

Building an Emotional Bank Account

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As leaders we hear things like applying “soft” skills is not as important as focusing on “hard” data, such as student achievement. Our collective work with district and school leaders shows us otherwise. We’ve found that student achievement is difficult to improve without leaders building effective working relationships with employees. (principals with teachers and staff; district leaders with principals and staff).

What do employees expect from leaders? They expect their leaders to know who they are, what they are good at, and what they value. A Studer Group study on work/life blend revealed five specific things employees want in their work environment.

- To feel valued and appreciated
- To know what to do to improve
- To provide input about their work
- To have the resources needed to do a good job
- To engage in processes that help with workplace productivity

To improve performance, leaders must first establish relationships with employees and build an emotional bank account with them. Why? Anytime individuals receive feedback about their performance it triggers an anxious emotion. Our first job as leaders is to engage in genuine interactions with employees to reduce their anxiety and build trusting relationships. We evaluate our direct reports during the year. If providing feedback about performance is one of few encounters our employees experience with us, we may jeopardize the opportunities to support and coach individual growth and improvement. Eventually these lost opportunities create the same loss for our students.

Our main job as leaders, is to support and coach our direct reports to achieve their highest potential so that their performance elevates school and district performance. So,

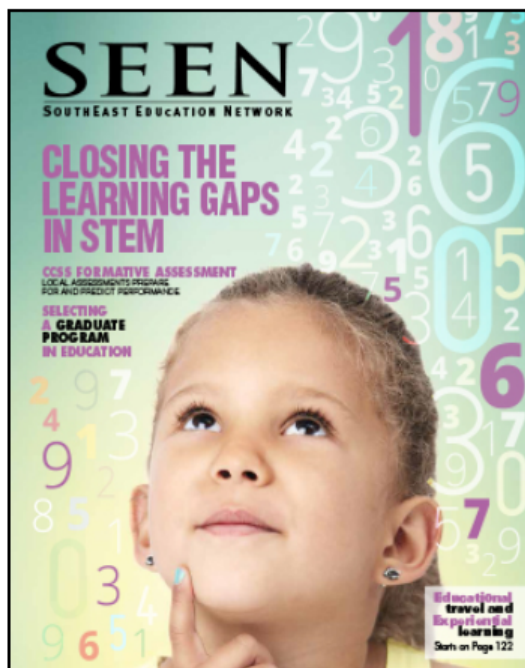
focusing on hardwiring “soft skill” strategies creates a “best place to work” culture. Here are some tips for leaders to apply throughout the year to build this type of culture.

Tip 1: Connect with employees. We work with leaders to connect with employees by making rounds with them. Different from a classroom walkthrough, in rounding leaders engage in meaningful and genuine conversations with employees to gather useful information rather than having a casual conversation. Leaders ask 1) What’s working well? 2) Do you have the resources you need to do your job? 3) Has anyone been especially helpful to you lately? After gathering the information, leaders continue to build an emotional bank account by communicating actions taken to improve processes and recognizing individuals. Leaders note the person recognizing others and the action being recognized.

Tip 2: Model good behavior and practice. “What We Permit, We Promote.” When we fail to follow a rule or allow employees to break a rule from time to time, we are saying to others, “it is okay to break this rule.” We model good behavior and practice it when we ALWAYS expect of ourselves what we expect of others.

Tip 3: Be open, honest and transparent. Leaders in general tend to receive low marks in their ability to effectively communicate. Usually, the approach and content present the major sources of the problem. To establish trust, school-wide communication needs to be transparent and open to discussion and not tainted in ways that is difficult to interpret. We propose that leaders follow Jim Collins’ advice; that is, use data to face the brutal facts. When leaders do so, they establish trust with employees and promote solving problems as a team.

Tip 4: Show your gratitude. Sometimes we take for granted all the good things that employees do for students, their parents, and each other. Openly thank employees by being very specific about why you are



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People
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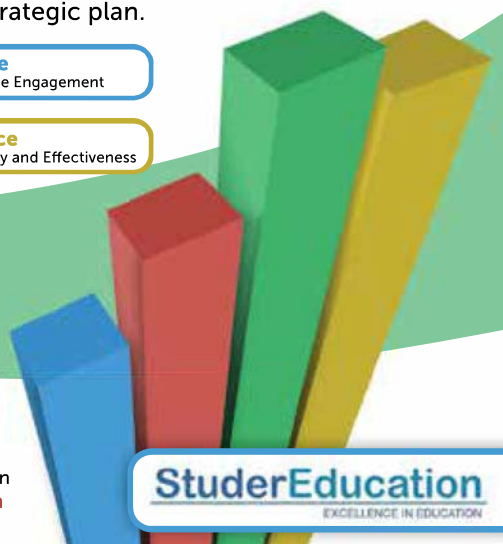
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thanking them or send them a “thank-you” note. When we work with teachers, we place a ‘thank you’ sticky note with specific feedback on their desk or computer. Also, sometimes nice gestures go a long way to make people feel valued and special. Bring someone a cup of coffee from time to time or ask someone what you can do to be helpful to them. Expressing gratitude becomes contagious.

Tip 5: Ask what you can do to improve. As leaders we do some things well and others not so well. Our perception is not always the perception of others. We build emotional bank accounts with employees by asking them what we can do to be a better leader. To do so we need to listen rather than react to the problem. By allowing conversation to occur, our employees may solve the problem or provide suggestions for us to consider. After the discussion we continue to leverage relationships when we follow-up by communicating specific actions we will take to improve.

Tip 6: Be an owner rather than a renter of work. We find that when leaders speak using We/They behaviors, they usually fail to own their job. We/They is when we make ourselves look better at the expense of others. As leaders, we tend to do this when we receive bad news and results, share bad news with others, or answer tough questions. Rather than take the blame, leaders may shift the blame to their supervisor, the superintendent or the school board. A must do for leaders is to stop using We/They. A good alternative is to write a different response using words that are honest, yet present sensitivity to the audience. If leaders need some time, they can simply reply by letting others know they need to research the answer to provide a thoughtful and accurate response. The opposite of We/They is managing up co-workers. That is, find something good that someone does and specifically let others know. Leaders can also manage up other leaders when they see something positive.

Tip 7: Harvest Wins. In our profession we tend to view performance with a critical eye or we look for what can be improved rather than what is right. Sometimes we should purposely look for the “wins” by posting as many as possible and celebrating the “wins” with others. We’ve witnessed leaders being very creative and fun as they harvest wins. The key here is for leaders to create a consistent structure and process for harvesting wins and include everyone associated with the school as a participant. We can never celebrate enough wins.

Building relationships with employees remains strategic and purposeful. As thoughtful people we know engaging in relationships with others becomes meaningful when we invest time, energy and emotion. Leaders own the responsibility for reaching out to employees and then expecting them to reach back as well as reaching out to colleagues, students and parents. Leaders deserve the benefits of doing worthwhile work that makes a difference in the lives of those they lead. Practicing these tips create ways for leaders to offer a great place for employees to work, students to learn, and parents to engage in their child’s education. The tips become our ‘new’ habits for building emotional bank accounts with those we lead.

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