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EVERY EDUCATOR ENGAGES IN EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING EVERY DAY SO EVERY STUDENT ACHIEVES

## Leading teachers during tough times



### 5 STRATEGIES HELP LEADERS SUPPORT THEIR TEACHERS

anxious, and frustrated. When staff in schools harbor these feelings, it is difficult to hide them from students and community members. Recent news stories about teachers and other public workers protesting reductions in public education funding and roll backs in bargaining rights have brought students' voices into the streets, council chambers, and government offices.

In tough times, coaches and teacher leaders often become sounding boards for those who want to vent or to seek assistance. As influential leaders in schools and school systems, coaches and teacher leaders are perceived as people who can change or fix things. This is a high honor and has often been demonstrated by these key leaders through their daily interactions with their colleagues. How leaders respond and facilitate interactions during difficult times can alleviate some of the pain people experience. Leadership in difficult times is even more challenging when leaders' own positions may be in jeopardy. This is particularly true for many school coaches.

By Joellen Killion

**T**imes are tough in schools, particularly in North America, where budgets for public education are being cut in state and provincial government funds. The size of these cuts leaves little room for avoiding reductions in staff. In many school systems, the decisions about how to reduce staff are clearly delineated within contractual language and agreements between school systems and staff associations. Staff reductions anywhere often begin a domino effect of changes that leave many staff unsettled,

#### 1. Align words with actions

Coaches and teacher leaders want to support their colleagues by maintaining a forum for honest interaction and a safe place for expressing personal concerns. They consider their priorities and goals for this support and choose appropriate strategies that are professionally respectful and personally supportive. To accomplish these goals, they will use strategies that honor individual perspectives, maintain

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civility, and arouse compassion in our conversations with one another.

## 2. Listen sincerely

Perhaps no other strategy is more important now than listening to one another, not with mind or ears, but rather with hearts. Deep listening calls for silence; the listener doesn't interrupt to tell his or her own story or respond on a rational level. It calls for the listener to be centered, to hold the person speaking within the listener's heart. Listeners can do this by putting all their energy and focus into the speaker and to receive the message spoken without interpreting it, arguing with it, or even repeating the content. Rather, the listener accepts, acknowledges, and honors the person by recognizing how the speaker feels. Listeners use patience to wait for the speaker to continue rather than interrupting with their desire to say something insensitive, such as, "I am sure it will be all right," or, "No one likes change except a wet baby."

Tough times call for coaches and teacher leaders to acknowledge the scope of what they can control and influence. In working with individuals or teams, they have substantial influence and minimal control. What they do control is their own feelings, words, and actions. They influence others through their behaviors. Being caught up in the frenzy and exhibiting negativity makes it more difficult for leaders to listen deeply and honestly. Their stances influence how they are perceived. Neutrality opens them to understand fully the perceptions of others and makes them more inviting partners in these difficult times. Coaches and teacher leaders can be honest about their feelings, yet want to be cautious about projecting their feelings on anyone else.

## 3. Recognize concerns

Remembering that people respond to change in unique ways is particularly helpful to coaches and teacher leaders in tough times. The Concerns-Based Adoption Model's Stages of Concern help us understand that educators respond to change in different ways with a ladder of concerns. The first type of concern is frequently a personal one. Because educators serve students and their families, community members are surprised when any educator thinks about himself or herself first. The politically correct response is to express worry about the consequences for students from these changes. Increased class size, fewer enrichment opportunities, reduction in fine arts programs, and pay-to-play are just some of the negative effects on students. This is what we want educators to speak about when budget reductions occur. Yet, they have personal concerns. Educators have families to feed, mortgages to pay, and college tuition bills

for themselves and their children.

Coaches and teacher leaders recognize and accept that personal concerns are natural responses to change. Honoring these responses and making room for their expression in interactions conveys personal support for the speaker. When coaches and teacher leaders take time to listen and to understand the scope of an individual's concerns, they help the speaker know that someone cares for him or her as a person. Change research suggests that recognizing and addressing concerns in the way they are expressed is one strategy for moving concerns from the personal level to the other levels of task and impact. Recognizing and addressing change occurs best by listening deeply.

