About this time—embarrassingly, five years into my career—the light finally came on. As I apologized yet again for a scheduling error, I heard myself say “I’m sorry, but since I don’t have recess duty, I didn’t realize there was a conflict.” That’s when it suddenly dawned on me: Why not let the individuals most directly impacted by the decision make the decision? It was just common sense. From that day on, I created guidelines but left decision-making to those most directly involved. Grade-level teachers created their own lunch duty schedules. Related arts teachers created art, music, and PE schedules for the entire school.

A Tale of Tables and Trays

Here’s a good example of how the process works. When it became obvious that we needed new cafeteria tables, I met with vendors to determine specifications and asked for the names of nearby schools that had purchased tables within the last five years. Did I call the principals of those schools for recommendations? No, I called them to arrange for my custodian to talk to their custodians about issues related to cafeteria tables. My custodian visited three schools, reported his recommendation to me, and I placed the order. The individual who most needed to have input and ownership had achieved both.

I use the same procedure with decisions that impact students: I establish the criteria and they make the decision. A recent example concerned the trays used in our lunchroom. Each class sent two representatives to the cafeteria, where I led a discussion about what characteristics were important in cafeteria trays. The students added their input (which included strong feelings about whether purple really matched our lunchroom decor) and voted for their choice.

It Doesn’t Always Work

Interestingly enough, my new decision-making guidelines weren’t exactly embraced by the staff. One of the things that makes teachers so wonderful is that they are such nice people—and nice people don’t like conflict. So any time you put four or five nice adults together to make a decision that will impact how they spend the next 180 days, you’re going to get conflict. Guess who the “bad guy” is when this happens—yes, the principal.

I’d like to say that time heals all wounds, but that wouldn’t be exactly true. Although repeated opportunities to collaborate and reach consensus—plus some valuable staff development in these areas—did make the process easier, I still have to intervene with particularly assertive individuals who want their own way and talented problem-solvers who are reluctant to speak up.

Sharing decision-making means giving up a degree of control, and I have learned to be careful in choosing which decisions to transfer to others. One decision I feel I must retain is assigning teachers to grade levels. I also assign students to classes and make final decisions about such student issues as retention and serious discipline problems. I also retain the dubious right to make decisions that may make a significant number of individuals unhappy. But if I give a decision to staff members, I have learned to let their decision stand, even if I seriously disagree with it.

Our job as principals often involves putting out fires, and I’ve found a solution that lets me be Smokey. You, too, can prevent a lot of fires by leaving decision-making in the hands of those most affected by the outcome.

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