THE LEARNING
System

FOR A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY OF DISTRICT LEADERS ENSURING SUCCESS FOR ALL STUDENTS

COMPETING VALUES FORM OBSTACLES TO CHANGE

*Deep conversations uncover invisible goals*

BY VALERIE VON FRANK

When heart patients were given life-or-death advice, only one in seven was able to change his or her habits, according to a recent study. If the status quo is so powerful that people will stare down death, how can systems overcome inertia?

Two Harvard professors have explained what they term "immunity to change" — and what those willing to challenge their own and others' thinking can do to make a difference.

"Running alongside our visible and expressed values is a competing set of values we're unaware of," said Robert Kegan, professor of

"Major change requires alteration in some of our basic, underlying beliefs."

— *Robert Kegan*
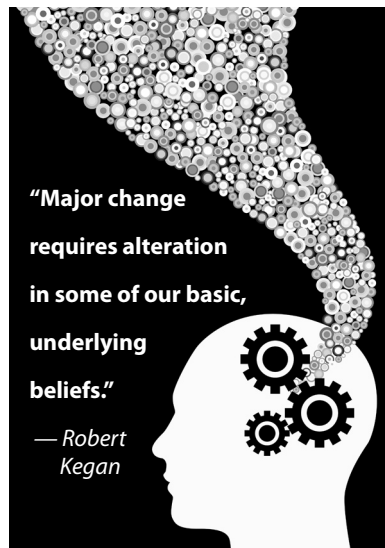
adult learning and professional development and co-author of *Immunity to Change: How to Overcome It and Unlock Potential in Yourself and Your Organization* (Harvard Business School Press, 2009). "Core values are a tremendous piece of leadership. Leaders need to be able to articulate values in a way that have flesh and bone connected to them — but that doesn't get you into the end zone by itself. Just wanting (change) isn't enough.

"We fail at accomplishing our visible goals because of our success in accomplishing *invisible* goals," he said in an interview.

Kegan tells this story as an illustration:

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NSDC's purpose: Every educator engages in effective professional learning every day so every student achieves.

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Read NSDC's definition of professional learning and stay up-to-date on NSDC's advocacy work by frequent visits to www.nsdc. org/connect/ legislative update.cfm.

Read Hayes Mizell's collected columns at www.nsdc.org/ library/authors/ mizell.cfm.

Leaders support learning teams by supporting teachers

In the final analysis, the National Staff Development Council's new definition of professional learning is primarily about teachers. Teachers will constitute most of the members of school-based learning teams. Increasing the quality, utility, and application of teachers' learning will be the teams' overarching objective. The teams' results will depend on how teachers use their team learning experiences to improve their classroom practice.

No one can predict how teachers will respond to team-based learning. That depends, in part, on how effectively superintendents, district-level administrators, and principals prepare teachers and organize teams. When teachers participate in any activity they experience as inefficient or inappropriate to the challenges they face in their classrooms, they dismiss it as a waste of time. Teachers are not a blank slate; they bear many scars from past participation in ineffective staff development. It is understandable, therefore, that teachers will approach school-based learning teams with many questions, if not skepticism.

Savvy school system and school administrators know that teachers are more productive when they feel secure. Teachers do not like to participate in structures and processes that lack specific goals and operational guidelines. NSDC's definition anticipates this by providing a clear statement of professional development's purpose and a broad step-by-step agenda for teams' work. There is more than enough room within these steps for teams to determine and pursue their unique learning goals and strategies. School systems and schools that take the definition's operational framework seriously and plan carefully for implementing each step with adequate support will go a long way toward alleviating teachers' concerns.

Teachers also will want to know that they can count on their learning teams in two ways. Is

their school system and school committed to team learning for the long term, or only until a problem arises or other priorities emerge? Teachers have seen other promising innovations rise and fall, and they may wonder if they can expect the same for school-based professional learning. Second, is their school system and school committed to ensuring that team meeting dates, times, and places remain constant? The first indicator that an innovation is in trouble is when the basics of meetings are no longer predictable. School administrators may cancel meetings, move the location, or change scheduled meeting times. Teachers will interpret inconsistencies as a clear signal that the school system or school does not believe team learning is important enough to protect.

