



4-2-24 Current final (to be posted)

Building Trust, Team & Community, with Steve Mikolike (Cohort 28)

I'm looking forward to continuing from our last conversation focused on faith, calling, and recovery. *[LINK]* How did you come to the themes for today – shared language, circles, building community, and education?

All the themes have helped me look at organizations, education and schools differently, and have added to my personal growth. The exciting part to me, too, is the “ing” – the learning, discovering, growing, and not-knowing but staying in the process.

I came to the themes in different ways, starting with 37+ years in the recovery community and 35+ years of walking with God. I went through CLP in 2019 and 2020, so our last sessions were online because of the pandemic. CLP made a significant move on my heart. After that, I participated in Seeding Conscious Co-creation, then experienced BD 101, Beyond Diversity.

Building community is my passion. Imagining and creating spaces where we can dream with other people who are dreaming; spaces where we can connect, heal, transform together, and be a part of real change that has a significant impact on improving *all* our lives.

This is especially true in education, when we find the courage and connection and build trust to talk about the things that we should talk about more, those things that nobody wants to talk about. When we can tell the truth to each other.

I'm in a new school now, it's been over a year. I don't use the word “principal” a lot, but I am the principal. I prefer the word “leader.” And I believe in *everybody's* leadership. I'm focusing and being reflective on who I am as a person and as a leader. We've come a long way, and we've got a long way to go.

When I got here, I perceived the school environment as punitive in nature, regarding consequences. I experienced police being called for what I consider non-police issues, I witnessed restraints that were avoidable with other approaches to managing behavior. There were unnecessary suspensions, and fights that were preventable with proper support. There was a culture where the staff was frustrated and tired in engaging and trusting students – and I was having a hard time listening to it. When adults talked about youth, it was the language of “these kids.”

Or even worse, “those” kids.

Yeah, that's right, even worse, those kids.



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We should relate more to “our” students, engaged in high-risk behavior, disconnected more important for them to be embraced.

ntage of youth. But COVID really opened of frustration and wanting more, something more social workers.

I education is *not* working for. at the barriers that are within us as *adults*, that are preventing us from greeting our youth fresh, starting every day. If we're sharing and engaging in community, then we should take ownership for what we're doing.

I really respect the 'we' in that; adults sharing responsibility, and not defaulting to that sad cultural norm of just blaming young people.

Right. And I choose community circles for breaking down those barriers. Circles that build on individual stories really start to build trust. We all have stories – they cut across age, gender, race, all of it.

We're creating community through a common language – where we can embrace our stories, even the things about ourselves that are hard to talk about, the thorn under the surface. This is definitely the direction our school is heading and presently experiencing.

I think as people sometimes we're running from pain, and eventually it catches up to us. So I want this to be a space – not that it has to be therapeutic – where we can begin to trust one another and bring our true authentic self. I think that's a real good start for personal growth and community. And believe me, I know that therapy has its place too.

I want to be a part of breaking systems of oppression. How do we do it? I think it's by creating community and a common language where we can discover our true authentic selves with one another. That's really my heart and my passion.

I appreciate that, I'm 100% with you.

I'm glad you brought that up. Because, what is it like to be present for one another, bringing our full self to a space?

To me, creating this common language helps with that, actually it's critical. Especially in an organization like a school. We can be present for one another, and also a spirit of unity gets a chance to form, like we're all in this together. And for me, unity does not equal conformity; bringing our full self also means bringing our unique self.

I don't even like the term "staff meetings" – we're a *team*. And I view team meetings as opportunities and offerings. I'm discovering that not everyone agrees. But my hope is that over time, we actually all want to be together! [laughing]

Can you say more about how you see full self showing up in an organization setting?

I forget who the model is by, there's three circles to our whole self: our physical self, our spirit self, and our mental self.

Is our emotional self part of our spirit self in that model?

Yes. And a lot of the conversations in education are using just the mental self, not taking into account the bigger picture of who we are. Those conversations tend to be based on opinions, and degrees, titles, seniority, that kind of thing. There is a lot of "this is the way we do things." And those ways we do things are based on the way we've *always* done things. It's a narrative that prevents growth.

