



BY DENNIS SPARKS

Leaders Promote Gratitude and Appreciation

I beseech you by all angels to hold your peace, and not pollute the morning, to which all the house-mates bring serene and pleasant thoughts, by corruption and groans.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

Civil school cultures are places in which genuine expressions of gratitude, appreciation, and celebration replace complaint and blame, or what Emerson terms pollution through “corruption and groans.” Members of civil school communities cultivate positive interactions that convey respect and caring even when discussing contentious issues, conveying a tone that is established through the leaders’ words, demeanor, and actions.

In *Choosing Civility: The Twenty-Five Rules of Considerate Conduct*, P. M. Forni points out, “It is up to you to choose between giving in to dissatisfaction and resentment and embracing contentment and joy. My suggestion is that you make every effort to start walking toward joy today, not only for your own good but for the good of those closest to you as well.” Leaders who “start walking toward joy today” can:

- Cultivate their own gratitude and appreciation for their lives and work. A simple but effective way for leaders to cultivate gratitude is to note in writing at the end of the day at least three things for which they are

grateful. Leaders who establish this routine for even a few weeks will find themselves more frequently feeling and expressing gratitude.

- Establish rituals through which community members can express their gratitude in public settings. Faculty meetings could begin, for instance, with a few minutes devoted to expressions of appreciation regarding colleagues, students, or parents. Such activities take little time, but can have a large effect on relationships, motivation, and group cohesion.
- Identify a recurring theme of complaint or blame and set a goal to remove it from their conversational repertoire. Whenever leaders experience the urge to complain or blame, they can focus instead on solutions.

Civility does not preclude leaders from forthrightly expressing their observations about problems and their solutions. Such candor is both a sign of self-respect and of respect for others. “It is possible to be civil and true to one’s beliefs at the same time. . .,” Forni writes. “When we express [our beliefs] with poise rather than rudeness, not only are we truer to our better selves, but we infuse our dissent with a power that it wouldn’t have otherwise.”

When leaders cultivate gratitude and celebration within candid and respectful solution-oriented cultures, they lead through learning.

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