

THE MULTICULTURAL LEADERSHIP TEAM: KEY TO SCHOOL-WIDE MULTICULTURALISM - THE AMERICAN SCHOOL OF GUATEMALA

By Ettie Zilber

I consider myself extraordinarily fortunate to have put together a professional, hard working and dedicated leadership team and have bragged about it to the Editor; thus, his request for this article. First, let me define the parameters of my educational admin team: the petit team of 8, made up of myself, 4 Principals and 3 Assistant Principals; and the grand team of 13, which incorporates the aforementioned plus our Early Childhood Lead Teacher, Technology, PE/Sports/Clubs, Curriculum and Library/Media Coordinators.

At the end of the academic year, our team reflects- in writing- on our accomplishments and our goals for improvement. Typically, we identify numerous factors about how we work as a team and how we would like to improve. Interestingly, we had never identified it in words, but now realize that one of the many reasons for our success may be the fact that we are a multicultural team and are respectful of and sensitive to each other. When asked to write a piece for publication under this title, we sat and discussed our 'multicultural-ness', which, as we know full well, is much deeper and varied than nationality.

How multi-everything appears: gender, nationality, culture, language, religion

Of our 13 members 11 are female and two are male; all are bilingual, two are tri lingual and one speaks 5 languages. We each have been raised with various first/native languages, but due to our multilingualism, each can speak their comfort language during our team meetings and all dialogue is comprehensible to all.

In addition, we are a mix of Canadian, US, Guatemalan and Cuban passport holders, some with dual citizenships or residencies. Of the 13, five of the North Americans have worked in 1-8 different schools in from 1-6 countries and continents. Among our North American members, we were brought up in diverse regions of the country, including NY, South Carolina, Ohio and Kansas...and Toronto.

Of the Guatemalans, the long term veterans have spent most of their teaching careers at our school and have never lived or worked abroad. Our Cuban teammate had a vastly different experience as an immigrant/refugee from his native land.

Three of us on the team are parents of Third Culture Kids, one is a TCK herself, and four of us consider ourselves Third Culture Adults. All except one on the team are married with 1 to 4 children. Our unmarried team member is proud of his travels with his TCK-dog.

Four of us consider ourselves expatriates, and have no family ties in the host country, while the rest all have extended family and obligations to their families in the country. Nevertheless, we do come together for special occasions and celebrations and enjoy each others company, sometimes including dancing and dining. Our spouses also enjoy these events, even if they have no association with the school. Two of our members do, however, have spouses teaching at the school.

Five on the team are parents of students and/or graduates of our school, one is married to an alumnus, whose mother was a past administrator at the school. Two of our expat members are married to Guatemalans and now call Guatemala their home, and our immigrant from Cuba has adopted Guatemala as his home.

In addition, we share different religions and different levels of spiritual beliefs, thus making us very sensitive to the diversity of traditions and beliefs of all. We claim to be spiritual and traditional, if not very religious.

Respect for longevity, history and institutional memory

The length of time and circumstances working at the school are very diverse, as well, from the most recent newcomers arriving just over 1 year ago, to those who have been with the school and community for up to 27 years. The most veteran of the team have grown and moved up in numerous positions within the school, one beginning her career in our student teaching program, another starting as a classroom assistant and moving up into teaching and then administration

and, yet others who were teachers and moved into leadership positions as opportunities arose. Combined, we have approximately 300 years of experience in education

The veteran members offer the most valuable assistance, which cannot be replicated by any newcomer; that is, historical memory about the school and knowledge of the families and their histories in the community. A school with a 64-year history demands respect and appreciation. As a multicultural team, we are committed to maintaining the sense of continuity and tradition, albeit, within an environment of identified and prioritized changes.

The longevity of those who have been closely attached to the school through employment and children offers an "insider's" perspective; this is a healthy balance to the "outsider's" perspective of the newcomers. There is a mutual appreciation and sensitivity of the insiders for the outsiders, and vice versa. The insiders assist and often warn the outsiders how to avoid the landmines of potential cultural clashes when trespassing traditions and cultures. In addition, the long-timers help the 'newbies' understand the specific culture of our parent and teacher communities, including the intricacies of family interrelationships, social pressures, status, business relationships, political issues...and so much more. Yet, the veterans appreciate and often initiate the introduction of new policies, procedures and programs that they know were missing from the historical panorama.

We have observed in our work as a team, that each of us learns and processes information in very different ways. Some can multi task, others prefer to work on one task at a time; some are visual learners, while others are auditory, some are sequential and others are random. Thus, when it is time to solve a problem, each one addresses the problem from a different angle and based on different personality variables; perhaps it is because of these differences, and in spite of them, we are sure to find the most successful solution for our community.

Most of us are extremely task oriented and have expectations of long work hours. We each have different opinions on topics from the mundane of student cell phone use and bus discipline to a philosophy of sports. Because we are a diverse team, we can identify with and see the diverse perspectives of almost every constituent group in the school.

Workshops on raising cultural awareness and sensitivity have become part of the orientation strategies of ASG. All new and veteran staff have undergone the 'doctrination.' How ironic, however, that it was only at the behest of Inter Ed's theme on multiculturalism that we actually sat down to analyze and contemplate how our success as an administrative leadership team has been based in the same multiculturalism, cultural diversity and sensitivity to which we aspire. We thank Inter Ed for motivating this activity.

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