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Productive Working Relationships with Staff and Stakeholders

Near North District School Board

The Near North District School Board (NNDSB) is located in Northeastern Ontario and currently operates 28 elementary schools, 7 secondary schools, an Adult and Continuing Education Centre and two Alternative Schools within its jurisdiction.

The NNDSB is an English-language public school board that also provides, French Immersion and Extended French as well as Native Language programs in some elementary and secondary schools. Secondary schools also offer a diverse range of Specialist High Skills Majors (SHSM) courses and an International Baccalaureate (IB) program at one of the North Bay secondary schools. In addition, the Board provides alternative, adult and community-based programs.

The boundary of the NNDSB covers the majority of the Parry Sound and Nipissing Districts, along with a small portion of the Muskoka District. The Board's western boundary is the French River. Bordering on Georgian Bay to the east, the Board boundary runs south east around Algonquin Park. The east boundary follows the Quebec border along the Ottawa River. The Board's northern boundary runs across numerous unorganized townships south of Temagami. The area the region covers is approximately 17,020 square km with a perimeter of 958 km.

While the amalgamation of past school boards is 20 years old, the wounds and historical slights remain quite significant with the physical board office and the majority of the population centered in North Bay. Those outside of the city suggest they can sometimes feel as if they are afterthoughts or that the reality of the rural school situation is not clearly understood. How the board office is seen to support these rural schools is of concern to those in the rural areas.

This case study focuses on the decisions made by the executive team to seriously and thoughtfully look into these significant feelings and ask ourselves if we should be addressing relationships in a more purposeful way. In particular, this case study addresses internal system and school relationships, local community groups and teacher federation relationships.

Initial Conditions:

The Board has had a number of directors over the past ten years.

As well, the Board of Trustees had undergone significant changes with 1/3 new members joining the team in the past election. Two new trustees joined the team due to the passing of one and the retirement of another within the first year of the new director's time.

Upon the hiring of the new director, the Board worked diligently with the executive team to complete the following plans over the past two years. (These planning frameworks had not been updated or implemented in a number of years).

- Multi-year plan
- Capital plan
- Strategic plan

The Board had just completed two significant accommodation reviews with two new elementary schools opening within a year of each other in both North Bay and Parry Sound.

As with most northern boards, the NNDSB has been hit hard by financial reforms and the imperative need for a capital plan and a significant accommodation review in the City of North Bay to address three high schools and three elementary schools.

Why this Characteristic?

The trustees asked that conditions for learning and culture be a priority. It was decided that an environmental scan by an outside facilitator be completed in order to start this process of change with the most honest feedback possible. All executive level staff, including trustees, were open to dealing with the feedback honestly.

The Senior Team chose to respond to the observations and recommendations of the scan and focus on the following priorities and premises as outlined in Kenneth Leithwood's study: [*Characteristics of High Performing School Systems in Ontario Part 3*](#), 2011.

Internal system and school relationships

- Central office roles are interconnected; work is undertaken collaboratively in the service of a widely shared set of purposes. Communication among staff is frequent and cordial.
- School staffs often participate in system decisions, are in frequent contact with central office staff for support and assistance. Central office staff is in schools frequently and know most school staff members by name.
- Networks and professional learning communities are well established at both school and system levels and have become the established way of solving problems and taking care of other business.

Summarized on the following pages are the findings of this scan. (With permission Advent 10 Management)

Environmental Scan - Near North DSB

- ❖ Mandate
 - ✓ Gather confidential stakeholder input regarding perceptions about the current working environment and organizational structure.
 - ✓ Solicit perceptions regarding what might be done to work more efficiently and effectively while providing a high level of service delivery to the schools and enhanced outcomes for students.

