



The Lion Pride-Cast Episode #3: Communications, Climate, and Culture
Recorded Sunday, September 25, 2022

TRANSCRIPT:

MILES: Hi everybody! Welcome back to our returning listeners and welcome if this is your first time listening.

SHARON: Yes, we are thrilled you are here listening to our third episode of the Lion Pride-Cast, a podcast created by the Lansing Unified School District 469 located here in Lansing KS.

MILES: Sharon, can you believe it's already our third episode?

SHARON: I know, this is our lucky three!

MILES: The purpose of this podcast is to inform our Lansing stakeholders, being our community members students and staff, about all things education. We are your hosts- I am Miles Azzeh, the Director of Teaching and Learning in Lansing USD 469

SHARON: and I am Sharon Burns, the Director of Communications and Marketing. For our returning listeners, you already know this, but if you're new, we interview a special guest every other episode. Since we interviewed the one and only Lansing High School Principal Dr. Alan Penrose last episode, we have chosen to focus this episode on a few topics that are near and dear to my heart, communications and improving the climate and culture here in our district.

MILES: Yes, we've had many a conversation, you and I, about how important this is, and I think it's important to many of us, a lot of us, it's something that I think you've been tasked with a little bit - obviously the communication is part of your role, but I think it's best for the listeners to hear a little bit about you, so you can tell a little bit about your background and how you've arrived?

SHARON: Right, right - so I have four boys (my life is crazy). Two of my boys have graduated from Lansing -they actually started here as kindergarteners and went all the way through the system. I also have a junior at Lansing High School - Marek - and my youngest, my little happy surprise, Brooks, who is a fifth grader at the Intermediate School. I love this district - I've seen a lot here. When my two

oldest boys were younger and going through the system, I found that at times communication wasn't the best. I relied on the teachers and a lot of times actually just PTA to get information. We didn't receive a ton of district-level communication, and there wasn't a lot of spotlighting the cool things happening. It was kind of lacking in that sense, so when I was offered the communications / PR job back in 2018, I was super excited. At that time, I not only was tasked with rebuilding the website to what you see today, but I was also given the opportunity to share the cool things going on in our district in our classrooms- what our teachers, our students were doing on a daily basis. So that was super exciting for me.

MILES: You are doing a great job. Thank you –

SHARON: Yeah, I've said it before, I'll say it again - I've got the best job in the district getting to share those positive stories.

MILES: So, talk a little bit more about sharing the cool stuff and focusing on communications - the recruitment or retention aspect of it. You also had another title a year ago, correct? Like you were almost splitting your time?

SHARON: I was, yes. So, when I first took on the communications role, I was actually working part time as the Director of Lansing Educational Foundation, which is fantastic, if you don't know about Lansing Educational Foundation, also known as LEF, it's a nonprofit attached the school district that provides grants to the classrooms. They do really cool work, and I was able to be the director of that for several years. I loved it, but both jobs started growing to where it became difficult, and I didn't feel like I was able to really focus as much effort and really do the best I could in either one because I was torn. So at that time, it has been almost exactly a year ago, they made (the Superintendent and the board made) the communications job a full time job. I turned the Director of Lansing Educational Foundation over to the wonderful Kara Thompson (she's fantastic), and I took on communications full time. I was not only able to focus solely on that and be able to get to share the cool stuff going on in the district, but I was also able to take on the climate and culture and looking at recruiting and retaining good employees.

MILES: Yeah, we're gonna talk a bit about that a little later on- right now I wanna come back to the communication aspect, especially since you've been doing it for the last year, remind me again, was it in March or April that you got recognized? Someone reached out to you, correct?

