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How Can Collaboration Assist School Leaders in Effectively Implementing New Programs?

Erin Guesno¹

Abstract

Elementary school students at a suburban K-12 charter school are facing a difficult transition into the secondary program. In an effort to ease this transition and retain students, the principal requires the secondary teachers to implement a study skills program into the daily curriculum. Initially, the teachers do not voice any objections to the principal, but as the workload increases, their frustration is communicated in a staff meeting. Moreover, students have displayed a negative attitude toward the program. The principal understands that he must diffuse the resentment of the teachers and gain student support to preserve the positive culture of the school.

Keywords

junior high transition, implementing programs, teacher resentment

Case Narrative

Lake Crystal Charter School is a public K-12 institution that offers a unique educational option for the community of its medium sized, midwestern suburban area. The school consists of 2,400 students—1,600 in the elementary program and 800 in the secondary program. Lake Crystal Charter prides itself on high scholastic achievement relative to other schools in the area as well as its strong commitment to character education. All staff in the school must complete character education training before beginning employment. Every teacher commits to the enormous task of shaping the ethical beliefs of each student with the intention of producing morally upright citizens for the future. Each student and teacher collectively discusses certain attributes such

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as optimism, caring, integrity, and interpersonal communication through class lessons and personal self-reflections. Consequently, each student receives a character education grade as well as academic grades. This unique perspective has created a deep connection with the families that causes many students who begin in the elementary program to remain until graduation instead of choosing to attend one of the larger, more traditional public schools in the area.

In the past 2 years, concerns were raised by an alarming number of parents that their children who transitioned from the elementary program into the junior high were not prepared to succeed in the new setting. The data collected last year revealed that more than half of the students failed one or more classes their 1st year in junior high, and 10% were required to repeat that scholastic year. As the junior high consisted of approximately 500 students, the students retained were highly visible to their peers and exhibited increasingly low self-esteem. The students claimed that they were ashamed that they had failed courses in school for the first time ever in their academic careers. Presently, some concerned parents state that because the elementary setting provides learning for students in one classroom, with a singular teacher, and a lenient attitude toward homework deadlines that, as a result, the students enter junior high facing a complex and confusing transition. Parents, students, and instructors have reflected that, in general, the students' lack of organizational skills weakens their ability to cope with seven changing classrooms and instructors with more stringent requirements for success.

In response, Principal Rodney Jeffers resolved to have junior high instructors implement a study skills program for every junior high student in the upcoming school year. This new program consisted of a large packet of worksheets that students would be required to complete throughout the year. In addition, teachers would be required to inspect grades with their assigned students utilizing the online gradebook, implement spelling tests to increase proficiency in writing, and perform locker checks to ensure organization and cleanliness on a weekly basis. The teachers of Lake Crystal Charter acquiesced to the demands amicably in the presence of administration, whereas behind closed doors, there were concerns and complaints about the extra workload. However, with the multiple teacher layoffs throughout the district due to budget shortfalls, no formal objections were addressed to the administration.

When September arrived, every junior high student was enrolled in a study skills class that met daily. As the school year progressed, a growing resentment resonated among the students. Many students expressed that the class consisted of unnecessary busywork and most of the high performing students resented the remedial spelling tests. Moreover, the majority of teachers found that their apprehensions regarding the increased workload were not invalid assumptions. Teacher morale regarding the study skills program dwindled as more and more instructors dared to articulate, among themselves, their dissatisfaction with the stress involved with implementing this program. In addition, many teachers speculated that the design of the study skills program was not helping students transition into junior high other than giving an incentive to

keep their lockers clean and understanding how to check their grades using the online gradebook.

In mid-October, Principal Jeffers called a meeting with the instructors of the secondary program. Jeffers informed the teachers that they would now be expected to incorporate an online career portfolio program into the study skills classes that would help students understand how to create resumes and explore different avenues in the career world. To Jeffers's surprise, there was audible grumbling and a few veteran teachers spoke with regard to their opposition. This was the first time Jeffers was made aware of any ill feeling toward the study skills program from the staff. Up to that point, he was under the impression that student support and buy-in were the only hurdles to the success of the new program.

Teachers relayed to Jeffers their dissatisfaction related to the amplified burden of work, the bitterness they faced with student attitudes toward the program, and their concerns that the study skills program was not designed to accomplish what the school desires it to achieve. Stunned but in an effort to regain control of the meeting, Jeffers asserted that the study skills classes would continue as planned. He insisted that, even though extra effort and planning were involved, every decision must be made regarding what was best for the students and not for the adults.