There's a different way, where we don't have to separate our personal self from our professional self. But we don't usually bring this wider lens to approaching one another.

Embracing our whole self, bringing our whole self to a space, you know, is new and very different for a lot of folks. Not a lot of leaders create spaces where we can engage in that type of work together. And I see that it can be scary. A co-worker recently said, 'When I think of team meetings, it's painful sometimes, because if we're building on stories, and people are talking about their stories,' he was saying 'I want to come to work and forget about my past, or more personal parts of myself.'

But when we talk about our full self and not just the mental self in an organization, it gives us a clearer picture of how we are all influenced by our experiences and groups – like age, race, gender, all of it. It moves the conversation from “my opinion” to my bigger experience, like ‘I statements’ in CLP.

I think that's a part of a way of creating community where, when I talk about breaking systems of oppression, we're actually engaged in unpacking conversations that have to do with our differences, our implicit biases, and learning to identify our core beliefs that are barriers to having deeper connections with one another. It's with *this* we create spaces where we can begin to hope and dream together.

Is the language you're building the same with the adults and young people?

Yes, absolutely. It's everyone in the school, including our youth and adults – we're all in this together. I think about building a team all the time.

I call it the “whole language.” If it isn't a present reality that we're experiencing, how are we supposed to be there for our students in a more holistic way? Teenagers are coming from a very different place, and we need the humility to ask questions and really give them the space to bring their experiences and perspectives.

When we talk about the full self in ourselves and in other adults and students, it really starts to create a language that allows us to have what I believe are more meaningful conversations. And it helps us see our differences along with commonalities and similarities.

It's great to be a part of a new system which is activating student voices, helping them to find their voice. Our teenagers are teaching me much. They are awesome, they have a lot of energy.

You know, it also brings up that need to look at power, right? What does power look like? It took me a year to get my mind, and my heart, and my soul around it. 'Cause misuse of power was big. Most of my experience in life was witnessing misuse of power.

I hear you. It feels more common than it should be, or could be.

Yes, I agree – and the first part of changing this is identifying it. It's one thing to experience misuse of power. But to introduce a model that is an example of *shared* power? It's necessary if we're ever going to develop deeper connections and trust. That top-down thing doesn't lend itself to healthy relationships that build community.

The dots started connecting with me, as I mentioned when we started – the intersections between circles in NA, church, CLP, Seeding Conscious Co-Creation, and a five-day, intensive BD101. I realized, I'm living the dream, because I get to bring this language and culture into a school, where it also needs to exist but doesn't very often. A parent just said it earlier today, that the model we're building here should be in all schools. You know, it's not easy work, it really resonated with us all, it was so beautiful.

I've been deeply reflecting about what shared power is. When we're around one another, and we start talking? Our voice is power. Is everyone heard? Is everyone seen? Is there a spirit of valuing one another, despite our differences and titles? And our team meetings started being infused with these questions and conversation.

It felt like going out on a limb as a leader, and I had to ask myself, ‘at the risk of – what?’ In my previous school, I was told that my passions and energy were great, but the language and approach didn’t belong in a school. I was told, “that’s you, but it’s not for everyone.” The place for it, I was told, was church or recovery communities or other personal spaces.

But if we’re not talking about this in our organizations, then how do we make a real, lasting difference in each other’s lives?

There’s a couple words that I like – context versus content. If the context is building community which includes building on stories, the culture and climate is an atmosphere where we can begin to feel safe and trust one another. Why? Because kindness, compassion, a feeling of kinship and a welcoming spirit becomes who ‘we’ are.

Then, the content is the operational parts -- the day-to-day school responsibilities, programs, the organization as a whole, and anything in-between. The operations start to flow more effectively and we experience each other, our value, our duties with a much wider lens.

So bringing our whole self to a school, a space -- and I use ‘space’ a lot, instead of ‘school’-- it’s different. We come into this space where we have a morning meeting as a whole school, adults and youth, we meet, check in, create community. And next thing you know, it’s a spring board, we can become a lot more effective.

Can you share an example of the specific language shifts, maybe in the morning meetings?