- ❖ Healthy working & learning environments include:
 - ✓ Genuine two-way communication
 - ✓ Fair and consistent treatment for all
 - ✓ Acknowledgement of accomplishments and contributions
 - ✓ Staff work co-operatively with each other
 - ✓ A “Team approach”

- ❖ Healthy working & learning environments include:
 - ✓ Shared goals
 - ✓ Authentic listening and valuing the ideas of others
 - ✓ Clear role definitions and expectations for all
 - ✓ Dialogue which includes praise
 - ✓ People who enjoy being at work
 - ✓ Pride in service delivery...doing a good job for clients.

- ❖ Lines of Inquiry
 1. What is working well now and should not change in our service to our clients in the schools?
 2. What would you change, if we could, to enhance our service delivery?
 3. What suggestions do you have for consideration?

- ❖ Process Followed
 - ✓ Personal private interviews were conducted:
 - Monday September 8, 2015 - Friday January 15, 2016
 - With the Superintendents
 - With the Chair & Vice Chair
 - With Executive Assistants
 - With Principals from Representative Schools
 - With other Board Office Staff

STRENGTHS:

Director’s Approach and Initiatives.

There was unanimous agreement that the new Director was removing barriers within the system, improving communication, relationships and staff morale. Monthly meetings with staff after Board Meetings were seen as worthwhile and were appreciated.

Competent and Skilled Staff.

There was clear consensus that a solid team of professionals with diverse skills to draw upon were employed at Central Office and in the schools. Staff members exhibited a pride in service delivery and believed they extended sincere effort to do the best job possible and were professional at all times with clients.

Marketing Education and Celebrating Successes.

Most were proud of the communications to the community and to the media that put forward the Board and staff accomplishments and events to the public. Many commented that this is an area of high achievement for the board.

Skilled and Hard Working Supervisory Officers and Managers.

There is consensus among the staff that the Supervisory Officers and Managers were well qualified and juggle heavy workloads and multiple conflicting priorities on a daily basis.

Change Orientation.

Many staff members, (both management and union) expressed excitement in the fact that a dialogue has begun on the need for change and that excitement and support is building. They expressed hope that the opportunities that present themselves be realized to bring about positive and constructive change for the better.

- Issues for Resolution
- Culture of the Board
- Lack of Updated Policies & Procedures
- Silos within the Board Office
- Atmosphere in the Board Office
- Governance Model
- Accountability
- Supervisory Officer Presence in Schools
- Fair and Equitable Treatment for All
- Resistance to Change
- Lack of Strategic Alignment

OPPORTUNITIES

1. A NEW SHARED VISION

The Near North District School Board has an opportunity to re-brand itself by engaging in a process to develop a Strategic Plan with a vision for the future.

This process should involve all stakeholders including; students, parents, community members and leaders, trustees and staff in schools and central offices.

2. A MORE CARING APPROACH

The Near North District School Board has an opportunity to prove to all clients in the schools and the community that we care in the board office is of critical importance.

3. A MORE EFFICIENT SERVICE DELIVERY MODEL

The Near North District School Board has an opportunity to right-size the support staff in the Board Office is one of substantial importance.

Each Department should be challenged to look at their service delivery model and come up with ways to be more efficient.

4. MORE SUPPORT FOR THINKING AND LEARNING

The Near North District School Board has an opportunity to collaborate with school staff on how to better support the learning process and the development of students into independent thinkers and problem solvers, which is exciting. The support structure for schools should be looked at with the view to enhance support for schools.

Recommendation #1 Updating Policies & Procedures

That each Department set as a priority the development of updated policies, procedures and protocols for all current practices.

The focus must be on equitable, fair and consistent treatment for all.

Recommendation #2 Creating a New Image Through Collaboration

That each Department has an open dialogue and create an action plan to improve the image of their department. Any practices that are not welcoming in their message should be discontinued. A survey of school staff and staff from other departments should solicit suggestions for improvement in this area.

Recommendation #3 Leadership Imperatives in the Board Office

That open-door policies, authentic listening and consideration for the ideas of others be encouraged in order to build trust and a healthy working environment. There has to be clear, timely and consistent communication by all staff and administration.

