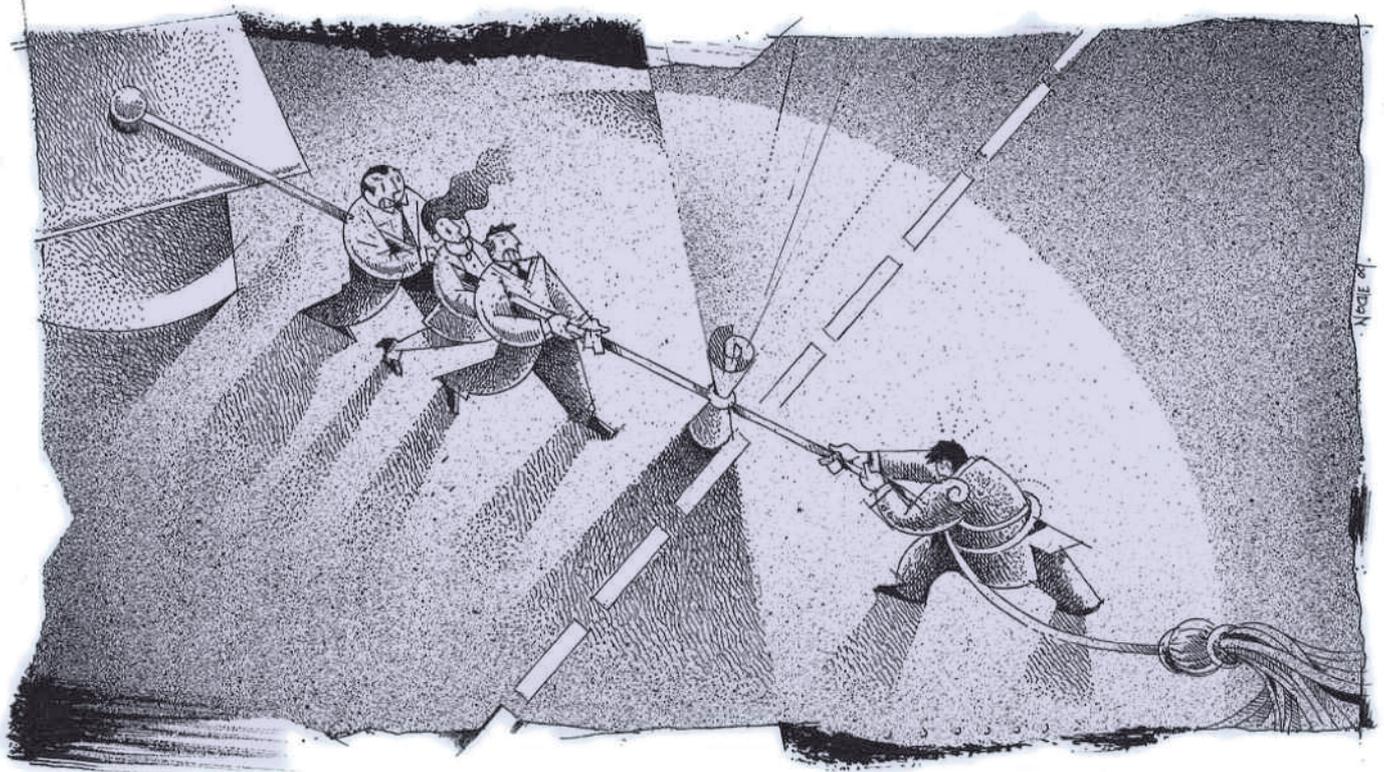


What Can We Do About Teacher Resistance?



If school leaders understand the nature of resistance, they can improve their relationships with teachers and increase teacher implementation of proven practices.

BY JIM KNIGHT

When efforts to improve student learning fail, teachers often end up being blamed. Teachers were resistant to new ideas, say the leaders who were working with them. Rather than blame teachers and ask, “Why do teachers resist?” perhaps those of us who lead change should ask, “What can we do to make it easier for teachers to implement new practices?”

