

Creating, Sustaining, and Establishing Value with Your School Culture Team

By: Tyler Patten, teacher at Antelope HS

We are fortunate at Antelope High School. Because we opened as a brand new high school in 2008, we had the opportunity to establish our traditions and the ways that we do what we do without having to worry about anything preventing us from trying new ideas. Each time one of our ideas came to fruition and was a success, we felt a rush. We rode the highs of those excitements for a long time. Then, one day about seven years into our journey, a few of us who have been here since the beginning looked at each other and realized that the newness and the excitement were wearing off. We knew that we had to do something in order to preserve what we had created and that the feeling of excitement could no longer be just a byproduct of what we were doing. We needed to be intentional about keeping our school's culture alive and thriving.

Creating the Team

We first heard about the idea of creating a school culture team from Tim Liles, principal at Sunnyside High School, after hearing him talk about it during lunch at the School Culture Summit in March 2015 – an early iteration of the School Culture Summit you are working at today. We did not know how Tim and his crew created their team. We knew only that the idea sounded cool and we wanted to make it work for us. I should say here that our way is not THE way. It is A way. I hope our story sparks an idea for you in the same way that Tim's story sparked an idea for us.

Our principal, our Activities Director (who also happens to be my wife), and I met to discuss why we needed to be intentional about preserving and continuing to shape our school's culture. We began with the premise that students will cycle through our school on a yearly basis, but our staff members will stay with us for much longer. Because of this, we believe that nurturing positive adult relationships and interactions on our campus is integral to our long-term success. Our guiding philosophy is if the adults feel good about being Antelope Titans, then the kids will feel good about being Antelope Titans too. Therefore, we recognize our need to make time intentionally to discuss our school's culture (what we do and how we do it), our school's climate (how it feels), and the actions that we need to take to create/preserve both.

Once we had our why, we talked about which members of our staff we wanted to get on board immediately with the idea and how we thought our culture team might take shape. We wanted to be sure to keep the team small enough that our conversations would be intimate and that each person would have the space to speak, but at the same time we needed the team to be varied enough so that each member would bring unique and valuable perspective to the table. We intentionally selected fifteen members from across our staff of about one hundred people. We paid attention to vary how long each team member had been on our campus - some since the beginning, others more newly hired. We made sure to have at least one member of every department represented including our clerical and administrative staff. Most importantly, we felt that each person had to have a desire to help continue to make Antelope High School a place no one wants to leave.

Our team met for the first time near the end of summer vacation in July 2015. We were conscious at the outset that we would lose some of our people right away if we said we wanted to have a “meeting.” Who wants to give up time from their summer vacation for a meeting? We decided, instead, to call it a “culture conversation” and to hold it off campus. At Antelope High School, we talk a lot about being a Titan family, so my wife and I held the first culture conversation at our home in our backyard with catered lunch and frosty beverages like any other family gathering. We wanted it to feel as opposite from a staff meeting as possible, but we set an agenda about what we wanted to discuss and why we wanted to discuss it. Then we shared it with our members ahead of time so that our team knew exactly what to expect and what we wanted our outcome for the day to be.

We thought that our first culture conversation should be only three hours long to respect our peers’ time, to maximize our impact, and to leave our group wanting more. We divided our conversation into two parts: a morning session and an after-lunch session. In the morning, we had small-group conversations (five people per group) facilitated by three staff leaders. We used some of the questions posed at the ends of chapters in *School Culture By Design* by Phil Boyte as starting-off points for our discussions. After lunch, we invited guest speaker Paul Lundberg, principal of Colfax High School, to share with the whole group about some of the culture lessons he has learned on his journey and what he observed about our group during the morning session. He provided us with an outsider’s perspective to help us affirm our areas of strength and uncover our areas to begin to improve. We decided then that the focus of our staff culture team for the

2015-16 schoolyear would be on reengaging our staff in school events throughout the year. We ended our conversation with a whole-group discussion about the commitments we were willing to make to each other and what we were looking forward to doing to support positive school culture in the upcoming year.

Sustaining the Team

In order to determine when we needed to reconvene the whole group, we held monthly check-in meetings with the three staff leaders of the team (our Activities Director, our Principal, and me) to discuss ongoing staff culture topics. We brought our team back together on two additional evenings during the 2015-16 schoolyear. Each time we made sure to be off-site in team members' homes. We wanted to be sure that we kept the more laid back, family vibe. We shared ideas, ate, drank, and laughed with each other.

Through our conversations about what we were seeing and hearing from our peers around campus, we determined that the most impactful times to convene our group are before Homecoming week – usually in September or October – and near winter break, which is the halfway point of our school year. We chose Homecoming week because it represents our largest opportunity for community connection, and we noticed our staff members attending less with each passing year. Through our culture conversation, we found out that many of our people felt paralyzed by the sheer amount of events that we have going on during Homecoming week. Some of our team members admitted to the whole group that since they could not make it to everything, they felt like they could not come to anything. As an outcome of this, we decided to send a handwritten invitation to each staff member that included a list of the events we were having and a note to ask them to come to one of their choosing. The combination of the handwritten note – a novelty in a world where electronic communication dominates – and the reassurance that coming to one event was plenty garnered us a great response. Had we not taken the time to talk to one another about what we perceived as a culture issue, we would never have come up with an idea to help solve it.