SHARON: Yeah, OK. So, I submitted an article to USA Kansas's publication - it's called Under the Umbrella, and it was talking about the communication sweet spot. They actually reached out to a lot of communications /PR people across the state of Kansas, and my article was chosen to be published. We talked

about the communication sweet spot so it's going from like I said earlier, when my older kids were younger, I don't feel like there was enough information going out, but we also don't want to have too much information. I'm glad you brought this up because as many of you know, hopefully our community knows, we had a strategic planning committee meeting about a week ago, and I was tasked with facilitating a room to gather information from our stakeholders (community members, staff, students) about communication and what we could do better. So, it was very eye opening for me because actually a lot of the things I heard, especially from parents, was that we were actually over-communicating. Yeah, we had a huge swing. I got a lot of great information from that - it's gonna make me a lot better at my job because of it. Now we're looking at, like the article, finding that sweet spot so we don't become white noise where parents aren't just getting flooded with information, and then don't want to look at it anymore - getting sick of it - but it's, you know, finding that spot.

MILES: How do you find it? So, like, I love that that happened that we have the strategic plan. You got to hear from the stakeholders and especially based upon your background with your older boys, it was probably eye opening like you said - like, oh man, I felt like there wasn't enough communication and honestly I think we'd rather have too much than not enough.

SHARON: Oh absolutely- I'm reflecting on that and have already started the ball rolling on some things. We had an admin meeting - the principals met last week, and I talked to them about the amount that's going out - keeping that consistent. A lot of the stuff that I was hearing was more from the classrooms, so it's going to be training parents on how to set their notifications for Google Classroom and Canvas. I think a lot of times they have it set that they're getting every single update about every assignment, so I can see that being overwhelming. But it's communicating and getting on the same page as the district as far as what we're doing, so everybody knows what the other one's doing, so we don't flood parents with a ton of information so they're getting what they need, but not too much.

MILES: I was in that meeting, and I think you did a wonderful job of communicating that to the principals and they seemed not only aboard but yes they are amazing- the best admin.

SHARON: They really see the value in communication which I can appreciate so they've been open to it. I think our communication from admin has been better than it's ever been. We have newsletters going out on a regular basis coming from them. Parents are finding a place they know where to go to get the information. So yeah I'm really happy with this team of people from Becca Dalton to Jennifer Kolb, Martin Altieri, Brooks Jenkins, Alan Penrose - kudos to them. Yeah- great, fabulous!

MILES: So, I want to switch back if it's OK with you. We talked about communication sweet spot. We talked about not wanting to over communicate. we've talked about how the principles are important, and we're really gonna help our stakeholders committee members and parents. Let's come back to that positive vibe information. Yeah, which I think would also really fall into that retention work that you said is a big part, right? You have a role in that. You're tasked with?

SHARON: Right- last May we sent out a climate and culture survey to our staff. That was great because we were able to pull a ton of information about you know - how teachers are feeling - how staff, not just teachers, but staff in general. So we're looking at that - it's, for me, it's not only now sharing the positive stuff out to our community and our stakeholders outside, but building that positive vibe within, because that's important. We wanna keep the, you know, keep these good employees. We've got a great staff here you know - we're a team and so I think that's that's kind of like wonderful thing for me to get the opportunity to work on building that positive vibe.

MILES: Especially with the you know quote UN quote teacher shortage that's happening right now and the amount of things are thrown at us post COVID- things going on at the state, the not just the looming state assessment but just all the work that we do. Right - it's necessary and vital for us to make sure that we're focused on retaining. So, what are some things we've done a couple things I remember right that, there's the climate and culture survey to give us some baseline information we used... we're gonna be doing our appreciation tours but yeah what are some other things?

SHARON: Yeah, I want to talk about the appreciation tours 'cause that's actually - you get props for that. You brought this idea to us, which was having appreciation days where Superintendent Wessel, Miles here, and myself go around with a cart, and we just thank every single employee. Now it's not done in one day 'cause this is a lot - every single classroom we visit, and we just tell everyone thank you, because we have, we do you know, it's important to give props where they're due and our staff is amazing. So that's cool and it's also getting to know people.

MILES: That was good for me 'cause I was new last year.

SHARON: We've started doing appreciation days where we recognize various departments, so not just our teachers not just our paras, but also our custodians, our business office here at the district office - they're amazing. They need to be recognized. I think a lot of times parents see their teachers and they think yeah teachers are great. Yeah, and they ARE great, but we also need to realize that there's a lot of stuff that goes on behind the scenes to make this amazing district.

