

Fish Philosophy and School Culture: A School and University Collaboration

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ABSTRACT: In the fall of 2004, an early childhood education center in the Midwest experienced a period of transition resulting from a significant turnover in administration and staff. Seeking strategies to improve and sustain a positive school culture, a newly formed Leadership Team looked to the business community for improvement strategies. The Team adapted and implemented the well proven *Fish Philosophy* as a basis for the improvement project. Through the school and university partnership, they collaboratively tailored the business philosophy with activities and routines to fit their educational settings. The philosophy's four guiding principles were successfully incorporated into the school and university environments.

NAPDS Essentials Addressed: #1 a comprehensive mission that is broader in its outreach and scope than the mission of any one partner and that furthers the education profession and its responsibility to advance equity within schools and, by potential extension, the broader community; #3 ongoing and reciprocal professional development for all participants; and #7 a structure that allows all participants a forum for ongoing governance, reflection, and collaboration.

The School

Valeska Hinton Center is a year-round school within the Peoria Public School District #150 in Peoria, Illinois. The school was designed to develop and encourage long-term family and staff relationships through the “sense” of community, which focuses on interactive learning; individual relationships; and collaboration with administration, teachers, students, and families (Jensen & Kiley, 2005). The architecture of the building reflects a modern exterior and is composed of four villages. As it is a community based school, the village concept reinforces the notion of: *It takes a village to raise a child.* The school serves 425 children from birth to eight years of age. Housed within its walls are supporting programs: STAR, Title I, Early Head Start, Adult Education, Special Education, Head Start Extended Care, Parent Education, and an In-School Health Center. The school provides family involvement which includes a Parent Advisory Board, quality learning opportunities for children and families and professional development for educators.

The faculty and staff focus on the whole child. Principles of self-esteem; self-discipline; and respect for others, their diverse backgrounds, cultures, and family structures are promoted. The goal is to provide effective services to assist children, families, and the community with academic performance, physical health, emotional wellbeing, and a devotion to building harmonious environments within those structures.

One of the unique features of the Center was its Leadership Team. The Team members included the Principal of the Center, Professional Development Coordinator and Literacy Specialist

for Early Childhood Programs, Family Liaison Facilitator and Lead Teacher for the Center, and the Site Coordinator. The site coordinator represented the Kemper Professional Development Schools at Bradley University for the school and university partnership. The Team met on a weekly basis to identify needs, share information, brainstorm, plan, and implement problem-solving strategies to become a fully operational team for the villages and family communities (Jensen & Kiley, 2005).

The University

Bradley University is a private, midsized university located in Peoria, Illinois. It has an enrollment of over 6000 undergraduate and graduate students. Students come from across the United States and 37 countries and select programs from the five colleges within the University. One of the colleges is Education and Health Sciences. The Teacher Education Program provides preparation for Early Childhood, Elementary, Special Education, and Secondary licensure. The strong teacher education program collaborates with school districts in Peoria, Tazwell, and Woodford counties as it provides preservice teachers with four outstanding school experiences as professional development for their careers.

Professional Development School Partnership

The Kemper Professional Development Schools (PDS) program was housed in the College of Education and Health Sciences at Bradley University in Peoria, Illinois. Valeska Hinton Center was

one of four PDS and is located within one mile of the University. Faculty and staff provide shared learning opportunities for children and their families and professional development for educators, as well as optimum learning experiences for preservice teachers. The partnership between the Center, a pre-k through first grade public school and the University has remained strong since 1994. Early childhood teachers, students, administrators, families, preservice teachers, professors, university organizations, and the community are the beneficiaries of this collaborative endeavor and continue to learn from each other.

The Fish Philosophy

“Once guiding principles are understood, it is time for action. We think we need to find the one wellworn trail that others have followed and that it will take us where we want to go. The truth is that we must blaze our own trail and all we will ever have as a compass is a set of commitments and our faith.” (Lundin, Christensen, & Paul, 2003, p.101)

The Fish Philosophy is a business philosophy that was adapted from the book, *Fish! A Remarkable Way to Boost Morale and Improve Results* (Lundin et al., 2000). The philosophy utilizes four principles consisting of Choose Your Attitude, Play, Make Their Day, and Be Present. The areas emphasize enjoying your work, valuing your colleagues and customers, and honing communication skills to improve relationships in the work environment (Lundin et al., 2003). These principles have been used to enhance and guide our school and university relationship as we tailored and implemented the philosophy with professional development activities.

Lundin et al. (2000) compared the term, “Fish” to a parable. It is an invented story about finding excitement, joy, and new problem-solving strategies that exist inside of everyone within an organization. The intent is to help people find goodness and happiness in their work, even when they have very stressful days. The philosophy originated at the Pike Place Fish Market in Seattle, Washington. The philosophy is centered on a shared ownership and open discourse for improved relationships in the work environment and a shared commitment from everyone within an organization.

There are four components to the Fish philosophy. The guiding principles are as follow:

- Choose Your Attitude
- Play
- Make Their Day
- Be Present

The first area of the philosophy is Choose Your Attitude helps people understand that they have a choice about how they respond to others and changes at work, the happy or unhappy attitude that they bring to their jobs. The second area is Play and it refers to enjoying your work. People who play are focused and committed to achieving their goals and finding goodness in their daily lives

(Thompson, 2007). The third area, Make Their Day, refers to caring about others, creating good will, and giving to others. Performing a kindness for someone to make them happy (Lundin et al., 2004). Being engaged in work and taking the time to listen to people around us is the third area called, Being Present. Being Present allows us to understand the people we work with and to provide assistance, whether by intently listening, helping to find solutions, or celebrating in someone’s joy (Lundin et al., 2000).

