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

## Turn resistance into positive energy

By Valerie von Frank

For the principal facing the watch-checker in the back of the room or looking again at the empty seat of someone whose “illness” often seems to be brought on by an all-staff professional learning day, resistance can seem as surmountable as Mount Everest.

But resistance is a kind of energy, according to expert facilitator Carolyn McKanders, co-director of the Center for Adaptive Schools. And energy can be used as a positive, she said, if a facilitator has the skill to channel it. From passive resistance to direct pushback, the most effective way to turn resistance into useable energy is first through skillful communication, McKanders said. Principals who become expert communicators then can dig into resources such as polarity management to add tools to their toolkit.

McKanders said principals first need to build the requisite mental maps of collaboration to approach issues within the group and take an adaptive schools approach to smoothing the way for cooperation.



“When people are stuck in their own perspectives and not listening to others, they are polarized,” she said. “They can only acknowledge their own perspective. They need to be honored and then to have their position expanded. They need to understand that we need each other, that all voices are useful voices.”

For principals to help others expand their perspectives, they often have

to make a mental shift themselves. McKanders said the biggest understanding leaders need is the first mental shift: the power of presuming positive intention in the face of resistance.

### Presume positive intentions

“We first have to shut out the mental noise of judgment and presume positive intention,” McKanders said. “Presuming positive intentions does not mean people are right. You have to set aside judgment and see merit in where the other person is based on their perspective.”

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“Right away, that makes the principal more resourceful because he assumes the person is seeing something the principal is not seeing, and it makes him *curious*; it makes him inquire into the person’s perspective, to learn more about that perspective.”

By recognizing that the other person simply has another perspective rather than an oppositional view, the principal can be inquisitive, keep an open mind, and ask questions about *why* the other person came to that conclusion. Taking an inquiring approach, McKanders said, leads to practicing the next norms.

### Pause, paraphrase, and inquire

The pause is a useful tool to quiet both the room and the leader’s mind, McKanders said. When the brain experiences distress, the prefrontal cortex is flooded with cortisol, creating a stress response and inhibiting thought and reasoning.

Robert Garmston, co-founder of the Center for Adaptive Schools, writes that pausing and taking a deep breath allows the facilitator the opportunity to get oxygen to the brain. Garmston recommends waiting three to five seconds before responding or asking a question to allow time to think (Garmston with von Frank, 2012, p. 84).

The paraphrase then, McKanders said, should show that the facilitator cares about what the person said, whether or not the facilitator agrees.

“I am honoring your opinion and you know I understand you and that I am attempting to understand your perspective,” she said. “I must presume the other person has capacity and forethought in what they’re saying. Learning that pattern is extremely important for communication, especially when there is tension.”

Some beginning stems for paraphrases, according to Garmston and McKanders, are:

- “So...”
- “You’re thinking...”
- “It’s really important to you that...”

McKanders said by paraphrasing and inquiring into the individual’s reasons for thinking the way he or she does, the leader hones communication.

“This leads you to become a skillful listener,” McKanders said, “and that’s what we want in a leader.”

### Pose invitational questions

Seek specificity about the resister’s point of view, McKanders said. Explore the person’s thinking, assumptions, interpretations, and try to have the individual inquire into his or her own thinking.

Garmston suggests questioning using exploratory words such as *some, might, seems, or possible*: “What might be some purposes of X” and using open-ended questions such as “Please say more about ...,” “I’m curious about ...,” “I’d like to hear more about,” or “Are you saying ...” (Garmston with von Frank, 2012, p. 85).

McKanders said the objective is to help resisters get from an egocentric to a more macrocentric perspective.

### Use data

Inquiry also leads to asking for and using data, McKanders said. Ask resisters to back up statements with data, and use data as a third point in the room to relieve stress that may be building between two opposing viewpoints.

The third point is a way of diverting attention from a confrontation between two sides so that the sides are not in direct opposition. By pointing to the data on a board, to a piece of paper, or to an abstract idea, visual contact is broken and people’s attention shifts.

“Now we’re looking away from each other and looking at the data and it really lessens the tension and shifts the focus,” McKanders said. “It becomes a conversation about *that*. You can say, ‘Let’s explore these data together.’ That’s a huge understanding.”

