

Debunking the Myths About

Michael Chirichello

Five common misbeliefs about change can be major obstacles to achieving it.

When principals travel down the road of change, they often find potholes of resistance, many resulting from misconceptions about the process. Perhaps by debunking some of the myths about change, we can help them meet its challenges.

Myth One: Change Is Always the Answer

It's time to change! When student outcomes in one or more disciplines are not satisfactory, principals look for change. They may initiate new professional development programs to improve teaching strategies, create new inclusion programs for students with special needs, or transform classrooms into small learning communities.

Once a principal announces any of these changes, trouble begins. Like ripples that result when a stone is thrown into the water, change creates turbulence that spreads throughout the staff and eventually affects the entire learning community (Gross, 1998).

What causes the turbulence that so often accom-

panies change? It occurs when principals focus on change rather than creating conversations around the need for change. As the need for any change becomes evident, principals must ask:

- How can we challenge our best students?
- What can we do to meet the needs of students mainstreamed into our regular education classes?
- What does the data indicate about our under-achieving students?
- How can we better serve the needs of all students?
- What can we do to provide more time for learning?

A hand holding a pencil is visible in the upper right corner, blurred. The word "Change" is written in large, bold, blue letters across the center of the image. Below the word, a red cube is shown on a white surface, with several red fragments scattered around it, suggesting a process of breaking down or transformation.

Change

When teachers understand the need for change, they become more accepting of new initiatives. But unless teachers can reach consensus on why things must be improved or done differently, they will continue to resist change. Effective principals know that they first must focus on the need for change rather than the change itself (Duke, 2004).

Myth Two: The Destination Is More Important Than the Journey

In the classic story *Alice in Wonderland*, Alice tells the Cheshire cat she wants to go somewhere. The cat asks Alice where she wants to go. Alice says that it doesn't matter. The cat replies that if she just keeps on walking, she is bound to get somewhere.

Principals who understand change will focus on the journey more than the destination. They spend time developing a plan for how to begin the journey and where it will go, one step at a time. The journey toward change becomes more important than the change itself.

“When you tell people they must change, you are saying that what they have been doing is not acceptable. ‘Change or else’ is insulting.”

Through conversations with staff, they imagine what the change can bring. Painting the picture should be the first requirement of a change plan (Bridges, 2003).

Second, be passionate about the changes you want to happen (Chang, 2000). Why should teachers be enthusiastic if the principal is not?

Next, believe the change is possible. Consider all the obstacles that may get in the way of the change and think of them as challenges that can be overcome.

Fourth, don't tinker around the edges in developing a change plan. Begin by creating a graphic organizer that includes secondary changes that may occur as a result of implementing the primary change. An inclusion plan, for example, will result in several secondary changes: professional development around new teaching strategies; differentiating curriculum content and performance assessments; rethinking how students are grouped; and interdisciplinary approaches to teaching and learning.

Finally, avoid introducing any changes not connected to your primary focus. Implementing change is like creating a patchwork quilt. Each patch must enhance the beauty of the finished product.

Myth Three: Change Depends on the Principal's Leadership

Making any transition from “what is” to “what should be” is complex. The change process depends not only on

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a successful plan but also on the context in which the change takes place. Principals who encourage risk-taking, welcome new ideas, are supportive, and have established trusting relationships will find that they have created a climate in which teachers are more receptive to change. In schools where principals exhibit these behaviors, teachers become more collaborative and begin to accept leadership roles.

In schools that value collaboration, principals and teachers work together in teams, and a web of relationships begins to emerge. When a spider spins its web, the more thread it creates, the stronger the web. Eventually, the web of interlocking relationships will begin to catch more and more teachers as groups coalesce into teams. The opportunity for successful change increases as teachers develop a collective sense of responsibility. In this context, everyone becomes accountable for implementing the change, not just the person in charge (Hall & Hord, 2001).

Myth Four: "Change or Else"

When you tell people they must change, you are saying that what they have been doing is not acceptable. "Change or else" is insulting. Instead, you need to focus on the transition involved in moving from the old to the new (Bridges, 2003).

One principal provided a good example when she told her staff: "As a result of our conversations, we have decided to make a transition to a concept-based curriculum. My role is to support you during the transition. I know that making transitions is not easy. During our journey, there will be some potholes along the way. When we come to one, we will fill it in together and continue toward our destination. Our success will depend upon each one of us accepting the challenges that will emerge along the way."

This principal knew she had to focus on the transition process of letting go of the old, traveling through the neutral zone, and arriving at new beginnings (Bridges, 2003).

Myth Five: Teachers Resist Change

Teachers express concerns about change more than they resist it. Consider, for example, the following analogy. Ask a group of people to stand along an imaginary line that stretches from "absolutely no" to "definitely yes" as they choose to buy a particular car. A few will stand at either extreme. The majority, however, will stand along the continuum between the two extremes. If you ask them why they cannot make a firm decision whether to buy the car, you will begin to understand why most people have different levels of concern about change (Hord, Rutherford, Huling-Austin, & Hall, 1987).

In this example, they may need more information about the car, they may want to take it for a test drive, or they may need to talk with someone who already owns the car to get firsthand information about its performance.

Hord et al. (1987) defined eight levels of concern about change, rang-

ing from those who have no interest to those who are able to refocus and present new and innovative ideas about the change. Teachers may need more information; they may want to know how the change will affect them and their students; they may want to know more about managing the change; they may want to refine the change so it has more impact on their students and the teaching-learning-assessment process; or they may want to collaborate with others who have successfully implemented the change.

During the transition, the role of the principal is to provide support for the different levels of concern, thereby reducing the levels of anxiety and creating a critical mass of supporters for change.

What Principals Can Do

Effective principals know how to navigate around the potholes that appear in the road as they begin to implement

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transitions; they understand the nature of resistance. Teachers may fear failure; may be very comfortable with what they are doing; may feel overwhelmed; and may be skeptical or resentful.

Effective principals focus on the need for change. They know that change is more a process than a product. They develop a culture that values collegiality and collaboration. They cultivate relationships and recognize that change is all about transitions. They also understand that resistance stems from different levels of concern.

Effective principals navigate change, using the same know-how of flying a kite. If you fly a kite, you know that you must work with the wind. You must know when to pull in, when to let go, and when to keep a steady hand on the string. So it is with the winds of change. Effective principals know when to ease up with the change, when to let out more string and let the change take off, and when to keep a steady course for a while. In other words, they know when to lead, when to follow, and when to get out of the way.

Implementing change is tough work. It requires principals to take risks, try new ideas, create a culture in which collegiality and collaboration are valued, be passionate about the changes they seek, and explore new ideas with a sense of wonder, curiosity, and creativity.

Effective principals understand how to work around the potholes and how to fly the kite as they go from the old through the change transition, and arrive at new beginnings. [P]

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WEB RESOURCES

This *Principal* article, "The Beliefs-Behavior Connection: Leading Teachers Toward Change," examines some of the reasons why teachers appear to resist change and offers research-based suggestions for changing teacher behaviors through staff development focused on changing their beliefs over time.

www.naesp.org/principal

This site hosts an excerpt from Alan Deutschman's book, *Change or Die: The Three Keys to Change at Work and in Life*. The author presents his framework for successful change in organizations.

www.thelavinagency.com/articles_covers/Deutschman/threekeystochange.pdf

The National Staff Development Council's publication, *Journal of Staff Development*, has several useful articles on understanding the phenomena of organizational change.

www.nsdc.org/library/change/organizational.cfm