After the meeting, Jeffers returned to his office contemplating the surprising events of the meeting. He truly believed that the study skills program would be the solution to the issue regarding the students' transition into the secondary program. Never had he anticipated that his staff would reject this approach. Previous to this occasion, Jeffers always considered his staff to have the most harmonious approach in accomplishing collaborative goals such as the character education program. Many times in the past, he had proudly described his instructors to other principals in the surrounding areas as the positive, driving force behind any achievement at Lake Crystal Charter. Jeffers understood that the obvious and growing negativity among the staff would affect the environment of the entire school, yet abandoning the study skills program was not feasible. Student schedules were already created and the issue of helping students transition was still a valid concern. In addition, he did not want to begin a tradition of yielding under teacher opposition. Moreover, the original intent of the study skills program was a response to genuine parent concerns that would still need to be addressed regardless of his decision. Jeffers packed his briefcase and walked to the parking lot hoping to devise a solution on the drive home. He hoped to come up with an answer before the pessimistic downbeat of the staff became more visible in the culture of the school.

Teaching Notes

This case is designed to cause students to consider the implications of implementing new programs into a school from the perspective of the school leader. Students can examine the effects of the decisions of a school leader in designing the program,

incorporating staff and the effectiveness of the new program in relation to the purpose it was intended to achieve. Lake Crystal Charter needs to support its elementary students in their transition to secondary. The school leader makes a decision without input from his staff to implement a new program with the purpose of helping the students transition. However, the program is not received well by the students, and the staff are resentful of the extra workload that feels overbearing and unnecessary. As is common in many organizations, leaders are often unaware of a growing resentment in their employees until the problem has escalated almost beyond their control. This unwillingness to express concerns to higher level management usually results from a fear of retaliation, which directly relates to the situation at Lake Crystal Charter. Students must decide the most effective course of action a school leader can take to accomplish the goal of helping students transition into junior high at the same time maintaining a positive school culture.

Central Issue—A Successful Transition

The Bureaucratic Frame

The fundamental problem at Lake Crystal Charter is that the students lack the training in organizational skills to successfully transition into the secondary program. However, the decision to implement a study skills program at the secondary level to address this problem reveals the bureaucratic nature of the organization. Similar to Mintzberg's model of a machine bureaucracy, the resolution that put the study skills program into operation was decided solely in the highest level of the immediate hierarchy of authority (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Morgan (2006) defines this approach created by classical theorists who "sought to ensure that when commands were issued from the top of the organization they would travel throughout the organization in a precisely determined way to create a precisely determined effect" (p. 21). Jeffers did not consult with any of his teachers with regard to how they would approach the issue of training students to effectively navigate junior high. Instead, he alone decided on a course of action and gave the directive that he believed would solve the problem.

Jeffers uses "vertical coordination" that relies on "top-down command and control," which causes the teachers to obey his instructions even though this does not result in a constructive outcome (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Morgan (2006) explains that often times in "mechanistic organizations," the workers in the lower level of the hierarchy are more likely to keep quiet and follow orders rather than voice their concerns, which will cause them to be considered "troublemakers" (p. 30). Therefore, the teachers at Lake Crystal Charter remained silent in the beginning phases of the implementation of the new program until the discontent and tension from the weight of the demands placed upon them became overwhelming enough for them to risk being perceived as agitators.

Morgan (2006) mentions how bureaucracies are inclined to devalue the contributions that human beings can make for their organizations. In 2010, Tanner remarks

that many designs for school buildings are definitely lacking because there is “little to no stakeholder participation in planning and design” (p. 38). In a similar fashion, Jeffers attempted to build a new program to fix a serious issue at his school, yet he did not seek the expert input of the employees who dealt with the problem daily to secure their ideas and support. Bolman and Deal (2008) remark that although in recent times there have been multiple attempts to better the public school system by returning to a mechanistic approach, most educators prefer to work in environments where they can “use their experience and judgment in finding the best way for students to learn” (p. 82). The teachers at Lake Crystal Charter have valuable experience and knowledge that could benefit the program if they were given the opportunity to contribute.

