

Changing School Culture Through Clinical Supervision of Personnel

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Abstract

Changing or adjusting the less than desirable culture of a school demands careful crafting on the part of the educational leadership of the school. Well defined staff development, while being the ultimate answer to this educational dilemma, must be embarked upon with sensitivity and professionalism. The case study reviewed in this paper will show that the process of cultural change can be undertaken through the utilization of a clinical supervision course as the conveyance for the change.

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Clinical supervision of teaching staff/personnel can take on various forms and serve various purposes. The most common of these is that of staff evaluation and/or retention. Yet a more useful purpose, but seldom considered, is that of altering the culture of the school. Peterson and Deal (1998) define culture as “The underground stream of norms, values, beliefs, traditions and rituals that has built up over time as people work together, solve problems, and confront challenges” (p. 28).

When the culture of a school becomes entrenched in a far from positive way, drastic measures must be taken to provide staff development to turn that culture around to become more productive. “Probably the most important - and the most difficult - job of an instructional leader is to change the prevailing culture of a school” (Barth, 2002, p. 6). The case study described here is that of a school where the culture became one of complacency bordering on noncompliance.

Case Study

The faculty, most of whom have been at the school for over fifteen years, were allowed to “coast” on their years of experience with minimal attention to continuing

education or staff development to investigate new techniques and methods of teaching. Consequently, the culture became less and less responsive to the needs of the student body. An attempt at fostering a professional development program fell far short of its intended mark. Despite financial incentives including partial payment of coursework and workshops, few veteran teachers took advantage of opportunities to advance their skills in teaching.

As the new administration realized that only one of the department chairpersons had attained state administrative certification, it became clear that the professional growth of the teaching staff was not being encouraged by the midlevel administrators (department chairpersons) because they themselves had not reached a point in their own professional development where they could utilize various techniques to facilitate professional growth in their peers. The goal was to develop what Lambert (1998) refers to as “a culture of inquiry

2

that includes a continuous cycle of reflecting, questioning, gathering evidence, and planning for improvement” (p. 19).

After lengthy conversations with university personnel, it became the intent of the administration to have these midlevel administrators pursue courses leading to state administrative certification. The plan for such a bold move had to be well thought out and orchestrated to make it obligatory yet practical for this group of highly influential individuals who had been allowed to form this complacent culture. Smith (1999) refers to such actions on the part of an effective leader as recognizing “that they must stand firm with regard to the organization’s commitment to the shared mission” (p. 603).

The plan took several paths toward insuring the success of the program as well as the satisfaction of the participants. For in insuring the success and satisfaction of this highly influential peer group, there was the distinct possibility that it would result in the professional

development of their department members. This professional development of department members, if configured well, would insure ongoing professional growth of each department centered around peer and supervisory observation and feedback.

Being a private school, the first obstacle was to secure funds for the project. Since it was the administration's desire to have the department chairpersons pursue state administrative certification, the designated group balked at paying for college level courses even though the majority of them had not returned to any formal education since receiving their initial teaching certificates. Yet, it was clear that these individuals had to be responsible for some portion of the cost of the program or they would have no investment in both participation and achievement. To create a climate where staff development would be a welcome experience, these lead teachers had to be treated as professionals in this experience (DuFour, 1991).

Support was procured from the school board in the form of scholarships for those who applied for them and wrote a proposal for this coursework to be considered as their professional development activity for the school year. The cost of textbooks for the course was subsidized by still another grant and, through an arrangement with a local university, the course was provided on the school premises once a week, immediately after the school day concluded. No faculty meetings were planned for the day of the week when the class

3

met and non-attending staff members dealt with student needs in the after school hours.

Course Design

Co-teachers of the course were both university professors, one of whom was on the staff of the high school as a special programs director. The course developed for this cohort was one of Clinical Supervision and Evaluation of Personnel. Each of the eleven

weeks the course met, the participants discussed required readings from *Techniques in the Clinical Supervision of Teachers* (Acheson & Gall, 1997). Each participant was also required to search out two articles from professional journals or magazines that related to supervision or evaluation of teachers. These readings were reported in a written form one-third of which was to be the participants' reflection on how this might or might not be useful to them in their present or some future position. The group was also given time to share, with their peers, the articles and reflections and carry on a discussion of the contents with the group. Additional reading on staff development through clinical supervision were assigned and guided discussion in small groups was a regular part of the weekly class meeting. Still another component of the course was to discuss education-related current events which served to heighten the participants' awareness of what was happening in the larger local and national education communities.

