

Two Fridays ago, I found myself sitting at my desk a couple of hours after school had let out, with much to do but very little in reserve with which to do it. It had been a long week. I won't bore you with the details for, as my father used to tell me, "Joe don't bother telling people your trouble; half of them don't care and the other half are glad." Knowing that my wife had also had a long week—funny how my experiences and moods sometimes colors hers—I called my long-suffering bride and told her I would just pick up a cheese pizza for supper and bring it home.

Wanting something fast, I stopped at a pizza place known for speed, a place which had never failed to just hand me a hot pizza the instant I reached the counter and told them my preference. And, for the first time, I had to wait. (It was less than 4 minutes, by the way, but whining is one my talents.) Dutifully, I placed my back up against the wall of the restaurant, next to a couple also waiting for their order. The two looked at me and then each offered a word, a job title. I responded with a witty and insightful, "Huh?" and they explained that they played a game when meeting someone new, each guessing that person's job. Both were wrong and I explained I was a school administrator. The conversation turned to schools and now it was my turn to play a game. Discovering that they had children in the Mitchell Schools, I asked them whether they were happy with their children's school and teachers. (I do this a lot with parents when I meet them, finding out many interesting and important things with this simple question.)

And they exuded praise, each identifying a specific teacher, explaining how they made their children feel really special. They reported how their own experience in school—in different states—was 'feeling like a number,' feeling like their teachers often didn't seem to care much who they were or even whether they learned much. They went on to offer specific things their children's teacher did which made all the difference in the world to both child and parent.

By the time they finished, my pizza was waiting on me. And my Friday and my week had taken a turn very much for the better. Let me tell you why.

Part of my job as superintendent of schools is to ensure that, as with all of our employees, our administrative team is engaging in professional development, is sharpening its saw, is better today than it was yesterday but not as good as it will be tomorrow. One of the ways we do that in the Mitchell School District is through book studies. We find some education or business or behavioral economics tome that seems to have real applications for schools and we read it as a group, attending weekly sessions to discuss what we've read and its relevance for schools. Over the years that I have been superintendent in Mitchell, we've read Thomas Friedman on the challenges our graduates face in an increasingly competitive, flat world. We've plumbed the depths of Clayton Christensen's theoretical construct, disruptive innovation, to discern just what disruptions are on the way and how we might best adapt to them. We've even studied the best way to have *crucial conversations* with people.

But perhaps the most influential book we've pored over was Jim Collins' *Good to Great*, that researcher/author's attempt to figure out what great companies did differently from just good companies. One of his conclusions was that great companies pursued a hedgehog, an operating principle which would keep those in the organization focused, unswervingly, on what would

truly make a positive difference. The first and perhaps most important step in doing so is to discover just what that hedgehog is for your organization.

Collins offered some assistance, noting that your hedgehog lies within the intersection (think Venn diagram) of what you are passionate about, what you can be the best in the world at (in schools this means really what you can be the best in your geographical area at), and what drives your economic engine. And so the Mitchell administrative team began what I thought would be a long contentious debate about just what our hedgehog is. I thought it would be long and contentious because I was pretty sure each educational leader at the table would favor their area. The food service director's identified hedgehog would be outstanding meals. The AD's would be winning athletic teams. The building and grounds director's would be beautiful and functional buildings. We'd never reach consensus.

And I was wrong. It actually took only three sessions for us to arrive at what we felt was our hedgehog, those 15 or so years ago. Since enrollment drove our economic engine, we asked ourselves what caused people to want to send their children to our school. Since we were all educators, our passion was providing the best education possible. And what we could be best at would be giving students a great education and a great learning experience over the life of their academic career at Mitchell.

And what accomplishes all those things? Putting the very best people in front of kids. Whether it be in the classroom, on the playing floor, on the stage, in the kitchen, in the hallways, in the offices, our hedgehog was to make sure that everybody we employed was absolutely the best person we could find and hire. The kind of person we would want working with our own child.

Now the treacherous thing about all professional development is that so often people take the training and then go on with life, without being impacted in their daily life one whit. We've all had some educational or emotional or spiritual experience in our lives, feeling incredibly moved by the encounter and then, a week later, discovered that it made zero difference to us.

So when Mitchell's school administrators identified the hedgehog as always putting the best people possible in front of our students, we committed to new hiring practices which really investigated teachers' ability to teach. And we worked to provide ongoing, meaningful training to make even our great people better. And, yes, we committed to the idea that not everyone could be that person we wanted and so some would need to be counseled out of our classrooms, our gyms, our cafeterias, our offices.

We also talk about our hedgehog on a regular basis. But still, I so often wonder whether it has truly made a difference to our actual operations, to the students and the parents of Mitchell.

Thus, after an unexpected conversation with a couple of people waiting in line for pizza, I had confirmation that it had. Not that a principal deserves the credit for what a great teacher has done for kids—that belongs entirely to that teacher—but rather that their continued, determined work to make our schools better by staffing them with great people had led in some small way to children and parents having a great experience and encountering a great education in our schools.

Eleven days later, I'm not still feeling good about that conversation. I'm feeling great.