Trust: The Key to Leading a Learning School

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Trust Matters

Great and wise leaders throughout history have celebrated trust as the powerful foundation of effective leadership because it is believed to be the institutional glue that holds a relationship, a classroom, and a staff together. Stephen M. R. Covey, the son of the well-known senior Covey and author of The Speed of Trust (2006), argues that trust is the single most transformative ingredient in any relationship, organization, or institution. For middle schools, trust paves the road to better teaching and learning.

Deborah Meir (2002) wrote in her compelling book, In Schools We Trust: “Learning happens fastest when the novices trust the setting so much they aren’t afraid to take risks, make mistakes, or do something stupid. Learning works best in fact, when the very idea that it’s risky hasn’t even occurred to kids.” (2002, p.18). For young adolescents, schools must be exceptionally safe, ensuring that at all times, each learner is safe from mental, social, and emotional harm.

Several years ago my colleague Trudy Knowles and I asked students in middle schools from communities across the United States to tell us what middle school teachers should know about middle school students. After several rounds of reading the letters to cull the larger themes, we concluded that middle school students hardly feel safe. (Doda & Knowles, 2007) It is exceedingly difficult for young adolescent learners to engage themselves fully in authentic intellectual activity when this fundamental need to feel safe is not met. Safety, however, is not just a condition met by cultivating positive teacher-student and peer relationships, though these are indeed essential. Safety for powerful learning demands an atmosphere in which growth is the ultimate goal and mistakes and fumbling and even failure are all viewed as valued and necessary elements of learning.

Just as social and intellectual safety empowers students and supports authentic learning, teachers’ growth thrives in an environment of trust. Parker Palmer (1998) claims that fear diminishes our best efforts to reach the young people we serve, to learn and grow as faculty, or to create schools where learning flourishes and is filled with joy and wonder.

He wrote:

“Educational institutions are full of divisive structures, of course, but blaming them for our brokenness perpetuates the myth that the outer world is more powerful than the inner…Fear is what distances us from our colleagues, our students, our subjects, and ourselves.” (Palmer, 1998, p. 36)

Unfortunately, trust is one of those things we don’t attend to until it’s missing. Writing on leadership, in their small and wise little book A Leader’s Legacy, Kouzes and Posner (2006) titled a chapter: “You can’t take trust for granted.” (71) But we do. The school year often begins with little time devoted to building relationships in our classrooms or among the staff. Advisory groups designed to build relationships far too often function like study halls or are used only for announcements and school business. And a single day of mixing kids up at lunchtime or providing a one-day anti-bullying workshop is hardly a sufficient dose for trust building for vulnerable young teens. Teacher teams are often expected to collaborate effectively with little actual guidance to do so. While at meetings, staff members end up seated in the same seats, month after month and even year after year, limiting their exchanges to the same folks in isolated pockets of connection. Even when schools add the promising structure of Professional Learning Communities, without the culture of trust, they often fail to yield significant results.

I would argue that middle school leaders are the keepers of school trust. In schools seeking to advance dynamic growth, no program, innovation, or stimulating idea will stick without it. This is not an easy time, however, in which to nurture a trusting school culture. Despite the rhetoric to that effect, fear is wreaking havoc with school trust. The news is replete with a never-ending barrage of assaults on public education; realtors rank property sales based on local schools’ test scores. Likewise, in states that have adopted Race to the Top, the new APPR (Annual Professional Performance Review) requirements encourage the ranking of teachers based more closely on student test scores. Alfie Kohn has argued that this is the “Learn or I will hurt you” era of school reform and it flies in the face of establishing learning environments where students and staff feel safe enough to take the kind of risks needed to really learn.
Perhaps news of Finland’s success with trust can boost our confidence. After all, in international comparisons, Finland is touted as an exemplary educational system to emulate. Sara Brown Wessling, a national teacher of the year recipient, once visited schools in Finland where she learned one stunning clue to Finland’s academic success: trust. (Wessling, 2011) She reported that in Finland they value trust and seek to create it for both students and staff. They believe that when schools focus on winning, competing, and testing, it is difficult to simultaneously invite all to really get their hands dirty digging into deep learning. After all, deep learning is messy; it’s not so much about right answers, as it is about right thinking. Such thinking occurs best in places where stress is low and positive emotions are high. Perhaps this is one lesson we might take away from Finland.

Understand the Trust Challenge

1. Traditional schools are not always conducive to trust. Eaker (2005) once observed that schools often function as a collection of independent contractors united by a common parking lot. Isolation characterizes our profession. Even with middle school teams, teaching can be perceived to be a sink- or swim-alone profession. Behind closed doors, teachers are masters of their own success or disaster. There are pockets of support and connection, but it is not widespread and inclusive. The goal in trust-building is to create a culture of mutuality and interconnectedness that permeates the entire staff.

