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1

Why It All Works

As soon as you walk into a school, any school, you can sense the level of excitement and energy, or lack thereof, in the building. The same is true when you venture into a classroom or hallway of a school. What is it that differentiates the places that are exciting to work from those that lack the energy and excitement essential to a high-functioning school? One factor is the morale and motivation of those who work at the school. How can we get *our* schools to be like the “high-excitement” educational centers? Once that spark of excitement is ignited, are there things we can do to build on this momentum? How can we maintain the energy of the first day of school all year long?

Whether your school is one that consistently has a high level of excitement or one where by the end of the first week someone writes the number of days until Christmas vacation on the chalkboard in the teachers’ lounge, there are several things that affect your school. One of the struggles we had in writing this book involved determining what to include in Chapter 1.

As principals, we often scoffed at theories—if we thought any in-service or article was even going to mention the word, we would readily opt out. This instinct also rang true when we were writing the book. We couldn’t wait to get to what the heart of being a principal was all about. However, we also thought it was important to lay a brief foundation of why the dynamics of schools are as they are. What is it that causes some schools to be dynamic and others to be duds? We felt that we had to include some background information in Chapter 1 that would help each of us understand where our schools are and how they got there. Thus, in this chapter we are laying out five theories that we feel are essential in developing an understanding of

dynamics and morale. If that “practitioner urge” gets to be too strong, feel free to skip immediately to Chapter 2 and dive in when you are ready. If you would like to get your toes wet first, however, as you read, think about the people you work with and how they fit into these models.

The general approaches outlined in these theories can provide a rich foundation for understanding why the specifics from the rest of the book actually will work to build a dynamic environment in your school. You may have heard of some of these ideas, such as Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (1970) and Herzberg’s motivational-hygiene theory (Herzberg, Mausner, & Snyderman, 1993). Others, like the Group Norm (Mayo, 1933) or Comparison Other (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 1996) may not be so familiar. However, one thing that is critical in all settings is the role of the leader(s).

In a school, the obvious formal leader is the principal. Additionally, there may be many informal leaders, as well as others with positional power: department chairs, team leaders, grade-level leaders, and so on. Each of these people can play a significant role in the morale of those around them. Let’s apply a few theories to an understanding of how morale can be affected in a school.

Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs

Maslow’s theory of the hierarchy of needs is a widely used study of motivation in organizations, including schools. According to Lunenburg and Ornstein (1996), Maslow identified five basic groups of human needs that emerge in a specific sequence or pattern, that is, in a hierarchy of importance. Once one need is satisfied, another emerges and demands satisfaction, and so on through the hierarchy. These five levels of need, which represent the order of importance to the individual, are physiological, safety and security, social, esteem, and self-actualization (p. 89).

These needs, arranged from lowest level to highest level, are as follows:

1. **Physiological needs** include the basics of food, water, sleep, oxygen, and the like.
2. **Safety and security needs** include the need for physical safety, avoidance of anxiety, order, structure, and job and financial security.
3. **Social needs** include the need for belonging to groups, friendship, and acceptance by others.
4. **Esteem needs** include the need for self-respect, appreciation, and recognition from others.

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The Friday Focus— A Staff Memo That Works!

One concept that has been much discussed in the literature regarding effective leaders is the idea of leadership versus management. This debate often centers around that idea that “management” is old hat and unrelated to being a good leader. In other words, organizational skills, pushing paper, being able to handle finances, and so forth were appropriate a few decades ago but are no longer valued. Instead, the desire now is to have someone who can provide “leadership,” that is, a visionary, a relationship builder, a communicator. We feel, however, that it is not an “either or.” Instead, the need is to have both.

One tool that can support both of these efforts is to have a staff memo that can provide management *and* leadership. Management is always important to have high morale in an organization. It may not be enough in and of itself, but it is an essential part. Think of the management element of an educational leader in comparison to the classroom management skills of a teacher. Just as a teacher with classroom management skills may not be an effective teacher, a principal with good management skills still may not be an effective leader. However, a principal without good management skills, just like a teacher without classroom management skills, will *never* be effective.

A staff memo, if it is developed and used properly, can help provide both management and leadership for an organization. If both of these can be in place, then the morale of the staff is much more likely to be positive and productive. Without a tool that is widely distributed to all staff on a regular

basis, an educational leader is missing an excellent opportunity to dramatically impact morale. If done correctly, the staff memo can be *the* most important resource for a principal in both managing and leading a school. It can be informational, organizational, and inspirational at the same time. Let's take a look at one model called the Friday Focus.

Friday Focus—Developing a Staff Memo That Works

One important facet of effectively motivating any and all faculty and staff is having appropriate vehicles to be able to do so. In a study of more than 300 elementary schools in Indiana, M. E. Whitaker (1997) identified four schools with “more effective” climates and four schools with “less effective” climates. Teachers at each of these schools were asked to complete an instrument describing the climate of their school. On-site visits and interviews with teachers and the principals revealed several key differences between the principals of the more effective and the less effective schools. One of the differences between these two groups was that the more effective principals have regular, positive, weekly memos for their faculty and staff. None of the less effective principals produced positive faculty memos on a regular basis.

As we discussed in Chapter 5, knowing the impact that the principal has on a school, it is crucial that principals firmly establish their own personal beliefs and work to effect an appropriate belief system throughout the school. One of the most important and easiest ways to do this is with a weekly memo for the staff. Although it may also be of value to have an additional memo for the students, parents, and others, we are going to focus on the development of a memo for *all staff*—teachers, cooks, custodians, bus drivers, everyone who works at the school. If the staff memo is done properly, it may not be appropriate to share with other groups such as students and parents.

The History of the Friday Focus

I was 25 years old when I took my first principalship. I remember walking down the hall early in the school year. A teacher stopped me and asked, “Are you ready for the big assembly this afternoon?” When I finally realized that *I was the principal*, and she was speaking to me, I muttered (quite unconvincingly, I am sure), “Yep, I’m ready.”

Then I scurried into the office and asked my wonderful administrative assistant, “Do we have an assembly today?” When she responded affirmatively, I raced around, found the custodian, and worked out all of the bleacher arrangements, equipment needs, and the like. When it was time for