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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

Times 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 in-

fluence 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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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.

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