

Photo: Pam LeBlanc



BY DENNIS SPARKS

Creating Cultures of Interpersonal Accountability

Instead of withholding our thoughts and feelings, we can share them. We can tell the truth—not The Truth (as in assuming our ideas are always right)—but our truth, the way we honestly think and feel.... Refusing to speak our minds often cheats others of an opportunity to look at a problem with a fresh pair of eyes.

Our promises create our lives. Our promises give life to our purposes and goals. Our promises move us into action.... Life works to the degree we keep our promises.

— Dave Ellis

IMAGINE a school in which everyone spoke with candor and respect. Agendas were not hidden. Important conversations were conducted in meeting rooms rather than in parking lots. Imagine a school in which important work was completed on time, according to the agreed upon specifications. Meetings began and ended as scheduled with everyone present and prepared. (These topics were addressed more fully in my January 14, 2008, and March 10, 2008, [columns](#).)

For many educators, such a work setting would be beyond imagination. But I contend that cultures founded on such integrity are attainable when leaders recognize that change begins within themselves and commit to cultivating these habits in themselves and others. In such schools interpersonal account-

ability replaces mandates and high-stakes testing as the primary motivating force in the continuous improvement of teaching and learning.

In schools with high levels of integrity and trust, teachers would feel responsible to one another for the actions they take to steadily improve their work. In team meetings and other settings where learning and decision-making take place, teachers would be candid about their perceptions and beliefs without fear of judgment or retribution. They would make and keep promises to one another about the actions they would take to improve the learning of all their students, in particular those students who have been unsuccessful in meeting agreed upon standards. They would also make and keep promises about the ways they would support one another in improving their teaching.

Leaders guide the creation of such a culture through their own integrity and accountability. They consistently speak with respect and candor. They keep the promises they make and expect others to do likewise. They do not make promises they cannot keep simply because it is easier to say yes to a request than it is to say no.

Doing these things, of course, is much harder than writing about them. It begins with an honest self-assessment and continues with the cultivation of new habits whose acquisition will require sustained attention and effort, a topic which will be addressed in an upcoming column. But when leaders understand the positive motivating force of interpersonal accountability among members of the school community and their central role in creating it, they lead through learning.

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