

Improving Staff Culture: Collective Leadership with Staff Teams

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Fact: Teams do well when leaders invest in supporting social relationships, demonstrate collaborative behavior, and create what I'm calling a "gift culture"—one in which employees experience interactions with colleagues as something valuable and generously offered, *a gift*.

Deer Creek is a relatively young school (27 years old) and we have experienced significant change over the past 8-10 years; cultural-shifts (ethnic/socio-economic), re-location, enrollment dips to the point of closing and now increase to point of reaching capacity, leadership transitions with 12 different Heads in 27 years, re-establishment of Board Governance, and more. Too add, this year 25% of our teaching faculty was new to our school, and over 50% of our teaching faculty has been hired over the past 3 years. And one more thing, in June 2018 our school board recently approved to merge with a small Christian academy which will increase enrollment by at least 25% and cause our teams to embrace hospitality at a whole new level.

When is too much change dangerous? The changes outlined above have made our school "feel" like a completely new place, all the while pursuing the same Mission, Vision and Core Values that make our school such a unique place in the South Suburbs of Chicago. We have worked hard to establish *who we are*, so what should we do to empower staff to lead midst so much change? Are we running a risk of changing too much, too soon? And what do we do with our veteran teachers? You know, the ones who have been expected to carry on through frequent leadership transitions, etc. They have been unintentionally trained to keep the learning happening in their own classrooms while school leadership gets focussed, rather than collaborating with other leaders in the building.

What was the focus of our project?

It has been our goal for 100% of our staff to contribute in the mission and vision of our school in tangible, "big impact" ways. This has been our way to embrace the significant amount of change in our learning community. Intentional efforts in maintaining professional collaboration will spill over to inspire a team committed to developing as professional educators and empower all to use unique leadership strengths in meaningful ways.

Two years ago I overheard a parent meeting their child's teacher for the first time. Before a proper introduction, the parent reached out her hand and asked boldly, "...and who are you?" The teacher replied with a sheepish smile, "Oh, I'm just a teacher". As the Head of School I was disappointed with this response and I take full responsibility.

JUST A TEACHER?! The “Just-a-Teacher” response seems to be saying that being a teacher is something less than other roles in education. **This needs to stop.** We need to empower school leaders – administrators, teachers, and students – who have the expertise needed to do the necessary leadership work of carrying our mission.

Much has been written about distributed and shared leadership. This is good. Collective Leadership is another term that I think describes our goals for this Staff Culture initiative. Collective leadership encompasses the practices through which teachers and administrators influence colleagues, policymakers, and others to improve teaching and learning. Collective leadership is about more than task delegation to make administrative work more manageable. It is about more than an administrator sharing power.

The type of Staff Culture we are aiming for requires the collective expertise of the entire school building. Great administrators have knowledge of finance, instruction, school law, management, policy, and organizations that is essential for school improvement. Teachers have expertise that is at the heart of the technical core of the educational enterprise – the art and science of teaching and learning.

If our goal is to improve teaching and learning in the middle of school transformation, could we afford not to get teachers involved in leading school initiatives?

What did we do? We created new Staff Roles and added Staff Teams. The purpose of creating various **Staff Teams** is to share leadership opportunities with staff that lead us to collaborate and contribute to carrying out the mission and vision of our school in a variety of ways - more than just teaching students. Teacher leadership roles provide a needed platform for teachers to share what they are best at. This could include opening their doors to colleagues, serving as coaches or peer evaluators, sharing curriculum, or leading teacher teams. We believe that all teachers and staff want to continuously improve and hone their practice, so when we build structures that allow teachers to learn from each other, all teachers can benefit. Most everyone wants to be part of something bigger than themselves, right?

In 2017-2018, all staff were expected to serve on **Staff Teams** (described below). Appointments were chosen at the beginning of the school year. Full-time staff were expected to lead one team, and participate on one other team. Staff were not assigned to a team, rather they were encouraged to choose teams that were of particular interest to them. If none of the pre-arranged teams spark interest, the leader proposed the creation of a new team.

Along with this theme of shared leadership, we restructured our administrative team to consist of a Head of School, added a Director of Development and Administration, full-time Administrative Assistant and part-time Business Officer. Deer Creek Christian School was in a

rut of have a principal that was spread too thin and was unable to be a visionary and lead well. With this new structure in place, our goal is to start dreaming big.

All **Staff Teams** were expected to report to the Head of School one time per month to share progress, plans, and/or goals. Key areas of oversight and responsibility include Curriculum, Instruction, Assessment, Accreditation and School Improvement Plan, Advisory Committee to the Head of School, Development and School Finance.

Social Team - *The Social Team is responsible for planning monthly staff gatherings (be creative!) solely for the sake of building staff unity outside of school. This team is also responsible for collecting staff dues (work with financial officer). The money collected will be used for purchasing cards/gifts for retirement recognition, birthdays, end of year party, showers (baby/wedding), funerals, appreciation days, etc..*

Chapel Support Team - *The Spiritual Life Director is ultimately responsible for organizing and planning weekly chapels. However, we would like to plan Quarterly Celebration Chapels/Awards Assemblies/End of Year Celebrations and School Theme Wrap-Up (Q1, Q2, Q3, Q4), which require more support. We also want this team to help organize monthly speakers who can connect with our annual school theme.*

PTF Teacher Liaison Team - *This team of teachers will attend monthly PTF meetings on a rotating schedule. This way we can have at least one teacher present at each meeting - an individual who can speak for the teachers and work to bridge a the gap between parents and teachers as the PTF Committee plan events for our school community.*

