

## Dealing with Resisters Biggest Challenge for Staff Developers

By Joan Richardson

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Joellen Killion laughs heartily when asked to describe educators who are resistant to change. "Ooh, they roll their eyes. They roll their eyes to the top. They roll their eyes to the bottom. They roll their eyes so much you think they're going to roll right out of their heads," laughed Killion who oversees staff development for the Adams 12 Five Star Schools in Northglenn, Colorado.

Carlene Murphy, another veteran staff developer in Georgia, describes "false faces and false language."

Maybe you, too, have heard one of the phrases Murphy says she hears repeatedly:

*"There's no research to support this."  
"Our kids are different from their kids."  
"This just doesn't fit our school."  
"We tried that last year."  
"Whose idea was this?"*

Whether staff developers work in Colorado or Georgia, Massachusetts or Hawaii, British Columbia or Nova Scotia, the reality is the same: Change is hard work and not everyone wants to participate.

"Most resistance is rooted in fear. People want to hang onto that which has been comfortable," said Debbie Welch, a consultant in Boulder, Colorado

Resisters are afraid of risk, she said. They're afraid of exposing themselves as inadequate. They're afraid of feeling incompetent when they confront a change.

But the fear of change can be rooted in many different places, all agree. Knowing the type of resistance helps a staff developer determine how to deal with the resistance.

In **Beyond the Wall of Resistance: Unconventional Strategies that Build Support for Change** (Bard & Stephen, 1995), change consultant Rick Maurer describes three levels of resistance.

**Level One** is resistance to the change itself. "People simply oppose, question, or are confused by the change. There is no hidden agenda. Consider this low-grade resistance," he writes.

At this level, Maurer says individuals resist change for several reasons:

- They don't understand what the organization is trying to accomplish.
- They don't know why it's important.

- They like the status quo.
- They don't know what impact the change will have on them.
- They don't think the organization realizes what the change will cost in time or money.
- They have their own ideas about what the organization should do.
- They like the idea but believe the timing is wrong.

**Level Two** resistance is "deeper than the particular change at hand." This is the level where Maurer places most organizational resistance.

Organizations and individuals, he said, resist change at this level for several reasons:

- They believe the organization has made promises before that they haven't kept. "They question motives, read between the lines, and extract meanings from every word, nuance, or perceived slight."
- Change upsets the precarious balance of a bureaucratic culture.
- People resist change than runs counter to the rewards and punishments inside the organization. "If what is rewarded gets done, it's also true that what is punished is avoided," he writes.
- People are afraid they'll lose respect, status, power, or control.
- Individuals fear they will no longer be included. "When they believe that they will be cast out as a result of a change, they resist it," he writes.
- People are afraid that a change is really the start of something bigger and deeper.
- Individuals may not necessarily be resisting a particular change. Instead, they are worn out by taking on so many changes so rapidly.

**Level Three** is the most deeply embedded resistance and may seem the most overwhelming.

Some of the reasons for resisting change at this level are:

- Distrust is deeply entrenched and may go back through several generations of the organization.
- There is a conflict between values and visions. "What management wants and what the people who have to live with the change want may be far apart," he writes. When distrust and this conflict between values and visions collide, resistance is very difficult to deal with.

Veteran staff developers admit that they often have to fight the urge to ignore the hard-core resisters.

"Sometimes, we kill programs by wasting resources on people who just aren't going to change. We should have planned interventions. But we should not expend the majority of our time and effort on changing people who will never change," Killion said.

Welch said she's always cautious about dealing with individuals who are openly resistant to change. "I'm not going to spend my energy on the deadwood. I don't ignore them. I respect them. But I work with the wood that's alive," she said.

But Welch said if resistance takes the form of sabotage, that requires a different approach. "If there is sabotage, I would deal with it very directly. I would make it clear what's OK and

what's not OK to do in this school," Welch said.

Murphy said a first step in letting a teacher know "what's OK" is ensuring that a school has been clear about how decisions are made in that building. For example, many schools decide that 75 percent of the teachers must support an idea before it is implemented.

"If 75 percent of the staff decide they want to do this, then can 25 percent sit out? Is that an acceptable norm in that school? Is it fair to 25 percent of the children in the school?" Murphy asked.

Except for the outright saboteurs, however, veteran staff developers agree that there must be efforts to reach out and include those who resist change.

No single strategy works with every resister, however, so staff developers say they employ a variety of techniques.

Some resisters are most likely to change because of someone who is like them. "I try to look for a different voice. Sometimes, it just takes a different person to carry the message," Killion said. "Sometimes, it's not the main rah-rah person, but someone who's struggled a bit to put an idea into place."

Murphy agrees. "The teacher-trainer may actually get in the way. They may have habits and attitudes that just turn people off," she said.

Murphy also advises creating small implementation and study groups of four to five because it's harder to be a non-participant in groups that size. "Someone may come back once or twice and say they didn't have time to do that when all their peers had time to do it. When you begin to look bad in the eyes of your peers, you may start to change," she said.

Staff developers also need to design specific interventions for educators who listen to the innovation and worry about the implications for additional work or work that is "harder" than the work they've done before.

"These people need implementation strategies that look more like recipes," Killion said.

"To help them, it helps to have all the resources pulled together. Have them readily available so they don't have to hunt for them. Have coaches and support people available. Guide them through the process of sorting out what to keep and what goes."

"This is the group that benefits the most from time. If we can create time, then we can offer them time to make their plans. We won't win them all over this way but we will make it easier for them," she said.

When pitching a staff on an innovation, Murphy counsels honesty as a way to deal with distrustful individuals. "Tell them up front that you don't have all the answers and that you recognize that every teacher and every school adapts ideas to fit their own unique environment.

"You have to be honest with people and tell them that you don't know exactly how it's going to play out in their classroom. Tell them 'there are holes and blanks that I cannot fill in for

... you.' "

Most of all, Murphy counsels patience and understanding when dealing with the most difficult. "Everyone is inherently a good person and they want to do better at whatever they do. They're generally supportive and nurturing people or they wouldn't be in education in the first place.

"Some of them have just struggled too much and they aren't willing to struggle anymore," she said.

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