

Getting Started and Winning Teachers' Support for Change: Setting the Climate and Building Relationships

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“An Overview: Challenges I Faced & How I Worked with those Challenges”

Challenges:

- To build teachers' trust, faith in me as a person, colleague, advocate, supporter, resource, listener, and expert
- To establish credibility—convey that I have something worthwhile, useful, and genuinely helpful to offer
- To honor prevailing and understandable sentiments: “She too will pass ...” “This is yet another initiative, another thing we start and never finish...”
- To appreciate the genuine sense of threat that I posed by my mere presence in the building (Teachers don't feel safe; they wonder: Will you judge me? Will you call into question everything I've been doing? Will you find out the areas in my own teaching that I want to change but don't know how to just yet? Will you take the time to really know me, the full context of instruction in my classroom, my students, and take note of all that I am doing right and well? Or will you adopt a deficit view and only be on the lookout for where I fall short?)
- To puzzle out power dynamics and identity issues in the building: Who has the power, how do they exercise it, who wants more power, how do teachers see themselves, what identities are they trying to adopt and project?
- To be on notice for the “discourses” –ways of talking, thinking, valuing, perceiving, and acting—at play. What are the stories teachers tell about themselves, their students, parents? How do teachers describe their practice? How do teachers talk with one another? With you? (Gloria Anzaldua describes identity as the “stories we tell about ourselves.” Listening closely to those different stories gave me insight into who teachers think they, their students, parents, the district are and can be.)
- To respond to really, really bad morale in a way that acknowledges teachers' feelings without wallowing into inertia and inaction
- To directly address a truly divisive philosophical difference that is poisoning the school culture, dampening a spirit of collegiality and leaving the staff in a state of arrested development.
- To support a beleaguered principal who is simply unable to make the kind of commitment to your work that will support substantive school change.
- To encourage constructivist teaching and learning in a high poverty school (Au)? To support teachers in taking up the challenge of providing “thoughtful” literacy instruction (Allington)?
- To avoid forging alliance and thereby creating divisive factions among staff

How I Worked with Those Challenges—Some Key Themes:

- Humor & Humility—I relied on funny picture books to add some levity, to change the air pressure in the room, to loosen teachers up, and to loosen myself up so I could create a more positive climate. I was deliberate about not always having all the answers (it's so liberating to say "I don't know" and it liberates teachers from the power struggle), I always threw a teacher's question out to the whole group for their full consideration before weighing in and positioning myself as the only one with knowledge, or the only valued, legitimate, and powerful voice in the room. This simple gesture sets up new patterns of discourse and new power dynamics. Also, I make it clear when I do demo lessons that it is not a dog & pony show. I deliberately tell teachers that I know teaching can be messy work, and that I'll always debrief after the lesson and talk about what I woulda, coulda, shoulda done differently. I have found that it is necessary to just put myself out there by doing demonstration lessons and by being vulnerable in front of teachers, so they know up front that I'm not there to talk the talk, then evaluate and judge their walk. It's one of the most effective ways to disrupt that usual evaluative rather than reflective stance toward teaching--as a teacher and I work together to think through the lesson and consider ways to refine it. These demonstration lessons—good, bad and ugly—helped me establish my credibility (teaching chops), enabled me to show various dimensions of my personality (as I interacted with kids, shared anecdotes, etc.), set up more symmetrical relations (as I was not the guru, I was really just another educator who could have good lessons and bad), created a thread in longer conversation (and a sense of momentum) with that teacher, and gave me some concrete stories to share at workshops (so I wasn't just talking the talk).
- Stance of Teacher Researcher—No pat solutions, educational slogans, quick fixes, just honest questions, and genuine grappling for understanding and insight; Learning to get comfortable with having an unexpressed thought ... holding back that impulse to hijack teachers' thinking, problem solving by pontificating ... listening more and talking less ... let them think out loud and find their way through a vexing teaching dilemma ... ("Hmm...Tell me more ...What do you think?")
- Hustle and Follow Through: Make that one day count ... touch base with every single teacher ... even if it's a note with an article or teaching tool; Show teachers I'm not going away, that I will not pass, that I'm here to stay and will be someone they can count on; I will do what I say; I will be prepared, organized, and will always be thinking of them ... bringing in something for them (great pix book on topic they're studying, etc). Make the most of email to build rapport, to maintain connection, to keep my presence alive; I also created Literacy Resource Binder with all materials I ever shared with individual teachers, during in-school release sessions, and after-school workshops to remain in literacy lab so teachers could always be plugged into our work; Also, for research purposes, we had to complete Excel document that recorded our contact time with all teachers each day, so I had a clear profile of who I was reaching and who I had overlooked. This allowed me to redirect my efforts accordingly. I basically took every