One fresh idea that came out of our midyear conversation had to do with our graduation ceremony. One of the first traditions that we established at Antelope High School is that graduation is a celebration of our students and of our staff who helped them along the way. For

us, graduation has never been a mandatory event. We do not have to work it; we are there to enjoy it. Since that first graduation ceremony, we have operated under the assumption that our people would come to a celebration thrown (partly) in their honor. This was true for the first few graduation ceremonies. Then, we started to hear things from some of our peers like, “I don’t teach seniors, so I don’t really know the graduates” and “It’s been a long year. I’m heading out of town.” Our school culture team knew that we had to figure out a strategy to reengage our staff in our graduation ceremony. We all saw the response we got from sending handwritten invitations during Homecoming Week and wondered if it would work again. After talking it through, we landed on the idea of having each member of our graduating senior class take a few moments to fill out a small slip of paper during their mandatory senior class meeting in the spring to explain to a staff member why he/she would love to have the staff member see him/her graduate. Then, we collected the slips from our seniors and went through them to account for which staff members had a personal note and which did not. Last, our Student Government seniors filled out a small slip for any staff members who were unaccounted for. This ensured that 100% of our staff – not just teaching staff, but all clerical, administrative, counseling, custodial, and cafeteria staff too – was getting a note from a student to let them know that it was important that the staff member be present to see him/her graduate. We have created a new tradition and, as a result, our staff has been attending at those “early graduation” levels again.

During the 2016-17 schoolyear, we brought some new members onto our team as a way of keeping our conversation fresh. We followed the same protocol as the year before. The new members represented different areas of our campus and had a desire to see Antelope High School be a place that no one wants to leave. We tried meeting at school because it became a challenge with everyone’s various commitments to find a time when we could meet to talk in the evenings. It took us only one conversation to remember why meeting at our site was not the best venue: we were still in “work mode,” distracted by our computers, cell phones, email, etc. and that made it feel like a meeting. Lesson learned. We made sure that the next time we met we did it off campus. We chose a local restaurant and it worked out well. There is power in meeting off-site. We have found that it just puts people into a different headspace that is more conducive to open conversation about how our school feels.

Our team’s focus for the 2016-17 schoolyear was on recapturing the sense of joy our staff members felt at work. Through our conversations, we came up with the ideas of face painting for

the staff on rally days, coffee and bagel deliveries to staff during event weeks, reigniting staff “Red Zones” (our student cheering section) at our football/basketball games, and more. The one idea that brought the most joy, however, was our “Secret Santa.” For years, our office/clerical staff had hosted a “Secret Santa” among themselves and loved it, but we had never tried it on a large scale with all staff. Two of our culture team members – our front desk receptionist and our choir teacher – took the reins on coordinating the event. At our November staff meeting, we gave our staff members a “Secret Santa” sheet which outlined the rules of the game and which asked them to provide information about themselves and little treats they like. Most people thought it sounded like a fun idea, so they participated. Our two culture team point people collected the forms and began working on matching up our players. At the beginning of December, we had the staff players meet for coffee in the quad one morning before school to find out who they were going to be “Secret Santa” for. We set December 12-19th (six total school days with a weekend in the middle) as our gift-giving days with the “Secret Santa” reveal to happen at the December 20th luncheon we host each year before Winter Break. It was a success! Our staff had so much fun bringing treats and goodies to each other throughout the week, and it helped us find a little collective joy to get through what is a stressful work time since it is the end of our first term. We will definitely do it again this year.

As with everything, our school culture team is a work in progress. This school year has been particularly challenging since it is a WASC accreditation year for us. That seems to have taken over everyone’s time, energy, and thoughts. We let the Homecoming conversation slide this time around, but I expect that we will get together for the midyear one. That is the time of the year that our staff always seems to need a pick-me-up. We will gather the group and see if we can brainstorm some ideas to help propel our people into the spring term feeling good about where we work, what we do, and why we are Antelope Titans. Further, I suspect that we are due for another summertime culture conversation in 2018 to reset our goals and realign ourselves to our priorities.

Establishing Value with Your Team

Since you are here at a School Culture Summit, you already have the genesis of your team. Look at the people who came with you today. They are the ones who care about making

your school a place that no one wants to leave. You already know that you have to be intentional about preserving and/or shaping your school's culture (what you do and how you do it) and the climate (how it feels).

Now, you need to figure out your vision for your school. What is important to you as a group? What do you want your campus to look, sound, and feel like? Why should your staff want to get on board with your vision? If your motives are genuine and your vision is clear, people will come along with you. I have no doubt. Who will you enlist to help you make your vision a reality when you return to your campus? You will not be able to do this alone and you should not.

As I wrote earlier, ours is A way, not THE way. I hope our story sparks an idea for you to find YOUR way.