

Is Resistance to Change Really the Problem?

By Dennis Sparks

THE DEVELOPER - March 1997

"What do we do about all those people who don't want to learn and change?" is the most frequently asked question I receive in workshops on effective staff development. The fact of the matter is that, although comfort with the familiar is a basic human impulse, "resistance" to change is but a symptom of a larger set of more fundamental issues. These issues have to do with the poor quality of experiences that teachers and administrators have had with staff development and school improvement processes, the fact that participants in change efforts are often "done to" rather than with, and school cultures that share a set of norms, beliefs, and structures that are antithetical change.

I sometimes joke that teachers' skepticism about the latest staff development program is a sign that they are not brain dead. It only makes sense that numerous negative experiences would condition someone to avoid the source of that discomfort. We must face the fact that most teachers and administrators have not been well served by staff development efforts that have been advanced in the name of change.

Similarly, many teachers and administrators associate staff development and school improvement efforts with something that is done to them rather than something they are intimately involved in creating. As someone once observed, "People don't resist change; they resist being changed. Events that are linked in memory with a sense of powerlessness and disrespect of prior knowledge and experience are not likely to be well received.

Perhaps the most significant source of "resistance" are school cultures that impede innovation. These schools typically have norms that inhibit learning, experimentation, risk-taking, and collaboration. They also are dominated by limiting beliefs about students' and staff members' capacity to learn and perform at high levels.

At the core of a school's cultural problems typically is the lack of a compelling vision of what is possible. It's been said that someone who has a "why" can endure any "how"; few things are more important to motivation than a purpose that is regarded as profound and morally compelling.

While the problem of resistance must ultimately be addressed at its root causes, keeping the problem in perspective is important. How many faculty members are active resisters compared to those who are sitting on the fence waiting to see if the change initiative persists over time? Very often a small number of faculty individuals who are persistent and vocal can be more influential than their numbers warrant. Their negativism often has undue influence over the attitudes and helpfulness of their colleagues.

Here are several suggestions for addressing the root causes of resistance.

- Make certain the learning experiences of adults in the school are well designed, are likely to lead to on-the-job changes that improve student learning, and use a balance of learning processes (e.g., study groups, coaching, action research, training) to accommodate various goals and learning styles. There is no margin of error for poor

staff development.

- To the fullest extent possible, involve all effected individuals in decision making about important issues. Strive to reach consensus on significant issues such as the establishing a vision and goals that will stretch the staff's capacity.
- Audit the culture of the school system and of individual schools to see if they promote learning, risk taking, experimentation, and collaboration. Is time available for learning and working with colleagues? Is the level of trust and communication sufficiently high to enable the formation of a genuine community of learners? Are the school's ambitions for its students sufficiently high that interdependency and synergy among staff members is required for their accomplishment?
- Remember that staff learning is a tool, a means to accomplishing stretching goals. It is not a end in itself, a duty performed by staff members to fulfill a bureaucratic requirement for seat time in a workshop room.

Resisters are not the problem. While the best conceived change efforts will meet their share of resistance and some hostility that reluctance will be temporary if deeper issues such as the ones described above are addressed.

The next time you hear someone say, "The problem here is that teachers don't want to change," reflect on the larger organizational and structural issues that affect attitudes and performance. And remember that those complaining are also left off the hook by their diagnosis of the problem -- after all, what can be expected of me if *they* won't live up to *their* responsibilities. As is most often the case, change begins with us.

copyright 1997, National Staff Development Council

[Click for NSDC Home Page](#)