



Just for the ASKing!

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Just for the ASKing! is a monthly column that addresses the needs of instructional leaders, particularly building level administrators. Each month, this column provides information, insights, and suggestions that help administrators as they strive to be instructional leaders in schools. This month's focus is on the principal as leader of change.

The Principal as Leader of Change



Bruce facilitating the Leading the Learning workshop.

For most of us the school year has drawn to a close. There was a flurry of activity as the schools administered standardized tests, planned transition activities for incoming and outgoing students, and completed all the necessary paperwork required to bring closure to the school year. Staff members celebrated another successful year. Teachers excitedly talked about their summer plans and reorganized their rooms for summer cleaning. The building suddenly became much quieter. Despite all of the finality that the end of a school year brings, the job of the principal doesn't have an ending. As principals we must constantly be thinking about the future, what changes are on the horizon, and how to keep the school on a path of continual improvement.

A significant part of the job of principal is dealing with changes that may occur in the future. While some staff members are taking a break from their jobs, the relative calm and quiet in the building afford the principal time to reflect on any impending changes and how best to implement those changes. In the world in general, change is accepted as inevitable and on-going. We need only look around us to see the explosion in technology, numerous social changes, and the impact of world events on our everyday lives. Somehow in education, change seems to come as a surprise and with a certain amount of resistance and trepidation. Since student learning, behavior, and motivation are so complex and unpredictable, we tend to get locked into our comfort zone whether or not our actions are truly in the best interest of student achievement.

Change comes from different sources. In some cases, the mandate for change may come from a source outside the school (central or district office, state or federal mandate), and it is the job of the principal and other school leaders to implement the change. Other changes may come as a result of the vision of the school leader who sees that there is a need or deficiency within the school as a whole or in a certain segment of the school. As the principal considers the introduction and implementation of a new idea, he or she should thoroughly think through the kind of environment that will be created as a result of the change. During these planning stages, the principal should reflect on some very basic ideas: How will this change have a positive impact on student learning? Can the change be carried out? Should we undertake the change? How do we proceed? What will it look like if the change is successfully implemented and in place?

Change can be overwhelming both for the leaders and the instructional staff who must implement the change. Educators are bombarded with ideas related to change and sorting through the abundance of literature on the topic can be confusing, and in some cases, paralyzing. Concepts such as C-BAM (Concerns-Based Adoption Model), evolutionary vs. revolutionary change, systems of feedback, the integrating innovation model, and advanced change theory can boggle the mind and impede the implementation of the change. There are, however, certain basic principles that should be followed when a change is being implemented:

1. Change should address a need or deficiency in the school;
2. Change should be based on an analysis of existing data;
3. Change is a process, not an event;
4. Change takes place individual by individual;
5. Changes requires time.

So how should the school leader approach the idea of change? There is some valuable information on the change process that can give us some food for thought. Philip Schlechty determined that the teaching staff can assume a variety of roles as the change process is being carried out. *Trailblazers* are highly motivated and will enthusiastically undertake the new idea; *pioneers* are willing to take risks but they need reassurance that what they are doing is worth their time and energy; *settlers* need much more detail about the change, specifically what is expected of them, and a belief that the change can be accomplished; the *stay-at-homes* will take on the new challenge only if there is a clear and compelling reason for the change; and finally the *saboteurs* will actively undermine the change and try to keep it from occurring. The *stay-at-homes* and *saboteurs* typically represent a small number of staff members. Schlechty has concluded that it is not a good use of the leader's time to spend energy trying to force these individuals to change. It is important, however, to keep them "close" so the leader knows what they are doing.

Once it is determined that the change will go forth, the real work begins. Some principals see their primary role as setting the process in motion and then letting the natural course of events unfold. Others start out with the best of intentions and then unforeseen circumstances demand their time and they do not monitor the change process properly. Still others do not have the proper leadership training or support from those outside the school to carry out the change to its ultimate conclusion.

A fellow principal with whom I worked for a number of years brought a very common sense approach to the role of the school leader in the change process. She narrowed the role of the principal down to six steps. She found that by following these steps with any new ideas that were introduced in her school, she was able to monitor the change as it moved through the various stages of implementation. The six steps are as follows:

1. **Be explicit about the change you expect.** Put the ideas related to the change in writing. Just as we say that teachers must be explicit about the assignments they give to students, school leaders must do the same for the adults with whom they work. Emphasize that the change is not optional.
2. **Prepare the staff for the change by providing professional development.** When change occurs, participants must be able to translate the change into a process they can understand and follow. When they go through training, they know in greater specificity what they are to do, and they get ideas from one another.
3. **Make the necessary resources available that will support the change and enable it to occur.** By talking to staff members as the change is in process, the leader can determine what additional resources are needed. A quick response by the leader in providing the resources will show the staff that he or she is supportive and in complete support of the change.
4. **Monitor the implementation of the change.** What gets monitored will get attention in the classroom. The principal should refer back to the original written documents outlining the change as the tools to use to monitor the process as it unfolds.

5. **Provide on-going feedback to the staff about how the change is progressing.** The principal should be visible, interact with teachers, carry out frequent “walk-through” visits to classes, and talk about what he or she sees in classrooms that serve as evidence that the change is being implemented.
6. **Collect data and document how the change is progressing.** The leader will never know if the change is being effective unless there is data to show what effect the change has on student learning. Good principals do not try “to go it alone.” They use their leadership teams or other schoolwide groups to gather and interpret data.

King Whitney, Jr. provides a quote that captures the essence of the change process:

Change has considerable psychological impact on the human mind. To the fearful it is threatening because it means that things may get worse. To the hopeful, it is encouraging because things may get better. To the confident it is inspiring because the challenge exists to make things better. Obviously, then, one’s character and frame of mind determine how readily he brings about change and how he reacts to change that is imposed on him.

A good school leader can inspire hope and confidence in his or her staff as a change is occurring. It is the role of the principal to be tenacious, be vigilant, be supportive and be patient.

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