As a requirement of the course, each participant was required to conduct three clinical observation cycles - one with a member of the study group and two with department members. These observations were to be a substitute for the annual evaluation observation that each of the department chairpersons was required to conduct with each department member. Paralleling the already established responsibility of providing an annual observation/evaluation of all their department members with the new strategies being presented in the class, it was hoped that the new observation techniques would be used not only for those cases that fulfilled the requirement for the course but also for others.

While it was the primary responsibility of the one university instructor to conduct class, direct discussion, create and present scenarios for consideration, it was the responsibility of the other university instructor who was a member of the school faculty, to meet with the participants to discuss pre-conference questioning, techniques to be used in

the observation, and, if requested, attend the feedback conference with the participant. A meeting after the teacher observation, between the university instructor and the participant in the program, was also built into the program. This was done so that the techniques being learned in the course and employed in the ordinary responsibilities of the participants, could be collegially critiqued building in the cyclic process of improvement.

So as to keep the course on a pragmatic level and to sustain interest, participants were required to create a tailor-made observation or evaluation tool for their department as their final assignment. This could be accomplished by examining the existing tool the participants used and, with knowledge gained by participating in the course, change or adjust it to suit the unique needs of the given department. Participants were encouraged to search web sites for existing evaluation instruments and also use these to help them fashion their new instrument. This was accomplished by creating an assignment for each participant to search out at least three web sites for evaluation tools and/or observation techniques. The participants were asked to list the web sites as well as provide a one paragraph critique of each site. They then shared their critiques in class and an “annotated bibliography” of sorts was created and distributed to participants.

Participants were often encouraged to work in cooperative groups especially for their midterm and final assessment experiences. All participants received three graduate credits from the participating university in a course that will apply toward the requirements for state administrative certification.

Observations Made During The Course

In conducting the course, instructors made it very clear that this was not another layer of responsibility imparted on a group of individuals who perceived themselves as already responsible for too much. Rather, it was emphasized at every opportunity, that clinical supervision, not evaluation, would lead to collegial relationships that in turn would foster staff development and thereby create a richer environment for both faculty and students. The constant reminder that the supervisor was asking the teacher to allow them to be “another set of eyes” (Acheson & Gall, 1997) was in fact asking the teacher to enter into a collegial relationship with the supervisor for the purpose of being more aware of what was going on

5

in their classroom. This premise also asked the supervisor to reserve the judgment of evaluation for another time and emphasize the support of the teacher in answering the questions which the teachers posed to help them record, observe and collect data on the personnel and student actions which occurred in their classrooms each day.

Because the participating department chairpersons were required to practice the observation techniques learned in class in observing one another first, there was a stated greater appreciation of each other’s discipline and skills generated. This in itself was a cultural shift from what had become isolated departments with no interdisciplinary interaction. Counselors got to see what teachers do and teachers got to observe what counselors and supervisors of support staff do. What was once a culture bound together by a common thread of inactivity and desire to keep the status quo, began to change into a culture that expressed the excitement that their department members, after a clinical observation, were enthusiastic to continue the dialogue in the hopes of perfecting their craft of teaching. A further layer of cultural shift surfaced at the conclusion of the course when department chairpersons petitioned the administration for them and some of their department members to work together on curriculum (in

many cases interdisciplinarily) during the summer. They wrote grants and secured funding for the summer work. This was one of the most dramatic changes in a culture that had previously walked out of the building with the students on the last day of school and did not return to the matter of education, with few exceptions among the faculty, until mid-August.

A culture in which the supervisor (department chairperson), each year went through the motions of a checklist evaluation, sometimes peppered with oft-duplicated narrative, began to evolve into a culture that wanted to invest in the members of their respective departments because they knew that the students would be the ultimate benefactors of better teaching. The shift was taking place from a complacent, apathetic culture to one of enthusiasm about mentoring and investing in the teachers they had participated in hiring. DuFour (1991) refers to this cultural shift as one to “satisfaction and productivity”(p. 29).

Requiring outside reading of professional journal articles of their choice, provided the participants an opportunity to search out topics of interest to them as well as those that might support their stance on supervision and evaluation or open them up to considering

7

that this “collegial relationship” building just might be the glue that would create a cohesive department for them as well as cohesiveness of the entire faculty. It was also the hope of the instructors that such professional reading and discussion would continue to be part of the new culture well after the course had concluded.