Soares and Soares (2002) question the effectiveness of decisions made by centralized authority figures with regard to areas such as standardized testing and standards that have not generated true “educational reform” (pp. 312-313). They argue that the top hierarchical figures “harmed the very students they insisted they were protecting” (Soares & Soares, 2002, p. 310). Jeffers intended to restructure the organization to accommodate students; however, his efforts resulted in new problems and did not fully resolve the original issue. Morgan (2006) states that frequently managers create processes “mechanistically and are unaware of other ways in which these [management] techniques could be used” (p. 22). Jeffers clearly wants what is best for his students, but for him to recognize the most effective course of action for his organization, he must approach this problem from a new perspective (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

The Open System Frame

Bolman and Deal (2008) remark that “Public schools . . . are highly vulnerable to external pressures” (p. 65). Lake Crystal Charter has proven to be no exception. The demands from parents to see their students transition with far less difficulty into the secondary program have caused the administration to create new procedures. Ironically, Morgan (2006) states that “mechanistically organized structures have great difficulty adapting to changing circumstances because they are designed to achieve a predetermined goal” (p. 28). Yet, it is obvious that Lake Crystal Charter is a paradox that contains a bureaucratic system and an open system that “must achieve an appropriate relationship with that environment if they are to survive” (Morgan, 2006, p. 38). Jeffers recognized that he must make some attempt to appease the parents and aid the students if he expects the elementary students to continue to transfer into the secondary program.

Moreover, the elementary program and the secondary program can be defined as “interrelated subsystems” within the larger organization (Morgan, 2006). Initially, Jeffers might have considered that the two programs were “loosely coupled” in that “events are responsive, but that each event also preserves its own identity” (Weick, 1991, p. 38). However, when reflecting upon the procedures acceptable in the elementary program such as leniency regarding deadlines that prove to be detrimental in the secondary program, it is clear that these two programs are more closely associated

than originally anticipated. Weick (1991) states that “the longer the string of prerequisites, the tighter the coupling” (p. 40). As there is necessary knowledge and training that needs to happen in the elementary program for the students to easily transition to the secondary program, the effect of one subsystem on the other is clearly established. However, Jeffers made no attempt to acknowledge the relationship between the two programs and placed the responsibility for remedial action solely on the shoulders of the secondary educators.

Overall, the open system relates to Lake Crystal Charter in that the organization is focusing on its “needs” to ensure its own survival (Morgan, 2006). Morgan (2006) states that the “ongoing processes” within an organization that help it acclimatize itself to the relentless change from the “environment” guarantee its continued existence. Jeffers cares about the success and survival of his school and therefore will not ignore the crisis represented by the floundering junior high students. However, he has fallen into one of the weaknesses of the open system frame in that he has become “dependent upon forces operating in an external world” and has failed to acknowledge his own power and the power of his constituents in rectifying this ordeal through cooperative “construction” (Morgan, 2006, p. 67). Jeffers hastily created the study skills program in response to negative input from parents and from the data. Yet, he did not recognize the capability of his own staff in providing the cure.

Solutions

The Learning Organization

Lake Crystal Charter is in need of reform. Senge (2000) remarks that the tradition of decisions being made at the “top” and handed down to the common workers to bring it to pass is an ineffective system of the past. He advocates for “learning organizations” that focus on “increased adaptability” to manage the external factors as well as concentrating on ways to be “generative” (Senge, 2000). Morgan (2006) states that a learning organization is able to “question, challenge and change the operating norms and assumptions” within its own establishment (p. 87). To repair the damaged relationships with his staff and to create a truly effective study skills program, Jeffers needs to unite his staff and assure them of an open dialogue without repercussions that will honestly reflect on the situation at hand (Morgan, 2006). This sincere assessment of the “status quo” is referred to as “double-loop learning” in which many organizations have used “brainstorming sessions and other forms of creative thinking to create new directions” (Morgan, 2006, p. 90). Jeffers needs to promote a new course of action for his secondary teachers as well as the elementary but it would be wise for him to incorporate his staff in the creation of the new design.

As the leader, Jeffers should start by producing a “creative tension” that accurately expresses the ideal mission with regard to the situation “juxtaposed with [the] current reality” (Senge, 2000, p. 290). By opening up this forum, his staff would begin to present multiple perspectives that at first represent opposing points of view but eventually

will lead to a resolution (Morgan, 2006). Jeffers needs to clearly communicate to his teachers that former traditions and practices will be examined and assessed for their validity in solving the present problem, and shed if they are not viable solutions (Morgan, 2006).