School systems and school administrators will be responsible for efficiently organizing and launching teams, but teachers will determine the teams' productivity. They must remain focused on why the teams exist: "improving teaching and assisting all students in meeting challenging state academic achievement standards." Fidelity to that purpose will require a high degree of team organization, teacher collaboration, and accountability for applying team learning to classroom contexts. Such efforts are well beyond the experiences of many teachers who are accustomed to working in relative isolation. NSDC's definition seeks to compensate for this deficiency by requiring facilitation of teams and "coaching or other forms of assistance to support the transfer of new knowledge and skills to the classroom."

In the end, however, success will depend on the attitudes and behaviors teachers demonstrate in their learning teams. These factors will determine how effectively teams function and how powerfully they improve teachers' classroom practice. School systems and schools must do everything possible to organize and support school-based teams in ways that elicit teachers' best qualities.

The husbandry of resources

Pat Roy is co-author of *Moving NSDC's Staff Development Standards Into Practice: Innovation Configurations* (NSDC, 2003)

A colleague shared with me an interesting dilemma. Her district was committed to using meager state funding to target classrooms, yet the result was a system of sparse out-of-classroom support to aid teachers and principals as they worked to adopt new classroom and leadership practices.

Many superintendents may need to develop new skills to navigate the political currents within their districts and gain resources for professional learning that they can apply strategically where those resources will have the greatest benefits, especially in the face of funding cuts.

System leaders must learn to focus sparse resources on high-priority goals. Educators often are very busy with activities intended to pursue *all* strategic goals, and yet little actually changes. In fact, one study found that the size of a planning document is inversely related to the extent and quality of implementation (Fullan, 2006, p. 59).

The superintendent and district leadership need to focus improvement efforts on a small number of high-priority goals that can be accomplished with available resources (Roy & Hord, 2003, p. 174).

Leaders need to involve the school board, principals, and teachers in a consensus process to identify a coherent set of goals based on sound educational research rather than opinion or pet projects. Researchers recommend that leaders identify a *limited* number of improvement goals (Fullan, 2006; West, 1998; Schmoker, 2006). A limited number means two or three priority goals (West, 1998). When there are myriad goals, the impact of any single goal is minimized as resources are stretched across all the initiatives.

Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) researchers identified available resources as time, money, personnel, and materials. The study authors found that "there is a substantial and positive relationship between district-level leadership and student achievement when the superintendent, district office staff, and school board members do the 'right work' in the 'right way' " (Waters & Marzano, 2006, p. 20).

One way the superintendent and district office staff do the *right* work in the *right* way is to "use resources to support the goals for achievement and instruction" (Waters & Marzano, 2006, p. 16). When resources are dedicated and used for teacher and principal professional development in order to achieve district goals, students benefit. The research also found that improving achievement and instruction might mean cutting back or eliminating initiatives that are no longer aligned with district goals.

System leaders must make near-heroic efforts to be sure limited resources are used wisely to accomplish high-leverage goals. Leaders can focus resources — and must, if they are to reap the benefit of school improvement efforts and professional development.

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NSDC STANDARD

Resources: Staff development that improves the learning of all students requires resources to support adult learning and collaboration.

Read more about NSDC's standards at www.nsdc.org/ standards/index.cfm.

UNCOVERING PERSONAL BARRIERS TO CHANGE

1. **Name a goal that is very important for you to accomplish.**
   Think about what bothers you most about yourself (e.g. maybe you don't say "no" enough; or you don't tell people when you disagree on important matters; or you give yourself a hard time too often); or think about your wishes for yourself (e.g. maybe you wish you could delegate more frequently; or you long to share your real feelings and thoughts with more people; or you wish you could take things less personally). Now turn that *bother* or *wish* into a specific goal. Example: *"I want to say 'no' more often and do more of what's on my own list"; "I want to be a better delegator and be less stressed."* Enter your response into column #1.

2. **Acknowledge your part in the problem.**
   List all that you do and don't do that *undermines* your progress on your goal. Be as honest and precise as possible (not to beat up on yourself, but because these behaviors will help you to see your immunity to change in the next step). Example: *My goal is to be more straightforward in telling people what I really think. What do I do that works against that? I sugarcoat my words; I withhold what I really think; I say something once and if the person doesn't respond, I let it go.* Enter your answer into column #2.

