

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Digesting discussions about diversity & equity

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PRINCIPAL EVALUATION CRITERIA

Creating a Culture, Improving Instruction, Closing the Gap

“You know what I’m craving? A little perspective. That’s it. I’d like some fresh clear, well-seasoned perspective.” This is what

Anton Ego tells the poor waiter, Mustafa, in one of my favorite Disney Pixar films, “Ratatouille.” Now in this case, he’s talking about dinner, but I’m craving a little perspective as well. I’m craving perspective regarding equity.

SETTING THE TABLE

Experiencing discomfort is one of those norms that looks great on a table tent. It sounds like a no brainer when leaning into equity work but is incredibly hard to do in day-to-day situations with your staff. It takes time to build authentic relationships with staff that allow you to have meaningful and courageous conversations.

Even the possibility of conversations around equity leaves room for fractured relationships with those who I’ve worked tirelessly to build trust with. Questions plague my mind. Can I really say something to a teacher who has been teaching longer

than my lifespan about something insensitive that he said? Is it okay to call out someone who is of another marginalized race for continuing to spread stereotypes of others? Why is it so easy to address inappropriate student behavior but so difficult with adults? Am I going to survive experiencing discomfort knowing that staying silent will only do more harm to our students in the future?

The answer to all these questions is yes, I will survive. Experiencing discomfort is going to happen on both sides when giving perspective, but it’s crucial for change.

DISHING IT OUT

A feedback survey is a tool I wished I thought of last year before approaching uncomfortable conversations. It’s nothing extreme, just an inventory of how staff would like to be approached or informed if they do or say something revealing biases or perpetuates “isms.” Without this tool, I had to approach uncomfortable conversations in the best way I knew how: with kindness and respect. There were two similar situations that occurred in the past year where I found myself wincing at a sentence a person had said in a meeting or written in

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an email. On both occasions, I took a moment to examine intent versus impact. Then I braced myself, headed into their learning environment when nobody else was within earshot and asked them each a question. “Do you want to know if you say something offensive to others?” And, “May I teach you something?”

Both educators said yes, and truly meaningful dialogue ensued where both of us left the conversation thanking one another.

HEARTBURN

If I'm going to be offering perspective to others, then I need to be prepared to receive perspective as well.

Experiencing discomfort as both the giver and receiver is essential in my own learning and growth.

Recently, I heard a teacher refer to biased and racist comments as food on one's face. I've made it clear to those around me, I want to know when I'm walking around with food on my face. The first thing I try to do when receiving feedback is keep my facial expressions and body language in check. The slightest brow furrow, crossing of arms, or light sigh could turn the conversation into a confrontation. I attempt to keep my emotions out of it and remind myself this isn't about how I feel, it's about how my actions made another person

feel. I don't make excuses and instead, I offer a thank you and an apology.

CLEARING THE TABLE

When an uncomfortable conversation is over, you save what you can still use, and you throw away what you can't. I save my respect for others and hope they do the same in return. I save my courage, my character, and my voice knowing I'll need them again soon. I throw away assumptions, judgment, and excuses knowing none of this is going to lead me in the right direction.

We leave the conversation fuller than when we started and with perspectives we once didn't see. While it may not always be ratatouille we are craving, we all get hungry, and we all need to eat. We might as well set a few more places at our table and eat together. ■

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