

Tips for principals in dealing with employee critics

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1. Play on your own playing field not theirs. Stop focusing on what the small group of critics are thinking and doing. Work with your supporters and the neutrals. Don't let the minority tyrannize the majority. But, ignoring your critics is not an option. Give them attention; just give your supporters even more during contentious times.
2. Don't cocoon. The last thing you should do is lock yourself in a bunker. Be visible. Get out of your office and visit classrooms. Seek employees out; don't wait for them to come to you. Remember: It's awfully hard to be unfair to someone you know.
3. Be solution-oriented, not problem-oriented. Critics and negativists like to dwell on what's wrong without offering solutions other than to "fire the principal." Make sure that your meetings aren't just complaint sessions. Everyone who raises a problem must offer a solution or two at the same time.
4. Don't treat your critics as a group; they're individuals. If you presume they are acting as one then they will. You also don't give them a chance to act as individuals so they let the loudest or most intimidating voice speak for them.
5. Don't presume other people's intentions out of your fears. While people tend to act a certain way in similar situations, you can't afford to presume that. The one time they might be willing to act positively toward you, you could react to them as you always have and drive them back to their old negative behavior.
6. Being a principal can be an isolating experience since there is only one of you. Resist the tendency to use front office staff as "confidential" employees or confidantes. Personal and personnel discussions are not appropriate with your staff. These are your front line people and they can't help but talk with parents and employees.
7. Be consistent. Staff members want you to be the rock of your school. They need to be able to count on you with some sense of predictability and confidence. Your role is to articulate a vision and show how everyone equitably fits into that vision. Your confidence to stand up to bullies gives them confidence as well. Understand that staff will need to process issues out of your earshot. Try not to be paranoid about what they are saying. Keep your ear to the ground and let them know they can always come to you if they have questions or concerns about what they hear.
8. Take parents out of the equation. Critics will try to poison the well with parents. Continuous, timely, reliable information is the best antidote to negative rumor mills. Keep parents in the loop, but on the sidelines. Use written and verbal communication.
9. Make sure of your paper trail. If you are evaluating employees do your homework and maintain an unimpeachable record of instances, comments and actions. Do not try to recreate it months after the fact when the details aren't clear.
10. Change vocabulary. Use the terms "Our, we and us" instead of "My, me and I". Talk about "our staff", not "my staff." Refer to the site as our school.
11. Keep them busy. Idle hands are the Devil's playground. If people have too much time on their hands then they have time to talk and spread rumors. Make sure people are fulfilling their adjunct duties and other assignments. Don't pick on anyone and make sure the workload is equitable.
12. If any grievances or accusations are leveled in writing or verbally, prepare a written refutation, even if you only keep it for your files. If something is put into your file you need to know it and have the chance to set the record straight.

13. Over-communicate on other issues and accomplishments to inoculate people to criticism. This creates a perceptual and factual backdrop against which they can measure negative comments they hear. Your goal is to get people to say, "That's not what I know, experience, see, or feel."
14. Watch your back. Look for emerging problems, smoldering controversies, or events that could be used as triggering devices or leverage points for critics to capitalize on. Get out in front of them with information and one-on-one contact with key individuals and opinion leaders.
15. Take care of yourself. If you find yourself thinking about the problem when you go to bed at night and when you wake up in the morning then stop and step back a little. Exercise, get rest and eat well. Work the problem to death not yourself!
16. Stay focused on what really matters at your school. You set the tone and you can set the criticisms in context by your demeanor and actions. Point to true north so others can follow your lead.
17. Make staff meetings count. These are little demonstration projects to see who will control the group. Don't let people Shanghai your meetings. Have protocols of conduct in place from the start. Set an agenda and stick to it. Start and end on time and don't revisit items for stragglers.
18. Make parent meetings and Back-to-School nights count. The tone you set with staff on their first day of the new term sets the tone. Write down what you're going to say and practice it. This is too important to just wing it!
19. Showcase success. Make sure everyone knows about the successes of teamwork and how individuals who are not in the group of critics are making the school outstanding for students and parents. Don't forget classified employees because they are part of the communication network.
20. Watch for end runs. Try to get a "no surprises" agreement with the central office that chills staff from going around you without your knowledge. If one person can do it then the district office paper trains everyone to do it. If they need to go over your head, at least let them do it with you in the room. You might need to be the one to call in the district office as an observer before the critics call them in as a judge.

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