

Hurupaki School, Northland 2017



A case for culture change

Hurupaki School, Northland

Background

When Robyn Posthumus, Principal of Hurupaki School in Northland, completed the Strategic Leadership for Principals Programme in 2016, she knew she had to make some major changes in the school she had recently been appointed to lead. The principal wanted to put emphasis on teaching as inquiry in a way that measured the impact of teaching on a “day-to-day” basis, particularly in relation to accelerating priority learners. For many of the teachers this would be a significant shift in their teaching practice. The principal recognised that some teachers would not be comfortable with this level of transparency and identified the need for a change in the school’s culture, in “the way things are done around here.”

While developing the strategic plan during SLPP, the principal consulted widely with her community and teachers. She took over the enormous whiteboard in the staffroom and put up goals and initiatives. Staff were encouraged to contribute their thoughts and comments and another smaller board was covered in sticky notes. Feedback was acknowledged and incorporated into each iteration of the plan, and the principal held both formal and informal discussions as the plan developed.

The principal initiated an important and ongoing discussion about recognising what behaviour holds the team back, and what moves it forward.

The project

Once the school’s strategic plan was completed, it was time to look at implementation and start the culture change process. Springboard Trust appointed a suitably qualified engagement manager, Jo Field to work alongside the principal and together they formulated an approach to start changing the culture. One of the key initiatives was to identify a baseline of behaviour and to assist the staff in recognising how some of their current behaviours were affecting the culture of the school. It was agreed that a staff survey would allow the principal to surface the issues and begin to have some courageous conversations. Only then could she really know the key areas to focus on and design a strategy to address the gaps.

The survey highlighted the need to clarify roles and responsibilities and the principal then involved teachers in discussing who was accountable for different elements of the school's delivery programme. She made it clear that her responsibility was to develop and lead the implementation of the strategic plan.

The principal also discussed, with the teachers, the challenges of being part of a school team and introduced some new language to describe behaviours and their impacts on others, namely, "Above the Line and Below the Line." She initiated an important and ongoing dialogue about recognising what behaviour holds the team back, and what moves it forward.

The "Above the Line and Below the Line" language was being adopted by the team and the teachers' language changed to include more "How" comments rather than "Why."

Next, she facilitated a "Belonging Workshop" where staff could explore what belonging meant to them and their school, and take shared responsibility for improving the outcomes related to this aspect of school life. Values were also woven into the conversation and this then formed the basis for moving ahead. In effect, the principal brought the team together as they discussed what was important to them and what they needed in order to feel they belonged.

Anyone who has worked to shift a culture knows it does not happen overnight. Although teachers were starting to shift, there remained a small number who remained skeptical. Some breakthroughs emerged with some staff admitting they had been resisting the changes. Several started to change their attitude and soon the "Above the Line and Below the Line" language was being adopted by the team and the teachers' language changed to include more "How" comments rather than "Why."

In 2017, the principal attended our coaching Alumni Learning Event and recognised how using the GROW model could further support the culture change she wanted to achieve. The teachers had already been using the GROW model with priority learners, but the new opportunity was to use it amongst teachers focusing on the collaborative practices they were reluctant to embrace. This helped to further shift the behaviours and practices of the team.

The principal gives credit to her engagement manager for supporting her as she worked through the changes. Jo Field was always well prepared and offered a range of models to discuss and try. One of these models was the DOMA model – Direction, Opportunity, Motivation, Ability. Using lens such as DOMA ensures multiple aspects of a work situation are considered before any solutions are applied. She also sought help into developing her skill in conducting courageous conversations – a must have, when tackling a culture change project.

Outcomes

There has been a definite change in the culture of the school as evidenced by a subsequent staff survey. The principal acknowledges it is still a work in progress but considering the major cultural change journey is only a year on, they have made huge strides.

Key learnings

Change requires principals to:

- Build your vision involving your stakeholders – this was critical as it underpinned all the changes she wanted to make
- Do your research – she consulted with her engagement manager and compiled a good resource library of relevant reading
- Get your baseline data so you can demonstrate and measure the shift – this helps to encourage and reinforce continuous improvement
- Be courageous – believe with a passion, don't be afraid to show your vulnerabilities
- Reinforce the changes so they become business as usual
- Don't forget to breathe!
- Be flexible – this type of work is difficult to plan as we need to slowly un-peel the challenges as they become apparent.

