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**x ♦ Problem-Solving Tools and Tips for School Leaders**

# Theme 1

## Perfecting Problem-Solving Performance

*I love the man that can smile in trouble, that can gather strength from distress and grow brave by reflection.*

— Thomas Paine (1776)

The town I live and work in was fortunate to receive a grant for a highway that would reroute large trucks away from the city core. Although construction of the new route would run directly behind my school—causing the din, dust, and delays associated with such projects—I was delighted as pedestrian and vehicular safety would be vastly improved. I was startled, however, to be notified shortly after the project began that a boundary line glitch placed several of my portable classrooms in the path of the road work. Even though school was in full swing and these portables fully occupied, they would have to be moved and the students they housed crammed into the main building of my overcrowded school. What was the timeline for the move? Immediately! This alarming development was another reminder that there is no shortage of trouble for a school principal.

When trouble strikes school leaders must do more than endure. Successful school leaders tackle problems quickly, intentionally, optimistically, and proficiently. As importantly, they help their teachers and support staffs handle problems constructively and grow from setbacks. These magical leaders are also proactive. They look for ways to *prevent* problems or at the very least, address them in the early stages before they grow to crisis proportions.

Theme 1 explores the problem-solving concepts and skills that are used by these savvy school leaders and provides practical suggestions for improving problem-preventing and problem-solving performances. You will learn techniques for identifying and prioritizing the troubles you encounter, tackling problems systematically, and implementing a variety of problem-solving procedures. Whether you find brand new strat-

egies to employ or come across tips you have forgotten to put to work, be assured that *each* strategy is designed to make your problem-solving pursuits rewarding ones.

## Talk to People in the Know

It has been said that one picture is worth a thousand words but I learned early on that one interview—with a person in the know—can paint a thousand pictures. I discovered the power of interviews when I was a young girl on a cross-country road trip with my parents. My mother had given me a packet of No. 2 pencils and several spiral-bound notebooks to keep me occupied and I used these journalistic tools to record information about the people I encountered along the way. Not celebrities or dignitaries, but ordinary folks like park rangers, gas station mechanics, and grocery store clerks.

Although a novice newshound, I ferreted out an amazing amount of information. I learned from an inn keeper, for example, that his job was a mixed bag of responsibilities—registering guests, keeping the inn’s books, supervising a platoon of employees, hauling trash, and folding laundry. Despite working 24/7, he loved serving people and the variety his job offered. The observations of this enterprising business man—and the other “ordinary” folks I interviewed—were eye opening.

Decades later when I assumed the leadership of a large elementary school, I begin learning about my school *not* by reading its performance reports, improvement plans, and handbooks but by interviewing the people who were “in the know.” One by one I talked to teachers, specialists, secretaries, cooks, custodians, aides, and food service workers. After quizzing the interviewees about their personal interests and job responsibilities, I asked the questions shown in Figure 1.1.

The staff members, I discovered, were highly dedicated and valued the children and families they served. Nevertheless, pockets of problems were revealed—the students were cooperative but coasting academically; the teachers were experienced and well educated but not working as a team; the classified staff was enthusiastic but felt unappreciated; and the previous principal had been competent but a shade “too nice.” Many staff members believed he had been reluctant to confront problems, such as the students’ academic decline and the lack of teamwork among the teachers. The interviews gave me the details I needed to begin my leadership work but, as importantly, helped me connect with my new staff. Listening to and learning from your people is a vital relationship building endeavor (Dolan, 1994).

How can interviews work for you? Whether you are new to your school, or have been there a while, paint a picture of your school’s strengths

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### Figure 1.1 Staff Interview Questions

Staff Member: \_\_\_\_\_ Assignment: \_\_\_\_\_

Tell me about yourself—your life outside school, family, and interests.

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Describe your education, training, and work experiences.

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Tell me about your work—your assignment and responsibilities.

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What is going well here?

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Do you think anything needs fine-tuning?

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Are there any suggestions that you have for me?

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## Theme 2

# Counteracting Workplace Negativity

*Our sense of engagement and satisfaction at work results in large part from the hundreds and hundreds of daily interactions we have while there, whether with a supervisor, colleagues, or customers. The accumulation and frequency of positive versus negative moments largely determines our satisfaction and ability to perform....*

— Daniel Goleman (2006, p. 279)

How can you tell that a workplace has become *negative*? Does the number of *Dilbert* cartoons tacked to the staff bulletin board provide a clue or does one search for furtive-looking staff members speaking *sotto voce* in the hallways? I started my investigation into workplace negativity by consulting my most reliable dictionary. I found these enlightening descriptors for *negative*: hostility, attacking, refusal, criticism, contradictory, disagreeable, pessimism, withdrawal (Merriam-Webster's, 2008, p. 829). I pictured a shouting match between a couple of hostile teachers at one end of the spectrum, and at the other end, educators who have become so disengaged they hide behind their computers playing electronic solitaire. Do these pictures of workplace dysfunction seem too extreme? Sadly, I have encountered both scenarios.

According to Lopper, workplace negativity includes “low morale, workplace stress, loss of motivation, and absenteeism” which translates into a working climate characterized by “complaints, criticism, and cynicism” (2008, p. 1). Some school leaders would add the following disheartening attributes to Lopper's list: static student achievement, lackluster teacher performance, unprofessional conduct, contentious staff relationships, and negative talk about one's career, colleagues, and clients. Heathfield observes that “nothing affects employee morale more insidiously than persistent workplace negativity. It saps the energy of your organization and diverts attention away from work and performance” (2009, p. 1). How much negativity should a school leader tolerate? In a word—none.

