Asking the Right Question

The conference kept dragging on. The Smiths, well-known, influential members of the community, were meeting with two of my teachers concerning their daughter’s recent conduct. The teachers were sharing their feelings about the girl’s recent behavior, while the Smiths repeatedly stated that they did not feel that her actions were “a big deal.” Opinions flew back and forth. As the principal, I was present although there was not much need—or opportunity—for me to speak.

At the end of the conference, the Smiths asked to speak with me alone. When the teachers had left, Mr. Smith turned to me and said, “That was the worst principaling I’ve ever seen.” In the past, I might have reacted with frustration. Instead, I said quietly, “Help me understand why you feel that way.”

When I asked Mr. Smith this question, he pointed out that I had not spoken much during the conference, which he felt did not go well as a result. I then shared my perspective. I told the Smiths I had listened carefully, that I did not feel that the teachers had said or done anything inappropriate, and that I sensed that the teachers felt a little intimidated by the parents’ stature in the community. I also said their daughter seemed to have a personality conflict with one of the teachers and that I would meet with them separately to try to resolve this. When I was finished, Mr. Smith looked at me and said, “You’re absolutely right. I’m so sorry.”

“Help me understand why you feel that way” has become my motto when dealing with teachers, students, and parents. It’s drawn from one of Stephen Covey’s Seven Habits of Highly Effective People: “Seek First to Understand.” I’ve found that if I am willing to listen to what others are willing to share, I will have greater understanding of their positions, with a greater likelihood of positive solutions.

Seeking to understand Mr. Smith’s perspective was one example of this strategy’s success. Another time, I had to deal with a teacher who had reacted with excessive anger to a discipline problem. After we had worked out the situation to the parents’ satisfaction, I continued to work with the teacher.
By asking him to “help me understand why you feel this way,” I discovered that he was confronting a possible divorce. Because I now understood the frustration that had resulted in his excessive reaction, we were able to talk through his issues and discuss anger management strategies. As a result, he improved in both his personal and work life.

I’ve found that students also need to be understood. I keep a large basket of toys on my conference table—everything from kaleidoscopes and microscopes to stress balls and Slinkys. It’s where students and I work out issues and problems. Whether it’s a student who suffers from depression, or one whose parents have recently divorced, students need to talk and letting them play with the toys seems to help them.

I’ve discovered that asking people to “help me understand why you feel this way” is an important first step in creating strong relationships with them. And I have discovered that once I can develop strong relationships with teachers, students, and parents, they will trust my leadership.

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Learning by Listening

- People need to share how they feel, but they will not if you’re intimidating or defensive.
- If teachers, students, or parents cannot openly share their feelings with the principal, they are going to share them in the teachers’ lounge or in the hallways. This can destroy morale and harm the school’s image.
- When a teacher, student, or parent shares how they feel, it gives the principal an opportunity to correct a previous perception.
- If change is necessary, there is a greater chance of success if opinions about it have been shared.