So we do appreciation days. The calendar's on the website - I put that out there, and we just had our first appreciation day. That's been about a week ago for IT professionals (our tech department). So if you wanna look at those and then we go around - usually it's Miles, Superintendent Wessel, and I and just give little gift bags and just tell people thank you. Thank you for the hard work they're doing so I think that's it- it's just building that positive vibe and shining the light on those things and making people feel valued. And that's really important you know.

MILES: We talked a little bit about our amazing admin team earlier. What have they done in your opinion to help lead this retention work, because, yeah, I shared an article with them last year when we did our admin meetings. I do this leadership studies, I called it I think leadership 101, and the article I had read years ago, which was teachers don't quit schools or buildings they quit principals, and the idea of it was like they want to feel valued from their principal. They wanna know that they have communication and their supporters. So what role has admin played specifically? You can talk a little bit about our new administrators that we have or just in general.

SHARON: I think the cool thing that I'm seeing this year, which we haven't done, is we're starting to see them recognizing standout employees. If you get the weekly newsletter from your admin- I know Dr. Penrose does it. He does it every single week - he gives a shout out to employees that are going above and beyond. And we're doing that at the district level as many of you know. The Board of Education does a monthly recognition for a staff member and a student, but our admin are doing that too. So they're recognizing these stand out people and that's important. I think their peers see that, and then they can celebrate one another. I'm trying to think of the - yeah I'm trying. Can you think of other ways they're doing it? I think it's something I can think of the other -

MILES: Yeah, I mean, I think you're absolutely right there's a lot of times in their newsletters that they- I think Martin had talked about - he spotlighted Caroline Reynolds.

SHARON: Yes, yeah he does his and he also does a weekly e-mail where he encourages the staff to give each other props so that's really cool. You'll see the shout outs and we keep that within. Maybe that is something we can share to the community, but I think it's cool that they send it, you know, through an internal e-mail to each other just saying - hey, this person did great and they and they recognize one another which is important, and it's also you know - I think the admin are really good about giving a voice which is important, that we heard through the survey. That an important thing, and I think this team of principles are good at doing that.

MILES: Yeah, one thing I'd say that all administrators have done a great job is sending me something cool that's going on in a classroom and telling me that I should possibly academic spotlight on the website, right, because that is one that the community gets to see on the website and on my teaching and learning one. Thank you for making that amazing. Yeah, so I could never make it look as good as it does, but yeah. So they do have a great job of that.

SHARON: And we talked about this during Dr Penrose's podcast last time. He has, what is it, the name it and claim it? Name it, claim it, yeah. He takes a picture of something going on in the building and then sends an all district e-mail and says name and claim it and he highlights the project and then the teacher who is spotlighted - no one knows who it is - and then that person has to jump back, reply all, and then explain the project so that's kind of a neat thing that they do.

MILES: Yeah I like that too.

SHARON: Something else -it's not just our administration, but also our mental health team. They have made the emotional well-being of our staff a priority this year. So I met with Jake Hanson who's one of our school psychologists a couple weeks ago and it was a fantastic meeting because he brought to me the idea of taking things off our teachers plates to help alleviate some of their stress and that also helps with climate culture. So he came to me with the idea and it's you know - really the gift of time is something we haven't really explored before here but I loved the idea and brought it to our administration. This is another thing we talked about it our admin meeting last week - to get some ideas of how we can take some things off the teachers plates.

MILES: I love that idea of the gift of time. I know the couple times that I've been in either at PD session or when I was teaching at the high school level a lot of times right before spring break our principal like surprised us with - we'd always have right before spring break like staff student basketball games or some sort of pep rally right before spring break and they always say like the minute the kids are out go enjoy your spring break and it would be like 40-45 minutes before contract time and it was like the best thing ever so I think that idea of the gift of time I think is sometimes overlooked - what we think it needs. Yeah, so important. Yeah, so if you'd ask anybody they would say that. Yeah, yeah absolutely - and the faster we can get home and put our comfortable clothes on, start binge watching some show or something and just unwind.

