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Communication Audit of Magnolia Cooperative Preschool

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Executive Summary

The communication audit of Magnolia Cooperative Preschool, a preschool in the Magnolia neighborhood of Seattle, Washington, begins by analyzing its history and organizational structure. The audit utilizes several methodologies to study internal and external communication at the preschool, including observation, questionnaire surveys, interviews, and narrative analysis.

Additionally, two theories of organizational systems, the Relational Strategy of Organizing and Seven Principles of Systems Thinking, are explored and integrated into the organizational structure of the preschool. The preschool's specific systems are analyzed and recommendations for improvement are provided.

Overall, Magnolia Cooperative Preschool is operating efficiently and successfully and has an established structure of internal and external communication. However, improvements can be made to ensure that it has the resources and strategies necessary to effectively communicate its positive attributes to the next generation of parents and volunteer leaders.

Introduction

History of preschool

Magnolia Cooperative Preschool was founded in 1942 in the Magnolia neighborhood of Seattle, WA. A cooperative preschool, or co-op, differs from a traditional preschool in that a parent or caregiver attends class with their child one day per week. As the child grows older, they spend more time at the preschool on their own. This slow transition into preschool enables the child to gain self-confidence and independence as a preparation for kindergarten (Magnolia, 2018). Parental involvement in the preschool develops into a network and community of parents that support each other and the preschool.

Magnolia Co-op is a non-profit organization run by a volunteer parent board. It is also affiliated with and runs under the direction of the Seattle Central Community College's Co-op Program. The College provides accreditation and other benefits to the preschool and also provides Parent Educators who are paid by the college and assist the classroom teachers at the preschool.

Mission statement and other guiding principles

Magnolia Co-op emphasizes the social development of the child and focuses on building a child's positive self-image, self-esteem, and self-confidence. Social, intellectual, and psychological gains are made through creative and cooperative play (Magnolia, 2018). Small and large motor skills are developed through a variety of toys, games, activities, and projects. Parents also participate in preschool activities and help with projects and organization while encouraging and supporting the children to try new activities and help them negotiate and cooperate (Magnolia, 2018).

Structure of preschool

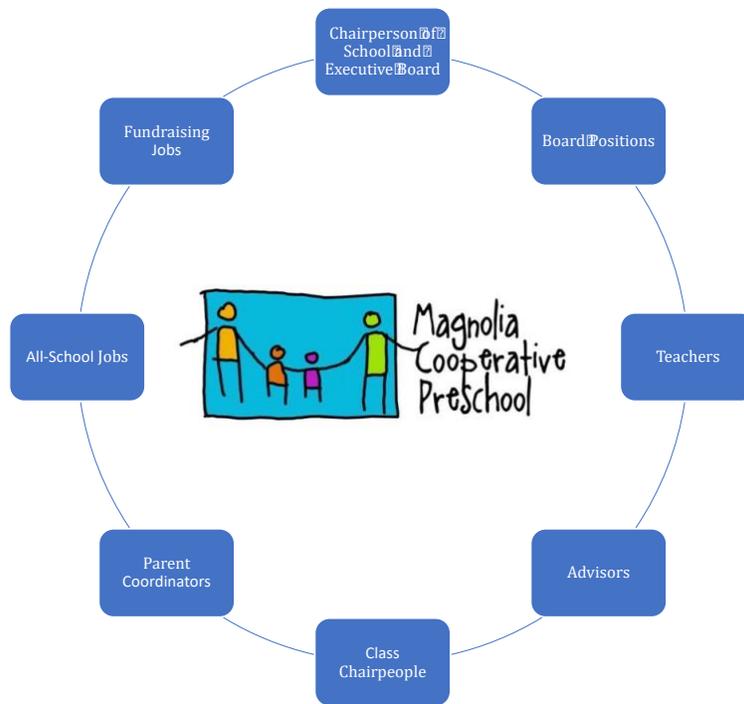
The preschool has six classroom teachers and 13 different classes. It is administered and run by volunteers. The teachers and a Treasurer are the only paid employees. There is no supervisor-subordinate relationship, nor a traditional hierarchical organizational structure in which major decisions are made by the people who have positions at the top of the organizational hierarchy (Conrad & Poole, 2012). Rather, the preschool has an eight-part organizational structure with a volunteer-run Executive Board making management and operational decisions (A. Anderson, personal communication, June 2018). All board members serve one-year terms that can be extended under special circumstances. The eight equal parts of the preschool structure are:

