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Knowledge about change is key to success

The Quality Teaching standard seems straightforward — educators should acquire deep content knowledge, know and use research-based instructional strategies, and know and use a variety of classroom assessments. One of the major tasks of the superintendent and central office is to create systems that ensure school staffs can implement quality instruction (Roy & Hord, 2003; Marzano & Waters, 2009). This seemingly basic task has been difficult to accomplish, in part, because we have all been extremely naive about the change process.

Almost 40 years ago, Seymour Sarason observed that a major barrier to improvement initiatives was “the lack of systemic, comprehensive, and objective description of the natural history of the change process in schools” (p. 21). This finding is still as relevant today as it was decades ago.

Fullan’s book, *Motion Leadership*, distills for us the essence of being change savvy (2010). “Change-savvy leaders always know that you can’t directly make people change. But you can create a system where positive change is virtually inevitable” (p.62). One component of that system is *nonpunitive accountability* in which clear outcomes and results are described and monitored. “The first response to underperformance is to invest in capacity building and not to take punitive action” (p. 61). The underlying assumption operating is that low performance is a result of low capacity, not resistance, lack of motivation, or apathy. That strategy is reiterated in *Switch* (Heath, 2010).

Chip and Dan Heath state that “What looks like resistance is often a lack of clarity” (2010, p. 17). That lack of clarity requires change leaders to provide “crystal-clear direction” to shape the path they want folks to take (p. 16). This does not mean providing scripts but rather providing people with decision-making processes to make critical moves that lead them toward the desired change. The authors caution us that we can never assume that the new way of doing things is obvious.

The Heaths also remind us that mandates and commands will not suffice when the change will occur over a long period of time. In those situations, we also need to tap into attitudes. To bring about change, we need to inspire, not just appeal to analytical thought. This is true even in analytical and quantitative professions. Too many current educational change initiatives seem to rely solely on an analytic approach instead of tapping into educators’ attitudes and aspirations. At the same time, guilt has been overused and does not inspire positive forward motion.

The new skill set for superintendents and central office staff should include becoming change savvy and studying how people change, how the structure of the organization and work shapes change efforts, and how to appeal to educators’ attitudes related to new classroom practices.

NSDC STANDARD

Quality Teaching: Staff development that improves the learning of all students deepens educators’ content knowledge, provides them with research-based instructional strategies to assist students in meeting rigorous academic standards, and prepares them to use various types of classroom assessments appropriately.

Learn more about NSDC’s standards:
www.nsd.org/standards/index.cfm

REFERENCES:

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