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Why Some Teachers Resist Change and What Principals Can Do About It

Judith Zimmerman

Schools across the country are pressured to reform by federal and state mandates. Because resistance is a major factor in reform failure, it is crucial for principals to discover why teachers resist change. This article explores the leadership and organizational change literature regarding some common barriers to change. Research-based strategies to promote change readiness and steps to overcome resistance are provided, including shared decision making, collaboration, professional development, principal's modeling, and preparedness for limiting forces of resistance.

Keywords: leading school change; change resistance

Clay was one of the most respected teachers in his small rural high school community. Not only had he taught hundreds of students over the decades of his career, but he also continued to coach long after his fellow veterans had stopped. He used a variety of strategies to teach his history lessons and developed civic responsibility in his students. Yet, when most of the teachers in his building voted to move to a block schedule, Clay was one of the resisters.

Tracey displayed genuine caring for her fifth-grade students in a suburban intermediate school. She not only set clear expectations behaviorally and academically for them but also included the students in some decision making about their studies. However, when Tracey's district administration decided to pursue the Baldrige Framework for Continuous Improvement, a systemic process for improvement that emphasizes the importance of leadership, mission/vision, shared decision making, and performance accountability, this veteran told her colleagues in the teachers' lounge that she did not want to hear about the "B word" ever again.

Dena was a recognized leader among her urban junior high school colleagues. As a strong union leader, she had a great deal of influence over the teachers and the administration in her building. Although both she and the building principal were verbally supportive of a change initiative prompted by a large federal grant, the two of them were frequently in disagreement about how to accomplish the reform.

These types of scenarios are becoming more prevalent as schools across the country are pressured by ever-changing state department of education mandates and the requirements of the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation to reform in order to improve the achievement of all students. Responding to these ambitious calls for change typically falls squarely on the shoulders of principals and teachers (Andrews & Rothman, 2002). However, because reform efforts in schools are often met with resistance, educator willingness or unwillingness to change can affect whether or not an initiative is successful. Furthermore, Fullan and Hargreaves (1996) warned that many change efforts in schools actually alienate teachers from reforming their instructional practices.

Because the success of initiatives is dependent on educators accepting change, when embarking on any reform effort, school leaders and change agents should consider the possibility of facing resistance. Therefore, one purpose of this article is to explore the leadership and organizational change literature regarding some common barriers to change educational leaders might confront when working with their faculty members. This statement should not imply that school leaders themselves do not exhibit resistance to change. On the contrary, a number of experts have delineated the actions that leaders must take to overcome their own resistance in order to change the way they lead their organizations (Clawson, 1999; Dotlich & Cairo, 2002; Kouzes & Posner, 1993). Consequently, a second purpose of this article is to examine the leadership skills and changes in leadership practices that will be required before principals are able to face the challenge of addressing teacher resistance to change.

Why Do Some Teachers Resist Change?

The first step in overcoming resistance to change in schools is the ability to determine who is resisting change and why (Duke, 2004). To begin this process, principals need to take a systems perspective that recognizes teachers' attitudes and behaviors within the context of the social norms of their schools (Kennedy & Kennedy, 1996).

Barriers to Change

Attitude toward change is a variable that has been linked to employee acceptance of new procedures/policies (Calabrese, 2002; Clawson, 1999; Duke, 2004; Greenberg & Baron, 2000; Robbins, 2000; Zimmerman, 2006). One of many barriers to both individual and organizational change that has been documented in the literature is a *failure to recognize the need for change* (Greenberg & Baron, 2000). Unless teachers understand and appreciate the need for change in their schools, their interest in maintaining the status quo will undoubtedly take precedence over their willingness to accept change (Greenberg & Baron, 2000). *Habit* is a related barrier to teachers changing their practices. Rather than working to develop new skills/strategies, it is simply easier to continue teaching in the same ways (Greenberg & Baron, 2000).

Other change resistance characteristics exhibited by teachers might be a result of their past experiences. For example, schools' *previously unsuccessful efforts* at change could leave teachers extremely wary about accepting further attempts (Greenberg & Baron, 2000). Moreover, because many people feel a sense of *security* from doing things in familiar ways, disrupting teachers' well-established professional and instructional patterns could result in a *fear of the unknown* (Fullan, 2001; Greenberg & Baron, 2000). Furthermore, if teachers feel that the school environment for change is unsafe, they not only are unlikely to embrace new practices but might also become defensive and resort to their old habits (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002).