- *Chairperson of School and Executive Board* - Secretary, VP Personnel, VP Operations, Treasurer, and Lead Teacher. The positions are elected by an all-school vote
- *Board positions* - Secretary, VP Personnel, VP Operations, Treasurer, Assistant Treasurer, Fundraising Coordinator, Membership, PAC Representative, Class Chairs, Teachers, Parent Advisors. All positions except Teachers and Parent Advisors are elected by all-school vote
- *Six Teachers* - hired by the Personnel Committee under contract from the Board. The teachers work with children and parents in the classroom
- *Parent Advisors* - Hired by Seattle Central Community College. The Advisors are responsible for parent education for all classes
- *Class Chairpeople* - appointed by committee. The Chairpeople run class meetings once a month and pass information from the board to preschool parents
- *Parent Coordinators* - appointed by committee. The Coordinators keep their classes organized and functioning

- *All-School Jobs* - filled by volunteers
- *Fundraising Jobs* - filled by volunteers

Organizational chart

Preschool staff provided the researcher with several documents detailing how the preschool is organized. Information from the documents and additional interviews with preschool staff (A. Anderson, personal communication, June 2018) contributed toward the creation of the following organizational chart:



Research Process

Limitations

The communications audit faced several limitations. Since the work is being completed in June, the school year has ended and there are no teachers or parents to interview or survey. The new school year won't begin until September and new parents

would need an additional eight weeks to become knowledgeable enough about preschool operations to be able to effectively participate in a survey. Additionally, a survey administered by the preschool was given to parents just a few months ago.

Scope of work

Since interviews or a survey could not be administered by the researcher, the audit focuses on examining external preschool communication, including marketing materials; examining the structure of the preschool and whether relevant information is appropriately summarized and distributed to preschool parents; and proposing new ideas for both internal and external communication.

Methodology

The methodologies used in this audit to study the internal and external communication at the preschool include: 1. Observation; 2. Questionnaire surveys; 3. Interviews; and 4. Narrative Analysis. Rather than administering a new questionnaire survey, which was not possible due to the school year having ended, the audit instead examines and analyzes a survey that was administered by the preschool in spring 2018. Also included in the audit are proposals for an additional survey given to preschool parents, interview questions directed toward preschool volunteers, and a proposed organizational outcomes survey that could be given to the six preschool teachers.

2018 Preschool Questionnaire Survey

A survey was given to preschool parents in early 2018, asking them 49 questions about their experience and satisfaction with the preschool (A. Anderson, personal communication, June 2018). The survey also asked parents for feedback about preschool events, include parent meetings, fundraisers, and quality of preschool leadership. The

survey was multi-faceted and included Yes/No questions, 1-5 satisfaction/dissatisfaction questions, and open-ended questions that generated a lot of personalized feedback. Forty-eight parents participated in the survey.

The survey was quite thorough and the questions were well-phrased, if wordy. It likely resulted in a great deal of useful feedback for the preschool leadership team. The researcher reserves judgment on the quality of the survey because he was not a part of its design or implementation, but, after reviewing the raw data, it appears that the parents provided thoughtful feedback. Going forward, it is suggested that future surveys of preschool parents follow the same format that was used in the 2018 survey, but additional feedback should be gathered by interviewing preschool leadership and administering a separate survey to the preschool teachers.

