



DARDEN SCHOOL
of BUSINESS



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Servant Leadership and Trash

Community Challenge

Robyn Cook noticed that when she picked up the trash in the cafeteria, students started doing the same and taking pride in the appearance of their school. As a first-year principal of both a small elementary and middle school, Cook was kicked out of the first Principals Pursuing Excellence (PPE) cohort. She reapplied— “probably the best decision I ever made”—and ended up with a Blue Ribbon in 2016 for closing the achievement gap in her middle school; she was then named National Principal of the Year the following year for her elementary school.

Action Taken

Cook calls being a principal the loneliest job because you can't hang with teachers, and you're not in the upper echelons of administrators. PPE provided that network of support and mentorship she needed. Every three months she convened with PPE principals and mentors. For a new principal, in particular, this was important, it prevented the self-doubt that “maybe my personality was causing people to react this way or that,” Cook said.

From her mentor, she got her first dose of tough love. Struggling with an exercise on the Six Effective Steps of Feedback, he told Cook, “You'll make time for what's important to you,” and walked away. Cook was stunned. But this is where she stresses the community of PPE. Another person came over and gave her a suggestion on giving feedback to the teachers at the two schools. “Feedback is what teachers crave, and what principals can find hard to give,” Cook said. She's learned principals need to get a grip on their calendars and get out of their office so they can model servant leadership.

One of the ways Cook modeled that leadership, besides picking up trash and washing the floors, was with green t-shirts that students earned in their own ways from random acts of kindness. With hard work and leadership, her D school went to an A school with a 45-point climb in test scores.

Key Takeaway

Strategic thinking takes time to develop and is core to position individuals and organizations to succeed. Cook, now a consultant says, “I wish the training I received in college to be an administrator looked more like PPE.” Furthermore, her view is the thing that’s keeping New Mexico from moving forward faster, is the “fact” that not all principals have the opportunity for this training.