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Principle #1: Gather Information

Perhaps because of the overscheduled, crazy busy lives most of us educators lead, we sometimes rely on others to articulate critical issues impacting our lives. We listen to our preferred news outlet with a naïve belief that it is imparting unbiased facts to us rather than trying to create or spin a story to increase ratings. Instead of reading actual bills or proposals, we receive information about the latest legislative mandate filtered through second-, third-, and fourth-party sources who have their own agendas. And we listen to the one person who actually attended the marathon school board meeting (other than the required participants) and forget that they, too, may be less than objective in the way they saw and report on things that happened.

Someone in the faculty lounge announces, “Well, you are never going to believe what happened at the illustrious school board meeting last night. They are cutting all our health benefits because the superintendent is throwing our district’s health insurance to his wife’s brother who works for Health-Issues-R-Us!” (Collective gasp.) The informant goes on, “Yes, and that’s a fact! My husband and I were there. My Elton had put in a competing bid, which was a far better deal, but they didn’t even give his company a chance. As usual, they didn’t even try to be fair, and now we’re all going to be left with the worst coverage ever. I am so sick and tired of how we are treated in this district. Next thing you know, they’ll have the coaches giving us our annual physicals to save on healthcare costs!” Those present are alarmed and begin offering their equally uninformed views and assumptions, painting the worst-case scenarios and generally working themselves into a doom-laden fit about how **They** are always picking on **Us**. What a way to start the day, right?

Or someone returns from a district workshop with the news, “Get ready folks because **They** are completely doing away with cooperative learning!” A lady in my group told me that her cousin’s daughter, who is a teacher, said her principal mentioned that he heard it from a reliable source. “**They** are going to prohibit the use of cooperative learning in all core disciplines. It’s true! From now on, we won’t be allowed to let students work in groups. Can you believe that? Oh my gosh, I don’t know what **They** are thinking! I cannot give up my groups. That’s the only way I have ever taught. **Those people** are crazy. Most of them haven’t been in a classroom in 30 years, and now **They** want to tell **Us** how to teach? I don’t think so. That’s the last straw for me. I’m going to turn in my resignation, buy a pair of skates, and go be a carhop for Sonic.” And the word spreads like head lice. By the end of the day, everyone in your school is preoccupied with the new mandate (which of course, turns out to be completely untrue).

Throughout the book, we talk more about how to avoid this kind of negativism and provide ideas for better choices than just blindly following along or chiming in when problems occur. For now, we want to highlight the point that each of us needs to make every effort to collect accurate information before we react to or act on hearsay.

We're not saying that schools, districts, states, and the federal Department of Education give every issue impartial treatment or that the decisions they make are always fair or even sensible. But we know from experience that it is vital for each of us involved to know as much as possible about impending issues. We need to be aware, realistic, and as informed as possible.

When trying to find authentic answers, we encourage educators to go as directly to the source as possible. If the proper link in the chain of command does not provide precise information, go to the next higher level and keep asking until you get a definitive answer. Consider possible biases and personal agendas of others that sometimes consciously or unconsciously skew information they present. Get as many objective responses as possible, and use your inner compass to navigate a path to the most likely truth.

In the case of the litter box dilemma, one simple phone call to the district's superintendent would have neutralized at least that one false claim. Without any sort of fact-checking, one concerned mom in Michigan made a public proclamation at an open school board meeting that this "nationwide" issue was part of a nefarious issue being pushed upon unwilling communities. She said, "I'm all for creativity and imagination, but when someone lives in a fantasy world and expects other people to go along with it, I have a problem with that" (Paz, 2022). Unfortunately, no one at the meeting responded to her disquieting statements, and a video of her histrionics went viral on social media.

When the matter finally reached the superintendent's attention, he immediately responded with, "It is such a source of disappointment that I felt the necessity to communicate this message to you. . . . Let me be clear in this communication, there is no truth whatsoever to this false statement/accusation! There have never been litter boxes within MPS schools." He went on to urge parents to contact him if rumors like this surfaced again. Problem solved. (We hope.)

The point of discussing the kitty litter box story is to emphasize the need for leaders and educators to be vigilant in not only seeking but also providing accurate information. We wonder why the officials in the MPS boardroom did not pause the parent's address to ask for a fact check. Too many times, our silence is perceived as agreement. In our current contentious, divisive atmosphere we must speak up with honesty and with facts.

Action Step 1.1

FACT CHECK

Scan QR Code 1.1 to watch this MediaWise video featuring a teen fact checker who investigates the litter box controversy. Think about how your school or district could do something like this to help diffuse erroneous rumors, gossip, and assumptions.



With intentionality, we need to help quiet the hyperactive beehive mindset surrounding our schools. School administrator, Gaskell (2022), talks about his already pandemic-stressed school community being overwhelmed by a “toxic groupthink” stemming from news about increasing school tragedies. His answer is to try to override parents’ emotionally charged spontaneous reactions with logic and practical thinking, “Students have a far lower chance of being harmed in school than almost any other risk they face including traveling to and from school, catching a potentially deadly disease, and suffering from a life-threatening injury through inter-scholastic sports.”

Gaskell believes in a proactive approach that teaches both parents and students how to get better at filtering information they find online. He recommends assisting students and families in managing constant distractions from alarming new cycles. He regularly discusses with students and parents valid methods by which they can guard against getting caught up in media frenzy and become discerning evaluators of information from every source.

We think it is additionally beneficial to be candid about the harm caused to all by unconfirmed accusations, idol gossip, and self-serving agitation. Schools should shine a spotlight on misinformation and provide a space where parents, teachers, students, leaders, and other community members can find up-to-date factual information.