Observation

The researcher has observed the preschool as a parent for two school years. He has attended parent meetings, all-school meetings, and an annual charity auction. He also knows several preschool teachers on a personal basis. Information and data gathered for the audit was gained through several informational interviews with one of the teachers, A. Anderson. She is the researcher's mother-in-law and has been teaching at the preschool for over 40 years. She provided much of the internal communication data and information used in the audit along with anecdotal information about preschool operations. The interviews were not formal and did not include a list of specific questions. However, a formal interview template has been developed and would have been given to all six teachers had time allowed.

Interview Model

A model was developed to be used as a template for interviews with the six preschool teachers and individuals who serve in a volunteer capacity at the preschool as a Board member or in another leadership position. Preschool parents would not be interviewed. The goal of the interview model was to gain insight on how information was distributed internally and whether an online portal would be more effective to centralize and distribute information to internal audiences. The proposed questions were as follows:

- How do you receive information related to preschool operations (board meetings, fundraising event updates, school announcements, etc)?
- Do you prefer the current way of receiving information?
- Would you prefer to receive more information over email in a consistent format such as a newsletter? Why or why not?
- Do you feel the correct information is consistently relayed to the correct audience? Have there been instances in which you have been involved in a meeting and received information that you thought was relevant but was never passed along to class chairs or parents?
- Would you like more say in what information is passed along to class chairs and parents?
- Would a password-protected internal web site or intranet with a blog and message board be of interest to you as a way to receive preschool information and contribute your own content?
- Do you think the preschool should have a public-facing blog administered by preschool employees and/or Board members? Would you be willing to write posts or contribute content to the blog?

- Preschool information (board minutes, etc) is emailed out and also posted inside the school. Do you prefer one format over the other? If the information was also posted on a password-protected internal web site, would you access it that way?

The questions were designed to identify the most effective ways to collect and distribute important preschool-specific information to the correct audience (volunteer, class chair, preschool parents, prospective parents, general public). While the interviews were not conducted, the template is available for the preschool to use in future communication efforts.

Questionnaire Survey

Additionally, a questionnaire survey was developed to determine the effectiveness of preschool communication with parents of enrolled children and whether new modes of communication would be preferred over existing methods. It was not administered because the school year has ended so parents of preschool children have moved on to other schools or will have new teachers in the fall, rendering the survey moot. The proper time to administer the survey, which was designed to be given to parents of children enrolled at the preschool, would be approximately eight weeks after the beginning of the school year. The proposed survey questions include an option to answer Yes/No/No Preference or similar along with an opportunity to provide additional comments on the question. The proposed questions were as follows:

- Would you like to communicate directly with your child's teacher by email?
- You currently receive weekly email updates from your class chair. Do you feel that the emails are relevant to you as a parent?
- Would you like to receive more or fewer emails from your class chair?

- Would you like to send your child's teacher or school administrators a note through a password-protected internal web site similar to MyChart or a company intranet?
- Would you participate in a password-protected internal preschool web site where you could pay your bill, email your teacher, access preschool policy guides and forms, and read an internal blog?
- You and/or your spouse currently attend a monthly preschool class meeting. Would you like the meetings to be recorded so that you could watch them online in case you had any questions or were unable to attend the meeting? Would you also like the bi-annual all school meeting to be recorded?
- If the preschool created a public blog where articles of interest, pictures of preschool activities, and preschool updates were posted by preschool employees (not parents), would you prefer such a web site over emails from your class chair?
- Would you be interested in participating in a password-protected internal preschool web site containing a message board for the entire preschool and also specific classes? Parents could post articles of interest, swap participation duties with other parents, and positively comment on classroom activities. It would be monitored by a preschool employee.
- In addition to the weekly emails you receive from your class chair, would you like to receive a monthly newsletter emailed to you and posted on the preschool web site detailing preschool-related activities and containing articles of interest to parents?