3. **Discover your competing commitments.**
   3a. **Fill in your Worry Box:** Ask yourself, "What fears come up when I imagine doing the opposite of all that I wrote in column 2?" Example: *When I imagine saying things directly, I worry that I'll say the wrong thing, and that people will think I don't know what I'm talking about, that I'm uninformed, maybe even dumb.* (Another person might worry that he will make people uncomfortable, that they won't like him, or that people will, in turn, be more frank with her, and she's not sure she wants to hear that.) Enter your answer into the small box labeled Worry Box in column #3.

   3b. **See the "brakes" you apply to your own goal: The Competing Commitments.** Consider that you are not only worrying (a relatively passive activity) about these things, but that you are actively committed (not necessarily consciously) to *making sure the things you worry about never occur*. In the space below the Worry Box, reframe each fear you named into a statement that expresses an active commitment to keeping your fear from happening. Example: *"I worry I'll say the wrong thing, and that people will think I'm dumb"* becomes: *"I am committed to being seen by others as smart, or easygoing, or likeable."*(Or *"I worry that my being more straightforward will lead people to be too critical in return"* becomes this: *"I am committed to people withholding the negative feedback they have for me."*) Enter each restated worry into column #3 under the Worry Box.

4. **Consider your immunity to change.**
   Look across these three columns. You should see now why you are not making the progress you want, and it is not because of the reasons you have probably thought. A part of you wants to accomplish an important goal and another part of you is expending just as much energy working against that goal — but for a very good reason: You are trying to protect yourself from what feels like disaster, just the work of any "immune system."

Source: Robert Kegan.

1. MY IMPROVEMENT GOAL

2. THINGS I DO (OR FAIL TO DO) THAT WORK AGAINST MY IMPROVEMENT GOAL

3. MY COMPETING COMMITMENTS

WORRY BOX

Competing values form obstacles to change

A large school district in California gathered its leadership team to discuss how to improve learning for Hispanic students, who were about three-fourths of the district's population. The team, using Kegan and Lahey's approach, identified first their expectations for the students. Then they identified obstacles that were getting in the way.

The next steps, though, are key. The group identified worries and hidden motivations, thinking such as "I'm afraid learning new ways of operating will lead me to feel incompetent" and "I don't feel like we have time to do the extra work." These were the third column in the chart that is the core of Kegan and Lahey's process (see tool, pp. 4-5).

The final step was to begin to identify a few small actions members could take that would "test" these competing assumptions that were holding them back from change and begin to allow them to see whether they could get to their main goal by demonstrating to themselves that these underlying assumptions might not hold true.

But the California group was coming to the end of a long day of work, and their comments about what fears were holding them back from their goals, Kegan thought, didn't really take them to the core of their resistance.

The next morning, an administrator approached and confided in Kegan, "If we're really honest about having a genuine commitment to higher expectations, we need to also recognize our commitment to a *pobrecito,* 'poor little ones,' culture — one that says, 'These children have so many burdens, how can we put more stress on them by creating a more rigorous program?' "

That breakthrough, when the administrator was willing to share it with the group, led to a much deeper discussion. "It was difficult to hear, but many agreed with him, and said, 'We've never had a way to talk about this,' " Kegan said. "It helped them to see you could undermine kids not out of disregard, but out of misplaced expressions of love.

"The process starts out so reasonable — identify barriers — that people say, 'Oh, we've done this a hundred times. …' " But going beyond identifying barriers to revealing competing values that are being successfully supported is critical.

He and Lisa Lahey, researchers in adult learning and change leadership, contend that people's inability to reach a goal, to carry through on a resolution, is due to an underlying commitment to a competing goal that prevents change. The competing commitment, of which most people aren't even aware, holds them back. The unconscious assumption is that to follow through on the new commitment would jeopardize the more deeply held, competing commitment, and so individuals effectively sabotage themselves over a perspective Kegan and Lahey term the "Big Assumption." The Big Assumption is a belief that we don't even question, but accept as an essential truth. Once people learn to recognize their own Big Assumptions, they can progress not only toward their goal, but in personal growth and development.

After uncovering Big Assumptions, the next step is to initiate change. Using small experiments built around the competing assumption, people begin to experience any flaws in the competing assumption and then to make the changes necessary to realize their main goals, Kegan said.