- opportunity to be helpful, supportive, and to let teachers know I was really there for them (I can remember just how appreciative some teachers were when they asked a about a particular book, like QAR Now, and I'd type up short and sweet overview of the book with some teaching tools)
- Introduce Alternative (and hopefully more productive) Discourses: The questions you ask, the exercises you create for professional development session, or just the way you frame a discussion sets up new discourse practices—new ways for teachers to position themselves, new identities / roles for teachers to take up, new ways of talking with one another, about kids, new patterns of thinking, valuing, etc. These are a few things I did: I told teachers about a grant opportunity through Vermont Council on Reading and convinced them they could write a compelling application; a crew of Title teachers and I met several times to collaborate on the grant, and the school was ultimately awarded the grant. The whole experience was powerful for teachers—opened up new ways of talking with each other (about their practices, their values, and goals); ignited sense that they were bright, articulate professionals that have thoughtful, informed rationales for their practice; garnered them great respect and appreciation from their colleagues. Any time I shared a teaching technique or approach, I immediately asked teachers how they might adapt it, tinker with it, and thereby create another tool for all our benefit. I including a “trouble shooting” item on our meeting agendas and teachers assumed role of solving problems and getting results. I also recruited teachers to develop agenda for building inservice and to present some break-out sessions for the day as a way to get them engaged in conversations about what they believed was a building priority, what they felt made a productive and valuable professional development experience, what they knew they could offer their colleagues, etc.
 - Rules of Notice (adaptation of Peter Rabinowitz) for Coaches: We have to be on notice, know what to pay close, careful attention to as we read the text of the school. Having a hyper-sensitive radar on teachers' stress level, their needs, frustrations, strengths, expertise, intentions, learning style, and so on helped me talk with teachers in a way that showed I was really mindful, present, responsive, considerate, flexible, and that I knew we were partners in the change process. This went a long way in building relationships—knowing, for example, that a teacher is taking a master course in assessment and feels she is an authority and wants to be acknowledged as such; reading the currents that teachers feel they don't get enough time to just talk and think with one another at in-services and deliberately addressing that need; overhearing one teacher's fears of working with older students and later talking with her about teaching in and out of our comfort zones and eventually co-teaching with that teacher to work through those fears, etc.
 - Listen & Learn: I learned from other consultants (through our field notes) the mantra of “listen and learn.” I read the work of Cathy Toll early in my second year, and this really edified my commitment to listening more and talking less to learn as much as possible about teachers, to silence my own voice so that theirs could be heard, and to position them more as agents in the problem-solving,

knowledge-building, community-creating process. The art of listening came with time (really not until end of my second year did I start getting better at holding my tongue and resisting urge to have the answers) and with confidence after more experience. I also just got better results—if I listened and asked questions more—I gained more insights about teachers and they ended up figuring out their own teaching dilemmas, feeling really gratified, and more fired up about the work. This is really what has made the difference for me in my current school which has been enormously challenging in terms of winning teachers' support. They really expected me to come in and tell them what they were all doing wrong and so they were very wary, guarded and defensive. I had to show them over and over again through small micro-interactions and during bigger PD sessions that I'd never adopt that stance.

- Prepare for and Practice Difficult Conversations: Toll's work was instrumental in helping me support a terribly divided staff (two school faculties were combined) with intense philosophical differences and extremely strained relationships. I listened and learned, steered clear of forming alliances, and directly and openly talked with teachers about the fact that they had competing views, that this often happens in the field, and asked how we could work through this, what we could do. I even used the language Toll provides in her book and actually rehearsed what I'd say during our meetings. I always tried to give even the most challenging teachers "the A," as Toll puts it, and assumed the very best of them by trying to understand and appreciate what they had at stake in those conversations—power, control, identity, and a sense of their own competence.