

A hand in a light purple sleeve holds a large bunch of colorful balloons. The balloons are in various colors including red, purple, yellow, light blue, white, pink, green, and orange. The background is a solid yellow color.

Celebrate

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Celebrating in a PLC

A critical step in the PLC journey is celebrating. Celebration is more than just having fun; it is a means of communicating what is important. When celebrations continually remind people of the purpose and priorities of their organizations, members are more likely to embrace the purpose and work toward agreed-on priorities. Regular public recognition of specific collaborative efforts, accomplished tasks, achieved goals, team learning, continuous improvement, and support for student learning reminds staff of the collective commitment to create a PLC.

The word *recognize* comes from the Latin “to know again.” Recognition provides opportunities to say, “Let us all be reminded and let us all know again what is important, what we value, and what we are committed to do. Now let’s all pay tribute to someone in the organization who is living that commitment.”

Most schools and districts, however, will face a significant challenge as they attempt to integrate meaningful celebration into their cultures. The excessively egalitarian culture of schools makes it difficult to publicly recognize either individuals or teams.

In most schools and districts, generic praise (“You are the best darn faculty in the state!”) or private praise (“I want to send you a personal note of commendation”) are acceptable—public recognition is not. Generic and private praise are ineffective

in communicating priorities because neither conveys to the members at large what specific actions and commitments are valued, and therefore, neither is effective in shaping behavior or beliefs. As Peter Drucker (1992) advises, “Changing habits and behavior requires changing recognition and rewards . . . [because] people in organizations tend to act in response to being recognized and rewarded” (p. 195). Tom Peters (1987) puts it this way: “Well-constructed recognition settings provide the single most important opportunity to parade and reinforce the

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specific kinds of new behaviors one hopes others will emulate” (p. 307).

We offer the following four suggestions to those who face the challenge of incorporating celebration into the culture of their school or district.

1 Explicitly state the purpose of celebration: The rationale for public celebration should be carefully explained at the outset of every celebration. Staff members should be continually reminded that celebration represents—

- An important strategy for reinforcing the school's or district's shared purpose, vision, collective commitments, and goals
- The most powerful tool for sustaining the improvement initiative

factors unrelated to the goal of creating a learning community” (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, p. 145). It is imperative, therefore, to establish clear parameters for recognition and rewards. The answer to the question, “What behavior or commitment are we attempting to encourage with this recognition?” should be readily apparent. Recognition should always be accompanied with a story relating the efforts of the team or individual back to the core foundation of the school or district. It should not only express appreciation and admiration but also provide others with an example they can emulate.

An effective celebration program will convince every staff member that he or she can be a winner and that his or her efforts can be noted and appreciated.

2 Make celebration everyone's responsibility: Recognizing extraordinary commitment should be the responsibility of everyone in the organization, and each individual should be called on to contribute to the effort. If the formal leader is the sole arbiter of who will be recognized, the rest of the staff can merely sit back and critique the choices. All staff members should have the opportunity to publicly report when they appreciate and admire the work of a colleague.

3 Establish a clear link between the recognition and the behavior or commitment you are attempting to encourage and reinforce: Recognition must be specifically linked to the organization's purpose, vision, collective commitments, and goals if it is to play a role in shaping culture. As Rick and Bob write: “Recognition will have little impact if a staff believes the recognition is presented randomly, that each person deserves to be recognized regardless of his or her contribution to the improvement effort, or that rewards are given for

4 Create opportunities to have many winners: Celebration will not have a significant effect on the culture of a school if most people in the organization feel they have no opportunity to be recognized. In fact, celebration can be disruptive and detrimental if there is a perception that recognition and reward are reserved for an exclusive few. Establishing artificial limits on appreciation—such as, “We honor no more than five

individuals per meeting,” or, “Only those with five or more years of experience are eligible”—lessens the impact celebration can have on a school or district. Developing a PLC requires creating systems specifically designed not only to provide celebrations but also to ensure that there are many winners.

Frequent public acknowledgments for a job well done and a wide distribution of small symbolic gestures of appreciation and admiration are far more powerful tools for communicating priorities than infrequent grand prizes that create a few winners and many losers. An effective celebration program will convince every staff member that he or she can be a winner and that his or her efforts can be noted and appreciated.