### Keep cool

Opening the channel of communication is sometimes difficult when a person continues to argue, McKanders said. While presuming positive intentions and the pause/paraphrase/inquire strategies sound reasonable, in the heat of a moment or with a relationship at work in the background, that may be more difficult.

Practice the pause, she said, and paraphrase, paraphrase, paraphrase. Honor what arises in the meeting, but balance that with the group’s needs.

“A confrontation creates negative energy and then you have to pull rank or use your role authority and coerce or embarrass the person into stopping,” McKanders said. “It may take several paraphrases. Attempt to understand several times. Then simply say, ‘Let’s agree to talk about this right after the meeting,’ or ‘Let’s set up a time to continue this discussion tomorrow.’ The facilitator cannot let one member hold the group hostage.”

Outside of the meeting, McKanders stressed, the work focuses less on immediate communication and more on longer-term strategies.

### Learn about polarity management

Much of education focuses on getting the “right” answer to the problem in front of us, whether it’s on the math quiz or the history exam. Polarity management is an

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### Learning Forward BELIEF

Successful leaders create and sustain a culture of learning.

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approach that “uses resistance as a valuable resource for significant, sustainable change” (Johnson, 1998).

Polarity management encourages adding both/and thinking to either/or approaches to a problem. Johnson says, “Those resisting have an equally valid, alternate view of reality...It is obvious to them that they are right...Their resistance is legitimate and they know it.” So, he suggests, the job is recognizing the values and fears involved in the “silos” that each side is promoting and avoiding.

Polarity management helps principals recognize that when there are tensions, there’s nothing wrong.

“Tensions are unavoidable in social systems,” McKanders said. “Conflict is a manifestation of interdependence. The fact that you are creating a collaborative professional community causes conflict.

“If you bring together people with differing opinions and diverse perspectives, it creates friction. As a leader, you want to support groups in remaining resourceful when these tensions are present. You want tensions around diverse perspectives. You want diverse ideas to be present in meetings so that the best idea rises to the top. Adults don’t know how to do that. What we are taught erroneously is that when someone has a different idea, we have to get angry or be afraid. Groups that are the most diverse are the most adaptive.”

### Build relationships

Being adaptive, however, requires a foundation built on relationships. McKanders asked one principal in a particularly challenged district what was behind the progress she was making in her school. “I build relationships,” the principal answered. “Not with the just staff as a whole, but individual relationships — actually going and making personal contact with people and saying, ‘Hi, how are you today? What’s going on in your life, and what support might you need?’ ”

McKanders cited another inner city school where the principal got blisters on her feet in September making daily visits to classrooms in the large school to be available to teachers and to speak to students. The impact was an immediate difference in a tough school climate that helped teachers to own the school vision and mission.

Both situations fostered a better school climate, which created greater camaraderie and less resistance for changes the principal wanted to make.

### Have a clear mission and vision

Teachers can be frustrated when they perceive that the principal is not clear about where the school is headed, McKanders said. They may feel frustrated when they feel unheard, when they feel unprepared to do what they are

### The seven norms of collaboration

1. Pausing
2. Paraphrasing
3. Posing questions
4. Putting ideas on the table
5. Providing data
6. Paying attention to self and others
7. Presuming positive intentions

Source: [www.adaptiveschools.com](http://www.adaptiveschools.com)

being asked to do, or when they feel the principal does not understand their work, creating a build-up of resistance.

“It’s hard to deal with when you think that someone is resisting you personally,” McKanders said. “But if you have a clear vision and mission and they are resisting that, you can turn to that third point and ask, ‘What challenges you about this? What challenges you about our school improvement plan? What support might you need? What are you seeing that the rest of us don’t see?’ ”

### Don’t take it personally

Finally, McKanders said, leaders who make the mental shift to presuming positive intentions, take an inquiring approach, use data, and build relationships will better keep their perspectives and avoid feeling hurt.

“You don’t take it personally when you know they’re not pushing against you,” she said. “They’re pushing against something they see. You want to find out what they are seeing and what support might they need.

“People are stressed. They are asked to do so much without the proper training, without the cognitive and emotional support they need. We need to be empathic about that, to work as a community, to say, ‘This is what *we* have to get done. How best can we do it? Through collaboration.’ ”

### REFERENCES

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