Two pioneers in unpacking the meaning of resistance, Miller and Rollnick, have this to say about resistance in counseling and therapy relationships:

To use the term “resistance” as explanatory seems to suggest that things are not going smoothly because of something that one person (the client) is doing. . . . In a way, it is oxymoronic to say that one person is not cooperating. It requires at least two people to not cooperate, to yield dissonance. (2002, p. 45)

We can learn a lot about professional learning if we apply the same kind of thinking to our understanding

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of “resistant teachers.” Consider six questions that can bring to the surface reasons for this dissonance between teachers and change agents.

QUESTION #1: Are the Teaching Practices Powerful?

In *The Evolving Self*, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi describes what’s required for one idea to supersede another. “Ideas, values, technologies that do the job with the least demand on psychic energy will survive. An appliance that *does more work* with *less effort* will be preferred” (1993, p. 123, emphasis added).

Csikszentmihalyi’s suggestion that people adopt new ideas or tools that are easier or more powerful also applies to teachers leaving behind old ways of teaching for more effective approaches. Teachers aren’t likely to implement new practices unless they are powerful and easy to implement. Indeed, that seems like wise practice.

The issue of ease of use will be addressed in question two. Let’s begin by considering the need for powerful teaching tools. Of course, few teachers will be motivated to implement a teaching practice if it does not increase student achievement, make content more accessible, improve the quality of classroom conversation, make students happier, increase love of learning, or have some other significant positive impact. Nevertheless, teachers report that they’re frequently asked to change in ways that don’t make a difference.

This situation can arise for at least three reasons. First, not all teaching practices are created equally. Before recommending practices for their schools, consumers of educational interventions must consider the quality of research that supports those practices, the effect sizes or other measures of statistical significance from supportive research studies, and the experiences of other educators. Indeed, change leaders should propose new ways of teaching only if they’re confident they will have a positive impact on student achievement.

Second, educators should consider student achievement and behavior data from their schools before proposing new ways of teaching. Decision makers should strive to find teaching tools that are the best match for the needs of their students. A highly effective program in one school might be totally ineffective if adopted in a school facing different challenges. School improvement is not a one-size-fits-all solution.

Third, even proven, effective programs that are a good match for a school’s needs still may not be powerful if teachers don’t get sufficient support for high-

quality implementation. Our research at the Kansas Coaching Project (Knight and Cornett 2009) indicates that teachers are unlikely to implement a practice successfully, if they implement at all, if they have had only workshops without coaching or other forms of follow-up support. Many teaching practices are sophisticated, and teachers can’t be expected to learn

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them without an opportunity to watch model demonstration lessons, experience job-embedded support, and receive high-quality feedback. Without support, a powerful practice, poorly implemented, is no better than one that is ineffective.

QUESTION #2: Are the Practices Easy to Implement?

Most teachers face what Michael Fullan and Andy Hargreaves (1996) have referred to as a “press of immediacy.” In a typical day, teachers grade stacks of papers, create lesson plans, complete reports, attend meetings, contact parents, stay at school for sporting events, do bus duty, supervise the cafeteria, attend IEP meetings, and on and on. On top of that, they complete all of those tasks while doing work that requires a great deal of emotional fortitude. The result is that even when teachers want to implement a new program, they may not have the energy needed to put that program into practice.

Research on the personal experience of change (Hall and Hord 2001; Prochaska, Norcross, and DiClemente 1994) suggests why change leaders need to make it easier for teachers to implement new practices. The personal experience of change is complex. Few of us adopt new habits of practice without some struggles, and if those new practices also involve a large number of tasks and learning challenges, professional learning probably won’t happen. Consequently, when change leaders remove barriers, they increase implementation.

Our experience suggests that several types of support are especially helpful. Teachers say they benefit greatly when they get to see demonstrations of new ways of teaching before they try to implement them.