Similarly, teachers might actually feel threatened in a number of ways by the prospect of change. Their acceptance of change could be affected by perceived *threats to their expertise* and proven abilities, and their belief that they lack the knowledge or skills to implement the change successfully (Fullan, 2001; Greenberg & Baron, 2000). Changes in long-established decision-making responsibilities could also affect those educators who perceive *threats to their power relationships* (Robbins, 2000). Moreover, structural and organizational changes in schools could represent *threats to social relationships* of teachers who have formed strong friendships with their colleagues (Greenberg & Baron, 2000). Finally, teachers and others who benefit from the current distribution and control of scarce resources might perceive *threats to their resource allocations* brought about by changes in the school (Robbins, 2000).

Understanding Change Resistance

Mental Models

Another consideration for principals, who are trying to understand why some of their teachers do not perceive the need to change and/or actually resist change, is the concept of individual and organizational mental models. Naturally, people do not all perceive the world or their workplaces in the same way. *Mental models* are the maps that individuals and organizations follow to help them not only make sense of their context or world but also to interpret their reality. Mental models can promote efficiency and alleviate some anxiety during change (Calabrese, 2002). However, some established mental models can prevent educators from closing the gap between the learning needed to be successful in new contexts and their outmoded ways of dealing with change, resulting in nonproductive behaviors (Calabrese, 2002; Duffy, 2002; Senge et al., 1999). Although teachers' values and attitudes may appear outmoded or dysfunctional to principals, Heifetz and Linsky (2002) warned leaders that asking people to change is, in essence, challenging how they identify themselves. Furthermore, principals should also guard against succumbing to their own faulty mental models, characterized by blaming teachers for resisting change without taking into account any underlying systemic issues that could be at the real heart of the problem (Calabrese, 2002; Senge et al., 1999).

Denial

Other authors have described individuals' feelings and behaviors at the beginning of a change process as a type of denial. Again, to understand why some teachers resist change, principals must realize that denial in some respects is similar to the first stage of grieving for what is lost (Calabrese, 2002; Clawson, 1999). This negative reaction can take the form of denying the message, the messenger, the pertinence of the message, and/or denying whether one has the capacity to deal with the message (Clawson, 1999). Therefore, at the onset of change initiatives, principals must be adept at recognizing and dealing with teachers' denial behaviors as a possible indication of their underlying feelings of loss for what they are being asked to give up or leave behind.

What Can Principals Do to Promote Change Readiness?

Simply gaining knowledge of impediments to change and understanding why some teachers resist change are not sufficient to promote teachers' change readiness. Therefore, in addition to being sensitive to teachers' potential change barriers, principals must also consider their own leadership skills and styles. Principals focus on their change readiness by striving to improve their leadership skills, by modeling risk taking and a willingness to change, and by earning teachers' trust. Furthermore, leadership strategies that promote change are described by numerous authors in leadership and organizational change literature, including developing a supportive culture, involving teachers in decision making, enhancing teachers' sense of efficacy, promoting professional development, and winning the support of influential teachers.

Improving Principals' Skills and Behaviors

Leaders prepare for change by understanding the change process not only as it relates to members of their organizations but also as it relates to them personally (Calabrese, 2002). Hence, if school leaders expect teachers to take risks in learning and practicing new behaviors, they themselves must be open to change and willing to expose their own weaknesses by becoming learners (Clawson, 1999; Dotlich & Cairo, 2002; Duke, 2004). Moreover, a catalyst to successfully implementing change is not only to admit that there is a need to change but also to know oneself; one's strengths and weaknesses (Goleman et al., 2002; Kouzes & Posner, 1993). Hence, principals should model lifelong learning and striving for excellence (Franklin, 2002; Fullan, 2002; Hessel & Holloway, 2002) and display optimism and determination as they encourage their teachers to challenge old assumptions and become risk takers (Clawson, 1999; Connor, Lake, & Stackman, 2003; Duke, 2004).

