

What Teachers Want in Their Leaders: Voices from the Field

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Educational leaders are faced with a moral, ethical and practical need for improving schools. Together leaders and teachers are searching for ideas, strategies and ways in which to turn around failing schools. Education, of course, is all about people who want the best for their students. In this article we discuss what teachers want in leaders and how trust, respect, time and resources can pave the road to teacher effectiveness and ultimately school improvement.

Introduction

Across the nation and in California in particular, we are faced with the daunting challenge of improving schools. Administrators and teachers alike are searching for ideas, strategies and ways in which to turn schools around. “The essence of competitiveness is liberated when we make people believe that what they think and do is important—and then get out of their way while they do it,” was Jack Welch’s mantra while he was C.E.O. of The General Electric Corporation in the 1990’s. Welch was wise enough to realize that *ALL* business is a people business. Education, of course, is all about people—individuals who want the best for the students. In this article we discuss what teachers want in leaders and how trust, respect, time and resources can pave the road to teacher effectiveness and ultimately school improvement.

According to Goleman (2006), the most effective leaders are those who are trustworthy, empathetic and connected. These leaders make us feel calm, appreciated and inspired. At the core of what teachers want from edu-

cational leaders at all levels is trust. Trust is the key to any successful school relationship because without trust a significant and long lasting symbiotic relationship cannot exist. Trust at times seems to be a simple concept; it is, however, a very complex phenomenon that is critically pivotal in the teacher-administrator relationship. When a leader is trusted, teachers will not only respect the leader, they will make an emotional investment in him and his educational vision. Trusted leaders are straight forward in a genteel way; they treat everyone with dignity and respect, make their expectations known, guide, facilitate and never take others for granted. They recognize that leadership is all about relationships centered on trust.

Trusted leaders can be counted on to be fair. Teachers want to know that they can go to the administrator with their concerns and suggestions and get a fair response. A leader who exhibits trust establishes two-way communication and listens to these concerns and suggestions with respect and an open mind. Mindful teachers realize that their ideas and concerns may not always be a priority, but they want to be heard and given sincere consideration.

Teachers want to work with administrators who do what they say they will do regardless of how minuscule it might be. Teachers give their all to leaders who can be trusted to follow through on their commitments while nurturing the best interest of students, staff, and the school. Teachers yearn for their leader's support and encouragement and ultimately for the freedom to make a difference in their classrooms. They trust that the leader will help them and will protect them. Teachers want leaders who have confidence in their knowledge, skills, talents and experiences (Morgan & Lynch, 2006). A trustworthy leader is competent and knowledgeable about his or her administrative responsibilities and those of his teachers. If teachers are lacking necessary skills, a trusting principal will provide the necessary training or staff development to make those teachers better qualified for their job. The leader does this because he/she cares about the well-being and success of the teachers. An empowering leader may even provide the necessary guidance. Teachers want to know that a competent and reliable administrator is leading them. A leader's trust in his own ability will strengthen his ability to trust others. Leaders "... can promote trust by demonstrating consideration and sensitivity for teachers' needs and interests, listening intently to communicate, respect for the person, and engaging in coaching and problem solving if that is what is needed" (Tschannen-Moran, 2004, p. 37).

Emanating from the core of trust are respect, time and resources. Each of these is essential in developing trust, teacher effectiveness and school improvement. When an administrator imparts respect, provides resources and time, the staff responds with trust. This two-way appositeness yields greater and sustained productivity. This potency will only stand to increase student achievement that is the ultimate daily objective. The quotation of legendary U.S. Army General George S. Patton, "Don't tell people how to

