

CHANGE NO *to* YES



**LEADERS
FIND
CREATIVE
WAYS TO
OVERCOME
OBSTACLES
TO ADULT
LEARNING**

By Ellie Drago-Severson and Jessica Blum-DeStefano

Supporting educator growth is critical for schools. The new challenges facing leaders — evolving teacher and principal evaluation systems, implementing the Common Core State Standards — heighten the urgency around building human capacity to meet new demands.

Nevertheless, effectively supporting adult development on the front lines of schools is no easy task. Recently, we talked with 20 education leaders — principals, assistant principals, teacher leaders, and district-level

administrators — about the most pressing challenges they face in supporting adult development in their schools and organizations.

These leaders participated in a graduate course about supporting adult development as part of their leadership training. We asked them how they use developmental principles and practices in their work and the obstacles they encountered along the way (Drago-Severson, Blum-DeStefano, & Asghar, 2013).

Three of the most common obstacles the leaders cited are:

- Understanding and managing resistance;
- Finding time to support teachers' professional learning; and
- Finding forums to grow as leaders.

Let's examine these challenges in depth and highlight the creative strategies that these leaders employ for overcoming them to make schools richer places of learning for both adults and children.

RESISTANCE

Resistance from colleagues and/or supervisors presents a pressing challenge to developmentally oriented leadership. The leaders we spoke with said this resistance complicated some of their early attempts to lead in developmental ways. They attributed it to:

- The many demands educators face every day;
- The challenge of convincing others of the value of a developmental approach before they've experienced it; and
- Adults' reluctance to engage in work

that feels unfamiliar/beyond comfortable competencies (i.e. resistance may be developmental in nature).

For example, these leaders understood that asking teachers to do something different — even when genuinely offered as support — may feel like too much at first, especially given the demands educators face.

One leader, who works as an education consultant in an urban district, explained: "Doing this work is different for people — it's hard. They don't know how to do it. They don't feel like they have time to do it. These schools that I'm working at have above-average dropout rates and gun violence. These are tough urban schools. They're the lowest-performing school districts, and the teachers are ... working at capacity in every sense of the word. And so when they're asked to be doing something different, of course there's going to be a [challenging] response to that."

Still, leaders suggested several strategies that help them allay colleagues' and supervisors' initial apprehensions:

- Maintain objectivity as a leader, and don't take complaints personally.
- Invite resistant adults to share their thinking/feeling, rather than demanding compliance.
- Invest time to stay in place as a leader, or remain present without pushing for immediate change.
- Remain open to different perspectives.

These leaders recognized that colleagues' discomfort with new initiatives can stem from their developmental orientations toward change and new ex-

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pectations. Keeping this in mind, they explained, was an important strategy for taking the personal sting out of colleagues' or supervisors' initial hesitations.

One course graduate, reflecting on her roles as a school leader and consultant, said: "I think a lot about the concept of complaints [as] signs of passion in teachers, and I felt that that was a huge paradigm shift in me. ... When I work in schools, I'm never overwhelmed by the amount of feedback that teachers have."

Resistance can have many roots. For these leaders, acknowledging the multiple possibilities of resistance while working to understand the reasons behind colleagues' pushback proved a more effective strategy than simply demanding compliance. See the box on p. 28 for additional strategies for managing resistance.

TIME

Not surprisingly, nearly all leaders named time as a significant obstacle, particularly in terms of the hectic and full pace of the workday, competing demands placed on educators, and lack of common planning time.

In particular, finding the time to commit to the developmental work of growing adults was difficult in the high-pressure, high-stakes, evaluation-driven context of schools today, leaders emphasized. As one course graduate, now a high school English teacher leader, said: "Your attention is constantly in demand from all sorts, like colleagues, your administrators, your kids, parents. It's so consuming that I think it's often difficult to even

make the time [for developmental work].”

With all that is increasingly expected of educators, these leaders underscored the importance of deliberately fitting developmental structures and opportunities into their busy schedules, lest it take a backseat to everyday exigencies. To do this, they cited two key strategies:

- Carve out time for collaborative work and reflection within the school day.
- Carefully budget time to meet multiple demands.

Making time to support learning leads to building trust, leaders said. One leader, reflecting on her work as an academic dean, said: “In an actual leadership role, the logistics are sometimes just as important [as a leader’s beliefs]. ... You can value it [adult development], but if you don’t give teachers the time and support they need and the space, then you’re not really showing that you value it. ... Giving the time and space — the logistics of that — is just as important, because you’re putting your money where your mouth is.”

Failing to merge intention and action — even in the logistical details of scheduling — can significantly hinder a leader’s work and inadvertently send mixed messages. See the box at right for additional strategies for making time for learning.

