

An Imagination Story for School Staff

Help Wanted: NASA?

Parents' experience of the PPT process is significantly different than the perspective of school personnel who conduct many PPTs throughout the year and are very comfortable with the format and protocol. The perspective of "walking in another's shoes" can foster better communication and better relationships. This is an imagination story about what it is like to "walk in a parent's shoes" at their very first PPT.

Imagine that you are leaving your job within your school district, for whatever reason might suit you; you quit, retire, relocate to another part of the country - the reason doesn't really matter to the purpose of this story. You decide to take a position using a skill that you had never intended to have, had never really had any prior knowledge of, or interest in (I know, I know, just imagine it anyway). You take a job at, let's say NASA, for the sake of this story.

When you arrive for your first day on the job, you are handed a small flyer the size of a piece of notebook paper with some official-sounding writing on it that uses terms like 'orbit inclination' and 'spectroreflectometer'. You *think* you can decipher the meaning of those words, but they are not used in any context you might have encountered before, so there is a doubt lingering in your mind about what the significance really is. The first task on your very first day is to attend a formal Board meeting, and there is a very personal stake involved – you will be discussing YOUR proposal, one that you have been working on for a very long while, and one that could have very serious consequences – you have proposed a list of the items that the astronauts will bring along on their voyage to Mars. You arrive at this meeting, but you don't know many of the faces there, and the ones you *do* recognize are people that you have only briefly met, and you really haven't a clue what kind of individuals they are. They all state their names and their positions, but of course this is NASA, not a school district in which you had had a pretty good idea of the hierarchy structure, and their different titles don't really give you a clear picture of what their individual responsibilities are or even who is whose supervisor. You're going to have trouble remembering their names anyway, because you always have trouble with names when you are nervous. Unfortunately, no one has told you what your role in this meeting is to be; are you to listen to their ideas? State your own? Would that be presumptive of you? What if these people, with whom you hope to have a lasting and respectful relationship, don't like you? What if you make a major blunder? After all, what ideas could YOU possibly offer anyway - these people have all worked for NASA for years, surely they know better than you do. No one has told you the format of the meeting (do you speak first or last? Is there an agenda?), and, likewise, no one has given you a sense of the accepted protocol. Do you call them by their first names? Should you take notes? Maybe not, since you see that someone is doing that for you, and you assume they'll be sure

to cover all important points.

You listen politely to everything that they have to say, but you really don't understand a great deal of it – they keep using all of those 'space-tech' terms, and it takes you a little longer to grasp the meaning. You are nervous about your proposal anyway, and it's hard to listen and worry at the same time. You have a question, but are afraid that if you ask it, they will think you are ignorant, so you hope you will find the answer in some other way that would offer less of a chance of embarrassment.

Suddenly, someone turns to you, smiling and asking you what *you* think. Since no one had directly asked your opinion on anything up until this point, you had assumed that that your role was to be a somewhat passive member (you certainly had not prepared a report as all of these other people had.). But you begin, reluctantly testing the waters, to see if your different perspective on the situation is well-received. It is not. They continue to smile and nod, but you notice that there is a tension building that was not present in the room before – and you notice they're not writing your ideas down. You quickly review in your head the fast-action instant replay of your statements, but feel sure you made a viable point. You falter, and decide it probably would be best not to make your next argument, you've apparently erred in some way and need time to collect yourself before making a fool of yourself again so soon.

You do, however, feel the need to make the suggestion that the astronauts bring along with them light bulbs, or the space equivalent thereof, and all at the table nod and appear to agree that light in the space shuttle would be a necessity.

The meeting comes to an end, and you are infinitely relieved. All assure you that they know what they are doing in regard to your proposal, and that it is safe in their hands.