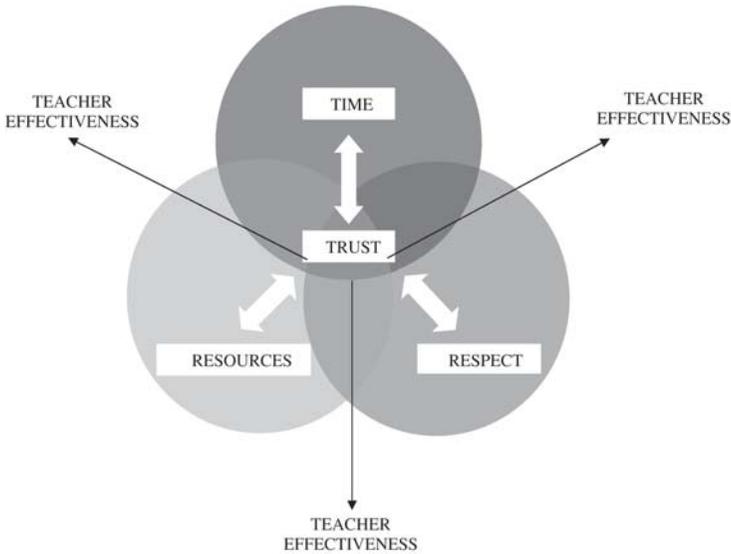


Figure 1. The relationship of trust, respect, time and resources and teacher effectiveness.

do things, tell them what to do and let them surprise you with their results,” is prophetic for the mindful and empowering administrator.

Figure 1 demonstrates the relationship of trust, respect, time and resources and teacher effectiveness. Trust is at the core of teacher effectiveness supported by respect, time and resources.

Respect

Every teacher wants “just a little respect” from his or her principal. Respect validates who we are and who we strive to be. Teachers want their principals to acknowledge them as educated professionals and especially as individuals. Respect implies that the principal dutifully “knows” the teachers both professionally and personally. This fosters a sense of caring, a behavior that builds a relationship of mutual respect. Lencioni, (2007) emphasized the need to take a personal interest in employees; furthermore he indicated that leaders need to reinforce this personal interest and demonstrate it again and again.

Teachers view themselves as professionals when leaders respect their opinions and engage in mutually respectful ways of communicating. Teachers go the extra mile for these leaders. One of us is a special education teacher who was involved in the transfer of a moderate to severe special education program from the county office of education to the school district. This transfer suddenly entrusted the care and education of students who have moderate to severe disabilities to principals who had no experience with this group of students. Based on my knowledge and experience in this

area, I was approached by the principal who said, “You are the expert in this program. It is new to us. We do not know what to do. We need your help.” This acknowledgement and validation of my expertise was the zenith of respect for me. Judging by the leader’s countenance, demeanor, facial expression and tone of voice, it was apparent that he was being sincere. For a principal to make such a sincere comment and plea was extremely significant. Because of this, why would one not burn the midnight oil to ensure the program’s success? A leader that demonstrates respect by validating teachers is one who motivates teachers and brings out the best in them. Teachers need to be needed and need to be reminded of this daily. They need to know that they are helping students and not merely serving themselves (Lencioni, 2007).

It is important to teachers that leaders know them well enough to know their strengths and allow them to demonstrate these. Conversely, teachers want a principal who can make suggestions with a purpose of improving one’s craft. Several years ago one of us was hired back at his own high school to teach biology. My evaluator was a vice principal recently promoted from the classroom and was my biology teacher from high school days some twenty-six years earlier. This vice principal was a terrific teacher who established trusting relationships with students that earned him the greatest respect. During one of the annual evaluations he merely suggested that I provide a sample of a poster I was having the biology students make on a body system. Due to the tremendous trust and respect he earned from me, I considered his request gospel. I went home that night and made a poster of that body system from cut outs, word-processing labels and colored clip art on the subject. I had the school laminate the poster and it was available for the students to use as a guide the next day. Soon I had made posters for all of the body systems we would be covering that year putting in scores of hours to complete them, life-like and in vivid color. On a subsequent evaluation he raved about the series of subject appropriate posters that would help the students learn each system. He complimented me on the posters, my time commitment to complete them, and gave me the credit for the idea. He was secure enough with himself to give me the credit for his suggestion in order to get his goals accomplished. That goal was to help make me a more effective teacher. He accomplished this and earned more respect as a person in the process. This enabling structure employed by him helped me succeed. He didn’t monitor my behavior to insure compliance (Hoy & Miskel, 2008). I intuitively felt that had he monitored my behavior to insure compliance with what he wanted, the end result would not have been as comprehensive. This is the respect teachers yearn for and expect from an administrator.

Time

Teachers respect leaders who value their time. Time is an element that teachers regard as personal property. An effective administrator would not

commit thievery by taking it without good reason. In these frenetic and changing times in schools, teachers are faced with more and more responsibilities each day. Competent and effective teachers are not looking for free time, rather they desire time to accomplish all that needs to be done. If all of a teacher's time is monopolized and cut from instructional preparation, resentment and discontent would increase rapidly. Teachers listen to, appreciate and follow leaders who allow them ownership of time. This ownership propagates teachers' pride and creativity in their work and will likely generate a higher degree of effectiveness.