Recommendation # 4 Accountability Structures

That the performance appraisal policy be reviewed by a committee of staff, support staff and administrators. Consistency in the application of the performance standards ensures that the performance of all staff is acknowledged and reviewed in a respectful and professional way.

Recommendation # 5 Human Resource Realignment

That the staffing at all levels of each department (and schools) be reviewed with the view to finding ways to realign staff strength to support Strategic Plan Initiatives and Improving Student Success.

Recommendations # 6 Financial & Material Resource Realignment

That the budget process be streamlined and that the budget be aligned with the new Strategic Plan and initiatives that support this Plan.

Recommendation # 7 Strategic Plan Alignment and Term

That the Strategic Plan focus be for an 18 month to 24-month duration to enable timely implementation.

The Strategic Plan should be the basis for any other Plans the board or schools may have to avoid overlap and conflict.

Recommendation # 8 Project Teams

That initiatives that fall under the Strategic Plan be placed under the leadership of interested individuals who will chair Project Teams to achieve quick results in an efficient way. Supervisory staff and Managers should delegate the leadership to interested individuals to allow them to develop as leaders and become engaged and invested in the Strategic Initiatives

Recommendation # 9 School & Department Plans

That each Superintendent report on a quarterly basis to the Director on the progress made towards achieving milestones set for the initiatives they have put in place to achieve goals set towards the Strategic Plan.

Recommendation # 10 Environmental Scan Recommendations

That the recommendations in the Environmental Scan be forwarded to the Executive Council for action and that those deemed appropriate be forwarded to the Strategic Plan Process for consideration.

What did you do to improve the condition of this characteristic?

Much work had already been undertaken by the executive team to strengthen existing relationships, but the recommendations allowed for the team to delve into the “how” and “why” and to acknowledge the need to speak honestly and with compassion about leadership journeys. Some of the changes put into effect include:

1. Highlighted work that was done by senior staff through presentations shared with the trustees focusing on the voice of principals, staff and student.

2. Instituted a new format within our public board meetings to bring attention to student achievement and well-being with plaques of recognition to be featured on our web page.
3. The director had instituted board office morning meetings after monthly public board meetings to recap significant information from these meetings and to highlight the interconnectedness of board office staff efforts with schools.
4. All postings be made transparent (unless special circumstances made this impossible, in which case the circumstances were shared with stakeholders).
5. The director instituted a “Director’s Council”- three meetings a year to meet with anyone within the organization who wished to have voice and audience. Participation was voluntary and meetings were held in geographical areas for ease for staff. (Participants included: superintendents, principals, board office staff, student services staff (e.g., O.T) education assistants, teachers and custodians). Meetings were started with: What does the director need to know and address and what are staff concerned and talking about?
6. Director utilized the audience of all principals at principal monthly meetings to present information and set tone, talk about culture, speak to expectations and share information (e.g. the findings of the environmental scan and next steps).
7. Director emails to “All staff” with the desire to help address alignment, speak to changes within the system, open dialogue with all staff (many of whom respond with more questions and insights), and push and welcome dissonance through questions about roles, responsibilities, readings, Truth and Reconciliation ponderings, news items, etc.).
8. Executive meetings changed from one a week to two a month with a stronger focus on breaking down silos, sharing responsibilities and keeping all conversation centered on the multi-year plan and core business.
9. Implementation plans were designed as an executive council, completed by staffs via portfolios, and shared with trustees, including ongoing updates has improved the depth of knowledge of trustees of our core work and the workload of senior staff.
10. Meetings with federation presidents three times a year to address concerns and speak frankly about professional collaboration – where are we – how do we improve? Discuss any hot topics with HR superintendent and director.
11. Planned professional development with federation presidents to demonstrate respect for roles and address key combined focus on student achievement.
12. All guidelines vetted by a group of dedicated and interested principals as well as our union reps.

