

Journal Synthesis Paper

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After twenty years in education, I am constantly impressed with the numerous moving parts that work in unison to create a multitiered learning environment, with the ultimate goal of creating an effective and caring educational community. Throughout these years my main area of focus has been the Literacy classroom, but as I enter into the macrocosm of school-wide culture and functions it is impressed upon me that the system that I thought I knew so well, goes far deeper and is filled with more complexity than I could have imagined. My internship at Overbrook Educational Center is providing me with keen insights into how, as a school leader, one's thoughts, strategies, feelings, and actions must always be reflected on in order to assess their effects on those who are influenced by one's school presence. This habit of mind, Thinking About Your Thinking (knowing your knowing), is guiding as a filter to so many of the experiences and learning opportunities I am exploring in my context at OEC and with my on-sight mentor. Each opportunity is allowing me to observe and experience how all of our thoughts and feelings will and do as leaders, driving the strategies and actions that affect those around us; for better and worse.

As a school leader the way one feels and thinks will guide all that they do and ultimately determine the direction a school and all reached by it will go. In observing my On-Sight Mentor (OSM) in the context of our school Leadership Team Meetings, I am struck with how true this is. We began our time prior to our first meeting discussing the intent and focus for this year's Leadership Team. Her intent was to see this team assist in and lead school-wide improvements to instructional outcomes. My journaled reflection initially from our meeting was as follows:

I appreciated that she brought me in on the process. I feel as though I am still learning so much about the school systems and getting a read on the building's needs that I assumed Meredith had a clear vision and mission for what she hoped for this group. I did not find this to be the case. It seemed that she had some thoughts, but not a clear idea of where

and how this particular team would be used. She mentioned classroom observations and critiquing teachers' performance. This would also be done through critiquing lesson plans as a group and then accessing whether they were effective, or if they needed support and extra resources to assist in their development.

It was clear that this was a plan that was in its infancy and would need a lot of guidance and nurturing. I believed this would and should be provided by her, but did not find this to be the case. I would find instead that she would miss our first meeting and leave others to lead in her absence. I initially thought this was a leadership development method, allowing us as leaders to find our way and create something dynamic and new, but again this was not the case. My OSM is led by her impulsivity and belief that she is the only voice of leadership in the building, this combination creates chaos and frustration in those led by her, because upon reentering a space in which she abandoned to deal with something more pressing, she will come in and redirect all that happened upon her absence. Developing in those, who attempted to put her unclear vision into practice, into a state of failure. This is her practice. In this same meeting I had some questions, that would further filter out this sense of working privilege and lack of self reflective practice:

*My question was whether this was PFT friendly or not and she responded, "I don't give a ^#&@." My initial reflection on *** as a leader/principal is that she is guided by a tremendous amount of privilege. She has repeatedly told me that she just does what she wants. This was also apparent last year when schools were told to have no indoor graduations, but she went for it despite the directive. I do understand as a school leader that there may be times when one might just need to go about what is right and ask forgiveness later; but this seems to be a practice here at OEC and not the exception (Schaaf, 1).*

This initial interaction has been a guiding example of how this school leader's thoughts and actions have significant effect on those she leads. Throughout my experience I have observed that my OSM leads very much out of her privilege (white, middle class, educated, etc.). The position of power, which says, "I can do what I want, and face no consequences," is prevailing in her leadership. The importance of a begin a self-reflective school leader requires more than a

staff survey asking how they would like to see her improve as a school leadership, but as Khalifa states so brilliantly, it requires, “identifying and vocalizing one’s own personal background and privilege, understand how they are directly involved or complicit in oppressive contexts” (Khalifa, 61). This truth deeply impacted my experience in the classroom and I see on an administrative level how key this is, in not just creating equitable spaces of learning for students, but also for staff and others in the community that need to be heard and valued as unique and qualified learners. This privilege touches everything. Berg says it well, “Beliefs and unconscious biases determine actions and practices...our actions and practices inform how our systems develop...and our systems reinforce the beliefs that shape them, effectively constraining any effects at change.” I believe my OSM wants to transform our learning community into a place of reflective practice, care, and excellence, but as school leaders one can only take others as far as they are willing to go themselves.