Learning also is much easier when someone breaks down new approaches into easy-to-implement steps. Change agents must have a thorough, deep understanding of the practices they share so they can effectively explain those practices to teachers. Finally, teachers are more inclined to adopt new programs when all teaching materials (overheads, readings, handouts, or learning sheets) are created for them.

The importance of easy and powerful interventions has been nicely summarized by Patterson and his colleagues: “When it comes to altering behavior, you need to help others answer only two questions. First, is it worth it? . . . And second, can they do this thing? . . . Consequently, when trying to change behaviors, think of the only two questions that matter. Is it worth it? . . . Can I do it?” (2008, p. 50).

Even if a proposed program is “worth it” and easy to do, we still aren’t out of the woods. Teachers will adopt powerful and easy practices only if they believe that they are powerful and easy. Consequently, change leaders need to be able to convince teachers that they are so. Unfortunately, the most common forms of persuasion often fail.

QUESTION #3: Are They Experienced?

I have shown hundreds of change leaders a scene from the documentary *The Waters of Ayole*. The short film describes the efforts of United Nations aid workers to support villages as they take care of village water pumps, literally a matter of life or death for many villagers. In the scene, four village leaders are asked what they thought when they learned they were getting a pump for their village. “At first, we weren’t particularly pleased,” they say. “We thought it might be a trick.” “And people refused to come to meetings.” “When the machines arrived. . . we were afraid they might scare us away from our village.” “Without seeing the water, we weren’t convinced.” Even when the water gushed out, “without having drunk any of it, we still weren’t convinced.” What finally convinced the villagers? “The day water came from the pump and we drank it. Then we said these people really did something for us.” Even when offered something that is lifesaving, people may resist until they actually experience the phenomenon.

Patterson and his colleagues explain that when it comes to change, experience trumps talk every time. “The most common tool we use to change other’s expectations is the use of verbal persuasion. . . [however] When it comes to resistant problems, verbal persuasion rarely works. Verbal persuasion often comes

across as an attack. It can feel like nagging or manipulation. If people routinely enact behaviors that are difficult to change, you can bet that they’ve heard more than one soliloquy on what’s wrong with them — and to no effect” (2008, p. 50).

If talk is cheap, or at least ineffective, then it’s experience that persuades. Tom Guskey has made exactly the same observation:

The crucial point is that it is not the professional development *per se*, but the experience of successful implementation that changes teachers’ attitudes and beliefs. They believe it works because they have seen it work, and that experience shapes their attitudes and beliefs. . . the key element in significant change in teachers’ attitudes and beliefs is clear evidence of improvement in the learning outcomes of their students. (1999, p. 384)

When it comes to change, teachers have to drink the water, so to speak, before they will believe. This has real implications for change leaders. First, they should provide teachers with experiences that demonstrate the value of a program. For example, if a school employs coaches, the coaches can present model lessons in teachers’ classrooms. Other forms of professional learning, such as Japanese lesson study or peer observation with feedback, also enable teachers to see and experience new practices. Video recordings and experiential learning activities can also be used effectively during workshops, study groups, and other professional learning activities.

Perhaps most important, if we know that teachers usually need to experience success to believe in a

teaching practice, that should change how we communicate with teachers. Trying to talk teachers into new ways of teaching without providing experiences can actually decrease implementation, creating what Miller and Rollnick refer to as an “ironic process,” an approach that “causes the very outcome that it was meant to avert” (2002, p. 37). A better tactic is to offer teachers opportunities to experiment with practices so that they can make up their own minds about their effectiveness.

Ignoring teacher autonomy often ensures that teachers don't implement new practices.

If the practices are powerful and easy, most teachers will implement them. If the practices aren't powerful or easy, there is very little anyone can say to persuade teachers to change. Indeed, the respectful way in which we talk to teachers can make a big difference in whether they implement a practice.