Moreover, Morgan (2006) remarks on the ability of cultural norms to cause the members of an organization to “act in a way that represents the whole” (p. 99). Jeffers can inspire the staff by reminding them of the vision of the school, which is incredibly unique in the value it places on character education. However, he must be careful that the culture is receptive to change as each situation is different. Specifically “cultures that embody closed visions and self-sealing values tend to die” (Morgan, 2006, p. 100). Lake Crystal Charter is an organization that wants to survive and affect multiple generations to come and will need a culture that embraces this futuristic perspective.

Jeffers must also transform his perspective of a leadership role to be that of an educator whose job is to help every member realize their own “mental models” or “assumptions” with regard to the function of the organization to compare them with reality (Senge, 2000). His teachers are able to help him create a better study skills program but they do need his guidance in realigning their understanding of the school with the facts to correct inaccurate perceptions (Senge, 2000). Moreover, Leech and Fulton (2008) state that “by sharing power, the leader creates a feeling of influence and ownership in organizational success. Leaders may create a sense of covenant by cultivating followers’ capacities to be successful” (p. 633). Morgan (2006) remarks that this process of portioning out power, which can obscure the chain of command, is often uncomfortable for leaders who desire to have heavy authority. Clearly, this will be a difficult transition for Jeffers who is essentially the typical, hierarchical figure. Yet, it is key for him to realize that any mistakes that result from the collaborative learning process are not evidence of its failure but instead a “resource for new learning” (Morgan, 2006, p. 91).

The Symbolic Frame

In searching for solutions to this dilemma, it can be helpful to utilize other organization frames defined by Bolman and Deal (2008) such as the symbolic frame. They state that an “effective ritual” can help the members of an organization leave outdated practices behind and “embrace a new beginning” (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 391). Jeffers should recognize the comparison that his teachers are making in their minds with regard to the old procedures and the new requirements being placed on them. Jeffers needs to institute a “ceremony” that celebrates the past accomplishments of the organization as well as facilitates the upcoming shift into a new era (Bolman & Deal, 2008, pp. 266-267). Bolman and Deal (2008) state that some ceremonies focus on “moments of triumph or transition” (p. 266). In this case, the ceremony that Jeffers should create should celebrate the past accomplishments of the organization and the upcoming change. This ceremony would not only “stabilize” and “reassure” the teachers of Lake Crystal Charter that they are valued employees but also “convey the message”

to the parents and students that the organization is unified, full of pride, and approaching the issues of the present with open arms (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

Another aspect of the organization for Jeffers to consider is that although the organization has a “corporate culture,” the elementary and secondary programs have their own separate “subcultures,” which consist of separate values and goals for the organization (Morgan, 2006). Inevitably, there will be disagreements among the two groups and for Jeffers to promote a “harmony” that is not artificial, he will need to create situations where the teachers do not feel that they have to “repress their differences” yet can candidly, but respectfully, explain their varying points of view (Morgan, 2006). To foster this positive environment, Jeffers should begin new “rituals” that encourage “informal interaction” (Morgan, 2006, p. 129). Bolman and Deal (2008) state that rituals can be “both personal and communal” (p. 262). If the elementary and secondary teachers begin to create worthwhile relationships, they will be able to join forces and work as a team with more ease.

Morgan (2006) states that “shared values, shared beliefs, shared meaning, shared understanding, and shared sense making are all different ways of describing culture” (p. 134). In the present scenario at Lake Crystal Charter, there is no central purpose and vision for a more balanced transition of students into junior high among the different groups of elementary teachers, secondary teachers, and administration. Therefore, the culture is currently fragmented and in need of unification. Morgan (2006) suggests that organizations have the ability to perceive culture as an “ongoing, proactive process of reality construction” (p. 136). Lake Crystal Charter has the choice of recreating the philosophy and principles that compose its culture to fit the evolving issues that the organization faces. As the leader of the organization, Jeffers can assist the building of this new culture by allowing the “shared meanings” to govern the motives and actions of his constituents rather than his own authority that will create an environment that is “flexible, adaptive, and non-bureaucratic” (Morgan, 2006, p. 139). By surrendering his control and taking a leap of faith, he could help transform his organization into a progressive unit that is prepared for more than just the current problem at hand.

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Bio

Erin Guesno has taught Spanish from Kindergarten to 12th grade in California and Michigan since 2007. She is also adjunct faculty in the sociology department at Baker College in Cadillac, Michigan. Her experiences with multiple age levels and diverse cultures contribute to her perspective in the educational realm.