Teaching about change and how people respond to it is another strategy for responding to those experiencing it. Coaches and teacher leaders might use opportunities in team meetings, faculty meetings, and even in one-on-one conversations to ask permission to share a few key ideas about change. Chief among those ideas would be that change is a deeply personal experience, so how one person responds will not match how another responds. Another key idea is the notion of personal concern often coming before task or impact concerns. This means that someone experiencing change is likely to be self-focused rather than student-focused. Understanding this principle about change helps a coach or teacher leader avoid judging a colleague for worrying about his or her own well-being.

## 4. Make sense of transitions

William Bridges, author of *Transitions: Making sense of life's changes* (2004) and *Managing transitions: Making the most of change* (2009), has researched and written about change in personal and organizational settings. One of the most troubling aspects of change, according to Bridges, is that organizations focus on the change and less on the transition. The change addresses the structure, people, organization, budget, programs, and environment, while the transition addresses the emotional side of change initiatives. Bridges describes it as situational. The focus on the transition — how people face the changes around them — distinguishes a constructive change from a destructive change. Transition is psychological.

Bridges identifies three stages of the transition. The first phase is ending. Endings provide opportunities to celebrate and mark the elimination of beloved programs or services. Endings allow letting go. The next stage is called the neutral zone. It resembles the fields in winter lying fallow while the earth rebuilds by composting nutrients left from the harvested crops. Many people experiencing transition are frustrated with the loss of clarity or drive during the neutral stage, yet it is a natural part of growth. The last phase is beginning. In this stage, people are refocusing, healing, re-

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### Learning Forward BELIEF

Sustainable learning cultures require skillful leadership.

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grouping, and starting afresh. In the beginning stage, people set new goals, have high energy, and commit to their work. Kurt Lewin (1947) refers to this process of change as unfreezing, changing, and refreezing.

Coaches may be hesitant to talk with colleagues about losses, yet doing so can help colleagues enter the ending stage. Encouraging others to share what they valued about what is being lost and what they will miss most begins the process of letting go. Coaches may want to help people prepare for the neutral stage by explaining what happens naturally during that phase. They might want to encourage colleagues to meet together during the summer, write in a journal, or take time for personal reflection. Coaches too will want to plan for the new beginning that will begin next school year and encourage each colleague to engage in both individual and professional goal setting as well as school and team goal setting.

## 5. Honor choices

Each person makes a choice about how he or she responds to change, and that choice must be honored. Some respond from the perspective of a victim. Victims believe they are at the mercy of the forces around them and have no ability to alter their fate. They often take a negative and helpless approach to change. Others take a more proac-

tive approach to change, recognizing that they are able to make choices about their situation. They can choose to take action to make the best of their situation. They may begin polishing their resume if they know their position is being eliminated. They may ask others to remember them as they talk with colleagues in other schools or districts. They might even consider other positions or opportunities both within and outside education.

Tough times test personal and professional strengths. Coaches and teacher leaders support their colleagues in tough times by aligning their words with actions, listening deeply, recognizing concerns, focusing on the transition process, and honoring individuals regardless of how they choose to handle the changes they experience.

## References

**Bridges, W. (2004).** *Transitions: Making sense of life's changes*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo.

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**Lewin, K. (1947).** Group decision and social change. In *Readings in Social Psychology*, T. M. Newcomb & E. L. Hartley (eds.). New York: Henry Holt and Co., 340-44.

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# Tool kit

## FOR TOUGH TIMES

We have amassed a collection of Learning Forward resources that support Joellen Killion's advice for helping your teaching staff get through these difficult times. Simply click the title of each resource to go directly to the download page, which is free with your membership, or available for purchase for nonmembers. Page 6 includes a discussion protocol to help you review and discuss resources with your team.

More resources are available in our searchable archives and Evidence Database.



Photo © GERRY BOUGHAN/Shutterstock  
Demonstrators express their opinions in Los Angeles in February.

