Straddling the Stream of “Us and Them”

I was early into my mentoring relationship with Dana, a third-grade teacher in our school and an aspiring principal, that I kept having this nagging feeling. And then it hit me—the realization that our school culture reflected an “us and them” dynamic.

I was a novice principal the same year that Dana was a novice teacher, a mere seven years ago. I’ve nurtured Dana’s teaching over the years even as I’ve nurtured my own leadership. I had noticed Dana’s leadership potential early on—her willingness to work hard, take risks, and accept feedback.

When she began studying for a master’s degree in administration and asked if I would serve as her mentor, I envisioned teaching her such basics as how to conduct and write an observation, how to promote learning in the lunchroom, and how to interview and hire new staff. I hadn’t expected that this new facet of our relationship would lead me to uncover some truths about my own principalship.

It happened quickly, yet subtly, as Dana’s role changed from that of a teacher to a teacher/principal intern. Due to her new lunch and recess responsibilities, Dana wasn’t able to join her friends for conversation and bonding over lunch. Meanwhile, I was getting asked some pointed questions about her involvement in certain projects. Dana was beginning to experience what it was like to be viewed not as “one of us” but “one of them.”

It’s a Lonely Job

This stirred up my own feelings about the interpersonal challenges of being a principal. I sometimes feel left out of social events, and I can sense when I am the topic of critical conversations. I can be enveloped by loneliness when the job gets tough and there’s no one around to listen to me.

I didn’t want Dana to abandon her dream of becoming a principal, but I realized I needed to work through this "us and them" issue for myself if I was to help her to overcome it. When her mentoring time came to an end, she would once more become just a teacher. How could I help her preserve her relationships with her colleagues?

I made a concerted effort to communicate to everyone the nature of Dana’s new role and what it entailed, so they would be clear about her responsibilities and motives. I began to see that if Dana and I could bridge the “us and them” gap, perhaps it could serve as a model for the kind of relationship I hoped to have with all of my teachers.

Bridging the Stream

As Dana and I look back, we can see how our relationship went from “us and them” to collegial. It wasn’t always easy. For example, our views and beliefs about discipline were very different and we had many heart-to-heart conversations about it that left us at times feeling frustrated and angry. But we worked through our differences and together created a discipline plan combining the best of our ideas. Working together to find a solution put us on the same level. We were able to discuss matters more as colleagues than as boss and employee.

Not every teacher was like Dana, who could freely disclose lessons that flopped and admit there were areas where she needed to grow. Other teachers didn’t seem willing to take those risks. In our conversations, they seemed to feel that my opinions and ideas had greater weight than their own, when I really wanted them to have an equal voice. I wondered how I could build teachers’ trust in me, be less intimidating, and invite more honest dialogue.

Slowly, I began to make changes in my interactions with teachers, hoping that it would lead to a change in theirs. Even though I welcomed input that differed from mine, I began to realize that I needed to elicit this type of input by delving much more deeply and listening with much more acceptance. I began to offer teachers options for sharing their thoughts—in writing, via e-mail, or in person. When I didn’t hear from some of them, I personally made repeated efforts to convince them that I would value and respect their ideas, especially when they differed from mine.

I knew I was heading in a positive direction when I opened my e-mail one Monday morning and found a brutally honest message from a non-tenured teacher. She told me about actions I had taken that had upset her, and what I could do differently to better meet her needs. Taking a deep breath, I sought her out for a conversation. With some gentle nudging and committed listening, she opened up even more. After celebrating her honesty, I asked her how it felt to share her true thoughts and feelings. She hesitated and replied with a smile, “Now that I’ve told you how I feel, I realize that the sky didn’t fall!”

As our formal mentoring relationship comes to an end, I marvel at how I set out to mentor Dana and ended up also mentoring myself. Even as I return to being the sole principal in the building, I wonder if it’s really possible to bridge the stream between “us and them.” While I’ve worked on making changes in how I invite, accept, and listen to differing opinions, I have yet to move open discussion of stream-bridging off my list of “undiscussable” topics—too risky to bring up at faculty meetings. Maybe sharing this article with them would be a good place to start.

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