Organizational Outcomes Survey

Additionally, an organizational outcomes survey was prepared to be given to the six preschool teachers with the goal of evaluating their satisfaction with how the preschool is

run and how information is communicated internally. Since the six teachers have all been at the preschool for several years, it could be administered at any time during the school year. The responses to the following questions were to be given on a 1-5 rating scale based on satisfaction or dissatisfaction:

- My job as a preschool teacher
- My progress in Magnolia Co-op up to this point in time
- My opportunity to contribute to the overall success of Magnolia Co-op
- Magnolia Co-op's system for recognizing and rewarding outstanding performance
- Magnolia Co-op's concern for the welfare of its teachers
- Magnolia Co-op's communication with its teachers
- Magnolia Co-op's overall efficiency of operation
- Magnolia Co-op's achievement of its stated goals and objectives

Narrative Analysis

External Communication

Magnolia Co-op markets itself to prospective parents and donors in the Seattle area. As such, it has a web site, social media accounts, and marketing materials designed for external audiences. Here are the examples of external communication that the Co-op provided for the audit:

- *Bookmark* – A bookmark with contact information and Co-op program details, including the slogan “Your community starts here!” The four keywords associated with the Co-op are also listed: curious, creative, confident, cooperative. This is a useful and small marketing piece that can be given out at a booth or at events.

- *Postcard* – A postcard-sized marketing piece with several pictures of happy children is also useful for public events. It details the history of Magnolia Co-op and highlights several of the selling points (Dedicated, experienced teachers; flexible schedule of classes for children ages 1 to Pre-K, etc.) and also includes a logo and contact information.
- *Pamphlet* – A pamphlet designed to be sent to prospective parents or given out at events includes a more detailed account of the Co-op’s philosophy and operations along with several black and white pictures. Sections include: our emphasis, time commitment, teachers & advisors, age requirements, and class size.
- *One-pager(s)* – Three one-page bulleted documents detailing: 1. why parents should choose a cooperative preschool for their child; 2. ten signs of a great preschool; and 3. A model called “the house of higher learning.” Content includes articles and content reprinted with permission and facts about the cooperative education model.
- *Article* – The Co-op gives out many re-printed articles to parents and prospective parents. Most articles are related to studies or reports detailing new trends or benefits for certain lifestyle activities for preschool-aged children. The article I was provided as an example discusses the need for parents to give their young children more playtime and includes tips for more effective playtime.
- *Announcement* - An announcement on official letterhead welcoming a new teacher to the preschool. It includes information about the new teacher, pictures of all six teachers, and the class schedule for the upcoming school year. It also has contact information for more details about class registration.

- *About Magnolia Co-op* – A one-page document detailing the Magnolia Co-op history, philosophy, program emphasis, role of parents, and affiliation with Seattle Community College. Addresses all relevant aspects of the Co-op on official letterhead. Professional tone and look designed to answer questions and provide detailed information not included in more brief marketing materials.
- *Web site* – The Magnolia Co-op web site was created and is administered by a volunteer parent. It includes program information, school philosophy and history, information for current and prospective parents, upcoming events, and a contact form. It also links to preschool sponsors, including Safeway, Whole Foods, Alaska Airlines, and local business leaders.
- *Social Media* – The preschool has an official Facebook page where classroom updates and photos of various activities are posted. It does not have any additional social media accounts.

Internal Communication

- *Board minutes* – The Corporate Secretary takes official notes of every Executive Board and General Board meeting and distributes them by email to preschool officials. The minutes are also posted on a bulletin board in the preschool. The minutes are available for parents to access but are generally not distributed, nor are they posted on the web site or in any other public domain.
- *Email updates from Class Chairs* – Each preschool class selects a Class Chair to represent the class at Board meetings and other official preschool functions. The Class Chair also sends an email update containing relevant preschool and class-specific information to all the parents in the class. The Class Chair gets much of this

information from the Vice Chair of Chairs, who is responsible for deciding what Board activity is communicated with the Class Chairs and ultimately relayed to the parents.

- *Articles* – Relevant studies and news articles related to parenting a preschool-age child are regularly distributed to preschool parents by Class Chairs, either by distribution in monthly parent meetings or by email.

