

Together We Build

By Christopher E. Moritzen and Rachel M. Hetzel



About the Authors: Christopher E. Moritzen has served as the administrative director for the Western Montgomery Career and Technology Center (WMCTC) in Limerick, Pa., for the past five years. He previously worked as both a principal and assistant principal in career and technical education (CTE), as an assistant principal (grades 9-12) and he taught health and physical education.

Mr. Moritzen serves as the President of the PA Association for Career and Technical Education, and is the Vice President of the PA Association of Career and Technical Administrators.

Rachel M. Hetzel has served as the director of technology at the Western Montgomery Career and Technology Center (WMCTC) for the past three years. She has been an administrator for over 18 years (K-12, higher education and CTE).

Ms. Hetzel holds a bachelor's degree in elementary education with a reading concentration, a master's degree in applied and instructional technology and is currently obtaining a K-12 Principal's Certification and a Vocational Director Certification.

Working as an administrator in a Career and Technology Center (CTC) has its challenges, but it also has its rewards. What makes the instructors at a CTC unique is that they generally are not native teachers, but rather they are the experts in the field of their particular trade. They must obtain their Vocational Education Certificate after they are hired. Why is this important information to know? It is important because while the instructors may be working on teaching certifications through an accredited program, there are many aspects to teaching that they must develop while in their teaching position. They are teaching while they are learning to teach. Simply put, they do not have the pedagogy, yet.

The A-ha Moment

We knew things had to change directions, but we did not know where to start. Then finally, the day came, the A-ha moment. During a workshop, our teachers were asked to do various activities. One of the activities had to do with seeing themselves as educational leaders. We had them write down what they thought described a good educational leader. We went over the answers and surprisingly, they thought we were asking them to describe a good administrator. They did not realize that we were talking about them as educational leaders. The fact that they are educational leaders took a few of them out of their comfort zone.

After this workshop, it was clear that we needed to make a shift. We needed to focus on relationships, teacher development, positive outcomes and maintaining a high level of achievement for our students all while creating a culture that fosters a collaborative, friendly and open climate. Prior to our conversations about culture change, our school, while efficiently functioning, operated like a string of franchises. Each teacher would have their own area, their own shop to maintain, and when it was time for them to come out of their franchised store for direction, they would come out (workshops, faculty meetings, etc.). After the meetings were over, they would go back to working in their own franchise, close themselves off and continue business as usual. While it functioned, the mechanism for idea sharing and talent sharing was not present. There was not a "cross-franchise" form of collaboration to be seen in any area. Other than working with our special education teachers, most of our instructors were in their own shop working on their own topics. We were missing the element of human interaction, the joy of forming relationships and an overall collaborative vibe.

We had many courageous conversations with our faculty and staff about what was working and what was not. What they thought we needed to push us toward greatness. While the faculty and staff were away for summer vacation, the administrative team began to form a plan. All the while, we kept in mind our vision, mission and goals.

Steps Moving Forward

We whittled it down to four categories:

- What can and cannot change?
- What is the overarching message we want to send to our students and their caregivers?
- What is the overall message we want to convey to our faculty and staff?
- What are we, as building and educational leaders, going to do on our part to be agents of change?

Fighting the temptation to change everything and start fresh was difficult at times. It takes a serious, objective inventory of your own surroundings to truly look at what is working that should stay and what is not working and needs to go (or in some way be amended).

One of the first things we decided to do was to rebrand our school. We had three different letterheads with three different logos. How could we be a unit moving in the same direction



when we couldn't even be identified or recognized by anyone receiving our literature? What had to go: multiple logos. We needed a new name and a new brand that would make us immediately recognized, consistent and one unit. We were able to market our school, and when our logo was used on our products, equipment, letterhead, uniforms, our website, etc., we were becoming recognizable. We were moving toward one family unit, not a divided house.

The next alteration was in how we delivered our professional development. What message did we want to send to our faculty and staff? We decided that forming Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) to research and discuss various topics that could be used for the betterment of our school. The goal was to have our PLCs do the research, planning and sharing of their ideas with the staff. Then, the PLCs and the professional development committee along with administration would work on professional development initiatives moving forward. Aside from the usual workshops that must be done (updates, changes, curriculum- and instruction-related topics), there were quite a few meaningful workshops that emerged because they were instructor driven. The intermingling of administration-led and teacher-led workshops lends itself to a more efficient way to utilize our staff's time as well as develop them professionally.

The next significant move we made was to look at how our building and our classrooms were set up and utilized. What message do we want to send to our students, their families and visitors? How are all of our rooms utilized? Are they conducive to a collaborative and welcoming environment? The answer was "eh, not really." However, with just a few changes, we could create resource rooms, private areas and team-teaching rooms. We were able to tear down our standing computer labs and move to a 1:1 ratio with technology. By virtue of the availability of technology, it eliminated the need for standing computer labs. In addition to



room changes, positive and motivational quotes were added to our walls as well as a new look for our student entrance. We wanted to enhance our student experience. The message to our students is simple: You matter, we care, and together, we will work to build a better future.

One of the most impactful changes was philosophical in nature. This also answers the question, "What are we going to do as educational leaders to be the agents of change?" This adjustment had to do with our hiring practices. It is very easy, when interviewing candidates to look for someone who is not only qualified for the position, but also someone who will "fit right in." While this may work for many, we did not want to continue on with more of the same. We made a concerted effort to hire people who were not only highly qualified for their position, but more importantly, professionals who embodied the culture that we were trying to create. Our goal was to have our school, staff and students conform to the new hire's culture, rather than the other way around. We had the rare opportunity to replace a building principal. We moved into this transition with the understanding that the principal is probably the most important representative of school culture in the building. The principal sets the tone for not just the teachers in their classrooms and expectations, but also for student behavior and discipline and for parental communications. The building principal is the face of the school.

This hiring practice sounds great in theory, and one would think it would make the process easier to manage.

In fact, we found ourselves having to weigh out our decisions and make a few hard choices. Do we go with the one who would fit in extremely well at the moment? This person could hit the ground running with little downtime, and it would be like we never missed a beat. Or, do we go with the candidate that leaves us saying to ourselves: "Because of this candidate, I want to be a better educator"?

The first one requires little to no work and we could continue on, business as usual. The second one is a different story. Hiring an agent of change sounds powerful and impressive. However, implementing the change takes patience, time, consistency, effective communication and modeled behavior. If you are ready for the challenge, it pays off in dividends. We are pleased with our updated hiring practice. Each subsequent hire has only enhanced our goal to change the culture of our school.

At WMCTC, we believe in these two maxims:

- Moving from Good to GREAT
- Together we build WMCTC

Almost immediately, we observed a rise in student attendance, Pre-NOCTI scores had risen, the discipline cases involving severe incidents had gone down in number and our Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are contributing to the school's betterment. Our staff and students have an overall feeling of team and pride, according to our anonymous surveys we send out periodically.

Building a positive school climate and culture is an arduous task. Maintaining and moving forward to continue to stay positive is an endless endeavor. Just know that it can happen. It is a slow and gradual process. Stop and celebrate the small victories and recognize all those who contribute to your school's greatness.

For additional information about this article, you may contact the authors at cmoritzen@westerncenter.org or rhetzel@westerncenter.org