Making decisions from a systems perspective is also helpful to leaders who must understand both the "big picture" and the detail aspects of improving their schools (Clawson, 1999; Connor et al., 2003; Duke, 2004). Furthermore, principals must be skilled in analyzing the alignment among their schools' systems, strategies, structures,

and culture in order to identify areas for improvement (Watkins, 2003). Similarly, Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) concluded that school leaders must identify the type of change needed in their schools (first or second order) and then match appropriate leadership behaviors to the degree of the change involved. Change moves along a continuum from first to second order to the extent that teachers perceive the innovation is significantly different from the past, conflicts with their current mental models, and necessitates obtaining new knowledge and abilities (Marzano et al., 2005). During second-order change, not only must principals become more knowledgeable of curriculum/instruction/assessment, but it is also particularly important for them to lead the charge as change agents (Marzano et al., 2005).

Finally, one of the most important characteristics of principals who want their faculty members to follow them on the rocky road to change, overcoming obstacles along the way, is the ability to earn their trust (Duke, 2004; Kotter, 1996; Kouzes & Posner, 1993; Marzano et al., 2005). Moreover, in building trust, leaders of great organizations hold themselves accountable when problems arise and yet are quick to share credit with others when they experience success (Collins, 2001).

Developing a Culture of Shared Decision Making

Encouraging the growth of trust is a precursor to principals developing a school culture that provides support through a balanced approach to change between top-down and bottom-up decision making (Duke, 2004; Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996; Kennedy & Kennedy, 1996; Kotter, 1996; Short & Greer, 2002). Although teachers (and parents) are most familiar with the educational needs of students, they are often limited in their power to meet these needs when important decisions are made beyond their realm of influence (Short & Greer, 2002). Therefore, when leaders include teachers and other stakeholders in developing a shared vision and goals for reaching the vision, their actions give meaning, a common purpose, challenge, and motivation to everyone in the school (Bass & Avolio 1994; Marzano et al., 2005; Schmoker 1999; Senge et al., 1999).

By providing opportunities for teacher collaboration and participation in decision making, principals and other school leaders can also develop a supportive culture for change. “Meaningful participation is a cornerstone of professional and school communities—a stone that we often leave unturned” (Lambert, 2003, p. 11). Moreover, by empowering teachers to participate in decision making, principals cultivate teachers’ competence as problem solvers and promote an environment of risk taking that encourages teachers to try new ideas and strategies (Short & Greer, 2002).

Enhancing Teachers’ Self-Efficacy

Not only are shared decision making and positive school cultures related to higher teacher efficacy, but high teacher self-efficacy is also related to students’

achievement, motivation, and self-efficacy (Tschannen-Moran, Hoy, & Hoy, 1998). Individuals are more likely to attempt to control the circumstances that affect their lives if they believe that control is possible (Bandura, 1997). Instead of perceiving difficult tasks as threats to be avoided, educators with high self-efficacy face obstacles as challenges to be overcome (Bandura, 1997). Teachers who possess high self-efficacy also motivate and challenge themselves and guide their actions by visualizing success (Bandura, 1997; Paglis & Green, 2002). Moreover, educators with high self-efficacy are more likely to embrace new ideas and try new strategies to meet their students' needs (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998). For example, one study found that both teachers' attitude to change and particularly their sense of self-efficacy were significantly related to their use of the Baldrige Framework to improve their schools and classrooms (Zimmerman, 2006).

Promoting Professional Development and Peer Support

Leadership support and professional development can also improve teachers' sense of efficacy (Hoy & Hoy, 2003). Recognizing that change is difficult and that teachers' confidence levels may decrease initially as they try new strategies, it is critical that principals respond with the necessary feedback and reassurance (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998). Similarly, Fullan (2001) described this inevitable *implementation dip* as "literally a dip in performance and confidence as one encounters an innovation that requires new skills and new understandings" (pp. 40-41). Therefore, a supportive environment is necessary for change to happen, so that teachers do not feel so stressed that they revert to their former instructional strategies and methods (Goleman et al., 2002).

Principals and other educational leaders can nurture a supportive culture for change by promoting professional development through teacher collaboration. By sharing their successes during faculty meetings and common planning times, for example, respected teachers cultivate self-efficacy in their peers by serving as role models and credible sources of feedback (Hoy & Hoy, 2003; Marzano et al., 2005; Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998). Influential teachers who are considered opinion leaders can also exert influence over their colleagues in the adoption of innovations (Rogers, 2003). This peer pressure combined with peer support is most effective in developing a culture of change in schools (Fullan, 2001). Furthermore, when teachers experience success with students, as a result of implementing what they have learned, their sense of personal efficacy grows (Hoy & Hoy, 2003).

