

## BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

The mascot at the William E. Doar, Jr., School for the Performing Arts was the wolf. By the end of our first month, I shared the following message about the importance of forging strong social bonds in the September 2012 PrincipalPOINT newsletter:

### *Lessons from the Wolf*

*I've thought quite a bit about our mascot the wolf – and how we, as a team, model their behaviors.* (According to <https://www.defenders.org/gray-wolf/basic-facts>)

*Wolves live, travel and hunt in packs of 4–7 animals on average. Packs include the alphas, their pups... The alpha female and male are the pack leaders that track and hunt prey, choose den sites and establish the pack's territory. Wolves develop close relationships and strong social bonds. They often demonstrate deep affection for their family and may even sacrifice themselves to protect the family unit. Wolves have complex communication systems, ranging from barks and whines to growls and howls.*

*I've been fortunate to see wolves in the wild in Canada. I've always admired these majestic animals, particularly their capacity to forge such strong interpersonal bonds. Some of our young wolves at WEDJ are on a hunt for a college degree, while others are not so sure about their future. Both parents and staff, as leaders of our pack, need to help steer our 'pups' toward that goal. How do we do that? We all howl in our own way – but our direction to make a difference is clear. Mr. McKeiver's howl, this week, was breathtaking. The new mural outside our front office promoting arts and leadership, that he and his family created, – adds so much to our 'den.' The words 'Thank you' cannot begin to express my appreciation for this self-less act. Some of the best ways to build strong bonds, like wolves, is to help others and ask for help. The support people give to one another under our roof is second to none. (<http://archive.constantcontact.com/fs091/1110378510852/archive/1111117486606.html>)*

At WEDJ we experienced the full scale of emotion. From the sad news of Ms. Johnson losing her brother and staff pitching in to help with the funeral, to the joy of births (Ms. Miles and Ms. Lucas) and Mr. Dickens's wedding, we relied on Mr. Carter to keep us all in the loop. We were sincere about caring for one another.

While people did share incredible acts of generosity and support, there were some small cracks in the walls that were difficult to mend, especially when some folks did

not go to the source with their concerns. I initially addressed these negative seeds by modeling positive behavior and speaking with staff about direct ways to solve problems. I also highlighted the positive work of various team members and shared tales of the importance of team. In my weekly bundle, I encouraged staff to dial direct by praising in public and criticizing in private, and be generous with ‘shout outs’ to one another for *going the extra mile*. I spoke about a metaphor of tacks on the floor, how different people respond when they see something left behind by others. Some folks might tell someone else to pick them up, others might ignore them, some might have a meeting to prepare a plan to prevent tacks from falling on the floor, some people might commission a study about tacks on the floor, and some folks will simply pick up the tacks. WEDJ was full of staff who leaned over and picked up the tacks.

Probably the first sign of a crack in the foundation came to my attention when some staff interpreted timing for transitions between classrooms, in different ways. Even though our classes were to end 5 minutes before the start of the next class, there were still many teachers keeping their students longer. I could see that there was a growing disconnect between staff, who valued the set timing for transitions, and those who lost track of time. Certain classes were sometimes 5 to 10 minute late for their next class. When students arrived on time, or possibly early, they had down time in the hall, creating additional opportunities to disrupt others. In addition to speaking to people directly, I addressed this concern in several ‘bundles; and insisted that everyone respect time.

In an arts meeting, the school and guest teachers discussed techniques, tools and strategies for improving their classes. They asked the school administration to work with teachers to make sure they delivered students to the arts classes on time. The school schedule was organized for the most part to have classes start on the hour or half hour. Establishing such times should have made it easier for teachers to follow the schedule, but the increasing number of late dismissals was contributing to the mounting tension in the school community. The lack of a consistent approach to timing of transitions also had a negative effect on school culture. We needed to address student discipline, as a response to our inability to execute transitions in a timely and effective manner.

During my initial rounds, I felt the excitement of a fresh start, but gradually I began to overhear some raised voices by both students and teachers. As the school year progressed, tensions mounted as we began the hard work of making improvements. I recall one teacher, who truly cared about each of her students, was so frustrated she tossed a backpack out the door. I had to duck as it just missed me. I waited to make sure things in that classroom quieted right down. I did not have to intervene, however, after the class, I made a point of visiting with the teacher to find out more about what was going on. She had calmed down and admitted she had lost her cool. This teacher had made enormous contributions to school spirit at our school and I was confident that giving her a second chance, so long as she kept her temper in check, was a good decision.

In the next bundle following the barreling backpack incident, I reinforced the importance of professional behavior. I explained that we could not afford to put off situations where we lose our cool to being a ‘bad day.’ I noted that students watch us and can mimic our every move, so modeling calmness in the face of adversity is the only option. Staff expectations were clearly laid out in our employee performance review documents:

- Staff must demonstrate a sense of humor, humility and emotional control.
- Staff must develop positive relationships with teachers and support staff.

There were only a few instances of teachers losing their cool. In the fall of the next school year, several staff members gave me the heads up that a teacher had told a student to ‘*f—off*,’ after the student made a mean comment about her. Within seconds of being informed of the incident, this teacher came right to me and apologized. She felt terrible, and when I asked her to go home for the afternoon, calm down and “don’t let it happen again,” she understood and respectfully followed through.

In response to staff concerns about discipline, we set up a committee to explore how to fine-tune the student discipline process. We wanted to be sure there would be mass staff buy-in – given the fact that each teacher would be responsible for implementation. In one bundle, I added the proverb: ‘Do not remove a fly from your friend’s forehead with a hatchet.’ That made Carter laugh, as he was someone who had to deal with student and staff emotion on a regular basis.

Most staff members were willing to help each other out with classroom management. Collaboration is never easy in any organization; it takes longer than a ‘do-it-yourself decision’ and it is hard work – plain and simple. It was invigorating for staff to have a say. Participants who entered into negotiating ideas with an open mindset resisted the temptation to judge input, and were willing to accept ideas generated by others around the table.

I wanted our staff and families to know that supporting one another is an important value. I could see that collaboration was critical for all school improvement, and building relationships would be central to the school’s success. My reports to the WEDJ Board of Trustees did include items related to school culture, and while I would have welcomed the opportunity to engage in focused discussions about the significance of building relationships, this was not a topic that garnered much attention.