Fear of the unknown, constant threat warnings, and negative “hives” promote pessimism, loss of self-efficacy, and hopelessness in each of us. Having trustworthy sources for data contributes to overall realistic optimism. Educators and leaders need to both seek clarity for themselves and take an active role in providing the tools others need to make informed decisions. Our goal is to pursue a realistic awareness toward what is happening around us.

Guiding Questions on Realistic Awareness

Before we buy into or begin reacting to what is being disseminated as *the truth*, it is our responsibility to ask ourselves some guiding questions:

1. Who exactly is “**They**?” Are we talking about a person, a committee, a voting body, or some other entity? It’s important to know exactly who is responsible for the alleged decision.
2. Have I done my own research/fact checking on the current education issue or topic?
3. Have I sought out and listened to at least two sides of the issue or topic?
4. Have I relied on the words of others to help form my opinion? If so, have I considered their possible biases and credibility?
5. Have I tried to separate the facts from my preconceptions about those who made the decision (including attributing motives based on my assumptions)?
6. Was there an opportunity for me or for other affected parties to voice our opinions about the matter before a decision was made?
7. Are we as a staff waiting to react or are we looking to begin a proactive approach to the problem?
8. Have we looked closely at the data used to support the new mandate?
9. Have we made an effort to contact similar schools or districts that have already implemented this program?
10. Have we as a staff dissected the full potential impact (pros and cons) on ourselves, our school, our community, and most importantly, our students?

Reviewing and reflecting on these questions might take time, but in the long run, the process will encourage helpful deliberations and perhaps influence those around us to think carefully before drawing conclusions. A worksheet for this purpose is provided in Appendix 1.3.

●●● DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND ACTION STEPS

1. Where do you get the majority of your information about school? What about information on the world in general? Do you think your source(s) influences the way you feel about things? Do you think other people's source(s) of information influences their attitudes about things? If so, in what ways?
2. Consider the story floating around the internet about the litter box in the students' restrooms or name some other egregious report that has been recounted in your district. Discuss how and why such narratives gain so much traction. What can you as an individual or as a team do when confronted with false or misleading information?
3. Pick a current hot issue at school. Use the steps in Appendix 1.3 *Realistic Awareness* to further explore the topic. Did using the steps expand your ideas about the subject? Why or why not?
4. Where do you direct students and parents to go when seeking accurate information about your classroom, school, or district? Why?
5. Is there a negative "hive" affecting your school community? Identify it (them) and list positive actions you have done or could do to help counteract their influence.
6. Think of an instance where you misjudged a person's intent or motive. Why do you think you made an incorrect assumption? How can you avoid making inaccurate conjectures about why others make the choices they do?
7. After taking the Mind Styles Test [see QR Code 1.2] and reading the descriptions of the four mind styles in this chapter, do you agree with how you scored? Why or why not?
8. How can considering information about areas such as mind styles improve our interactions with others?
9. How would our human relations be improved if each of us began every interaction with the assumption that others were operating with good intentions?
10. In a meeting of more than 10 people, play the children's game, Gossip (search online for Gossip Game Ideas [Benac, 2017]). Discuss how rumors and gossip interfere with the idea behind Principle #1: Gather Information.

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Action Steps for School Leaders

1. Plan a staff meeting to introduce or reinforce the Four Principles of Deliberate Optimism. Lead a group in using the four principles to deal with a present school-wide issue.
2. Acquaint parents and the community with the Four Principles of Deliberate Optimism by adding the principles to school newsletters and other school publications as well as discussing them in PTO, PTA, or similar meetings.
3. Have the Four Principles of Deliberate Optimism printed for every staff member. You can use laminated pocket cards, squeeze balls, posters, or whatever suits the style of your school community.
4. Establish a place (newsletter, website, social media site, etc.) for parents, teachers, community members, and students to go to for straight facts and information. Keep it up to date; make it as transparent as possible.
5. In the most diplomatic manner possible, shine a spotlight on agitators, gossip mongers, and misinformation specialists. Provide accurate, updated information and politely ask them to avoid inflammatory rhetoric and get their facts straight before posting information.
6. When there is a problem (e.g., teachers arriving late for duty assignments), speak directly to those responsible. Blanket emails or general announcements at faculty meetings are usually ignored by the transgressors and are demoralizing to those who are doing what they are supposed to do.
7. Post a “Chain of Command” type flowchart for both parents and teachers to see. Let them know the most effective course to take for getting their needs met (e.g., calling the superintendent at home to complain about Vincent’s drop from an A- to a B- in art class is not the best place to start).
8. Periodically administer inventories, questionnaires, and fun quizzes to teachers and staff to gather more information about them as individuals. With their permission, post their birthdays, special events, interests, talents, accreditations, learning goals, and so forth, so that you and others can gather insights about who they are.
9. If you don’t already have one, establish a hospitality committee that will oversee team-building events and fun activities appropriate for the staff members at your school.
10. Using an asset-based approach, look at unique gifts and preferred ways of learning among staff members. Shape professional development

and other activities around their strengths with personalized learning experiences. For additional suggestions, see Appendix 1.4 *Recognizing and Celebrating Staff*.

11. Set up a suggestion box so that questions and ideas can be posted anonymously. Address as many as you can and try to acknowledge the ones you cannot do (e.g., At a faculty meeting, you might state, "I'd like to acknowledge the request I got from one of you to limit the number of students in each of your sections to twenty-four. Unfortunately, with our present number of students and teachers, that is not possible, but I'm willing to look at a more equitable way to balance classes if you'll write me or come by my office and give me more details about your particular situation." Or, "I'd like to acknowledge the request for me to take a long walk off a short pier, but I really need you to be a bit more specific about what is bothering you.").

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