Teachers’ Lounge: From Toxic to Tonic

Teachers’ lounges have a disgraceful reputation as a place where negative, angry teachers go to complain about their students, rant about the principal, and moan about the trials and tribulations of their jobs. When I was completing my teacher certification more than 15 years ago, more than one professor advised our class to avoid the teachers’ lounge, describing it as a place for gossip and complaints to fester and grow. They told us we’d only be successful professionals if we distanced ourselves from the politics and negativity of the lounge. During my first few years as a teacher, I stayed in my classroom and worked largely on my own. I developed few relationships with other teachers, and I’m sure I had a reputation of being a loner. And I was lonely.

When I changed jobs, an amazing principal who understood the importance of strong bonds with colleagues proved to me that the teachers’ lounge can be a place teachers go to refresh and revive. It can become an area where rich professional conversations occur, where teachers get to know one another on a personal basis, and where laughter can be a critical counterweight for teachers as they balance the enormous responsibilities of their jobs. Staff morale and school culture inevitably improve in schools where teacher-to-teacher relationships are fostered.

So how can we develop lounges that will raise teacher morale instead of crush it? I believe it begins with the school principal. With the right leadership, the lounge can become a place of renewal and creativity. Here are a few simple strategies to make your lounge a positive place in your school and an important part of your building’s success.

1. Create a Pleasant Space
Make it a priority to find a space that will work. If your building doesn’t have a good space yet, create one. Transform the lounge so that when your teachers walk in, the room looks and feels more like a living room. Invest in art with motivational, uplifting phrases or hang a series of calming pictures. Have the walls painted a warm, soothing color—a gentle latex color works very well. Put several large area rugs down. Invest in trendy coffee mugs and contract for a coffee service. Make sure you have several working microwaves, a garbage disposal, and a toaster. Try to have these items donated. But if you have to buy them, the investment is worth it. Finally, make sure your custodian understands the importance of keeping the lounge neat and clean.

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2. Play Games
Every month, design a different game that will get people talking and laughing when they visit the lounge. For example, collect toddler pictures of staff and have a guessing game to match the child with the adult. Have staff submit “Two Truths and a Lie” about themselves and hang them all; run a contest to see who can identify the most correctly. Play “Things No One Knows About Me.”

3. Celebrate
Have a monthly breakfast potluck so your whole staff can dine together. Baby and wedding showers can be held in the lounge. When you celebrate holidays, do it together in the lounge. Host a costume contest for staff; hold your holiday gift exchange; or have “Only Green Food” lunch on St. Patrick’s Day. Countless events in our lives are worth celebrating, and having these celebrations in the lounge will bring your staff closer together.

4. Eat Lunch in the Lounge
As the principal, eating with your staff builds strong relationships. They’ll see you in a relaxed, conversational setting, and it will allow you to get a feel for issues that are percolating in the building. Sometimes it may feel as if you’ll never eat another meal without hearing questions and concerns, but these meals give staff the opportunity to speak easily in a nonthreatening environment. You don’t have to eat in the lounge every day, but random, friendly, collegial visits will build trust between you and your staff.

5. Hold Special Events
You can host special events as often as you like, as long as they feel relaxing and genuine. Here are some proven ways to bring colleagues together:

- A novel exchange: Teachers bring gently used books they’ve finished reading and are ready to part with; they then trade books with their colleagues.
- A gift card exchange: Staff members bring gift cards they have been given and will never use, and then they exchange with a colleague for a similarly valued gift card they would rather use.
- A soup and salad contest: Have teachers bring their favorite soup or salad and vote for which they like best. Award a prize for the winner. This can be done with cookies, chili, sandwiches, and so on.

The benefits of building a safe and refreshing teachers’ lounge environment are endless, and those benefits will carry—like sunlight—into every corner, nook, and cranny of the school.

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