



Problem-Solving Strategies

from a Mentoring Principal

How to smooth fissures and build trust after a period of high turnover in leadership.

By Chris Barnes

New principals face a host of challenges when assuming the leadership role for the first time, from building relationships to establishing effective teams to communicating a clear vision. Having an effective mentor to provide problem-solving strategies early in this process can be a critical component of success.

Trusting relationships help form the foundation of a school and its community. These relationships can become fractured over the course of numerous leadership changes in short periods of time, creating a negative culture and a lack of faith in leadership. This scenario is especially daunting for a new principal and provides an opportunity for helpful guidance from an experienced colleague.

I had the opportunity to provide such guidance to a new principal taking the helm of a middle school halfway through the school year. That principal was my protégé from principal mentoring certification training, and having an established relationship allowed for immediate dialogue on strategies to approach the enormous challenges created by this lack of stability.

Build Strategies

Faced with the immediate task of establishing trusting relationships, the following questions can help guide initial problem-solving efforts:

- What strategies can be implemented now to build trust and relationships with staff?
- How should you assess how the school is currently operating in the context of your vision and mission?
- What mechanisms in place are effective and what needs to be modified in relation to parents and your school community?
- How have the numerous changes in leadership affected the students and how can you best measure their needs?
- What strategies can be utilized to schedule priorities and most accurately reflect on the bigger picture?

Build Trust

In order to create trust, individual emotional deposits must be made on a daily basis. Principals should initiate one-on-one conversations on safe territory such as the teacher's classroom, and conversations should reflect a personal interest in the teacher's life and perceived pur-


pose at the school. An important starting point is involved listening and dialogue to seek common ground and to clarify your vision, mission, and commitment to the students and staff. This dedication to emotional deposits is a long-term project to reconstruct trust and evaluate each staff member's commitment to and passion for his or her role at the school. Attending school and community events and hosting opportunities to meet parents is also a vital strategy for cultivating relationships.

Build Teams

One key problem posed by this new principal involved how to best manage an established school team comprised of people in the wrong seat of the bus, or on the wrong bus overall. In this case, quiet observation and attention to the motive of each team member is a crucial strategy. Establishing a protocol of norms at the first team meeting is imperative to create a baseline to assess individuals and groups. A principal can then follow up with more personal conversations to further align goals and vision.

"Overwhelming" is a word often used when new principals initially consider the big picture and want to make an immediate impact to create a more robust, positive learning environment. Talking with students in the cafeteria, initiating individual and group conversations, and surveying students are positive problem-solving strategies to obtain immediate feedback. This approach of information gathering provides tangible data to make necessary changes in students' best interest.

Build a Mentorship

Mentoring helps paint a road map for a new principal to create and answer his or her own questions, reaching beyond mechanisms already in place to foster and implement problem-solving strategies of approaching, questioning, and interpreting feedback. Effective mentoring based on a trusting relationship empowers a new principal to gain greater confidence and understanding of the responsibility, decision-making, and demands of this role in today's complex academic environment. 

Chris Barnes is principal of Corte Sierra Elementary School, Avondale, Arizona. For more information about NAESP's National Mentor Training and Certification Program, visit www.naesp.org/mentor.