We added the morning meeting, including a check-in with one another. The language we use for check-ins is numbers one to five, and *why*. One being, we’re not ok. Five being, things are going really well. We use the weather too, it’s a good way -- I’m a sunny day, I’m a cloudy day, I’m tired because I didn’t get much sleep last night. That’s ok, nothing wrong with that, that’s awesome.

But the *why* is where most of us struggle, youth and adults alike. If that’s my personal life, then why would I share that? My answer is, we don’t have to be detailed, we can just say ‘I had a real rough night, so I’m a two.’ I think our true condition is the ultimate goal.

There’s applause for the fives, but inside me, I’m applauding the ones. I’m thinking, somebody’s coming in and saying, I’m not ok. Or even, I’m a two, because things aren’t good. What this is also saying is ‘I need help.’

What is that about? Ultimately I think the intent of the practice is about building a culture and climate that invites deeper connections. And it’s in those connections where we start to build what I’ve been mentioning, a greater trust. The ultimate goal – and even a dream of mine – is for us *all* to identify our need for one another and ask for help – a lot of us just don’t know how to ask for it.

Are there other culture-setting changes you’d like to share?

First, going back to that “ing.” I’ve been learning that the words discovering, exploring, unpacking, building, not knowing, and maybe in time more will be revealed – they’re not common. I think we’re called as people to *know*, and to give this façade as we’ve *arrived*. We want immediate results or answers. I’m saying, hold on a second.

As a school we also implemented the use of ‘agreements’ – ways we want to show up and be together. They’re not ‘rules,’ they’re norms, how are we operating together on a day-to-day basis. Everyone has a voice in those agreements, and I think that’s a big part of creating a mutual environment that’s loving, respectful and conducive to learning.

Our use of circles started at team meetings. Then the practice was introduced for students when we piloted our summer enrichment program last year. We have an awesome social worker who was used to doing one-on-one counseling. But we moved to circles and she facilitated them, and something *happened*. She was discovering her voice differently and starting to see a side to our youth that she would have never experienced if she was doing the counseling by itself.

It's inspiring to hear the different ways community circles are being used.

I think of circles and shared power. Circles allow us to take off our hats, right? The roles that we play, and even the word “facilitator” being used. Ultimately, a facilitator doesn't have to be the adult, in the case of a school. It could be student-led. Once they learn the model – this is how the circle operates – they can see themselves as the operator. We're *all* space-holders.

I think when you create a circle where everyone begins to experience that they're a space-holder, it allows us to come together. The value is that you're seen, you're heard. And I think we're starving as a culture for presence. We all know those who are present for us; when they're truly present, there's a wow. And we want more of that.

Gregory Boyle, he's the founder of Homeboy Industries. In his book, he talked about going to speak at juvenile detention centers, and I just started weeping. He says, ‘I go speak, a fight breaks out, all the adults are in the back of the gym. I wonder why everybody's always in the back of the room, and I asked the question. They go, ‘so if anything pops off, we're ready.’

He was talking about, why can't we engage with one another? Eye contact. It was profound to me. If we're engaged, if there's eye contact, if young people feel like they're heard and valued, maybe it would be less likely for something to pop off.

One of the things with circles, when open, honest sharing and trust is being established? It creates a space where we begin to feel safe. We may not know why, but eventually we discover that it could be a place to grow together and take ownership.

We're learning how to be present for one another. Like when we use a talking piece, allowing each other to start and finish. Especially in this generation, with our youth, to start and finish is not very common. When they start experiencing that, you can see, there's a value in it: “I'm not done yet.”

We are shifting the culture to a restorative model – I'm so grateful to [Cameo Thorne](#) for her training and passion for this work. To date, we have no suspensions, and only one fight – it's unbelievable. With all the students who came here because of how they've managed anger and language in their previous schools? It is a different way of managing, resolving conflict, and viewing consequences.

The goal is to identify harm – it's huge.

What does it look like then to repair the harm?

That's a great question; we talk about that a lot, to repair the harm and hit the reset button.

Mediations are huge. Two people that have conflict or harmed one another get a chance, face to face, to resolve it. Part of the intent too? Growth; at some point, you might wind up meeting your true self, and saying “wow, I was that petty over *that*?” Or realizing that some of your own trauma is really overflowing onto the situation; the other person really isn't the problem.