Still another point that was emphasized by the instructors through the supplemental readings was that they should look at department members as well as themselves in two possible ways - that of coaches for change or content area coaches (Guiney, 2001). It was also emphasized that these roles could be undertaken by any department member and that peer clinical observation was in fact just as useful, or

possibly more so, than the hierarchical form of supervision they were accustomed to. As the course progressed, it was obvious through conversation, that the department chairpersons were not only willing to relinquish some of this activity but, in some cases, could readily identify some department members who were more skilled at content coaching and were anxious to share that expertise.

The final component of this course was to emphasize the responsibility the department chairpersons had to leadership in staff development. While this may, at first glance, seem to be a given, the general attitude in this particular culture was that leadership was just another layer of tasks thrust upon an already overextended pseudo-administrator. Again, through supplemental readings that emphasized the influence leadership has on school culture, the group began to see themselves in a different kind of leadership role (Peterson & Deal, 1998). Again a cultural shift toward the positive.

Post Course Observations

The principal of the school referred to in this case study was interviewed several months after the course concluded. The principal reported that the most obvious shift in attitude which, in turn, has created a change in the culture of this midlevel administrative group is that of a heightened awareness of their own leadership skills. Where prior to the course, this group of individuals saw every call to leadership in their position as another “job” or “chore,” they have now become assertive leaders willing and desirous of sharing

the responsibility of leadership with the administration rather than just the exertion of the

power of leadership. This new view of leadership has been observed in monthly group meetings with the administration in which there is an increase in ownership in the mission of the school. This shift to co-ownership has also been observed in their desire to share in the responsibility of more significant aspects of leadership with the

administration. This has been exhibited in several ways and, most significantly, in the summer curriculum workshops. Not only did they propose the summer interdepartmental activity, they took on the responsibility of procuring grant money to subsidize the curriculum project.

Observation reports handed in to the administration in the semester following the university course indicate fewer “drop in” visits of faculty members by the department chairpersons and more planned observations and follow-up sessions with faculty members. This behavior seems to indicate more investment in the process and the personnel than was previously displayed by the same group. It was also observed that the written observation reports indicate a greater commitment to successfully mentoring teachers beyond their first year of teaching. This too is a cultural shift from that of seeing their obligation to mentor only first year teachers to having a long term investment in already established teachers. If this shift was in fact taking place, Senge (1990) would note that the new culture could support, among other things, team learning. Sangor (2000) in his book *Guiding School Improvement with Action Research* would go one step further and note that since this activity of supervision by collegial observation has become meaningful as well as attractive to the department chairpersons, they will “find time to sustain the effort” it takes to plan such observation cycles. (p.181).

As a result of their collaborative efforts during the university course enrollment, the participants’ proposed joint effort to write curriculum together during the following summer, might be referred to as this group’s actions at collective autonomy (Glickman,1993). This too is not only a shift from the “my discipline only” attitude which was pervasive in the former culture, to a more multidisciplinary approach to delivering the curriculum. The group has become less territorial and more collaborative in the education arena as a result of their work together in the university course. Modeling this kind of attitude and behavior will, most probably, filter down to the department level

where many teachers were eager to try some interdisciplinary approaches but met with resistance from the department chairpersons who

9

believed that this was another layer of responsibility and work for them.

Lastly, the group has taken upon themselves to create a tool of self-evaluation for their position. In workshops during the summer, they have embarked upon a process of creating a tool that they will be able to use as an indicator of effectiveness in their position.

While it is too early to evaluate the depth of the cultural shift that has taken place as a result of calling these individuals to recognize their responsibilities in the arena of collegial supervision, it has brought a renewed investment on the part of this midlevel administrative group. The previous culture among the department chairpersons seemed to be one of resistance to the true role of leadership and always open to conflict with the administration. The newly configured culture appears to be one of investment in the future of the teachers who are part of their departments. In the trickle down affect, it should also prove to be a renewed investment in their school and the mission of the school.

Conclusions

While clinical supervision of personnel is most often viewed as a door leading to much needed staff development, in the case study presented here, it not only opened the door to much needed continuing education of the department chairpersons, it served as the conveyance for changing what might soon have been viewed as a toxic culture. The long term ramifications of creating such an opportunity for this group of midlevel administrators might be found several years from now in such areas as changed teaching strategies,

collaborated efforts to unify courses, new course designs, and a yet unthinkable plethora of student achievements.

10

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