



How Administrators Can Use Business Practices to Keep Teachers Happy

By **Cindi Rigsbee**

February 28, 2018

After more than **30 years of teaching**, I retired last month amid a great deal of emotion and fanfare. Soon after, I was met with some obstacles (the wrong time of year, mainly) while searching for a post-retirement job in education. So I ended up in the business world instead and have just begun training for my new job.

As I enter this new realm, I've been taking numerous mental notes on how business practices can be used to help keep teachers in the classroom and curb shortages.

The first noteworthy practice was the barrage of emails and phone calls I received prior to my start date from recruiters and managers saying, "Welcome to the team! Do you have any questions?" I felt a part of something big early on, so I was proud of getting the job and excited to begin. I didn't know exactly who was on the "team," but I couldn't wait to work with them.

When I met my supervisor, the first thing she did was hand me an interest inventory form and say, "I want to get to know you!" What a great feeling that someone wanted to know about my family, my likes, dislikes, and interests. As she talked me through procedures, including how to take leave days, I was struck by her flexibility and "family comes first" mentality. I immediately felt at ease, knowing that she was accessible and approachable and would be empathetic to my needs. She also handed me a beautiful gift box full of company swag. Who doesn't like a surprise gift?

As the training facilitator took me through work procedures, the theme running through all of her remarks was, "This is a great place to work, and you will be valued here."

I was reminded of a teacher colleague's words after an interview several years ago: "The principal seemed like an amazing captain of a ship I wanted to be on."

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Research has shown that **administrative support is the most important factor affecting school culture**. In fact, results of North Carolina's most recent Teacher Working Conditions Survey indicate that

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teachers chose “school leadership” over “managing student conduct,” “professional development,” and other indicators as the factor most affecting their decision to stay in their school.

How do great principals, like great business leaders, develop a culture that **makes employees want to work there and stay there?**

Yes, the business world has one thing schools don’t have—money—but many of the factors contributing to whether or not a teacher stays cost only a little time and effort.

Administrators Establish the Culture

Over the years, I’ve been involved in trainings where principals brainstorm and trade ideas for encouraging their teachers to stay. I’ve now seen helpful practices in the business world as well. Establishing a culture of caring can be easy (and free).

Here are some ideas for things principals can do to better their school culture—many of which are also being used in successful businesses.

- **Bring out the welcome wagon for teachers new to your school.** Provide school or school district spirit wear and novelties, tour the school with the teacher and point out important landmarks, provide enthusiastic introductions, and allow the teacher to ask questions. Teachers should come into their jobs feeling they are valued, appreciated, and part of a team. Maintain an “open door” policy from that moment, and try to be available to hear teachers’ concerns when necessary. Sometimes teachers just need to be heard.

- **Stay positive.** Even when the media reports about education are unpleasant, focus on what’s great about your school. Be the “ship your teachers want to sail on.” Take every opportunity to point out the great accomplishments of staff and students. And don’t stop at the front door of your school. Shout out your positive stories on social media, and share your anecdotes on blogs and websites. Let the community know that your school is the place to be! Remember there are future teachers out there reading and listening, too.

- **Celebrate your employees.** I met a principal who creates handwritten birthday notes for everyone on staff and mails them to their homes. For just the cost of a stamp, this sends the message that the staff is valued and important. Other recognitions are free and easy. One of my principals used to recognize a teacher at every staff meeting. That teacher was given ownership of our (stuffed) mascot for one month. Boy, were we competitive over that bear. That same principal used to shout at me when he walked by my classroom door: “Hey, Mrs. Rigsbee, did you know you’re my favorite teacher?” I would break into a big ol’ smile just as I heard him shout the same thing to the teacher next door. The culture he established —“This is a fun place to work, and this is my family”—made me proud to work there.

Other practices, which aren’t so touchy-feely but are just as important, include supporting teachers who are struggling with classroom management, sitting in on parent conferences that have the potential to become volatile, and planning professional development based on teacher need instead of district mandates. Sending the message that teachers are important and that administrators will do whatever it takes to ensure they are supported is the best way to keep a building staffed.

And, of course, happy teachers teach happy students who are learning and thriving. That’s *our* business model.

*Cindi Rigsbee is a National Board-certified teacher who recently retired after more than 30 years in education. The 2009 N.C. Teacher of the Year, Rigsbee was a finalist for National Teacher of the Year and is the author of **Finding Mrs. Warnecke: The Difference Teachers Make** and a contributing author to **Teaching 2030: What We Must Do for Our Students and Our Public Schools... Now and in the***

Future. *She is also a member of the **CTQ Collaboratory**. For more discussion on the teacher shortage, please see the **roundtable discussion about teacher shortages at CTQ**.*

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