SELF-DEVELOPMENT

The leaders in our research understood the importance of — and challenges to — self-development, both in growing one’s own developmental capacities and occasionally stepping out of the role of expert to assume a learning stance.

An awareness of one’s own way of knowing — and all of its strengths and limitations — was key to maximizing and growing their own leadership. One leader, an academic dean in her school, said that meeting teachers where they are and helping to support them in a developmental sense also requires “recognizing where you are on that spectrum.” Leaders’ developmental capacities color the types of supports and challenges they offer, as well as their expectations of other adults, so awareness and growth are essential to effective leadership.

Likewise, many leaders in our research said that adults often expect leaders to know the right answers or best course of action when faced with difficult dilemmas. Given the pressure to establish authority and maintain respect as a leader, it was hard at times for these leaders to publicly or even privately acknowledge their own journey as lifelong learners. Still, they understood that maintaining and sharing a commitment to one’s own development was key to supporting others because it modeled the type of openness and vulnerability necessary for growth.

As one leader, a middle school principal, explained, “It can be very difficult to say, ‘I don’t have the answers, and I’m learning.’ ... When you’re in a leadership role ... you’re supposed to have all the answers.” Yet, for this principal and others, moving past this pressure was a challenge, an opportunity, and an imperative.

To grow as leaders, they read and keep abreast of current

STRATEGIES FOR ...

MANAGING RESISTANCE

1. Share short articles about developmental theory and learning-oriented leadership to help others understand key ideas, and explain why this is important to you.
2. Explain the direct link between supporting adult learning and increasing student achievement.
3. Meet adults where they are in development by being present to them without pressing them to change immediately.
4. Scaffold adults’ understanding as they strive to grow by offering developmentally appropriate supports and challenges.
5. Help them understand that you are with them — that you know change is hard and that it takes time.
6. Ask questions to learn more about what they are resisting and why.
7. Ask how you can help. What supports might be useful? What, in particular, are they finding challenging?

MAKING TIME

1. Invite adults to meet before or after school. Provide food.
2. Create lunch clubs where educators discuss practice, articles, initiatives, or problems of practice.
3. Ask publishers to offer free or discounted books for book clubs.
4. Host monthly dinner meetings during which teams can share experiences, reflect on practice, discuss challenges, and engage in collegial inquiry.
5. Reframe existing meeting and collaborative times with developmental practices.

SELF-DEVELOPMENT

1. Seek opportunities to collaborate with others.
2. Find or create relationships for collegial inquiry and/or mentoring.
3. Carefully consider and reflect on your own way of knowing and how it influences your work.
4. Reflect privately through journaling.
5. Carve out space for your own learning and growth.

ideas. They also reflect deeply about their practice, seek advice from trusted others, and solicit feedback from key stakeholders. See the box above for additional strategies for supporting self-development.

WHY ADULT LEARNING MATTERS

When adults learn and grow in schools through effective professional learning, students do, too (Guskey, 2000). Research shows that supporting authentic learning in adults has been positively linked to improving student achievement (Donaldson, 2008). However, traditional sit-and-get professional learning adds almost nothing to teachers' long-term development — and has no lasting effect on student performance (Murnane & Willet, 2010).

This discrepancy stems from the fact that conventional professional development often fails to account for the different ways that educators, like all adults, experience the world and their practice. Research over the past 40 years (e.g. Kegan, 1982, 1994, 2000) indicates that adults have different developmental orientations and capacities — or ways of knowing — that influence the ways they think about and experience teaching, learning, and leadership (Drago-Severson, 2004, 2009, 2012; Drago-Severson & Blum-DeStefano, 2013).

While each way of knowing has strengths and limitations, the mounting demands placed on all educators call

for increases in their internal capacities — not just technical or pedagogical expertise, though these are also important. Likewise, because educators have different ways of knowing, they will need different supports and challenges in order to grow and improve their instructional practice and leadership, whether it is related to taking in feedback, exercising leadership, or collaborating with team members.

With appropriate supports and challenges, adulthood can be a time of immense growth. Leaders can, for instance, strategically and intentionally differentiate practices that help adults build their internal capacities. Leaders can also use these practices to support their own growth.

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GROWING THROUGH CHALLENGES

Through their experiences, these leaders came to see developmental intentionality as an enduring core of effective leadership, rather than a simple add-on or supplement. Eager to implement developmental ideas in their own contexts — given their connection to both student and teacher growth — these leaders learned that supporting adult development is neither simple nor straightforward.

As a process of building and sustaining growth-oriented cultures over time, learning-oriented leadership requires vision, adaptation, responsiveness, and imagination in order to challenge resistance, build time, and create the conditions for everyone — including leaders — to grow.

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