QUESTION #4: Are Teachers Treated With Respect?

Commenting on how another professional works is almost always difficult because so much of a person is woven into how she or he works. This challenge may be even more difficult for educators because few professions are more personal than teaching. Change agents need to be aware that they walk on sacred ground when they suggest new ways of teaching, especially when they criticize a teacher's current teaching practices.

In more than 200 interviews that I've done with teachers about professional learning, teachers have been close to unanimous in criticizing professional developers who fail to recognize teacher expertise. The old model of an expert talking to a room full of strangers is, in fact, in some cases literally worse than nothing because teachers may leave traditional sessions feeling frustrated, disappointed, or patronized and worse off than they were before the session. One teacher's comments summarize the views of many of these teachers: “It's not like we are undergraduates. There are many people on our staff who are bright and who do read what's going on in the field, who do take classes on their own time, not because they have to but because they love to teach. And I do think it's kind of demeaning [when a presenter appears not to] know about that.”

Few change leaders actually intend to be demean-

ing, but intentions don't matter. What matters is how teachers perceive change leaders. Perception is reality, and if teachers feel that their identity (their own sense of how good, competent, or talented they are) is under attack, their most frequent reaction is to resist (Stone, Patton, and Heen 2000).

Change agents, then, are likely to be more effective if they are masters of effective communication. They need to listen respectfully (Goldsmith and Reiter 2007) and communicate positive comments so frequently and so authentically that they foster what Kegan and Lahey refer to as “a language of ongoing regard” (2001, p. 101). Perhaps most important, they need to communicate recognition for the professionalism of teachers. For that reason, change leaders must understand the role of reflection and thought in professional practice.

QUESTION #5: Are Teachers Doing the Thinking?

Thomas Davenport has deepened our understanding of professional practice by describing the attributes of knowledge workers who, he says, “think for a living. [Knowledge workers] live by their wits. Any heavy lifting on the job is intellectual, not physical. They solve problems, they understand and meet the needs of customers, they make decisions, and they collaborate and communicate with other people in the course of doing their own work” (2005, p. 15). Few people do more thinking on the job than a teacher standing in front of 27 students, so it seems safe to say that teachers are knowledge workers.

Davenport extends his analysis by stating that a defining characteristic of knowledge workers is that: “*Knowledge workers like autonomy. . . Thinking for a living engenders thinking for oneself. Knowledge workers are paid for their education, experience, and expertise, so it is not surprising that they take offense when someone else rides roughshod over their intellectual territory*” (2005, p. 15). This is precisely the case with teachers. Ignoring teacher autonomy often ensures that teachers don't implement new practices.

On the surface, having a small group of educators and administrators do the thinking for teachers is understandable. Schools need programs implemented consistently across a district, and it's not especially efficient for many teachers to be deeply involved in curriculum revision. However, if change leaders ignore teachers' need for autonomy, they run the risk of alienating their audience.

Respecting teachers' professional autonomy does not mean all teachers have complete freedom to teach

in whatever way moves them. There have to be some non-negotiables in schools. Schools could expect all teachers to develop classroom management plans, use common assessments, or adopt particular textbooks

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or curricula, for example. However, handing a pacing guide to teachers and giving them no say in its development and no choice about implementing it is a recipe for disaster. When someone else does all the thinking for teachers, there's little chance that teachers will implement the practice.

QUESTION #6: What Has Happened in the Past?

How teachers view professional learning in their schools on any given day will inevitably be shaped by how they have experienced professional learning in the past. If professional learning has been truly professional, respected teachers' need for autonomy, offered powerful and easy practices, and been supported through coaching and other forms of job-embedded learning, then teachers will approach professional learning with positive, high expectations. When these elements are missing, however, history can become a major roadblock to implementation.

