

Stepping
Out

of the

Informative

Bullet
Point

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Agenda

Introduction

Two things were instrumental in helping me to start the first staff meeting of the year with an activity very much like what I was doing in my classroom, and not with an ‘informative bullet point’ type of communication.

The first is a quote from the *BCPVPA Leadership Planning Guide*: “There is no ‘right’ way to conduct a staff meeting, but remember that no one likes to be ‘talked at’ for an hour, so prioritize what business must be conducted at the face-to-face meeting and what can be dealt with via email.”¹ Thank you to whoever wrote this: it sparked a big change! Why was it that in the classroom I was advocating for small group thinking and sharing, with students standing up and moving around, yet that as a Principal, my first impulse when holding a staff meeting was to talk through the agenda while attendees listen?

The psychological aspect of this will be left for another time: today I want to reflect on the activity presented by BCPVPA Executive Director Kevin Reimer in his article “Developing a Staff Vision”² which is the second piece that was instrumental to transforming my first staff meeting of the year. In his article, Kevin says that in September 2020, “School leaders were challenged to maintain authentic connections with their staff members to develop and reinforce a shared understanding of the purpose of their common work”. Upon reading this sentence, I felt compelled to try the activity he proposed as – surely – two hours of informative bullet point delivery won’t achieve anything that approaches authentic connections leading towards a shared goal. So, here is how I adopted and tweaked Kevin’s activity (thank you Kevin!).

Note that when thinking about “authentic connections with staff members”, I think of all the staff in the school including teachers, teaching assistants, and

office staff. It would be a pretty obvious irony to talk about student inclusion while never having space and time where all the staff can be together. So, I invited everyone to participate in the first half of the meeting (before proceeding with the informative bullet point items – I figured I could not totally escape those!)

The Activity

1. As a group, we followed Kevin’s suggestion and went through the definition of ‘Hall of Fame’, and the reasons why people may be inducted.

2. Pens and white sheets of paper were distributed to all and, as suggested by Kevin, everyone was asked to write down thoughts related to the following questions:

Note that I gave each question one-by-one, leaving the staff with time in between for thinking and writing.

- What is your Hall of Fame moment in teaching/ working with students and their families?
- What do you view as a significant success or accomplishment in the work that you do with students, families, or staff members?
- What beliefs or values are you able to connect to that moment?

3. Small Group Sharing

- In small groups, staff shared their stories. Then they were asked to identify the values or beliefs that were central to the stories. They recorded the values on a sticky note.

- Here, I departed from the ‘choose a partner’ strategy, and I leveraged with great results the technique of visible random grouping from Peter Liljedahl.³ Both Peter’s research and my own classroom and outside-the-classroom experience have taught me that visible

¹ BCPVPA Leadership Planning Guide, June 2020, www.bcpvpa.org/resources/publications/leadership-planning-guide

² BCPVPA Leading: Back to School, August 2021, “Developing a Staff Vision”, bit.ly/LBTS_sv

³ “Building Thinking Classrooms in Mathematics, Grades K-12: 14 Practices for Enhancing Learning” (Liljedahl, 2020), <https://peterliljedahl.com/wp-content/uploads/Visibly-Random-Groups.pdf>



random grouping is the best way to achieve authentic and inclusive small group discussion. If the ‘choose a partner’ technique would have been used, I am ready to bet that teachers would have mingled with teachers, TAs with TAs, and office staff with office staff. And if I had myself chosen the groups in a visible or hidden way, I am ready to bet that some staff members would have resented me in some way, which would not have helped the creation of connections between all. Using the compassionate systems vocabulary, one can say that employing a visibly random strategy for group formation is very conducive to triggering a generative social field.⁴

- To create visibly random groups, I directly leveraged the technique used by Liljedahl in one workshop I attended.⁵ Playing cards are chosen at random by people, who then go to find large-size playing cards placed all around the gymnasium. The people who have similar cards find each other at the same location and form the group. It is fun, makes us move, and stand, and achieves a fast visible random grouping with a total Dollar Store investment of \$5. Unbeatable!

⁴ <https://www.systemsawareness.org/cultivating-generative-social-fields>

⁵ myPITA Conference, (Whistler, May 12, 2017). Just experiencing this playing card technique was worth the day driving back and forth from Richmond to Whistler. I will take the opportunity to thank my Principal at the time, M. Réjean Gosselin, for offering to take my classroom for the day in case there was no substitute teacher available. This is a hallmark of true leadership from my Principal, for which I am very grateful and from which I learned immensely!

4. Sticky Note Moment

- “Every staff activity needs a sticky note moment,” says Kevin Reimer in his article. I took it as a joke initially, but in fact there is a lot of wisdom to it!
- In turn, one delegate from each group went to a big sheet of paper on the wall, affixed the sticky note, and said loudly to all the value that was written on it.
- This concluded the activity. The poster with all of the ‘values’ sticky notes is in my office, and my task ahead is to engage in the follow-up process described by Kevin.

Reflection

It was my first time trying to dedicate staff meeting time beyond the traditional bullet point agenda items. It felt very much like trying something new in the classroom, and the same questions related to risk-taking arose for me:

Will it work? Will anyone sabotage the activity? Will inclusion, meaningful connections, and learning be generated from it?

I felt like a bit of an outsider. Unlike being the teacher, where I always expected to remain the teacher while students engage in activities, I found that in being the

facilitator, it felt weird to be alone in the center of the gymnasium while everyone was discussing in their small groups. I was also a staff member, and would have liked to be part of the small group conversations.

While I could have briefly joined some small groups, I never liked it when others had done this when I was in small groups in the past. It felt intrusive, and can break the flow of the small group dynamic, so I decided to not visit the groups. I was – and still am – thirsty for inside information of what happened in those groups.

I did ask two people: a teacher and an office staff member. The teacher had a mixed reaction in terms of how she liked the activity, yet she shared a very telling story. One TA in her group shared what a special needs student told him on his first day of work: “You will be like the others; you will leave soon”.

The office staff members shared that some TAs were uncomfortable writing things down. This is interesting, as TAs are supposed to help students actually engage in the process of writing things down. However, the same TA the staff member was referencing volunteered to put the sticky notes on the wall, and I remember her telling everyone with energy while

walking to the wall “This I can do”. This really felt like a good combination of different activities, one being a stretch, and the other more easily accessible. This also provided TAs with an opportunity to experience an activity that students are typically being asked to do.



What is Next?

I want to build upon this process, and continue having a similar dynamic during the first part of our staff meetings. We have started training ourselves in restorative practices,⁶ and I intend to leverage the restorative practices material so that as a staff we explore the concepts more deeply using similar types of activities.

In addition, I just completed a 4-day compassionate systems leadership seminar. Even though the intent to write this article, and its main ideas, were born prior to the seminar, the act of writing it is a direct result of my participation in the seminar. It is also obvious that the ideas in the seminar can be leveraged with great effect to continue to step out of the bullet point agenda: this is just the beginning!



Sticky Notes on the Wall