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 use-able 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.

Leaders in a learning system

I n 2009, Learning Forward released its seminal text, *Becoming a Learning School,* which has guided the school improvement efforts of district and school leaders across the world. The book provides educators with a framework for using professional learning as a key lever for improving the effectiveness of teachers, teacher leaders, principals, central office personnel, and others whose work impacts the learning environments of students. Later this year, the follow-up text, *Becoming a Learning System*, will be released. Our goal in this edition is to explore how systems (school districts, charter management organizations, and networks of traditional and non-traditional schools) can create environments that foster effective teaching and learning in every classroom and every school. In essence, it's about taking learning schools to scale.

Playing a key role in a learning system are school leaders. All of our research in leadership continues to remind us that principals create the conditions for effective teaching and learning that is scaled throughout their buildings and sustained over time. As a recently released Wallace Foundation Perspective (2013) states:

Education research shows that most school variables, considered separately, have at most small effects on learning. The real payoff comes when individual variables combine to reach critical mass. Creating the conditions under which that can occur is the job of the principal.

As a field, we are starting to get a better sense of what it is effective leaders do. For example, our own Leadership standard (Learning Forward, 2011) calls for skillful leaders who develop capacity, advocate, and create support systems for professional learning. In a learning system, however, we also explore the needs of leaders and consider ways we might support their learning. During the Learning Forward Annual Conference in Boston, I delivered a thought leader lecture where I explored the question, "What would a learning system look like from the perspective of a school leader?" I respectfully offer this list of 12 responses to that question.

In a learning system…

1. My district or CMO has a clear picture of what effective teaching and leading look like in practice.
2. My system has strong relationships with the universities that provide our teachers and leaders.
3. My learning is considered just as important as my teachers' and my students'.
4. I have the necessary supports and professional learning at all stages of my career.
5. My supervisor knows my strengths and learning needs.
6. There is a culture of trust throughout my school system.
7. My colleagues and I have a role in working with my district office to create the optimal conditions for teaching and learning.
8. I see a true learning community being modeled in my district office.
9. My district doesn't make me fight for the resources I need to do my job.
10. Our school board has adopted a definition of professional learning.
11. It's my responsibility to identify and support future leaders.
12. I am highly effective in my craft.

As you reflect on the practices of your school district or charter management organization, does true learning permeate the system? Do leaders have the supports they need to significantly improve teaching in learning in their schools? Perhaps the list above doesn't capture all that is needed, but it's my hope that it provides food for thought.

The School Principal as Leader: Guiding Schools to Better Teaching and Learning **and other reports on leadership are freely available at The Wallace Foundation Knowledge Center: www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center.**

REFERENCES

Learning Forward. (2011). *Standards for Professional Learning.* Available at www.learningforward.org/standards/leadership.

The Wallace Foundation. (2013, January). *The school principal as leader: Guiding schools to better teaching and learning* (p. 4). New York, NY: Author. Available at www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center.

•

Frederick Brown (frederick.brown@learningforward.org) is director of strategy and development at Learning Forward. ●

Identifying problems of practice leads to cultural changes and student success

By Rachel Blundell

This year I am finishing my sixth year as principal at Santa Fe Junior High (Texas). My first year here we implemented a schedule with embedded professional development time and learning communities. We saw a rise in student achievement and a rise in test scores. As time went on, though, we saw fluctuations and then our growth stagnated. We seemed to always be on the cusp of student achievement.

Last summer, we joined Learning Forward's Learning School Alliance with the goal of helping our learning communities function better and increase our depth of learning. This summer, we received our state test scores and every grade level and subject saw gains. Some gains were only three points, but others were substantial. For example, our 8th grade history gained 14 points.

BACKMAPPING

One of the biggest pieces that contributed to our success was the backmapping model. We started with looking at results and then created goals for our campus. We created one large goal and then took the model to our departments for them to apply themselves.