Prior to teaching, one of us worked in surgical sales; this experience proved to be one of life's learning experiences specifically related to trust and respect for one's time. The manager valued and trusted his employees enough to grant them the time to work, be creative and to plan for the future. During the yearly evaluation period each spring, the manager handed out the evaluation forms and instructed his employees to give careful thought to their previous year's performance and to objectively evaluate themselves in each category. They were also asked to plan comprehensively for the upcoming year. Each employee was given sufficient time during the workday to complete the process. The goal was to have each individual reflect on and evaluate his or her performance and to plan for the future. When the evaluation meeting arrived the employees' goals for the upcoming year were higher than what the manager envisioned; all formulated more detailed plans than were expected. What he demonstrated was that by allowing sufficient time for the employees to plan their work, they could then work their plan more productively, and with ownership. Employee productiveness was high and morale was excellent. Because the manager placed a high value in the employees' time, they had a greater appreciation for their time.

Successful leaders are mindful of the time pressures faced by teachers and limit factors that wastefully deplete this vital resource. Leaders who are mindful of time wasters maximize time for teachers to best meet the students' needs, plan effective strategies and collaborate with colleagues to share best practices. Teachers expect administrators to streamline the bureaucratic paperwork when it is not directly related to the technical core of teaching and learning. Teachers want in-services aligned with what is being taught in the classroom. Leaders should seriously consider disseminating generic administrative information electronically so that staff meetings are functionally focused on meeting students' needs. Being conscious about time implies that principals ensure that staff meetings start and end on time and that the purpose of the meetings is worthwhile.

Resources

Like a master craftsman in his workshop, teachers need tools, time, and a buffer from bureaucracy to apply their expertise for the greatest benefit of their students. All teachers undoubtedly need tools to complete the job ef-

factively for students. Many of these being expensive and technical in nature, they are not readily available to teachers in the classroom. In this Twenty First Century of technology, computers, projector bulbs, printers and the like can run into the hundreds of dollars. These components are frequently in use, sometimes on a daily basis and are essential as a curriculum delivery tool. If an integral piece of equipment is down, it must be repaired or replaced immediately so the teacher can continue unabated in the classroom. A principal who is mindful budgets and anticipates failures in equipment and has contingencies in place to handle the unexpected. Perhaps he or she might have a supply of equipment and parts on hand in a personal stash for emergency replacement. An explanation stating that “we are out of money” will not bolster morale, will not solve the problem, and most importantly, will not help the students excel. Teaching resources such as paper, pencils, crayons, books, and photocopies are also necessary tools to get the job done. An empowering principal will readily provide these tools to assist the teacher with their needs. Teachers expect these resources and when they are not provided teachers become frustrated and disillusioned. On the other hand when these tools are readily available teachers feel supported and feel that their needs are taken seriously. The provision of these tools eliminates obstacles and allows teachers to focus on the technical core. Teachers, want to spend their time meeting students’ needs, developing effective teaching strategies and planning effective lessons. They do not want to be preoccupied with concerns related to not having the right tools to do their job. An empowering principal would not want that either.

Some Final Thoughts

It is amazing what teachers will do if they trust their leader and if the leader demonstrates respect for them. Trust is created and reinforced when leaders focus on teachers and provide them with the necessary time and resources. It is interesting that Tschannen-Moran (2004, p. 35) tells us that, “Because of the hierarchical nature of the relationship within schools it is the responsibility of the person with greater power to take the initiative to build and sustain trusting relationships.”

We invite all leaders to reflect on what takes place in their schools each day and identify the ways in which they are helping teachers. Teachers are the conduits to students and through teachers we can go about the task of improving schools. For a two week period we recommend that you record how you are supporting teachers and record the resources that you provide for them in a timely manner. Also, carefully examine how teachers’ time is being used. Do they have the necessary time to plan, collaborate with their colleagues and solve problems? After these two weeks we suggest that the leader analyze that which has been recorded and identify the strong as well as weak areas. This reflective process will allow the leader to make changes and determine how one can go about developing relationships based on

trust. A careful examination of a leader's actions toward teachers is the first step to school improvement.

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