13. Communication protocols were reviewed – who has what information when and how can we improve to demonstrate that our staff need all information first (they shouldn't receive it as a parent before the channels for staff).
14. Feedback loops built in through principal anonymous surveys and director to principal/staff meetings. All information gathered is shared back out to respondents.
15. Senior staff went out to schools involved in the accommodation review to respond to concerns and outline the ARC process etc. inviting all points of view to be shared with ARC members.
16. Executive council members work with school staffs re: budget, hiring processes, etc. breaking down miscommunications and misrepresentations through face to face meetings – dedication to new sense of availability (e.g. Superintendent of Business meets with principals, staffs and assistants to review fund raising challenges and outline guidelines and regulations).
17. Refocus on building leadership amongst all staff centered on a belief of a “spirit of generosity” (Simon Sinick) and non-judgmental conversations.
18. Deep conversations about the work that will take us to the next level with strengthened belief systems of system leaders and alignment of all practices from board office to student desk – utilizing the OLF and coaching.
19. A concentrated effort to remove “noise” for all key stakeholders and hold accountability to defined work.
20. Director met with all First Nations chiefs and education counsellors to ask how we could improve relationships and conditions for all students. Open communication channels are encouraged.
21. First Nations team alongside First Nations partners took part in conversations regarding shared work, addressing how to best prepare and plan for transitions for Anishinabek Education Agreements.

This work was started at the same time strike action was taken throughout the province. This provided the senior team with ways of addressing new relationships. This time also afforded the team a focus on how to do our work differently with new levels of accountability.

Many points of the laundry list above were quick wins and allowed the system to see a deep commitment to new processes and invitations for voice. The work though, came through the authenticity and necessity to understand and discuss the value added to this process amongst all staff. Many conversations centered on the importance of voice and honoring the expertise of staff. The executive team had to remind and catch themselves when frustrated or harried about this new stance of learning together and accept truths as presented.

This work is remarkably fulfilling and the feedback that has come forth tells the team they are on the right track. Conversations about change and how to accommodate, and plan for upset within the organization are being had throughout the organization. There is a newfound respect for all of the work and workload that each team member carries. The streamlining of senior staffs' efforts has been felt by all staff and principals alike as it has created an atmosphere where conversations about student achievement and well-being can now be the real focus.

Staff, trustees and communities are feeling more valued outside of North Bay. This is recognized by the many comments about optics, visits and meetings that are actively set up and attended, and the many conversations leading to action that have taken place. Staff members continue to express gratitude regarding this new focus and appreciate the sense of comradery. There is a new and deep sense of trust and appreciation for the work that we all do together.

What advice would you provide others?

This is work that is necessary for any organization. Starting with an outside agency demonstrated a desire for anonymity and honesty. It was hard to hear about some of the feedback, especially considering how hard everyone was working, but it was necessary to start with this mirror to reflect discussions internal to the team, regarding relationships throughout the organization.

It is important to have an outside person be the facilitator of this initial work if at all possible; particularly if one thinks a culture isn't one of honesty and transparency. If, however, the scan lies with an internal team then explain to the organization "why now," "why this work," "why this focus," "who was chosen to lead the work and why," and "what is expected to be done with the findings, within what timeline."

It must be understood that this is hard work and takes much planning and strategizing. It takes a huge dedication of time and commitment and cannot ever be seen to waver in intent. If one piece of the organizational puzzle falls out of step it will cost the movement forward significantly. To embark on this work is to truly look hard and long at structures, old ways of doing things, and the barriers that are built for ease and speed. Nothing about addressing trust can be done quickly. The team at the top must hold itself to a high state of accountability and demonstrate an openness to hearing criticism about the true health of the organization at all time. Authentic feedback loops must be built in and feedback must be addressed actively - not just collected.