For instance, as educators in the California system put in place a little more rigor for the students, they might begin to see that the students rise to the challenge and don't crumble. That outcome then leads to adults altering their assumptions at a collective level.

"Once you have identified and unearthed hidden motivations," Kegan said, "you begin experiments to see if you can modify your behavior. It can lead to bigger development of oneself and of the system as a whole." The change allows people not only to potentially achieve their

Once people learn to recognize their own Big Assumptions, they can progress in personal growth and development.

Stating beliefs, unmasking assumptions

On the National Public Radio series, *This I Believe,* a listener told his story of encountering an aged blind woman on the streets of a major city. She stood out of the way of the morning commuters, and as he approached, she put out her hand and began to speak.

Having noticed her as he approached, this first-generation immigrant's immediate reaction was to reach into his pocket. As soon as she spoke one word, "Please…," he pressed a bill into her hand. But she shook her head.

What she needed, she said, was directions.

This story illustrates how we perceive our place in the world. *What assumptions was the commuter operating under? What questions might he ask himself to examine his perceptions? How might he act in small ways to modify his behavior to test his assumptions?*

main goal but to change their underlying way of thinking to continue to learn in new ways, what Kegan called "creating a transformation in meaning-making systems."

The framework rests on a developmental theory of mindsets, Kegan said, that expresses the neural plasticity of the brain. In other words, people's minds continue to develop beyond adolescence, a breakthrough idea just a couple of decades ago. With that assumption, Kegan, a psychologist, has focused his work on creating ways to make that growth intentional.

For systems, growth begins, of course, with individuals. Kegan said organizations often are able to identify teams of about 12 to 18 key leaders. That group then completes a "focus 360" review, with each individual talking to peers, those who report to them, those to whom they report, and a significant person in their private lives to determine a single change goal — "one big thing" they could change to become significantly better at what they do.

While some might balk at revealing matters they perceive as very personal, he said he points out to groups that everyone has worked for a leader with "issues" that staff had to work around. When people recognize that they may be the person someone in the organization is finding impedes progress, they become more willing to examine their own mental models, he said.

Work teams then discuss their individual immunities around a shared goal, following up with a look at group immunities, Kegan said. He and Lahey have spent the years since writing *How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work: Seven Languages for Transformation* (Jossey-Bass, 2001) working with leaders and teams across various cultures and fields within many systems refining their process and seeing its impact.

"A system can overcome its immunity," Kegan said. "This is a powerful launch pad for learning." ■

> **NSDC'S BELIEF**
>
> Sustainable learning cultures require skillful leadership.

For more information, see www.mindsatwork. com

Strategic work aims at education federal policy makers

NSDC's strategic goal of affecting policy about the most powerful forms of professional learning has taken a giant leap with the launch of a new newsletter. Funded by College Board, *NSDC Policy Points* will be sent to members of Congress and their education staffs to help them develop greater understanding of federal government's role in supporting educator learning that directly affects student achievement. Each issue will examine a specific aspect of professional learning and its relevance to policy making.

The quarterly newsletter will be publicly accessible online at www. nsdc.org/policypoints/ for members to read and download. NSDC invites members to share these newsletters with state-level policy makers and other key decision makers within their own spheres of influence.

The first issue, published in January, establishes the importance of professional learning for our nation's educators and illuminates
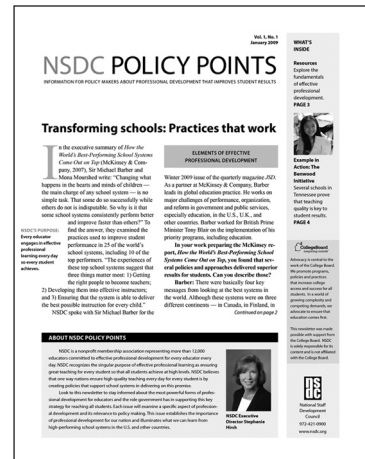
what we can learn from high-performing school systems in the U.S. and other countries.

NSDC believes every educator can make a difference in how teachers learn by having our voices heard about the definition of quality professional learning and its link to student achievement. To read NSDC's definition of professional learning and stay up-to-date on the organization's advocacy work, visit www.nsdc.org/connect/legislative-update.cfm.