USING A NEW VOCABULARY

We started using the term "problem of practice" to make sure we viewed student results through a lens of examining our own practice instead of just student outcomes. This meant that all of our teacher learning was based on problems of practice. For example, the math department noticed that their engagement levels were down, so they had a whole year of learning built around more engaging lessons.

TAKING OWNERSHIP

We had set goals every year, but most of our materials directed us to identify the "greatest area of need" for our goals. Once we started looking at issues as problems of practice, we realized that we were not taking ownership of student learning, which we learned is critical for real change to materialize.

We looked at each student outcome and asked how the teachers' learning met the students' needs. This created depth and complexity to what we were doing with professional learning — building goals from the bottom up and not just from the top down. Often, when learning goals are so far away from individual classrooms, they are easy to forget. When classroom goals were tied to creating ownership in learning and aligned to other building goals, though, we saw improved instruction.

Taking ownership of learning was an eye-opener for us. Many teachers readily admitted that we teach but don't take ownership of student results. Once we broke our data reviews into quintiles, it became obvious that we had not been looking at whether or not students actually learned. We always looked at data in the past, but this year we took it to heart and went back to reteach what was not learned – instead of saying it was the students' problem if they didn't learn. This was a cultural problem.

CHANGING CULTURE

To change mindsets, we took Learning Forward's belief statements and put them on a wall for our leadership team. We had team members, who come from all parts of our campus, write about how they felt about the beliefs. They then examined those beliefs and identified one they had a problem with. We then did this with the entire staff and had them rate where we were the most challenged. Ownership of student learning came out as the biggest. We immediately went into defining our problems of practice. This process made the staff more open to the work.

Our leadership team had to hold each other accountable and remain focused throughout this process. Teachers picked up on our example and it got easier over time. We tracked data closely and frequently so the teachers could see where they needed to work with the kids and celebrated small gains. These, in turn, led to larger gains.

•

Rachel Blundell (Rachel. Blundell@sfisd.org) is principal of Santa Fe Junior High in Santa Fe, Texas. ●

Continued from p. 1

"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.

> **Learning Forward**
> **BELIEF**
>
> Successful leaders create and sustain a culture of learning.

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

Continued from p. 4

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

---

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

Garmston, R. with von Frank, V. (2012). *Unlocking group potential to improve schools.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Johnson, B. (1998). *Polarity management: A summary introduction.* Sacramento, CA: Polarity Management Associates. Available at http://westonatwood.com/uploads/2/8/4/4/2844368/polarity_management_-_summary.pdf.

•

Valerie von Frank (valerievonfrank@aol.com) is an education writer and editor of Learning Forward's books. ●

The facilitator's role

Use this tool to help you and other leaders understand roles and typical responsibilities of facilitators. You might use these suggestions to create a job description and responsibilities, to help leaders understand needed facilitation tasks, or to provide information when requesting funding for a professional learning team facilitator. This sheet also could be a checklist for you to determine your own strengths, keeping in mind that the list is not comprehensive and should be adapted for your situation. In areas you do not feel confident, locate someone to assist with that task while building your own skills.

The professional learning team facilitator:

Models continual learning and builds knowledge and skill in the following areas:

- Professional learning team goals, concepts, and processes.
- Fundamentals of professional learning team work and of team development.
- Team facilitation strategies and skills.
- Working effectively with adult learners.
- Establishing productive relationships with team members.