   In student life, schedules can work against trust. In middle schools that utilize ability grouping, for example, student groupings may fall out in ways that may accentuate divisions of social class and race. Likewise, period by period scheduling whizzes students through the day with very little time to grow relationships. If we hope to build trust, we need to recognize the many ways we organize against it and counter accordingly.

2. According to Daniel Duke, (2008) risk aversion is one of the leading reasons why teachers avoid learning new methods and new approaches, but the risk is not based largely on a fear of the new approach. It is more often fear of the anticipated response of fellow colleagues. He claims that this can be so strong in a school’s culture that those who do seek to grow are often pulled back into the “crab bucket” to protect those in fear. This undercover fear needs to be addressed for a school to reach high levels of professional innovation.

3. Since instructional change is often the most challenging to engineer, it is useful to know that when principals talk about instruction in ways that reflect a real understanding of best practice, they engender teacher trust. Moreover, when principals visit classrooms and make instructional quality a priority, they further build trust with teachers. Finally, when principals invite teachers to step forward and have a voice, they support trust. (Louis & Wahlstrom, 2011)

4. When asked, many principals describe their schools as friendly. While friendly is certainly something to celebrate, congeniality should not be confused with collegiality. A friendly faculty may not have sufficient trust to tackle tough issues with honesty and courage. (Dufour & Berkey, 1995) In fact, because a school is friendly, it is easier to neglect trust.

5. Trust begins with our values and beliefs. Consider our educational history. For as long as most of us can remember, schools were deemed rigorous if they were filled with cool skepticism and distance. New teachers were admonished, “Don’t smile ‘til Christmas.” On one occasion, when I was conducting a workshop on the concept of middle school advisory, one teacher quite passionately told me that he could never be “close to kids” as it would undermine his credibility and authority. On another occasion in a middle school, I started to enter a girls restroom, when a faculty member gently advised me to only use the “adult” restroom. I was puzzled as this was a very safe place, but she proceeded to explain, “We just don’t do that here.” I asked her, “why?” She replied, “I don’t really know we just don’t.” I was struck by the message this sent to the young adolescents there, and by the fact that we often do things in schools simply because we do.

Some Big Trust Ideas

No matter where your school may be on the trust continuum, the following ideas might help you strengthen your school’s level of trust and nurture the school’s sense of community:

1. Ask the right questions.

First and foremost, assess your school’s trust factor. Start by asking these questions:
• Do teachers feel safe to critically examine their own practice, to make needed changes, to test out new methods? Do they feel safe sharing these attempts with fellow colleagues and administration?

• Do students feel safe to think critically, to make mistakes, to not understand, and to seek support? Do they feel as if their success is our success? Do they know learning and growth are more important than grades or test performance? Do they feel safe with other peers? While this will not leave you with a definitive trust score, it will help you begin to identify issues and concerns.

Next, imagine that when you stop in for classroom visits, you focus on inquiry into what teachers and students think is going on. You might say, “Tell me about your lesson. What’s working and what’s not working? Why do you think that is so?” If this was your focus, the emphasis would be towards growing, not grading, the teaching and learning.

2. Failure has to be an option.

If we hope to eradicate the risk aversion that is problematic to growth, we have to open the risk door. We have to make it clear that we support experimentation with study and that we recognize in the early stages, that new ideas are not perfectly executed. If we hope to be a learning school, we have to let both teachers and students draw outside the lines when innovating and growing. One student expressed this hope:

“It might be nice for middle school teachers to know that we are living human beings, we have feelings and we are people. Sometimes teachers think of you just as a student not a person, so they push you over your limits and sometimes they maybe might talk to you a little louder than they usually do if it is taking you a long time to answer a problem or you don’t understand. We are people too! We are not perfect. We can’t do everything perfectly the first time. If teachers understand this, it might make us feel more comfortable and we might do better in school.” (Doda & Knowles, 2007)

3. Engender a culture of respect.

Meir says trust depends on a “community of presumed equals” (2007, p. 19). This is a far cry from the belief that teachers are of worth more than their students. In fact, teachers at times prick when they read this kind of statement. Rightfully so. It is frightening to consider the notion that we ought to indeed share our power with kids. But this does not mean, nor has it ever meant, that we relinquish being the older, adult humans whose knowledge and life experience is a critical resource for our young. It does mean, however, that we trust children to be thoughtful, vibrant, concerned, and capable young people.