Respecting the giftings of those we serve with will determine the effectiveness of the actions and strategies implemented by our leaders. Barth states, “Learning is a humbling act! Pride keeps me from admitting when I need help; when I see others doing something great or profound it keeps me from rejoicing with them and being thankful for their gifts.” Within our school community there are many who have been released from the classroom. What this means is that we have a wonderful amount of qualified people who support and lead the management of our school community. Many are those whom my OSM utilizes as her undeclared Leadership Team. They include the School Counselor, the MTSS, Instructional Lead, the Vice Principal, Special Education Lead and Community School Lead. I have found that they are deeply discontent, despite the fact that they love the stated mission of each of their positions. The question then, is why are you unhappy? The resounding critique they all give is that they do not

feel supported, and they often feel stepped over by my OSM. Often they are given the task to develop something, or to make a decision that will determine the way a system may go, and their efforts are then dismissed. After a conversation about assessments within our School District with our MTSS Coordinator I reflected on her position and how she was currently serving within the building:

It seems as though if Emily were to do the responsibilities that she is meant to be doing it would have a larger and more relevant impact on the school as a whole. OEC has a great deal of support staff and released people within our community. The question seems to be, "are there those who are not being as effective in their role, therefore allowing for others to have to step in and take over their responsibilities?" Again knowing that this is on occasion something that needs to happen, based on staff shortage, but continuously being called onto fill another's role seems counterintuitive to the goal of having someone who is assigned to keep the big picture and organization of student needs at the forefront. Especially in during this time, I would absolutely as a leader keep Emily doing the job in which she has been called to, because it is so easy to lose track of the macro and become so reactionary to the micro that every day feels like a practice in putting out fires as opposed to igniting a fire of administrative excellence under your people (see what I did there?) (Schaaf, 3).

The gifts that individuals have on staff are vast and unique. I believe when each member of a community feels they are valued as a learner, and as a professional they will come to the community enthusiastic, strong, and ready to be transformed by their learning environment. I think it is fair to say that our staff now feels alone and disconnected in their practice. I believe what Gaston Fisher says is very true, "When a school expects and supports collegiality,...guided by professional development is born that benefits both the individual and the school (Gaston Fisher, 158). If this is lacking, coupled with a lack of, "understanding and practice, expectations and follow-through, teachers experience fear and competition among themselves. The symptoms include: a breakdown in school communication, an increase in competition among teachers, a lack of trust that one is valued and supported (Gaston Fisher, 161). All of which we face at OEC. The singular feelings and thoughts of one individual are limiting the actions of those who are

more than capable of enacting a transformative culture at OEC. Yet as a community there are ways, despite the lack of guidance, we are moving forward for the betterment of our students.

As a community I have been encouraged by the devotion and diligence of our staff and families. There is not one person I have met who is complacent in their work with and for the students we serve each and every day. I believe this is in large part to good hiring practices and utilizing the community surrounding our school, which is a strength of my OSM. Many of our support staff members are parents of students or those from other organizations who believe in what is happening at OEC. We are also a special needs school for those with Visual Impairments, therefore we are heavily resourced. I do believe my OSM has the best intentions for our students and families, but lacks the personal strengths and abilities in order to create a space where all people feel heard and valued. It is here that I believe she is losing the battle and is creating a culture of chaos and discontent. Unfortunately, if something does not change, I believe she will begin to lose staff and families who are tired of the failing structures, systems, and leadership. As Collins states, “True leadership only exists if people follow when they have the freedom not to (Collins 11).” We do have freedom and it is just a matter of time that people begin to exert those freedoms and move on.

We are all affected by the thoughts, feelings, actions and strategies of our leaders. The genuine encouragement, or the small glances of support go a long way to bring people alongside the mission and vision of a trusted School Leader. It is in these moments that we feel known and trusted. It is also here where leadership can gain the support and loyalty of their people. “THE MORE ONE IS WILLING TO GET CURIOUS, open one's ears, mind, and heart, and walk through the familiar terrain as a visitor, the more likely one will be able to emerge with new insights and revelations that can lead to more clearly defined problems and new solutions (Strike

& Cohen, 38).” This is the heart of where we need to be as a school and where we hope to follow as we transform and grow as a community.

Good reflection. It definitely synthesizes what you have been grappling with this semester. Here are some thoughts:

- Grade: A
- I wonder if it’s worth it to check out Lencioni’s work on team dysfunctions:
<https://www.tablegroup.com/product/dysfunctions/>. If you search around the internet you can pull up some quizzes that teams can take to see which level of dysfunction the team is operating on.
- This isn’t a criticism, just something to think about. This is totally a safe space so I want you to be able to process your experience 100%, so don’t stop calling, writing, etc. to get it all out. I feel like maybe you need to find something within your control to find some success so that you can feel good! Maybe spend a journal processing a coaching session that went well so you can feel good about yourself!
- Make sure you use APA formatting in future papers. I keep this website open as I write my papers and find it very helpful:
https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/apa_style/apa_formatting_and_style_guide/general_format.html
- Don’t forget Walt Whitman’s words (through Ted Lasso):



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