This sentence changed my life in Narcotics Anonymous: *In my inability to take personal responsibility, I was creating my own problems*. I used to shift everything on everybody else as the problem. How would I ever

drop my walls long enough to ask for help, when I didn't know how to live?

Repair, I believe, starts with realizing the nature of the negative impact on someone or the community at large. Repair isn't just "I'm sorry," but making amends and having a heightened awareness that there are different ways to express anger, frustration – managing emotions like rage or being blatantly disrespectful – this can actually be possible.

Mediations are *a lot* of work. Students, parents, some other adults. Our team sometimes will say, 'we don't need another mediation, 'cause students know what to say' – and they really don't take things serious. But my response is, how do we know, in that space, that something new might not be discovered and an *aha* moment happens? This is a key part of the work of building community that needs to be done, and I think we're all seeing the beginnings of positive results.

I appreciate the way you reflect about mediation not as just a tool, but part of the larger culture to grow and connect.

That's right. And you know what's amazing? Our students' families are beginning to get it – I'm talking to their families, and they're speaking the language. Those are the moms that I've been reaching out to; they've been a big part of the support for their son or daughter recently.

Another big thing that is happening is called Table Talk. Every other week at breakfast we have a guest come and we create questions for them to reflect on, have conversation. It might be an educator, entrepreneur, a district supervisor, one of our own students, or a parent. It's a definite community builder.

Another big one was hiring a chef and a food prep associate. She's so expressive about how bringing people together around food builds community. All our food is raw-to-cook, and is incredible. That was unheard of before.

This new role and space sounds like such a great fit for where you are in your own leadership journey.

I'm gonna be honest with you. I knew that this passion was in me, I had little slices of it in a former school, but there were administrators and teachers who would shoot down anything. I was called to move for a reason. January first was one year here. This type of work is incredible – our team is incredible. They are courageous, resilient, and a great group.

With all that said, it's not like everything is perfect all the time. It can get messy, including for me. But we all get through it together.

Culture change takes time and trusting in the process is not easy for me – it takes faith. I think one of the things as a leader that I'm learning to manage, is my frustration with things not happening fast enough. Everyone on the team isn't necessarily where I'm at with this work or with this practice. Everyone is unique.

For me – like we talked about [in our last conversation](#) – this is a passion and a calling, so it's hard to be patient. But I don't want to come from judgment – it's the highest form of self-righteousness, and I don't want to be that person. So I'm working on judging less, looking at others with a wider lens, and having more compassion, kindness, respect, tenderness -- with myself and everyone else. 'Cause judgment is definitely counterproductive on all fronts. I'm working on it.

What I hear too is a style that invites everyone to show up in their leadership, adults and young people alike, so everyone is co-creating the culture.

Yes! That's right. That's the vision – my dream for sure!

Think of a quadrant. The Y axis is expectations, and the X axis is support. The corner, where the zero is -- if you have no expectations and no support, we use the word neglect. There's no responsibility there. If you have all expectations with no support, most of the time you're doing things *to* people, it's more of an authoritarian, top-down model. When you're all support but no expectations, you're enabling, you're doing it *for*.

That top right quadrant, when you have high expectations and great support – we're doing it with one another. That's the *with* part – that's a restorative model and culture.

Listen, there's needs in our building. This model and this design, it's not for everyone. If you're looking for a leader that's going to tell you what to do, if you're just showing up, just coming for a 9 to 5, it can become a place of cynicism, doubt, and the us-against-them.

My interviews now when onboarding potential new staff, one of the main questions I ask is, what does building on your story look like, or can you give me an example of what community building looks like to you? If there's an indifference towards core values of who we are, that's not a good beginning.

When we start to realize that there's a higher order of doing business that has to do with building community, looking at ourselves, building on our stories, this restorative model – it's inspiring.

We're transforming, we're building on our stories together, living moment to moment. We're building a team, and you know what? I'm having the best days of my life. I think that more schools should model this direction we're headed in. If we can create spaces like this, then we can heal, we can change, we can grow. Most of all, hope becomes real and showing up daily can be a true joy.

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Read Cameo Thorne's (Cohort 27) post, [Meeting Our Needs Through Restorative Practices](#)