### FOCUS ON THE TRANSITION PROCESS

#### ARTICLES

**4 key strategies help educators overcome resistance to change**  
*Tools for Schools*, WINTER 2011

**Blending together, step by step: Principal uses professional learning to combine two school cultures into one**  
*JSD*, JANUARY 2009

**Research can build optimism about change**  
*The Learning System*, NOVEMBER 2007

**Understand, anticipate the process of change**  
*The Learning Principal*, NOVEMBER 2005

**10 do and don't assumptions about change**

*The Learning Principal*, NOVEMBER 2005

**Understanding change process key to changing practice**  
*The Learning System*, NOVEMBER 2005

**Anticipate change: Design a transition meeting**  
*JSD*, FALL 2004

#### TOOLS

**School's orientation to change**  
*Tools for Schools*, WINTER 2011

**6 considerations for delivering a change message**  
*Tools for Schools*, WINTER 2011

#### BLOG POSTS

**Professional learning resolutions for the new year**  
JANUARY 10, 2011

**Make clear your theory of change**  
APRIL 1, 2010

**Professional development change we can believe in**  
JULY 28, 2010

#### WEBINAR

**Creating conditions for changes in practice**

### CREATE HONEST AND SAFE WORK ENVIRONMENTS

#### ARTICLES

**Trust matters — for educators, parents, and students**  
*Tools for Schools*, FALL 2010

**A learning community is built on trust**  
*The Learning Principal*, APRIL 2009

**The trust factor: Schools change when coaches build relationships with teachers**  
*The Learning Principal*, FEBRUARY 2008

**Math facilitator adds trust and multiplies effectiveness**  
*Teachers Teaching Teachers*, SEPTEMBER 2005

#### TOOLS

**Let's get acquainted**  
**A portrait of trust**  
*Teachers Teaching Teachers*, NOVEMBER 2010

**Trust factors**  
*Teachers Teaching Teachers*, OCTOBER 2009

#### BOOKS

**The life cycle of leadership: How to survive and thrive in today's schools**  
*Learning Forward*, 2010

**Change, lead, succeed**  
*NSDC*, JULY 2010

#### BLOG POSTS

**Make professional learning a joyful experience**  
AUGUST 9, 2010

**Promoting effective teamwork means laying a solid foundation**  
JANUARY 5, 2010

### MAXIMIZE RESOURCES

#### ARTICLES

**The changing role of central office staff: Administrators provide a crucial link to learning resources**  
*The Learning System*, SPRING 2010

**The husbandry of resources**  
*The Learning System*, MARCH 2009

**The gift of time: School get creative to carve out collaborative time for teachers**  
*The Learning Principal*, NOVEMBER 2008

**Role of the school-based coach: Resource provider**  
*Teachers Teaching Teachers*, APRIL 2007

**No. 1 resource has a human face**  
*Teachers Teaching Teachers*, APRIL 2007

**Time to learn from and with each other**  
*The Learning Principal*, APRIL 2007

**Finding time for teams**  
*JSD*, JANUARY 2007

**Dollars and sense**  
*JSD*, SUMMER 2003

**What your district's budget is telling you**  
*JSD*, SUMMER 2003

**Leading edge: Ask for more, but focus on doing better with what's at hand**  
*JSD*, SUMMER 2003

**Think outside the clock: Create time for professional learning**

**How to find time**

**Schools that have found time**

**Districts that have found time**  
*Tools for Schools*, AUGUST/SEPTEMBER 2002

**How to figure the cost of professional development**  
*JSD*, SPRING 2002

**Cracking the calendar**  
*JSD*, SUMMER 2000

**Time: It's made, not found**  
*JSD*, FALL 1999

#### TOOLS

**Achieving NSDC's resources standard**  
*The Learning Principal*, DECEMBER/JANUARY 2010

**Resources about time**  
*Tools for Schools*, AUGUST/SEPTEMBER 2002

#### BOOKS

**Finding time for professional learning**  
*NSDC*, 2008

**From the inside out: Learning from the positive deviance in your organization**  
*NSDC*, 2004

#### BLOG POSTS

**Find strength in numbers**  
MARCH 30, 2009

#### WEBINARS

**Stretching PD dollars**

**Creating effective teacher professional development in tough economic times**

### LISTEN DEEPLY

#### ARTICLES

**Lessons from a coach: Listening can cultivate growth**  
*Teachers Teaching Teachers*, FEBRUARY 2010

**Collaborative culture: Raise the level of conversation by using paraphrasing as a listening skill**  
*JSD*, SPRING 2008

**Math coach adds listening skills to her repertoire**  
*Teachers Teaching Teachers*, APRIL 2006

**Practice the discipline of committed listening**  
*The Learning Principal*, DECEMBER 2005

**Listen carefully: Good communication skills build relationships that foster school improvement**  
*Tools for Schools*, OCTOBER/NOVEMBER 2002

#### TOOLS

**Listen fully**  
*Teachers Teaching Teachers*, APRIL 2006

**Listen to understand teachers' unique needs**  
*Teachers Teaching Teachers*, NOVEMBER 2005

**Resources about listening**  
**Listening fully**  
*Tools for Schools*, OCTOBER/NOVEMBER 2002

# A discussion protocol

**T**his protocol provides a means for a group to discuss a short reading, such as one of the resources provided on pp. 4-5. While this strategy works best for articles, it can be adapted for a book by breaking the book into chapters.