Adlai E. Stevenson High School in Lincolnshire, Illinois, is often cited as a school that has used celebration to communicate purpose and priorities and to shape culture. Stevenson does not offer a Teacher of the Year program, but over several decades, it has distributed thousands of Super Pat awards (small tokens of appreciation that represent a pat on the back for a job well done) to hundreds of teachers. In fact, since 1995, Steven-



4 Keys FOR INCORPORATING CELEBRATION INTO THE CULTURE OF YOUR SCHOOL OR DISTRICT

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son has *never* had a faculty meeting without celebrating the effort and commitment of individuals and teams. Stevenson also surveys its seniors each year to ask, "Which staff member has had the most profound impact on your life, and why?" The students' heartfelt responses are then published in an internal Kudos Memorandum and distributed to the entire staff each quarter. Staff members have read thousands of testimonials citing specific examples of how they and their colleagues are making a difference in the lives of students. Stevenson employees receive ongoing reminders of the school's priorities and the commitments that are being honored in order to achieve those priorities, and every staff member feels like he or she has the opportunity to be recognized and celebrated as a winner.

One of the most frequent concerns that educators raise when they are wary of making celebration a part of their school or district is that frequent celebration will lose its impact to motivate. Yet research has drawn the opposite conclusion; it reaffirms that frequent celebration communicates priorities, connects people to the organization and to each other, and sustains

improvement initiatives (Amabile & Kramer, 2011; Kegan & Lahey, 2001; Kouzes & Posner, 2003; Peters, 1987).

Can celebration be overdone? Absolutely. The criterion for assessing the appropriateness of recognition for a team or individual should be the sincerity with which the recognition is given. A commendation should represent genuine and heartfelt appreciation and admiration. If that sincerity is lacking, celebration can be counterproductive.

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Celebrations allow for expressions of both appreciation and admiration. Appreciation lets others know we have received something we value, something we are happy to have. Admira-

tion conveys the message that we have been inspired or instructed by observing others' work and commitments. When admiration and appreciation are repeatedly expressed, organizations create a culture of ongoing regard that sustains effort because such language is "like pumping oxygen into the system" (Kegan & Lahey, 2001, p. 102).

Celebrations also provide an opportunity to use one of the oldest ways in the world to convey the values and ideals of a community: telling stories. As Kouzes and Posner (2003) write, "The intention of stories is not just to entertain. . . . They are also intended to teach. Good stories move us. They touch us, they teach us, and they cause us to remember" (p. 25). Good stories appeal to both the head and the heart and are more compelling and convincing than data alone. They bring data and evidence to life and persuade people to act in new ways. Good stories personify purpose and priorities. They put a human face on success by providing examples and role models that can clarify for others what is noted, appreciated, and valued. They represent one of the most powerful tools for shaping others' thinking and feelings.

Finally, a multiyear study of what motivates knowledge workers concludes that the best motivator is celebration of progress (Amabile & Kramer, 2010). The study advises leaders to set clear overall goals, sustain the commitment to the pursuit of those goals, proactively create both the reality and the perception of progress, and celebrate even incremental progress (Amabile & Kramer, 2010).

An excellent predictor of future behavior of any organization is to examine the people and events it elects to honor (Buckingham, 2005). This is true of schools in particular. In his study of school culture, sociologist Robert Evans (1996) concludes, "The single best low-cost, high-leverage way to improve performance, morale, and the climate for change is to dramatically increase the levels of meaningful recognition for—and among—educators" (p. 254). Study after study of what workers want in their jobs offer the same conclusion: they want to feel appreciated (Kouzes & Posner, 2003). ■

This excerpt was taken from *Learning by Doing* (3rd edition) by Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, Robert Eaker, Thomas W. Many, and Mike Mattos (2016).

Discussion Questions

- 1. What gets publicly celebrated in our school?**
- 2. Do our public celebrations reinforce our purpose and priorities?**
- 3. Have we created opportunities for lots of people in our organization to be recognized and celebrated?**

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