principal, they began to talk about him and eventually went to the superintendent to voice their complaints. The principal had been blindsided.

If I were an anthropologist studying the culture of a school, among the artifacts I would collect would be meeting agendas and minutes. I would look at who talked and who listened. And I would search for five qualities:

- Many people had opportunities to express their ideas and receive feedback from their colleagues.
- There was ample time for discussing topics directly connected to the everyday work of teachers and the shared vision of the school.

■ There were structures that ensured opportunities for everyone to voice ideas and opinions.

■ Civil disagreement was encouraged rather than glossed over.

■ Teachers left the meeting with a deeper understanding of some issue than they had before they came.

During my tenure as principal, these five qualities were the openly discussed criteria by which the school faculty and I judged our meetings.

As we began to change our approach to instruction, we found that we needed more time to talk with one another. We benefited from our new e-mail system, which enabled us to disseminate the announcements that used to eat up time at meetings. Now that we had more time for dialogue, we reserved faculty meetings for discussions that profited from the thinking of a broad range of people and helped us learn from one another. Because time remained a precious commodity, we used a variety of simple techniques—brainstorming, dot voting, and round-robin discussions—to make certain that every voice was heard in a relatively short amount of time, and we practiced examining issues from six different points of view to ensure an appreciation of other perspectives (see sidebar).

Convincing everyone to bring school issues to the table rather than discussing them only with me or with like-minded colleagues wasn't easy. Many faculties don't operate that way. Our natural instincts for agreement and safety make us shy away from conversations that openly deal with different points of view. Talking to like-minded colleagues provides only short-term safety, however. In the long run, a climate of such limited conversations encourages cliques, develops a we/they mentality, and results in less-effective decision making.

I had to insist again and again that school issues come to the whole staff during regularly scheduled faculty meetings. Gradually, our meetings changed from passive listening sessions to dynamic discussions. We began to talk about how children learn to read rather than whether to use ketchup packets or bottles in the cafeteria. We learned to separate ideas from personalities and to attack problems, not people, so we could disagree without hurting feelings. We found that facing one another in a circle and studying the arts of dialogue, inquiry, and advocacy improved our conversations. As we worked toward a shared vision and increased teacher leadership, our dialogue helped us look at issues from multiple perspectives before making decisions.

Strategies for Open Discussions

Brainstorming

Participants generate as many solutions as possible to a given problem, recording their ideas on a large sheet of paper or a flipchart. The purpose is to create multiple solutions, not to evaluate the quality or feasibility of individual suggestions. No discussion or questioning of ideas takes place during a brainstorming session.

Dot Voting

To get a quick picture of the group's thinking and to set priorities after a brainstorming session, each participant receives two sticker dots and places them by the two statements that the participant believes are most important or should be discussed first. In a few minutes, a clear sense of the group's priorities emerges.

Round Robin

The group facilitator asks each participant to give a short response to a question, such as "What is one thing you're planning to do on Curriculum Night to help the parents of your students better understand what their children are doing at school?" or "What is one idea you will take away from this conversation to use in your classroom?" This activity collects information from a variety of sources in a short amount of time.

Six Points of View

Participants discuss a situation from six points of view, such as the points of view of the superintendent, principal, teacher, parent, student, and community member. This activity helps participants understand the complexity of an issue.

Inclusive Planning

Effective leaders spend less time solving problems and more time planning. When I first became a principal, teachers brought me many problems, and I worked hard to help them solve them in a thoughtful and intelligent way.

The more adept I became at solving problems, the weaker the school became. We were constantly reacting to difficult situations rather than planning to prevent them, and our solutions were limited by my understanding and experience. Every problem I solved created three or four new ones.

We needed a planning process that prevented problems from occurring and engaged the thinking and experience of every faculty member. By pooling our experiences, we revealed a good deal of the information we had formerly kept hidden from one another. We made better decisions and learned from one another.

This effort took two forms: standing committees and ad hoc planning committees. These committees enabled us to recognize and solve problems while they were still small and to make plans that anticipated and prevented other problems. Although we didn't always agree, we understood the thinking that led to our colleagues' opinions.

