

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 transition over the past 8-10 years; cultural-shifts (ethnic/socio-economic, re-location, enrollment dips to point of closing, and now enrollment increase to a 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?

What Did We Do? We created new Staff Roles and added Staff Teams. The purpose of this is to share leadership opportunities that lead us to collaborate professionally and contribute to carrying out the mission and vision of our school in a variety of ways. Teacher and staff leadership roles provide a needed platform for us to share what we are best at. This could include opening 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. Teacher efficacy is the number one leader in increasing student achievement, so it's worth our investment.

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. 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.

What Are We Learning?

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 This Making? 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 emphasize collaborative learning and professional development. Ultimately, teacher efficacy impacts student learning in the most powerful ways and this is what we are after.