Yep- So what are some other ways? So we have the gift of the time, we're talking about all these appreciation things - are there some other ways to improve climate and culture and celebrating each other's success?

SHARON: Yeah, yeah. So I think to keep in mind - I think I talked about this during our this I believe episode - it's being able to explain to staff the importance of celebrating each other's successes. That's so, so important, and we want to try to get away from the what's called the tall poppy syndrome. Have you ever heard of the tall poppy syndrome?

MILES: You were, you were referencing it - I'm glad you're bringing it up in this because I don't think I have.

SHARON: Yeah, so it's similar to the Japanese expression the nail that sticks up gets hammered down. OK, so it's based on the idea that poppies should all grow together at the same pace and height so therefore if one poppy grows taller it should be cut down and you know that's the same with employees. So if we have a standout employee, and this is something you know when they do get the shout outs, they're doing something outstanding that they should be recognized for. We don't want our staff cutting those tall poppies down, and I know you probably heard, and I think you've referred to the crab bucket mentality. Yeah, that one's coming. Yeah, so the crab bucket- if you have a bucket full of crabs it doesn't need a lid because they literally will sit and each of them are trying to get out so much, they just keep pulling each other down and they –

MILES: almost sabotaged

SHARON: They sabotage, yeah, it's terrible. So, we're trying to get away from that. We're getting- we want our employees to get used to the idea of celebrating one another and that that is like you know I just talked about it about a minute ago, about our admin are really good about this year, about continuing to celebrate one another. Continuing to do those shout outs, so we get used to it. We get used to cheering each other on and building that team, you know, that team mentality.

MILES: What do you think causes the crab in the bucket mentality - like that idea of like I don't want somebody to be outshining me - I don't want, I mean... What do you think is probably?

SHARON: You know it can be caused by low self-esteem by the other members, you know envy, resentment - it's you know negative things we need to look at of how we can avoid. So it's, it's making our employees, everybody, feel valued and important so that they don't start pulling each other down - they need to be pushing each other up, rising above, and then we're all going to be better for it, and therefore our students will be better for it.

MILES: And you're right really, it is just a climate culture thing.

SHARON: Yeah you have the climate and the culture - that people are being recognized and we want everyone to be recognized, like, don't feel you need to be envious or right, whatever ,insecure about something, instead realize this is a chance for everyone should try to be outliers. Right, right, yeah, right. We all want tall poppies.

MILES: Yes, yes. Any other ways to fight against it or what are some other, you know in terms of you know, could our podcast play a role in any of this?

SHARON:I hope that teachers are listening and they do and I think being aware of it- realizing what you're doing, because you know that's it. I don't think people do it intentionally, I really don't. I think it's something you know if we if we can give our teachers a voice, if we can have them all feel valued, I think that's going to be the first step,, and you know then keeping them knowing that no one should have a low self esteem, no one should be envious, because you know we have amazing teachers and staff here. We should all recognize that and celebrate one another.

MILES: I couldn't agree more, Sharon. I wanna say that we are extremely lucky to have you here in this district. Thank you and thank you for everything that you're doing. Before we end, I had an idea early on and if you, for people who listen, we started the last podcast with a question for Dr. Penrose. We gave him a couple questions to pick from. Do you remember that? And I wanted to start that with you, and I completely forgot because I love this stuff and I wanted to keep talking, so I'm gonna ask you, can you share a time in your life, and I'm putting you on the spot here, alright so don't freak out, but maybe meanest teacher I think that was one of the questions that we asked. We also asked to think of some of the questions that we specifically asked Dr Penrose, who is yeah, I think it was just - Oh yes tell us the funniest story about yourself in high school, student senior prank was one thing, tell us the most- I remember Dr. Alan Penrose was like Nope, pass. Yeah I know I know, tell us the most embarrassing thing that happened to you in school, talk to us about the meanest teacher you had and why, or what was the most trouble you got into in high school.

