



Keeping the focus on student learning requires confrontational conversations

If a problem exists, it exists whether we talk about it or not. In fact, things will likely get worse. Why, then, do so many of us talk about the problem, but with the wrong person? We triangulate. That's when person A bonds with person B over their mutual loathing of person C, who often remains blissfully unaware of the drama. Robin Totten decided that there must be no more triangulating, no more truth-telling squeamishness in her school. Here's how she did it.

— Susan Scott

By Robin Totten

Schools exist to help every child prepare for college, careers, and life. To make this happen, schools must keep the focus on high-quality instruction for every child. Robert Marzano (2003) suggests that, in

addition to a planned and viable curriculum, staff collaboration is a leading factor in helping schools succeed. Unaddressed adult issues can take our focus off of what's best for children.

I have seen firsthand that schools cannot help kids learn until the adults can function like a team.

As a new principal, I decided that my first days and weeks would focus on building relationships with and between staff members. We collaboratively developed and then published group norms and explicitly

defined how we would make good decisions together. We did team-building exercises about unity, respect, trust, empowerment, accountability, and strategies for good communication.

I thought we were off to a good start. We made improvements in curriculum, instruction, and assessment of student learning. However, it is hard to sustain change and momentum without the school culture to support it.

ADDRESS THE ISSUES

Susan Scott says relationships and organizations succeed or fail “gradually, then suddenly, one conversation at a time” (Scott, 2002). This was true at our school. During my first month, I noticed problems people knew and gossiped about but had chosen not to address. I gathered my courage, reminding myself that schools were for children, and began to address the issues.

Staff members began to see I was willing to take on tough issues. They

started to talk about how they felt pushed around and mistreated by colleagues.

Younger staff members kept quiet in meetings because they feared retaliation from peers. Teachers could identify peers they didn't wanted to teach with due to poor classroom management. They knew of classrooms they wouldn't want their own child in but didn't want to talk to the person about it. A school board member said the school culture problem had gone on for more than a decade, and former principals had left rather than confront the situation. A review of district staff surveys verified this.

I worked alongside many hard-working teachers and staff trying to keep the focus on kids and student achievement. However, by the end of my third year, we remained a staff divided. People were being asked if they were on my side or the other side. While I continued to say there was only one



Totten

In each issue of *JSD*, Susan Scott (susan@fierceinc.com) explores aspects of communication that encourage meaningful collaboration. Scott, author of *Fierce Conversations: Achieving Success At Work & In Life, One Conversation at a Time* (Penguin, 2002) and *Fierce Leadership: A Bold Alternative to the Worst “Best” Practices of Business Today* (Broadway Business, 2009), leads Fierce Inc. (www.fierceinc.com), which helps companies around the world transform the conversations that are central to their success. Fierce in the Schools carries this work into schools and higher education. Columns are available at www.learningforward.org. © Copyright, Fierce Inc., 2013.

side, gossip and accusations increased.

Good teachers started making plans to leave. The new teachers union president felt pressured to promote an anonymous survey, which neither she nor I thought would solve the problem. People shut their classroom doors, and student achievement began to stagnate. I considered leaving, too, but decided to stay and fight for the kids, the staff, and our community.

At individual year-end conferences with staff, I asked what I could do as their school leader to improve our school. The message was clear: Help staff learn strategies to confront others in safe, productive ways, and do whatever it takes to solve the problem.

LEARN STRATEGIES

The superintendent and I arranged for the whole staff to engage in professional learning over four afternoons in the fall. At the first meeting, people were so nervous they hardly talked. The facilitator taught us that a conversation is not about a relationship. The conversation *is* the relationship. We left mulling over the idea that, in a true conversation, everyone is equal. We engaged in small-group conversations that helped to surface some of our unaddressed issues.

I admired the superintendent's courageous leadership as she modeled effective conversations. She hosted a meeting that included varied perspectives on our school challenges: teacher, union president, school board member, and principal. Out of this conversation came the next action steps. We agreed that an anonymous survey wasn't the answer.

Next, she facilitated conversations with staff. Through this process, staff members began to speak out. At times, participants' actions and nonverbal behaviors were as much a part of the conversation as their words. It became clear who was working for the team and for kids and who wasn't. The superintendent and I determined to

tackle the toughest challenge first. This required some hard personnel decisions. Other members of the school team began to try effective conversation strategies with peers.

At one of our final meetings came a turning point. We had been afraid to have difficult conversations with each other because we thought it was kinder to ignore problems, deny them, and hope they went away. In reality, that made the problems worse. We listed our worst fears about speaking up and found they didn't outweigh the challenges we faced by continuing to overlook the problems.

The session leader asked, "On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being high, how much do you prefer that people confront you when they have a concern?" She asked individuals to stand up for the number that represented them in that scale. The huge majority stood up for numbers seven through 10.

Then she asked, "On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being high, how often do you use confrontation when there is a challenge with others?" This time, only three people stood up for numbers seven through 10. It was obvious — we preferred people speak up and tell us what we needed to hear but, as a group, we weren't courageous enough to do it. Then we learned a strategy for planning productive confrontational conversations.

REBUILD SCHOOL CULTURE

We started rebuilding our school culture and learning to make difficult conversations a daily practice. Staff members started to speak up, and student achievement rose. Student learning once again became the focus. Now, our conversations are more about instruction and less about each other.

Recently, we began a five-day protocol. If a person has a concern or challenge with someone, he or she has five days to talk to the person; brainstorm or talk the problem out

with a friend, then go to the person or take the friend along to have the conversation; or drop it and stop talking about it to others.

Here's what we learned: Leaders can't shy away from tough challenges, interpersonal or otherwise. Don't give up. Gather many perspectives to help tackle tough challenges. I've grown as a leader by not quitting when it was tempting to do so. I've learned not to handle people's interpersonal problems for them. If I do, it robs them of a learning opportunity.

Though our conversational strategies are becoming more second nature, I still write out the first 60 seconds of a tough conversation in advance so that my invitation to talk about the topic is clear and compelling, increasing the chance for success. As supervisors, we often think we are doing our job to have the tough conversations, but we don't have them in a way that gets the other person to buy in. These one-sided conversations do not enrich relationships or provoke learning.

Keeping the focus on student learning requires confrontational conversations. To have these, people need to feel safe, gather their courage, and know some strategies. They also need formal and informal leaders at every level who believe that good relationships are worth fighting for in order to focus on students' educational and emotional needs.

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Robin Totten (tottenr@orting.wednet.edu) is principal of Orting (Wash.) Primary School. ■