Develops the expertise to successfully:

- Guide teams in holding productive meetings.
- Provide helpful feedback to teams on their work.
- Move teams to the next level of collaboration when needed.
- Read and respond appropriately to team logs.
- Establish online communication among teams; and between teams, designated school and district leaders, and consultants.
- Model leading a team meeting, if necessary.
- Troubleshoot team problems as they arise.
- Help with team logistics to the extent possible (gather needed resources; teach a class to allow a teacher to observe a colleague, etc.).
- Observe classroom applications of teaching practices that teachers are working on collaboratively and provide productive feedback.
- Provide books and/or research-based information on topics teams are studying.
- Provide updates on the team's work to the principal, outside consultants, and others as requested.
- Set up webinars and other types of online networking as a way of connecting team members with outside consultants for coaching and troubleshooting.
- Assist in seeing that team members respond to surveys and help with other formative data collection as needed.
- Regularly publicize the work of the teams (through wikis, school web sites, newsletters, bulletin boards, PTA meetings, faculty meetings, etc.).
- Recognize and advocate for needed changes in the school organization that will better promote and support teacher collaboration.

Builds the knowledge and skill to:

- Train new teachers in the professional learning team process.
- Do follow-up training with existing teams as needed.
- Lead training sessions for other faculties as needed.

Source: Jolly, A. (2008). *Team to teach: A facilitator's guide.* Oxford, OH: NSDC.

Organize for the journey

Good facilitation begins with good organization. Set up a method to collect and organize information before the team start-up. Keep on hand this list of types of information and artifacts a facilitator might maintain throughout the professional learning team process, and review it periodically to be sure you are covering the team's needs.

INFORMATION:

1. **Teams:** Record team members' names, information about each (subject taught, special skills and training, etc.), and contact information.

2. **Logistical information:** Keep a record of when teams will meet, where they will meet, and how long meetings are scheduled to last.

3. **Team goals:** Keep each team's goal in a place where you can easily access it while reading logs, briefly visiting a meeting, and so on.

4. **Team logs and communications:** Set up a separate folder, a notebook section, or electronic folder for each team. Keep a record of each team's communications there. Include copies of all team logs as well as feedback sent to teams in response to their logs. Add other communications concerning the team's work.

5. **Reports and memos:** Include copies of any reports you make on a team's progress or of the professional learning team project in general. These records might include informal memos to the team members, principal, etc.

6. **Resources:** Keep a record of materials (research articles, books, web sites, DVDs, outside experts, etc.) that team members use in their study and work.

7. **Monitoring and evaluation:** Include team self-assessments, pre-assessments, mid-year evaluations, and end-of-the-year evaluations, plus other input and observations. Include anecdotal data, such as agendas from faculty meetings, showing changes in school faculty meetings as professional learning teams gain higher priority, for example. Include information on changes in classroom instruction, changes in teachers' behaviors, and any signs that teacher collaboration across the school is increasing.

8. **Tools and tips:** Keep track of tools, tips, and ideas that further the team's progress. These can inform future professional learning team work.

9. **Personal journal:** Keep a journal of your own activities and reflections. Soon you'll have an understandable history of the project and a source of invaluable information for later use. Journaling may seem like a nuisance at first, but it's a great way to document the project's evolution. Your daily reflections will spur valuable personal insights and help steer your future course.

Source: Jolly, A. (2008). *Team to teach: A facilitator's guide.* Oxford, OH: NSDC.

learning**forward**
THE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING ASSOCIATION

New resource on technology and Common Core implementation

MEET THE PROMISE OF CONTENT STANDARDS: TAPPING TECHNOLOGY TO ENHANCE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

More stakeholders are turning to technology to advance the professional learning required to support new standards and evaluation systems. Yet how technology is used will determine its potential to influence educator practice and results for students. This brief outlines how technology can enhance professional learning, offers examples of how technology is being used to meet the demand generated by Common Core standards, provides guidelines for selecting and using technology as a resource for professional learning, and identifies common challenges and ways to avoid them.
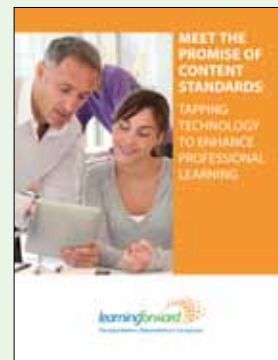
Available at www.learningforward.org/docs/default-source/commoncore/tpltappingtechnology.pdf