Adapting the Fish Philosophy

Having simple, clearly defined goals can cut through the fog like a beacon in the night (Parker & Anderson, 2006, p. 75)

In the fall of 2004, seeking strategies to improve and sustain a positive school culture, a newly formed Leadership Team looked to the business community for improvement strategies. During this time, the principal suggested a new book that had been published. The Team read the book and met to identify ways to adapt the Fish Philosophy into the school culture. They enthusiastically endorsed the *Fish Philosophy*, by Lundin et al. (2000). The Team problem solved as to how to create activities for each of the four areas of Choose Your Attitude, Play, Make Their Day, and Be Present. They enlisted assistance from the Lewis J. Burger Center for Student Leadership and Service at the University. The Center provides leadership development and service opportunities for undergraduate students. Together, the Leadership Team and the Lewis J. Berger Center created Fish activities for the faculty and staff.

Activities that contained the word “fish” and affirmations were placed in different locations around the school and sent to faculty and staff through e-mail and inner school mail. As the Team tailored the areas to fit their educational setting, they slowly infused the four areas of the Fish Philosophy into the school environment, which created a high level of curiosity within faculty and staff.

In the spring of 2005, the Teacher Institute was designed around the Fish Philosophy. The Institute included 149 early childhood faculty and staff throughout the school district and was slated for the end of the school year. The Lewis J. Burger Center’s undergraduate students introduced, monitored, and concluded each of the learning activities for the four areas of the Fish Philosophy. The schedule for the day was as follow:

- Introduction- *Fish!* video was shown to all participants. The video explained the beginning of the philosophy at Pikes Peak Market and how the four components are used in daily life.
- A reading of *Fish Tales* by the Principal.
- Interactive learning activities for Choose Your Attitude, Play!, Make their Day, and Be Present
- Wrap-Up
- Net-working
- Cast Your Thoughts . . . reflection of the day.

Evaluations

All participants completed a “Cast Your Thoughts . . .” evaluation at the conclusion of the Teacher Institute. The informal survey asked questions about what the educators liked or would change about the Fish Philosophy presentation and share any other thoughts they had about the professional development session. There was a consensus of enthusiasm to use the new philosophy and participants stated that they were excited to start the next school year.

During the Spring Celebration of the Kemper PDS Teaching Academy, the Fish activities were infused into the meeting, also. The luncheon combined the PDS educators and administrators, from the four schools with faculty and staff at the university. There were 33 evaluations completed using a scale of 1 - 10 (1 being awful and 10 being great). Participants ranked the session as great with a 9.45 average. Some comments included:

- *I would like to improve my attitude at work – not just for myself, but to make work pleasant for those around me*
- *“FISH” will trigger remembering the key ingredients*
- *I will remember to write more positive notes to everyone*
- *Learned more about my colleagues and enjoyed each moment*
- *Opened me up to a new attitude*
- *Good reminder of choosing attitude and being present*

Since the two initial events, at the school and university, there have been more fish activities incorporated into the faculty and staff work days. As they experienced the four areas of Choose Your Attitude, Play, Make Their Day, and Be Present, the faculty and staff enjoyed working with the new philosophy and the Bradley University students. They also gained a greater appreciation for their colleagues and the work that they accomplish throughout the school year, which contributed to a positive working environment or school culture.

Conclusion

Adapting the Fish Philosophy for the school and university educators and staff proved to be a rewarding experience. As they enjoyed participating in the activities, participants’ evaluations displayed that they found a renewed sense of collaboration with others, felt a sense of well-being, and a desire to change their attitudes in the work environment.

Since the spring of 2005, the Center has continued to incorporate the Fish Philosophy into their school. The faculty and staff used the four areas throughout meetings and for daily tasks. Congratulations for significant events, birthday greetings, acknowledgement of accomplishments, and bulletin boards with kind notes written to faculty and staff are some of the ways the Fish Philosophy has continued to be used in the school. Fish reminders are posted, as well as shared inspirational sayings and specific activities that include the four areas of the philosophy were incorporated into faculty and staff meetings. One activity that resulted from the Philosophy was JEAB’EM. This activity

involved trading places for an afternoon. A member of the Leadership Team substituted for the teacher in the classroom while the teacher had professional development time. From the Leadership Team initiated activities to the faculty and staff driven “fishee” projects, they created their own events or activities, such as the school carnival, Reading Pirate Program, Monarch Mondays, and Drum Program.

The Fish Philosophy supported and enhanced the PDS project by providing extended learning opportunities for the faculty and staff at the school and university. As Center adapted the business philosophy to improve school culture, the Kemper PDS also implemented the philosophy’s concepts into the university environment. Using the *Fish Philosophy*, in the school and the university enhanced the relationship between these institutions through a shared learning experience and improvement of the school and university work environments.

The school and university faculty and staff participated in many learning activities that highlighted the four areas of Choose Your Attitude, Play, Make Their Day, and Be Present.

They enjoyed working with the new philosophy and gained a greater appreciation for their colleagues and the work that they accomplish throughout the school year. They tended to take those attributes and good feelings back to their respective classrooms, families, village dyads, grade level teams, which benefited everyone in the school setting. The end result has been an improved work environment where faculty and staff enjoy their jobs, value each other, and continue shared efforts for the betterment of their children, families, and community. The Fish Philosophy supported and enhanced the PDS project by providing opportunities for extended learning environments, collaboration, leadership, shared decision making, celebrating diversity, teaching excellence, and responsiveness to change. ^{SUP}

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