Standing committees met once a month throughout the year for dialogue and planning. Their responsibilities changed as the needs of the school changed. The Curriculum Committee, for example, evolved into the Reading Support Team when the faculty set a goal to move all struggling readers up to grade level. We started a Technology Committee when

it became clear that technology could be a valuable pedagogical tool. The School Operations Committee retained its name but changed focus as needs arose.

All faculty members served on a standing committee of their choice. Those who loved big ideas found help from those who focused on details, and those who loved details learned to view issues from a broader perspective. Veterans benefited from the insights of newer faculty members, who often asked perceptive questions that challenged old practices, and new faculty learned from the experience of veterans.

Ad hoc committees met once in the spring for three to four hours to plan for the following school year. They worked on school resources: time, money, space, teachers, and parents. Membership was voluntary. The committees recommended their plans to the entire faculty during the May goal-setting meeting. When the faculty set a goal of improving all students' reading skills, we used the Time Committee to organize the schedule to allow all classes at least a 90-minute block of uninterrupted time every day for reading and writing instruction. The Money Committee developed a budget for the librarian and classroom teachers to build their libraries, and the Space Committee provided a room free of distractions for work with struggling readers. The Home/School Committee developed a list of suggestions for how parents could support the school's literacy program.

When the planning process was complete, we had aligned resources to school goals, and everyone understood the reasons for the decisions we had reached. There was little we didn't know about one another's thinking. Because we had so much information on the table, we were able to make decisions that prevented rather than caused additional problems.

Inclusive planning should involve all parents, not just those who are most vocal. To hear the parents' voices, we worked with our Parent Teacher Organization to establish a Parent Forum that met once each spring. The forum addressed two questions: What makes this a good school? and What would make it even better? Parents divided into groups of 8–10, brainstormed answers, and set priorities with dot voting. We encouraged parents who were unable to attend to write their answers to the two questions. We shared the information generated by the forum with the entire community and used it to set goals for the following year.

We began to talk about how children read rather than whether to use ketchup packets or bottles in the cafeteria.

Creating Study Groups

Everyone has unexamined assumptions about how children learn. To examine our assumptions, we organized voluntary study groups that met before school. We read and discussed articles and books that presented different points of view about how children learn and how to organize learning experiences. As we read, talked, and sometimes argued with one another, we discovered that some basic tenets on which we had built our practice were actually unexamined assumptions. For example:

- Children learn best when they are grouped with others of similar ability.
- Intelligence is a fixed quantity present at birth.
- Competition increases learning.
- Some students are broken, and it's our job to fix them.
- Some children cannot learn because they come from deprived home situations.
- Learning is linear and takes place in an invariant sequence.

From these unexamined assumptions, we had come to believe, for example, that students must learn phonics before they can read, spelling before they can write, and algorithms before they can reason mathematically.

We realized that much of our curriculum and many of our organization structures were founded on these assumptions. If we no longer believed them, we had to make changes in the ways we organized and taught our students. Making these changes wasn't comfortable, especially for those of us who had been teaching a long time. A few teachers began to experiment with new teaching methods. They eliminated ability groups, used more trade books instead of the basal series for reading, had their students write more, and challenged students to think mathematically rather than memorize algorithms.

Gradually, more and more teachers joined study groups and changed their classroom practice. Even those who were reluctant to participate were intrigued by their colleagues' excitement, energy, and commitment and the students' progress and enthusiasm. Slowly, the reluctant teachers began to make changes, too.

In the process, we all became smarter and stronger as individuals and more effective as a team. Our students were learning more. Their test scores rose, and their enthusiasm was contagious. This process took five to six years. All our problems did not disappear, but we developed structures and habits that helped us deal with them more effectively. We now had 30 brains working on them instead of one. Most important, we learned that only lack of information was dangerous. We were all safer and more effective when we took information out of hiding, revealed it to others, and saw what we could learn from it. ■

[1]This name has been changed.

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