Relational Strategies of Organizing

The traditional strategy of organization model has the leaders on top and subordinates below in a multilevel triangle shape. Decisions are made at the top of the triangle. In contrast, the relational strategy asserts that organizational hierarchies are flattened and decision-making is centralized (Conrad & Poole, 2012, p. 115). In a relational strategy, employees at every level are empowered to make decisions on issues that directly affect them and their jobs, resulting in fewer links in the formal chain of command.

Participatory decision making (PDM) is a form of relational strategy that includes delegation, management by objectives, quality improvement programs, and self-managed teams. Teachers at the preschool could be considered individual self-managed teams, part of PDM and the relational strategy of organizing, as defined by Conrad and Poole (2012).

Self-managed teams

The teachers' responsibilities fall into what Conrad and Poole (2012) define as "collective responsibility for managing themselves and their work with minimal direct supervision." The teachers are self-managed because they each plan and schedule work, order materials, monitor productivity, and act on matters once reserved for management.

Ethnographic research undertaken by the researcher as a participant in preschool activities identifies the teachers as self-managed. They are all friends but rarely teach each other's classes. They are autonomous and responsible for their own classroom operations. However, the teachers do work together and with the board to develop preschool policies and procedures that apply to every classroom. Each teacher is hired and evaluated by the Board of Directors, but the Board members do not oversee the day-to-day activities of the teachers in a supervisory role. No one at the preschool has a designated role of manager or supervisor.

Principles for team effectiveness

Additionally, many of the Principles for Team Effectiveness apply to the teachers at the preschool. Principles for Team Effectiveness were created from two studies which indicated that effective teams have eight common characteristics (Conrad & Poole, 2012). The Co-op teachers share the characteristics, which include working toward a clear, elevating goal; being competent team members; having a unified commitment; striving toward a collaborative climate; working toward established standards of excellence; being supported and recognized externally; and serving under a board of directors that empowers them as principled leaders (Conrad & Poole, 2012).

Seven Principles of System Thinking

Organizations are systems and can exist at several levels, including individual teams, departments, and even the individuals themselves. The relationships among individuals include authority, communication, work roles, and interpersonal relationships (Conrad & Poole, 2012). Among departments, relationships include authority, communication, and work (which department does what work). Conrad and Poole (2012) refer to seven

principles of systems thinking to help in understanding organizations and developing strategies for organizational communication. Four of them apply to Magnolia Co-op and are listed in detail below.

- *Cause-effect relationships in systems are complex* – Success is hard to define at a preschool. One metric that has been measured through surveys is parental satisfaction with the education and experience their children receive. Another, more quantitative, way to determine the school's success is demand for classroom slots. The school usually fills up long before the start of the next school year. This is because of positive reputation and parental satisfaction. The system has succeeded without a single ultimate cause.
- *Systems must adapt or they perish* – The preschool encounters a new environment every school year with new volunteers assuming leadership roles. It is vital that the school adapt quickly and incorporate change to help the system operate effectively. The school has many pressures, including level of parental involvement, enthusiasm about the school itself, demand for classroom slots, fundraising, and teacher retention. The school would quickly perish if it was unable to adapt to new organizational systems each school year.
- *History is important in organizational systems* – History is one of the biggest factors in the continued success of the preschool. Institutional knowledge is vital to engaging new volunteers each school year. It is important to quickly educate them so they can seamlessly contribute to the school's operations. They already believe in the school and its values, but they need to know how things operate in order to make decisions that benefit the school and its continued success.

- *Systems must constantly learn and renew themselves* – New people come into the school every year. This is generally a benefit because they all have fresh enthusiasm and new ideas, but sometimes the new group is not as engaged or adept as previous groups. The preschool feeds off the involvement of its parents and volunteers so new concepts and ideas are often brought in and acted upon. Learning is continuous.