One particularly self-destructive pattern that prevents real change from taking hold in schools is what I call an "attempt, attack, abandon cycle." During the attempt, attack, abandon cycle, change leaders introduce a new practice into a school. However, very little support is available to help teachers try the new practice, so many teachers never implement it and others *attempt* it but poorly. Before the program has been implemented effectively, and before it's had sufficient time to be fully implemented, various individuals in the school or district begin to criticize or *attack* the program. As a result, many teachers implementing the program begin to lose their will to stick with it. Inevitably, even though the practice was never implemented well, district leaders label it unsuccessful and *abandon* it, only to propose another program that's sure to be pulled into the same vicious cycle, to eventually be attacked and abandoned for another program, and on and on. Thus, schools stay on an un-merry-go-round of attempt, attack, abandon, without ever seeing any meaningful, sustained change in

instruction taking place (Knight 2007).

Hargreaves and Fink (2005) have identified lack of continuity as another self-destructive pattern in schools. When districts swing from one instructional approach to another, when school leadership is constantly changing, the lack of consistency and focus can undermine a teacher's enthusiasm for new ideas. Of course, if the history of professional learning is one that ignores all of the above questions, there is an even greater likelihood that teachers will adopt the age-old refrain, "This too shall pass."

Suggestions for Leading Change

I hope the above questions show how the approach taken by change leaders can have a significant positive or negative impact on whether teachers adopt better ways of teaching. Indeed, if we carefully consider change issues, we might wonder why teachers don't resist change more than they do. If we ask teachers to implement practices that may not have a powerful impact on students, if we don't make it easier for teachers to adopt new ways of teaching, if we tell teachers why innovations are important without providing them opportunities to experience success, if we do the thinking for teachers, if we ignore the personal and professional aspects of change, and we do this year after year while continually changing the focus for professional learning, can we really expect teachers to be enthusiastic about changing their practices?

Fortunately, our six questions carry within them suggestions for how we can increase the likelihood that teachers will adopt and implement proven practices.

1. Seek high-leverage teaching practices that are proven and powerful. Those who propose new ways of teaching need to be certain that what they bring to teachers will have an unmistakable positive impact on students' and teachers' lives.
2. Use data to select and monitor the impact of practices. Data can be a valuable tool for the selection of effective teaching practices. Ignoring data can waste a great deal of effort on tools that don't address students', teachers', and schools' most pressing needs.
3. Provide quality coaching. The preliminary research on coaching (Knight and Cornett 2009) suggests that teachers rarely implement without sufficient support involving precise explanations, modeling, and encouraging feedback.

4. Balance precise explanations with provisional comments. Professional developers can make it easier for teachers to learn new practices if they precisely describe how teachers should use new practices in the classroom. However, they should also explain those practices provisionally to allow teachers the freedom to adopt practices to fit their unique pedagogical approach or the particular needs of their students
5. Obtain commitment by offering teachers choices and valuing their voices. The more teachers can have a say in how and what new practices they implement, the more likely they will be to embrace new ways of teaching.
6. Focus professional learning on a few critical teaching practices. Professional learning that involves too many approaches can lack focus or overwhelm teachers (Davenport 2005). A better idea is to collaboratively identify a few critically important practices and then work together to ensure that they are implemented successfully.
7. Align all activities related to professional learning. Professional learning communities, coaching, teacher walkthroughs, program book studies, and all other forms of professional learning should focus on the same critically important practices that everyone agrees are important within the school.
8. Increase relational trust. Professional learning is most successful in settings that foster support and trust. As Michael Fullan has stated, “the single factor common to every successful change initiative is that relationships improve. If relationships improve, things get better. If they remain the same or get worse, ground is lost” (2001, p. 5).

Conclusion

This article began with a simple question: “What can we do about teacher resistance?” One answer is that those of us who are change leaders should be careful about how we share practices with teachers. Professional developers who adopt the suggestions included here should see much less resistance and much more meaningful and valuable professional learning. More important, when teaching practices improve, there is every reason to believe student achievement will improve as well. 

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