Days later, you receive the minutes of the meeting and you notice that the issue of light bulbs is not there. You assume this is an oversight on someone's part, but what should you do? *You* think it is a very important point, it was, in fact, one of the critical points made during the entire meeting, at least from your perspective. You feel the mission to Mars would suffer greatly if there were no light bulbs on board. You make a decision based upon your past experience with workplace protocol (which may, you realize, differ immensely from NASAs) that you should go to the person who wrote the notes, or perhaps you feel that the person who seemed to be in charge of the meeting is the appropriate person to approach. After you've worked up the nerve to tell people you hardly know that they have made a grievous error, they assure you that they are aware that light bulbs are needed, and it will be handled when they load the shuttle, they work on those sort of things all the time, they are used to having to deal with those kinds of details, and that you shouldn't worry about a thing. You do remember, in the back of your mind, something about having the *right* to disagree in writing, but you would not be that presumptuous, they have assured you it will be handled correctly and it would be rude to doubt them, wouldn't it? After all, you just met these people, and you don't want to offend anyone. You feel reassured by their confidence, and breath a sigh of relief that it will be taken care of. After all, you think again, these people have worked at NASA for a very long time, and they certainly know better than you how to get things done.

The shuttle takes off. There are no light bulbs on board. The mission that had such a personal stake for you will suffer and you are frantic. What to do? You decide to go to someone, perhaps the same person you had gone to before since they still seem to be the one in charge, or maybe you decide to go the

his/her superior. You try to work out in your head who that might be, but you don't fully understand the hierarchy or the responsibilities of each of NASA's CEOs. Either way, you receive some very polite and encouraging responses, but don't yet feel you have an answer to your situation. You now decide to take things into your own hands, and contact the number on that flyer you received that first day. The answer they give you is that it was *your* responsibility to put in writing your disagreement with the minutes, and that if you had, it could have been fixed. But now, unfortunately, there is nothing they can do, you have been held equally accountable.

At the very next meeting tension is in the air even before you speak, and you are now afraid to say that you disagree with some of their ideas. How can you make your points clear (and you know you **MUST** to avoid another '*light bulb incident*'), without further damaging the relationship? You do not have an answer.

Now imagine how many more errors you can make from here, since you still have a very vague grasp on the workplace situation and expectations that could further alienate you from the rest of NASA's staff. In the private sector, you could eventually be fired for your confrontational and uncooperative attitude. You could quit, deciding that perhaps it was not such a good idea in the first place to enter into a situation in which you had such little prior experience, and seek another position in which you would feel more confident and comfortable.

Parents can't quit. And they can't be fired. *They must continue to struggle on at their job at NASA attending those tension-filled meetings, fearful of mistakes but wary of being taken advantage of, because it would be unreasonable to think that they would have an equal understanding of such a complex process without instruction. They are naive about this system because these were skills they never intended to have, never really had any prior knowledge of, never really had any interest in. A comfort level and self-confidence never quite materialize, but the meetings become more and more complex (and, therefore, the number of errors one can make increases dramatically) as the child enters middle school and then high school. It is a job that they never sought out, and never voluntarily accepted, but the consequences of the alternative were unacceptable. Many parents are quite honestly trying their best to manage a situation that they are thrust into, and at the same time they are also managing what seems a multitude of doctors, therapists, and well-meaning (though advice-touting) relatives as well as a very stressful home life. This is a particularly difficult situation for anyone.*

Seen from this light, I hope that you will all do what you can to ease the mystique surrounding Planning and Placement Team meetings, and offer as many answers and as much support as you can to alleviate parents' reservations. I suspect that a first-time teacher new to your staff would not be left without a great deal of this transitional assistance and support (who to go to for what kinds of problems, the meaning of some of the jargon, how to fill out the forms and what they mean, etc.), and rightfully so. The parent attending their first PPT could benefit from the same efforts, and could, and should, become as valued a member of the team.

Please remember that, just as minimizing the frustration levels of our kids will help them to learn and become more productive, reducing the frustration levels of their parents who are struggling through difficult material would help them become more productive as well. You would be serving yourselves as well as the parents in taking any steps possible to see this happen, because it would reduce the number of those "light bulb" incidents and "fires to put out" that plague your day. I hope this 'Imagination Story' has sparked a memory of sometime in your life when you felt behind the 8-ball, and the feelings, as well as the lasting impressions, that can result.