

Learning Together

Use professional development opportunities to build staff relationships

By Nathan Wills

One rainy day during the Revolutionary War, a rider on horseback came across a group of soldiers attempting to move a heavy piece of timber. The corporal in charge was shouting encouragement to “heave” repeatedly, but the soldiers couldn’t get the beam to budge. After watching their lack of success, the rider asked the corporal why he wasn’t helping, to which the corporal replied, “Don’t you realize that I am the corporal, sir?”

The rider dismounted his horse and went to work with the soldiers to get the oak beam in position. When they had finished moving it, the rider mounted

his horse and addressed the corporal. “If you should need help again, call on your commander-in-chief. My name is George Washington.”

How do you think that made those soldiers feel? Can you imagine the sense of appreciation and renewal of spirit they found simply because their ultimate leader was willing to share in the effort of moving a beam? Do you think that their sense of purpose was strengthened?

Sharing Experiences

I bring this story up not as another example of servant leadership—

although it could be—but to illustrate how we as leaders can share in the experiences of those around us in order to build trust and foster strong relationships. As an elementary principal, I have ample opportunities to lead adults in learning through shared experiences.

In *Adult Learning: Linking Theory & Practice* (2013), Sharan Merriam and Laura Bierema write, “Experience in learning has a centralized role in adult learning.” I will take this a step further and assert that *shared* experiences in adult learning play a critical role in developing strong relationships between leaders and those being led.

When lead learners (principals) learn alongside adult learners (teachers), it is not only beneficial in gaining knowledge and refining our profession, but it also helps strengthen relationships between leaders and the groups they lead. For example, I’m involved in professional development with my teachers. Participating in professional development alongside staff builds relationships and aids the adult learning process. The staff witness that learning is important to me through action, and they often make a more concerted effort to learn and improve as a result.

To really succeed in this type of transformative learning, you must get outside your comfort zone. You must be willing to try new things or take on new challenges to grow as a leader. Experience is the best teacher, and trying out new teaching methods mined from professional development activities can revitalize your passion for your chosen profession.



As principals, we should be passionate about continuing education and willing to expose our teachers to new ideas, thoughts, and teaching practices.

Encouraging New Ideas

Testing new approaches to learning is the best way I know to evolve in the educational process. As a principal, I support and encourage the efforts of our staff to try new ideas and strategies. I tell them that it's OK to try something new, even if you fail; by learning from failure, we will eventually succeed. However, telling and encouraging are not enough. It is also my responsibility to model behavior by


participating in professional development with staff.

Professional development provides me with the opportunity to have a dialogue with colleagues while we share in growth and progress. Principal-teacher collaboration during professional development can be an inspirational process that increases student learning. It is important to the culture that teachers witness firsthand my commitment to professional improvement.

As principals, we should be passionate about continuing education and willing to expose our teachers to new ideas, thoughts, and teaching practices. In "Fostering Transformative Learning in Leadership Development" (2009), Joe Donaldson says that actions taken by leaders to improve their own leadership abilities and their organization's productivity support the learning of others inside and

outside the organization. And by supporting the development of teachers, principals improve the quality of teaching and learning within their buildings.

Collaborative interaction between administration and staff is a critical component in realizing meaningful school reform. In *The Principal's Companion: Strategies for Making the Job Easier* (2009), Pam Robbins and Harvey B. Alvy say that "school leaders must promote trustful, honest relationships with faculty members in order to establish a culture that satisfies the adult learner's innate needs and desires to improve, grow, and learn."

Shared learning experiences among administration and staff will enhance school culture, while students will benefit from the strong relationships built in support of their education. 

Nathan Wills is principal of Puxico Elementary School in Puxico, Missouri.

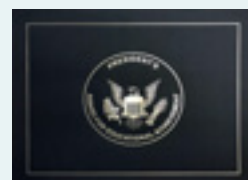
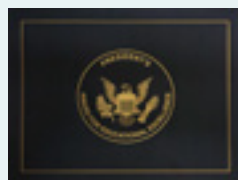
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