- 1 Have an entire group read silently.
- 2 If the group is large, break down the larger group into smaller groups of five to six participants for this discussion.
- 3 Invite one participant in each group to begin by selecting one idea that they most want to share with others. There should be no dialogue during this sharing. *Time: 2 to 3 minutes.*
- 4 In a round-robin fashion, the next person suggests another idea. Again, no dialogue during this sharing. *Time: 2 to 3 minutes.*
- 5 Continue this until every participant has had an opportunity to talk. Continue doing rounds of sharing until participants have exhausted their comments or your time has expired.

Source: Adapted from the National School Reform Faculty, [www.nsrffharmony.org](http://www.nsrffharmony.org).



## Virtual relationships: Where and when do your best conversations take place?

Teacher leaders meet with classroom teachers regularly throughout the school year to gain insight on new practices, ideas, and perspectives; hone and refine skills; and discuss student needs. Some proponents of online networks declare that relationships established or sustained online can continue to support these types of connectivity, collaboration, and learning. Others have common objections — its disruptiveness, lack of authentic face-to-face interaction, and potential to overshadow what is labeled “real” life. At the same time, there is a clear understanding that social media are here to stay. In our current culture and economy, virtual relationships will increasingly connect people across media and influence how students live and learn.

In the popular book, *Wikinom-*

*ics: How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything* (2006), Don Tapscott and Anthony Williams outline four principles that characterize virtual networks: being open, peering, sharing, and acting globally. These four principles are inherent in successful educator collaborations. They demonstrate a new age where people can and are expected to become actively involved in their own learning. They also provide a powerful lens for considering how to best implement the Collaboration standard.

The standard for collaboration states that professional development that improves student achievement integrates three critical elements: social interaction, interpersonal support, and creative problem solving. The Collaboration standard focuses professional learning on the core elements of teaching, emphasizing that collaboration as well as new forms of

mass communication are essential to integrating these principles to produce the results desired. Districts, school leaders, teacher leaders, instructional technology specialists, and coaches have the opportunity to ascertain and develop the knowledge and skills necessary to improve the quality of collaborative work.

### Being open

Being open to new ideas, thinking, and tools moves teacher leaders into a new space for exploring and sharing with other teachers a wide array of possibilities for staying both current and relevant when meeting students’ learning needs. This self-directed, passion-driven approach to learning can be developed through online relationships by contributing or subscribing to blogs, wikis, and podcasts focused on a variety of education topics. Moving

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beyond conventional learning and viewing the use of online tools for the purpose of better connecting people can be a difficult shift for some. It is, however, this vulnerability to change that opens up the opportunity for interpersonal support among peers that will strengthen collegial efforts.

### Peering

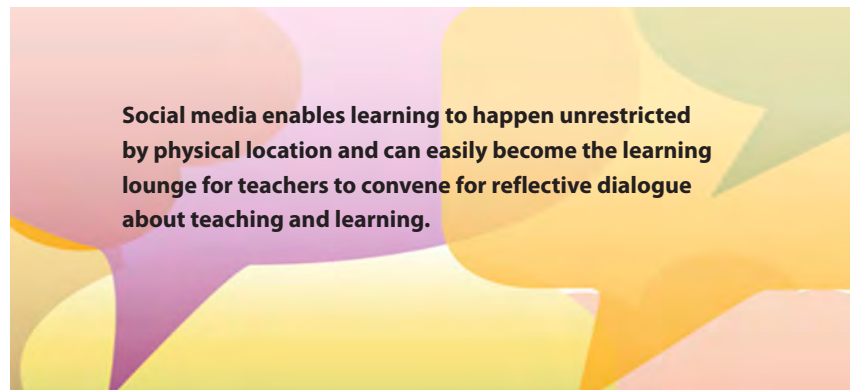
Harnessing ideas and opinions from a virtual peer group can be a non-threatening way for teacher leaders to express thoughts, challenges, and perspectives around topics while gaining perspectives and resources. Building an online professional learning network allows teacher leaders and coaches to enlist others in assisting and supporting their efforts to move classroom teachers beyond their own knowledge and skills and benefit from the expertise of a larger group of professionals. Educators can connect online in a variety of social network sites, including Twitter, Facebook,

YouTube, LinkedIn, and Flickr. At times, virtual relationships can transition into face-to-face relationships. Participation in area-sponsored or content-focused meetups and Tweetups are examples of opportunities for offline relationships to develop. These events are widely attended by conference participants who follow

the backchannel, a real-time online conversation that takes place at the same time as a conference session, typically on Twitter.