Overcoming Resistance to Change

Beyond understanding change resistance and promoting change readiness, principals must take certain steps to actually overcome resistance to change in order to successfully lead their schools into the future. These steps, gleaned from the leadership and organizational change literature, include creating a sense of urgency,

developing and operationalizing a vision, rewarding constructive behaviors, aiming for short-term successes, and creating a professional learning community.

Creating a Sense of Urgency

Sometimes, it is too easy for educators to complacently blame other factors for the failure of students in their schools, such as “it’s those parents” or “it’s students’ lack of motivation.” To combat this indifference, a critical first step leaders must take is to get everyone to believe that there is an urgent need for change (Duke, 2004; Kotter, 1996; Marzano et al., 2005). One method for principals to create this sense of urgency in their schools is to share disaggregated data with teachers about their students’ test results relative to the state report card levels, closing the achievement gaps for all groups, and about the NCLB adequate yearly progress requirements. Principals could also reveal to teachers the market realities and financial impact of declining enrollment in public schools as the state promotes charter schools and other forms of school choice.

Creating a sense of urgency, however, should not be equated with punishing teachers with data. On the contrary, change leaders must make accountability less threatening. Rather than observing teachers stepping back fearfully from data collection and analysis, principals should encourage them to welcome this effort as providing evidence of their improvement (Zimmerman, 2004). Moreover, data used appropriately to help rather than to punish can energize everyone in the school to be more accountable (Marzano et al., 2005; Schmoker 1999).

Developing and Operationalizing a Vision

Once teachers accept the need for change, the next step is to involve them and other stakeholders in developing a vision of what the future should be like, including goals to reach the vision (Connor et al., 2003; Duke, 2004; Kotter, 1996; Robbins, 2000). At first, this involvement may just include a small group of believers, “a powerful guiding coalition” (Kotter, 1996, p. 57), who can influence others until a critical mass is reached to push the change effort forward.

Unfortunately, mission and vision statements can gather dust on walls and shelves unless they are implemented throughout the school. Thus, not only is the school leader’s constant communication in a variety of ways important, but he or she must also provide meaningful education and empowerment to teachers so that they can act on the mission/vision (Connor et al., 2003; Duke, 2004; Kotter, 1996; Robbins, 2000).

It is particularly important to help teachers operationalize the district/building goals and strategies at the classroom level. Although discretionary dollars are scarce for schools, district and building administrators demonstrate their commitment to change when they provide the funding and time for professional development that teachers need to be successful. These opportunities for professional interaction pay dividends when

teachers are able to obtain assistance and feedback from their colleagues (Short & Greer, 2002). Examples of low-cost job-embedded professional development include using staff meetings for teacher sharing and inquiry-based learning such as lesson study and book study groups (Killion, 1999; Sparks, 1999). Recently, *blogs* (Internet Web logs) are becoming popular, particularly among younger teachers, who use them to reflect on their classroom experiences and to share advice and support with their colleagues (Franklin, 2005).

Rewarding Constructive Behaviors

Nothing can undermine a change initiative more than when leaders espouse certain new behaviors or actions but appear to reward others, particularly those associated with the “old ways” of doing business. Faculty and staff should be recognized and rewarded in some fashion not only for implementing the changes but also for sharing information about any potential problems (Connor et al., 2003; Duke, 2004; Greenberg & Baron, 2000; Kotter, 1996; Marzano et al., 2005). This recognition can be as simple as the principal sharing positive feedback about the school’s progress at faculty meetings or giving personal notes to staff members who have contributed to the effort. Moreover, district leaders, boards of education, and teachers’ unions should cooperate to remove any obstacles at the building and/or district level, in the form of policies or procedures, before they can affect the performance and motivation of those trying to implement the reforms (Duffy, 2002; Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996; Kotter, 1996; Robbins, 2000). These obstacles might include outdated master schedules, teacher evaluation processes, or salary schedules.

Aiming for Short-Term Successes

Unfortunately, in any long-term reform effort, it is possible for people to lose sight of their school’s vision and the goals that they had set to reach it (Duke, 2004; Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996). Hence, change agents must be prepared for the possibility of these implementation dips and other forces that might limit the reform efforts (Fullan, 2001; Senge, et al., 1999). Therefore, it is crucial for principals to aim for some short-term wins along the way (Kotter, 1996; Marzano et al., 2005). For example, after one semester of implementing some of the changes, the building might have experienced fewer disciplinary referrals, fewer course failures, and/or increased attendance. By collecting and analyzing similar data, these important short-term wins can be celebrated, if only in some small way, by the building and/or district. Much-deserved celebrations can create the energy and motivation necessary to persevere in the long haul.

