

By Jenny Holmes

Leadership GiANTS

Pequot Lakes School District uses simple tools for impactful leadership

GiANT is a *message*, an *idea*. The idea that if we could grow *humble leaders*, we would have *less drama* and *insecurity* in the world. If, together, we could build cultures full of *liberated leaders* then we would be able to create *true change* in our cultures from pride-based leadership to humility-based leadership.

A worldwide 'giant' in leadership training is creating a movement in the way several regional school district administrators interact with staff and one another.

GiANT Worldwide is a global company dedicated to leadership transformation and raising the standard of leadership across the world. The company, which typically works with Fortune 500 businesses, puts a focus on helping individuals become liberating leaders, build high-performing teams, and lead thriving organizations.

In 2014, National Joint Powers Alliance hired GiANT Worldwide for an in-house assessment and training. Paul Drange, NJPA Director of Regional Programs, said the training was so impactful that NJPA knew it had to extend the opportunity to its members.

"It didn't take us long to realize how impactful GiANT

was going to be for us internally," Drange said. "It was about changing our culture and the way we were led, from our senior leadership team all the way through the organization. The common language and the tools to work through difficult situations was impactful from the very first moment we engaged them."

It was in the early summer of 2014 when NJPA first realized the potential of GiANT, and, by December that year, attempted to roll out a regional option for school districts.

"It initially took some time to get a foothold," Drange noted. "But it has since been expanded, and Pequot Lakes School District is a shining example of where it's been really successful."

It was that initial rollout in 2014 when Pequot Lakes Superintendent Chris Lindholm had a chance to participate in the GiANT-led training to get a better idea of how it could best serve his district.



Melissa Hesch, Eagle View Elementary Principal (left), Chris Lindholm, Pequot Lakes Superintendent (middle), and Mike O’Neil, Pequot Lakes Middle School Principal (right) pose with their favorite GiANT tool.

“I saw it, liked it, and brought it on board,” Lindholm said, also recognizing NJPA for bringing international resources to a regional consortium. “Schools in our region could never afford to access this kind of training. GiANT is very high caliber as far as the quality of what they do.”

GiANT Worldwide partners with the leaders of organizations and gives them the framework and tools, and teaches them how to communicate in a healthier manner in their organizations. In addition to the initial training, GiANT provides ongoing coaching and workshops to help leaders learn more about themselves, their talents and opportunities, and to reflect on how they can improve their leadership abilities.

“The challenge for any leader is building common language into a system and making it work,” Lindholm said, “Whether it’s ‘Good to Great’ or Stephen Covey’s work — whatever you latch on to. But with GiANT, I saw good language and very good services to deliver. When NJPA began talking about taking this regionally, it didn’t make sense to take our district in a different direction. I got excited about how common language could have a ripple effect if it was being used regionally. It creates synergy.”

The following year, Lindholm invited three of his building leaders to attend GiANT Worldwide, and, in 2016, he extended the opportunity to a handful of other district administrators.



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“We have leadership teams in each of our schools and we’ve slowly begun to roll out common language and the GiANT framework to these teams. As an administrative team, it has provided us safe vocabulary to have hard conversations. We process as a team how to have norms in our group to call out when something isn’t right or when a member of a team doesn’t feel like someone else can be trusted. When there’s an issue in our teams, the language from GiANT provides a vehicle to have that conversation.”

One of Lindholm’s favorite GiANT frameworks is “Know Yourself to Lead Yourself.” During this step, participants undergo an extensive personality and wiring assessment to develop a greater sense of self-awareness. By “holding up a mirror,” participants can better understand what it’s like to see themselves as others do. They also take time to help leaders explore and understand the connection among their behaviors, drivers, and self-concept.

“When you really look at yourself in a mirror, you may find that you have broccoli in your teeth that no one has told you about,” this lesson explains. “And we all have broccoli in our teeth. The bits of broccoli are the things about us that annoy other people the most.”

Other powerful frameworks modeled by GiANT include CORE Process (Call it, Own it, Respond, Execute), the Apprenticeship Square, and identifying the Five Voices that determine if an individual has a Pioneer, Connector, Guardian, Creative or Nurturer “voice”.

“The power of the framework is not that it’s miraculous,” Lindholm said. “It gives us tools to say, ‘this is where we are and how do we get around the next corner?’ Has this changed our district? Absolutely. Has it made me a better leader? Absolutely.”

Middle School Principal Mike O’Neil first came to the Pequot Lakes School District three years ago from the Anoka-Hennepin School District.

“I was in a place where my leadership had been well-established, and then was going somewhere where I had to start over. I was like a middle schooler myself, trying to figure out my role, my style, my sense of self. All the while, building the ship while flying it. What I learned through GiANT gave me permission to be me – good, bad, and indifferent. I feel more comfortable to be me, but it also allows me the perspective to see myself in a meeting: how I interact with others and addressing my blind spots.”



GiANT Worldwide partners with organizational leaders by giving them a framework and tools for healthy communication.

O’Neil said he has appreciated the ongoing opportunity to participate monthly in a cohort of other Region 5 administrators to work through struggles and share successes.

“I can dominate a room, but I also need to be aware of the soft skills I have,” he said. “I mean, I got teary eyed at a board meeting when I was first introduced here. I’m a young, male administrator trying to assert himself, and to let the feelings come out from underneath this façade has been refreshing. It has also helped in other realms of my life – being a better husband, being a better friend. It’s crossed into every element of my life.”

“It’s helpful to know when to stop and to be Mom, not a principal for a while, and that my teachers and paraprofessionals need to do that, too,” said Eagle View Elementary Principal Melissa Hesch.

Hesch also participated in GiANT Worldwide with O’Neil two years ago.

“It really spills out into your church life, your family life, and the family you grew up in,” she said. “You start to see the voices in your family members and look at them a little differently.”

Hesch said she has learned a lot about herself through the GiANT process, both positive and negative. While giving her a variety of tools to use at the elementary level, it has also allowed her to get to know others, building camaraderie and rapport.

“I’m not an island,” she said. “There’s a level of what you need to focus on and hone in on that is specific to the age group of students you serve. In this role, we feel like we’re pioneers. We’ve been doing so many new things in different ways. And that feels new to staff. In my personal life, I’m a nurturer and connector. You learn that’s okay and that you can’t pioneer all of the time. You have to just be. It makes you very aware of where you’re spending your time and reminds you to take time to take care of yourself and remind others to do the same.”

Hesch flipped through a small, spiral-bound book filled with the frameworks and tools provided by GiANT.

“There are so many of these to use,” she said. “But it’s also about when to use them and what makes sense for your purpose, your building, whatever you’re working on. What’s best for the kids and how can we do what we’re doing but even better for them. We don’t want to be just good. We want to be great. The tools through GiANT and NJPA are helping us to be great people, great teams, great schools, and great districts.”

For more information about GiANT Worldwide and the opportunities through NJPA, visit www.NJPAcoop.org/giant. ■