SHARON: No, yeah – OK. I'm gonna talk about the meanest teacher – it doesn't have to be in high school right?

MILES: No, no.

SHARON: It's just, OK. Meanest teacher ever. When I was in first grade- it was a substitute teacher, Miss Pfannenstiel, and she wore big brooch, I remember this, and it was scary. She was so scary. Her name is kind of scary, can say it again if she is listening right now – Pfannenstiel. And I knew my teacher Mrs. Tognascioli at the time at Oakwood Manor Elementary was gonna be out, and she told us she was gonna be out ,and guess who was there - pfannenstiel was coming in,

and I came to my mom, and I said, mom, I don't feel well. I have a stomach ache. She was like, you have to go. And actually, I think, no no. I begged her so much - I think I might have shed some tears. Told her I had a tummy ache which was nerves. She actually allowed me to stay home when Miss Pfennenstiel was there, and so my teacher was only supposed to be gone one day, so I'm like, I dodged a bullet. Went in the next day, came in, and I still see her sitting at the desk with that horrible, awful brooch, and I knew it was like, oh, and I felt I have a vivid memory of that. So, it's Miss Pfennenstiel. She was mean. Yeah, she needed to retire. No more miss Pfannenstiel. But yeah, that's my, that's my meanest.

MILES: Thank you for sharing.

SHARON: Luckily I didn't have her all year. Yes it was just that day.

MILES: But, unfortunately you had to have her that day, it was very memorable in there.

SHARON: I barely remember Mrs. Tognascioli, I remember.

MILES: What grade was that?

SHARON: First grade.

MILES: You know I went to Greenbush district training last week and district leadership training, went with Alan and Martin and Sandy from the high school, sandy VanCise, and we learned a lot and one thing that they had talked about was they asked this question- they said,, what was the what was the economy like in 3rd grade? Do you remember? And most people are shaking their heads and frowning, and what was the first assignment that you had as a third grader? Most people you know, you can't remember right? And then the last one was what was the name of your third grade teacher and everybody, almost Oh yeah- 80% of people like blah blah blah and I've done that a couple times with staff and it's been hilarious how people are like, Yep! They know the answer. Yeah and really it shows experience and relationships is what sticks. It's not always information. So thanks for sharing that. Unfortunately that miss – what was her name again?

SHARON: Pfannenstiel

MILES: And still stuck with you. Yeah, but I'm sure that the actual teacher stuck with you too. Was she a nice teacher, OK?

SHARON: Wonderful. Yeah. Oakwood Manor!

MILES: Sharon thank you again overall for this. We are very lucky to have you and thank you for your work on the strategic plan and reflecting on the things that you heard from stake holders. Yes, thank you for everything you are doing with climate and culture. It's really important. Like I said - best job in the district.

SHARON: OK, so I think that's it. So as always- for updates and stories on Lansing USD 469, you can visit us at www.usd469.net, and if you don't already have it, I've said it before, I'm gonna say it again every single episode - download the free Lansing USD 469 mobile app on apple and Android and that app will allow you to be the first to know all the fantastic things happening in the district. All the things we talked about - that we share - it goes through the app, every single one, so get it.

MILES: And don't forget the most important thing sometimes our teachers what else do you get first notification of?

SHARON: Snow days.

MILES: Snow days. Yep. If you like our content and wanna stay up to date on the latest episode, please follow us wherever you are listening to us and leave a review to help others find this and learn more about our great district.

SHARON: Yep we are available on apple podcast, Spotify, Google podcast , Amazon Music, YouTube, SoundCloud, and of course on the website. We actually have a banner now like on the front page of our website, so you can listen to the podcast there and please listen.

MILES: Yes, yes - also if you'd like to be a guest on our podcast or even if you just want to give us some topics and ideas. By the way, we have gotten emails from people thanking us and just you know kind words. Thank you so much- keep them coming.

SHARON: Yeah, you can e-mail me at Sharon.burns@usd469.net if you want to be a guest or you want a topic for us to discuss. I think that's a wrap on #3. We did it!