Yearbook Team - *This small team is responsible for working with the Head of School and Administrative Assistant to organize the school yearbook. We partner with a company who requires us to choose and upload photos (maintained by the Head of School), and select formats and themes for pages. Work for this team begins in February, or so.*

ACSI Events Team - *Math Olympics, Spelling Bees, Speech Retreats, Art Competitions and more. The ACSI Team is required to work with the Head of School and in collaboration with classroom teachers to organize and lead Deer Creek's various contests that lead to ACSI's Regional Events. This team promotes important opportunities for students to flourish in a variety of ways.*

Battle of the Books Team - *The Battle of the Books team helps organize student participants and parent volunteers for three B.O.B. competitions that take place in April (date are already set) at the Crete Library.*

Red Ribbon Week Team - *Red Ribbon Week is the oldest and largest drug prevention campaign in the country and serves as a vehicle for communities and individuals to make a commitment to live drug free lives. At Deer Creek we also see RRW as an opportunity to raise awareness about drugs and alcohol and to celebrate our bodies which are uniquely created in God's image. This team will organize activities and dress-up days to help us raise awareness.*

Bulletin Board Team - *We have 3 beautiful bulletin boards at Deer Creek - awesome spaces for us to communicate with parents/students/faculty/visitors visually what matters to us at our school - Students, Student work, Faith Formation, Core Values, PAWS-itive behavior, etc. The Bulletin Board Team is responsible for making the boards look great and updating them each quarter, or coordinating with others*

to update them. The Central Bulletin Board in the elementary wing should always be connected to our school's annual theme. Work with the Head of School on this.

Deer Creek Literacy Team - It's all about promoting reading throughout our entire school. This team will plan unique/memorable ways to get students engaged in reading activities throughout the week.

Community Service Team - It's important that every student at Deer Creek understands the concept of servant leadership. The purpose of the CHF team is to organize a consistent opportunities for students to serve others outside of our immediate community. The CHF Team will work with K-8 classroom teachers to schedule monthly visits to CHF in Homewood. It will also be this team's responsibility to collect/share data that shows specifically how we have served. For example, during the Summer program we packed 306 bags of beans!

Multicultural Relevancy Task Force (Includes Board Members, Parents and Teachers)

This team's mandate is to clearly define what multicultural relevance in learning means in view of a Christ-centered education. To gather and study resources and data that support the implementation of a multicultural learning environment. To provide opportunity for the Administration, Faculty, Board and Families of Deer Creek to engage with and provide insight towards a better understanding of multicultural learning. To evaluate our current multicultural learning practices and recommend a comprehensive plan for improvement, which will include recommended timeline, resources, communication plan and evaluation process.

Learning and Instruction Team (Includes Board Members, Parents and Teachers)

The Instructional Committee of the Board is new to DCCS and serves the school in two specific ways: 1) assisting the Board in ensuring that the educational program of the school is in keeping with the stated educational goals, philosophy and mission of the school. 2) supporting assisting, and providing direction to the Head of School in his/her role as the educational leader of the school. As the educational leader of the school, the Head of School retains full responsibility for the educational program, while this committees provides oversight, direction, and insight into how we "do school" at Deer Creek.

Administrative Teaming that includes new office staffing.

Director of Development - To devise and manage a program designed to attract the maximum gift support possible to DCCS. This program includes annual fund solicitation; planned giving programs; corporate and foundation proposals; and planning major capital gifts.

Director of Finances – To oversee the financial workings of the school and adhere to the fiscal operating budget and make recommendations to the Head of School to enforce school policy relating to fiscal management.

Director of Facilities – In cooperation with the facility ownership ensures that the buildings and grounds are maintained properly and to lead in maintaining DCCS' joint use agreement and future agreements relating to facilities while overseeing adequate inventories of Information Technology, equipment, furnishings, etc.

Information Technology – To oversee and provide leadership to the Director of Information Technology whose role is to oversee the implementation of the DCCS scope and sequence for technology throughout the facility. This will be done in collaboration with the Head of School as it relates to the education program.

What Are We Learning?

Ultimately, teachers and staff collaborate regularly before, after, and during the school day, both formally and informally. We need to find ways to stay united. When this happens, all teachers, administrators, and support staff can speak about our school's goals – what they are and how we are working towards them together.

My guide for this deep change comes from the book *Switch* by Chip and Dan Heath when they write about “Shaping the Path”: **Tweak the Environment, Build Habits, and Rally the Herd.**

With our purpose for the project in mind, a few critical moves are taking shape and we are learning a lot about how collective leadership can unite our staff while taking ownership of the school's vision. We are learning that:

1. We need to look for diversity. The most successful teams require diversity. Diverse teams have access to many people with varying skills and experiences. A diverse group will be able to pull from all these experiences in order to achieve the mission.
2. We need to practice teamwork. Team-building exercises are the best way to see how individual members will work together to accomplish a goal. Before our staff teams have to work on important tasks, we need to see how they handle something simple like an ice breaker. Who takes the lead? Who works well together?
3. Determining the strengths of each team member and assigning them to specific tasks based on their strengths has been huge for our newly formed administrative team.

What difference is it making in your school?

After the 2017-2018 year, we intend to take what we have learned about **Staff Teams** and **Collective Leadership** to organize professional learning communities for our teaching staff in 2018-2019. We have positioned ourselves well to put an emphasis on collaborative learning and professional development. Ultimately, teacher efficacy impacts student learning in the most powerful ways and this is what we are after. Together, we are learning who we serve with and our ability to serve others well is growing.