Analysis of systems at Magnolia Co-op

Magnolia Co-op has several different organizational systems, all of which work together to maintain operational efficiency. They can be broken down into the following segments:

- *Volunteer* – Board Members, Executive Board Members, Vice Chair of Chairs, Public Relations, Auction staff, and Toy sale coordinator
- *Paid employee* – Six teachers and a Treasurer
- *Parent Educator* – Assist teachers with classroom preparation. Provided by Seattle Central Community College
- *Class Chairs* – Leaders of each preschool class
- *Preschool parents* – Parents of children enrolled in the preschool

A great deal of filtering occurs between the Board and Class Chairs. Different units in the organization have access to different messages, and the differences often have profound ramifications for the coordination and control of the organization (Downs & Adrian, 2004). The Executive Board generates a great deal of information, and it is the responsibility of the Vice Chair of Chairs, a member of the Board, to decide what information discussed at Board meetings is communicated to the Class Chairs, who then pass the information to preschool parents. Therefore, the Vice Chair of Chairs must

understand the motivations, listening habits, and perceptions of the Class Chairs who receive the information (Downs & Adrian, 2004). The Vice Chair of Chairs has the most important communication-related role at the preschool because he/she controls the flow of information downward to larger segments of the organization.

Summary of Major Findings

Based on client interviews, organizational observation, and data analysis, Magnolia Co-op is succeeding as a preschool. Classes are full, parents give positive feedback in surveys, and volunteers enthusiastically fill important leadership positions.

Successes: The preschool runs smoothly and efficiently, transitioning yearly from one volunteer leadership team to the next based on institutional knowledge communicated in policy documents and in face-to-face conversations. Fundraising events are successfully coordinated and executed, resulting in a great deal of financial resources available for the preschool. Parents are involved and attend classes and meetings, and participate in surveys. Class Chairs provide timely, useful information to parents by email.

Weaknesses: Teacher satisfaction is not known. It is assumed that the teachers are satisfied with their jobs and roles in the preschool, but, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, interviews and surveys are not administered to teachers and satisfaction levels are unknown. Additionally, satisfaction with communication outreach has been measured in survey questions to preschool parents, but action has not been taken to modernize internal and/or external communications.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Internal Communication

Communicating with preschool parents is one of the most important aspects of success at Magnolia Co-op. Most communication related to student success is done in face-to-face monthly meetings with the class teacher. Email updates are also sent to parents by their Class Chair detailing notable upcoming events and other preschool operational updates. However, more could be done to create a two-way flow of communication between the preschool and the parents, including the development of an internal web site, a public-facing blog, and an expanded presence on social media.

Internal web site

A password-protected internal web site could be developed for the preschool. It could include a message board, secure messaging, secure tuition payment, and web pages for individual classes. Some parents already create Facebook groups for their specific classes; this internal web site would be a similar space where parents could ask questions of each other, post pictures, and interact in other meaningful ways. Board members could also have their own secure site where board documents and other administrative resources could be securely accessed and shared. The internal web site would enable collaboration and ensure that parents are able to positively interacting with each other, the teachers, and volunteer preschool administrators.

External Communication

The preschool has established channels of external communication, including detailed marketing materials. They are high-quality and only require minimal improvements, such as updated, color photographs. The preschool's online presence is adequate and administered on a volunteer basis. Since so many people research and seek

out information online, it is more important than ever for the preschool to have an improved online presence.

Web Site

The preschool web site contains relevant information about its mission, philosophy, and history and is presented in a unassuming manner. However, more could be done to engage the audience. One suggestion is a public-facing blog administered by preschool leadership and populated with content generated by Board members and preschool teachers. It could include classroom pictures, relevant articles, or even anecdotal musings about child behavior and development. It would bring a personal perspective to the preschool and its teachers and would offer interested parents and the general public additional insight and a new perspective on the preschool's operations.

Social Media

The preschool should increase its presence on social media. The preschool currently has a regularly updated Facebook page, but is not engaged on other social media platforms. Many parents are rightfully sensitive of pictures of their children being posted online, but Instagram could be utilized in a more general manner, with parent-approved pictures of children being featured along with pictures and descriptions of classrooms and general preschool activities. Twitter could also be utilized to post links to relevant educational articles and provide general updates such as closures and classroom hours. In the age of classroom safety, social media channels could also be utilized to immediately update parents on the status of the preschool and its classes in case of an emergency.

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