### Communities of practice

Online communities are popping up everywhere among professional and personal associations focused on a defined community with a common interest in a specified practice. They have been designed to build, engage,



and sustain communities of practice using Ning, Moodle, or other social web sites. These new platforms are customized to allow educators to capture and share best practices, collectively solve problems, cultivate professional development, and network with colleagues. Most sites are comprehensive and provide subscribers with a variety of opportunities to collaborate and share resources while also offering other learning opportunities, including webinars, virtual conferences, and discussion groups. These environments approach learning as a social endeavor, determining solutions and building innovations in common areas of concern. By collectively expanding the knowledge base of educators, these kinds of virtual relationships can assist teacher leaders in moving agendas forward and add value to current instructional goals.

### Acting globally

No longer do teachers need to feel isolated in their own classrooms or even limited to the knowledge of their own school or city limits. Internationally, educators are convening online to connect, collaborate, and create with one another out of a desire to engage with others with widely different perspectives. This social learning has allowed groups of educators, including superintendents, principals, teachers, and support staff, to meet weekly online to chat about specific topics, exchange resources, and discuss education dilemmas. This new opportunity

allows educators to collaborate beyond their schools with other professionals from Frisco, Texas, to Stuttgart, Germany, to Windsor, Ontario, to New Milford, New Jersey.

Apart from networking, marketing, and branding, virtual online relationships allow educators to contribute to the learning of others while acquiring social media competencies. Making time for teachers to participate in extended learning opportunities and engage in productive collaborative community continues to be an area in need of improvement. Social media enables learning to happen unrestricted by physical location and can easily become the learning lounge for teachers to convene for reflective dialogue about teaching and learning. By both harnessing and leveraging the use of virtual relationships and multiple forms of social learning, educators can continue to model and mimic the same innovative learning expectations we have for students, thus becoming 21st-century educators that serve 21st-century students.

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Tapscott, D., & Williams, A. (2006). *Wikinomics: How mass collaboration changes everything*. New York, NY: Penguin.

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### COLLABORATION STANDARD

Staff development that improves the learning of all students provides educators with the knowledge and skills to collaborate.



## With a wardrobe of strategies, we can select one that fits

**By Valerie von Frank**

**Q** What coaching strategies work best for you?

What's helped the most is having a variety of strategies. You have to pick the right one for the right moment with the right person. Knowing which is based on building relationships.

I spent the whole first year building relationships. Getting into the classroom is a huge accomplishment. At first, I would go in with any excuse related to instruction. We'd just had a social studies curriculum adoption, so I would tell them I would deliver materials to them rather than have them wait for the custodial staff to do it. I would listen and watch, then later compliment the teacher on something she was doing. In the second year, teachers started coming to me.

The principal and I now do daily walk-throughs using forms we created specifically related to our school improvement plan. The form focuses on objectives, such as whether students are engaged, objectives posted, and whether the teacher is differentiating instruction. We watch and take notes, and then we both go out of the class and fill out the form together. We always offer two positives and an idea or a question. Next, one of us goes in and takes over the class and the teacher comes to talk to the other in the hallway, getting immediate feedback. Then we both go back in the classroom, and the person who's taken over is implementing the idea so the teacher can see it in action. We make it a goal to see each teacher once a week.

At first, some teachers did not want their instruction interrupted, so we picked four teachers and asked if they would help us learn this process.

Within two months, other teachers we said wouldn't want to do in-out coaching asked why we hadn't come to their classrooms.

It's not always the right time to do in-out coaching, so sometimes we might leave a note, catch a teacher after school, or whisper coach while the teacher is teaching. We have teachers observe one another if the principal or coach is there to whisper to them throughout about what they are seeing. A lot of coaching is just asking questions.

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