Creating a Professional Learning Community

Once the new methods for operating are institutionalized, then administrators and teacher leaders can focus their attention on monitoring progress and initiating more

changes (Duke, 2004; Kotter, 1996). When principals lead their schools in a commitment to change to meet the needs of all students, the schools become learning organizations (Greenberg & Baron, 2000; Senge et al., 1999). Similarly, the core principles of professional learning communities include embracing learning rather than teaching, collaborating to help all pupils *and* adults learn, and using data and focusing on results to foster continuous improvement (DuFour, 2005; DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005; Hord, 2004).

Conclusion

“Umpteen reforms have come and gone, using up time, money, and hope. They have left a crippling disillusionment in their wake, a cynicism about staff development and any belief that training or innovation benefits students” (Schmoker, 1999, p. 37).

If, indeed, most school reform efforts fail (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996), educational leaders are asking themselves what they can do in their schools to beat the odds. Because resistance is a major factor in the failure of school reforms, it is crucial for principals to discover why teachers resist change, before they can work to overcome this resistance. Returning to the teacher scenarios at the beginning of this article, one can more closely examine the “resistance” depicted in light of the aforementioned information.

Why did Clay, an accomplished teacher, resist change in his high school? Perhaps it was because of his *fear of the unknown* or a perceived *threat to his recognized expertise*. Even veteran teachers’ sense of efficacy can be tested when they are attempting new instructional strategies, such as those required in a successful block schedule. In this case, Clay’s principal would be advised to demonstrate to Clay that he or she has every intention of supporting the new *vision* through the necessary time and funds for *professional development*. Making appropriate staff development and peer coaching available to boost Clay’s confidence and *sense of efficacy* is important as he tries new strategies. In addition, as a respected teacher, Clay should be *recognized and rewarded* publicly for trying to implement the changes.

What about Tracey, who as a veteran, had “seen it all” during her career? She not only might *fail to recognize the need for change* but undoubtedly has also witnessed *previously unsuccessful efforts* in her district. Tracey could also be in *denial* because of her concerns for what administrators in her building/district will expect her to give up in order to implement the latest reform. In this instance, Tracey’s principal must first earn her *trust* before this veteran is likely to believe that this innovation is different from the rest. Both sharing data with Tracey to *create a sense of urgency* and appealing to her caring for her students could help convince Tracey to embrace this latest effort to improve student achievement. Furthermore, the principal should involve Tracey in *decisions* about the implementation of Baldrige both in her classroom and the building. It is also critical to demonstrate to Tracey that, although this is a long-term effort, their building will *celebrate short-term wins* along the way.

Finally, is Dena’s disagreement with her principal really resistance or simply a *struggle for power and scarce resources*? Teachers and administrators alike, who truly

want to collaborate to improve achievement for all students, must reconsider their historical “us versus them” *mental models*. Particularly in this urban public school, Dena’s principal must convey to her the *urgency* of working together to combat both the internal and external forces that work against improving their students’ achievement. Furthermore, with the increased opportunities for shared decision making that are afforded to Tracey and her fellow teachers, their *mental model* of being professionals should be expanded to include an increased sense of their responsibilities (Danielson, 1996). Those responsibilities might include collaborating with administrators to plan *professional development* opportunities that help teachers to operationalize the building/district *vision*. Moreover, all educational leaders and union leaders in Tracey’s building/district should work *constructively* to revise policies or procedures that could inhibit teachers from implementing the reforms.

Change resistance in schools should not result in principals perceiving a division of faculty members into the “good guys” and the “bad guys.” Moreover, principals should remember that although change resisters, like thunder clouds, may make leaders uncomfortable, they are not always bad (Zimmerman, 2004). Many teachers, because of their experiences and frames of reference, have legitimate reasons for resisting change. Therefore, it behooves educational leaders to work with teachers in respectful ways to address their concerns before launching into change initiatives. That accomplished, effective principals are poised to become “sources of both light and heat. They help teachers see the benefits of new initiatives while simultaneously insisting on progress” (Tomlinson, 1999, p. 114).

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