Fortunately, the tips discussed in this Theme are proven strategies for confronting workplace negativity. You learn how to engage staff in constructive behaviors, nurture a culture of positiveness, curtail negative behavior, and build constructive employee behaviors. The payoff? School relationships that are healthy, supportive, and productive.

## **Cultivate Constructive Actions**

My father was raised on a bustling 150-acre dairy farm where the maxim “busy hands are happy hands” was taken to heart. When my dad left his family’s homestead to become a machinist for the airline industry, he started a small but demanding farm operation on the side. I grew up on this mini-farm and by the time I was twelve could cook; sew; bake; put up jam; raise rabbits, chickens, and goats; and grow a cornucopia of fruits and vegetables. I had three active, articulate, assertive siblings but squabbles were few and far between—we had too much work to do.

When I became a school principal I observed that just like on a farm, negativity is diminished when there is productive and engaging work. The direction for this work comes from many sources—federal legislation, state mandates, school district initiatives, and community expectations. There are also enlightening resources to guide school leaders who want to involve staff in improving performance, such as the *Nine Characteristics of High-Performing Schools* (Shannon & Blysmá, 2007) and the *School Improvement Planning Process Guide* (OSPI, 2005).

The *Nine Characteristics of High-Performing Schools* provides educators with a sizable “to-do” list of school improvement actions organized by theme (p. v):

### **Nine Characteristics of High-Performing Schools**

- ◆ Clear and shared focus
- ◆ High standards and expectations
- ◆ Effective relationships
- ◆ Collaboration and communication
- ◆ Alignment with state standards
- ◆ Monitoring of learning and teaching
- ◆ Focused professional development
- ◆ Supportive learning environment
- ◆ Family and community involvement

Each theme comes with a descriptive definition, such as the one that follows (p. 27):

### **Clear and Shared Focus**

Everybody knows where they are going and why.

The focus is on achieving a shared vision, and all understand their role in achieving the vision. The focus and vision are developed from common beliefs and values, creating a consistent direction for all involved.

In addition to the aforementioned list of actions and definitions, there are suggested surveys for staff, students, parents, and community members. The results generated by these surveys will help principals assess their school's progress toward meeting each of the nine characteristics.

The *School Improvement Planning Process Guide* serves as a companion to the nine characteristics sourcebook. In addition to process steps and surveys, it offers data tools and professional practice recommendations.

The *Nine Characteristics of High-Performing Schools* and the *School Improvement Planning Process Guide* provide endless opportunities for productive and rewarding work. As an added bonus, keeping staff members *constructively* engaged is a powerful antidote to workplace negativity.

### **Suggested Readings**

Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction. (2005). *School improvement planning: Process guide*. Olympia, WA: Author. Available at <http://www.k12.wa.us/Improvement/publications/SIPGuide/SIP-Guide.pdf>.

Shannon, G. Sue, & Bylsma, Pete. (2007). *The nine characteristics of high-performing schools*, 2nd ed. Olympia, WA: Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction. Available at <http://www.k12.wa.us/research/pubdocs/NineCharacteristics.pdf>.

### **Affirm**

My high school choir teacher was passionate about classical music and played snippets of noteworthy symphonies at the start of every class. Students were challenged to identify the symphony or composer—rarely could anyone name both—and success merited an abundance of praise. One day *Scheherazade* was featured—a symphonic suite composed by Rimsky-Korsakov. As luck would have it, this was the *only* classical recording my folks owned and it was regularly played in our home. When *Scheherazade* began, my hand shot up immediately and when called upon, I confidently named the music *and* the composer. My astounded choir teacher and classmates enthusiastically applauded my success and

from that day forward, I took a keen interest in classical music. I think about my choir teacher when I need to strengthen employee conduct in my school. Not surprisingly, positive affirmations are a powerful tool for eliciting positive behavior.

What kind of behavior are we after? Schools and school districts spell out behavior expectations through professional standards, job descriptions, new employee checklists, evaluation criteria, staff norms, and even logos like “Students First” or “We Climb Higher.” But once these guidelines have been presented to staff members, then what? Wise school leaders look for ways to *affirm* behaviors that positively impact their schools. Here are five easy ways to do just that:

- ◆ *Person to Person Communication:* Take time to personally thank staff members for behaviors that give a boost to school culture and climate. All it takes are a few well-chosen words and a sincere attitude.
- ◆ *Written Messages:* Use e-mail messages or handwritten “good news notes” to praise teachers’ relationship-enhancing behaviors. A couple of lines like “Great job making your new student feel welcomed,” are all you need to make a lasting impression.
- ◆ *Public Announcements:* Use faculty bulletins, newsletter articles, school board reports, electronic news breaks, and staff meeting announcements to *publicly* applaud staff members for positive contributions. Highlight employees who mentor new staff members, serve on student intervention teams, or “go the extra mile” during emergencies.
- ◆ *Time-Off Tickets:* Thank staff members for exemplary behavior by distributing tickets that allow staff members to leave school early—be willing to cover a class if necessary. This gift of time gives a morale boost, builds lasting relationships, and generates untold good will.
- ◆ *Observation and Evaluation Reports:* Document positive behaviors and attitudes in employee observation and evaluation write ups. Be sure to be specific about the behaviors you appreciate.

Figure 2.1 is a simple format for affirming desired behaviors in a teacher final evaluation. Note that the teacher is reinforced for engaging in professional growth activities, providing school and community service, and accomplishing goals. The teacher’s culture building behaviors

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