In classroom life this translates into practical shifts in the way teachers interact and respond to students. Teachers become incredibly respectful of students. They might be more inclined to say, “I never thought of it that way” or “thank you for your idea.” They would be comfortable using student restrooms at school or eating lunch on occasion with students. Moreover, they would invite students to regularly join them in planning and developing many aspects of classroom life, including the core values to live by, the classroom working agreements, seating arrangements, rubrics to guide daily work, and so on.

David Strahn (2008) who recently conducted and reviewed research on trust and student motivation, noted that, “When a student learns to trust a caring teacher, he or she can begin to take chances, find the will to invest effort in a task, and receive the guidance needed to improve skills. Trusting relationships thus constitute the threshold of action, a point beyond which meaningful learning can occur.” (p.7) Moreover, he added that when teachers engaged in caring behaviors devoted to knowing students well both as learners and people, students were significantly more motivated to try and more likely to succeed.” (Strahn, 2008, p. 9)

The same principle applies to the relationship between administration and staff. It is particularly important to safeguard the way we talk about and to the staff in our school. Do we model the same respect we so hope they give to their students?

4. Slow down.

I like to draw on other fields of thought in my search to capture understandings as complex and simple as trust. Even though his work is now surrounded by controversy, a story recounted in Three Cups of Tea (Mortensen & Relin, 2006) by Greg Mortensen, still offers a good lesson for us all. He shares an incident where his Pakistani partner takes him aside, walks him up a strenuous mountainside, and tells him:
“These mountains have been here a long time…. And so have we. You can’t tell the mountains what to do. You must learn to listen to them…. Now, you must listen to me. Sit down. And shut your mouth. You are making everyone crazy.

Then he took Mortensen’s level, account book, plumb line, and walked him back down to Korphe. He locked up his items, prepared tea and then explained, ‘If you want to thrive in Baltisan, you must respect our ways. The first time you share tea with a Balti, you are a stranger. The second time you take tea, you are an honored guest. The third time you share a cup of tea you become family, and for our family, we are prepared to die. Doctor Greg, you must take time to share three cups of tea. We may be uneducated. But we are not stupid. We have lived and survived here for a long time.” (150)

Mortensen reflected, “…Haji Ali taught me the most important lesson I’ve learned in my life. We Americans think you have to accomplish everything quickly. We’re the country of thirty-minute power lunches, and two-minute football drills…. Haji Ali taught me to share three cups of tea, to slow down, and make building relationships as important as building projects. He taught me that I had more to learn from the people I work with than I could ever hope to teach them.”(151)

I share this because it reminds us to take time to be attentive, for schools, like families, can take on the personality of those who lead. If we let the “business” of school life consume us, relationships can be lost.

Suggested Action Steps.

While there is no quick fix for something as multi-layered as trust, here are a few simple ideas for building a middle school culture of trust that really works:

1. Self-contain students on their first day of school in small advisory-like groups and run the first half or full day centered on building relationships in those groups. This day’s orientation can be planned by teams and can include the usual first day items (eg; lockers, schedules, supplies, etc.) with a heavy dose of the fourth “R”—relationships.

2. Make staff meetings an opportunity to introduce new protocols for interaction including the small group check in/out. In this protocol, all meetings begin and end with a brief share time. The check-in share time gives each member a chance to check into the meeting by sharing what’s on his/her mind. There is no crosstalk or conversation during the check in. The checkout is usually last words on the content of the meeting. Each time the staff meets, these check-in groups would be changed.

3. For staff gatherings and meetings, try discussion buddies, clock appointments, or other partner arrangements to encourage conversations with as many different staff members as possible. These appointments can serve as another way to start a meeting with a quick discussion partner chat. By the end of the year, nearly everyone will have had several interactions with every member of the staff.

4. Avoid the old one-shot professional development (PD) model and replace it with sustained, job-embedded PD. Be sure to focus on the learning cycle that always includes the steps of study, practice, reflect, and refine. This means if your staff is learning about new approaches to differentiation, they should have many opportunities to try out learned methods, reflect with others about their efforts, then revise as needed, and finally re-teach.

5. Ask the students. Invite students into staff meetings to enlighten your understanding of what is happening at school. They can serve in a panel format or they might join small groups of teachers at tables to help see your school from their point of view. This is an exceeding powerful means of building a trustful culture and getting inside the hearts and minds of your students.

6. Give the staff multiple opportunities to grow as one staff. While it is enriching for teachers to attend conferences or workshops not sponsored by school, when the whole staff learns together, staff cohesion improves.

7. Slow down. Avoid the merry-go-round of initiatives, and choose one area to target for the year. After all, when a staff is frenzied, trust is a lost cause. Lead with the idea that less is more.

Closing

Good schools are continuously growing and improving. They seek to be learning schools committed to finding solutions to help students learn. They recognize, however, that a learning school is built on a foundation of trust and they take that very seriously.