Ensure that all messaging is from this song sheet – every communication must address a transparent "why." For instance, communications to all stakeholders now starts with the preface – "In an effort to address our commitment to excellence in communication we are..." and then an outline as to why the information was sent.

As an executive council make time to talk about this work. Make sure "culture" is on the agenda. Talk to the changes that are being experienced and celebrate them (or question why something isn't moving). Be prepared to have conversations about the power of vulnerability and unpack what "control" looks like (and what is the worst that can happen

if you let it go). One of the phrases the team is starting to explore is “**humility versus hubris.**” The more one starts the conversation surrounding these premises and continues to circle back to them as words and ideas, the more one can have conversations about how difficult it is to remain true to this ideology - but how important.

Not ironically nor a surprise as to timing, these discussions are very much aligning with the board (and Ministry) discussions on professional collaboration (PPM – 159) and establishing collective understandings and expectations.

New relationships with our federation partners have been a priority despite our different roles and responsibilities and ways of interpreting the Collective Agreements. There is a commitment to a shared fundamental belief that all educators work best when respected, heard and allowed to be part of planning. The best environments for learning occur when teachers feel supported and cared for in a system of trust and respect.

Time will define our work and set the true tone and long-standing culture change. For example: how deep are the changes within the culture itself against who is giving lip service and using a hierarchical place of power behind doors, is of concern.

There hasn't been as much movement on policies as was hoped but a commitment to this has been made. There is much chatter in the organization about how things feel different but also people have raised their expectations about best practices (e.g., I thought if this organization were being transparent you might have done this differently)– a lovely problem to have but for which you need to be prepared. Members of the senior administrative team have also had to “take on” challenging conversations with all staff if they present poor behaviours that don't fit with a culture of trust and respect, and to really explore the concept of “what you permit you promote”. This is work that is being monitored carefully.

To engage in this journey, one must have an open mindset/stance, be willing to set personal feelings aside when feeling attacked and dig deep when feelings of unease surface. The focus of leadership amongst the senior team, and to principals has been to try to see oneself honestly and adopt a strong and ethical position on leadership. If one is not willing to hear the harsh criticism then no movement forward will be attained. The greatest achievement right now is to celebrate when our staff at all levels come forward to express a concern about their own culture of work, and to address it head on. How the team stops, looks internally and responds to the criticisms helps define our next level of work.

Next Steps:

A lot has been done in a short amount of time but as mentioned above it is important to pay attention to any themes of feedback that indicate dissonance of understanding or places where this culture has not been allowed to flourish.

Not everyone in an organization looks at leadership the same way. There are many who can grow weary of “selling the farm”, “giving away power” or “letting them get what they want”. Continuous conversations need to be had to talk about healthy choices for the organization. The team has many, many conversations about intent and impact and try to

model, as a senior team, what it means to take ownership for transgressions, authentically apology and to acknowledge when an error in judgement has been made.

A need to press forward on how to do portfolio work through this lens remains important. Discussions circle around how to find new ways to break through old, established ways that uphold power structures that don't help build relationships. It can feel as if some portfolios lend themselves to this work easier but that is actually not the case. If this is the organization's fundamental belief then how does the senior team help all within our organization see and experience the benefits; and see themselves as leaders? One will also find that there are some folk who don't want to take part in these types of conversations – they want to be told what to do and when, and actively propel away from this new level of accountability and responsibility. The team must actively address this and decide the fundamental levels of support that are needed in each case.

The discussions that are had at the executive council level at this time center on how to actively outline the next level of work that builds on our existing successes and honor the team's learning. A continued focus is to ensure the team's relationships are safe and trustworthy and that we address when the team doesn't actively walk the talk.

It is pleasing to know that through focused efforts the organization is in a new and healthier position regarding relationships because a new reality is requiring a new way of doing business. If these relationships hadn't been established, some strong fundamentals of the organization would not have been able to invite the creativity of problem solving that is necessary and required to address some interesting and significant issues.