

Procrastination can sink even the best school improvement plan. A few simple strategies can help get those projects moving forward.

As I have worked with school leaders to implement professional learning community concepts in their schools and districts, I have seen some efforts flourish and others flounder. In reflection, I find that leaders' tendency to delay or avoid action is one of the single greatest barriers to advancing on the continuum of change. Being willing to take steps, however halting, is an absolute prerequisite for school improvement.

Rarely do administrators consciously choose to procrastinate. More typically they delay and defer in the belief that there is one more prerequisite that must be fulfilled before they can begin to implement the concept under consideration. Three qualifications often used to justify inaction are the need for greater buy-in, more training, and stronger relationships.

WE NEED MORE BUY-IN

School leaders have become increasingly sensitive to the need to build consensus rather than impose their personal will on reluctant teachers. Consensus is indeed a powerful tool in the improvement process. It gives leaders the moral authority of the group both to proceed with the initiative and to confront resisters. Some leaders, however, have confused consensus with unanimity. They feel they must have everyone on the school improvement train before it can leave the station. There is always one more group or individual to be converted before they are willing to take action, and as a result, nothing changes.

While leaders should strive for unanimous support for an improvement initiative, they typically will have to settle for something less. I have found the following definition of consensus to be a more realistic benchmark for action: All points of view have been heard, and the group's will is evident, even to those who most oppose it. When those who are resistant to implementing new processes and procedures are in a position where they must acknowledge that the group is ready to proceed, leaders must press for action. Furthermore, they must clarify the specific responsibilities

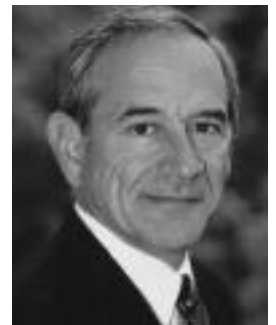
each member of the staff must fulfill in the initiative, create procedures to monitor each person's attention to those responsibilities, celebrate evidence of commitment and improvement, and confront those who fail to contribute in a positive way. Their focus should be on ensuring that all staff act in ways that will advance the initiative. The focus on initial commitment is misplaced. Deep understanding and commitment follow action; they do not precede it. As people gain experience in the improvement process and begin to see benefits, their enthusiasm for and commitment to the process are likely to increase (Burnette, 2002).

If leaders are unable to achieve the threshold of a clear consensus as defined above, then they should pilot the initiative on a smaller scale with a willing group of participants. For example, assume that despite his or her best efforts, a principal is unable to convince most teachers that working in collaborative teams benefits students and teachers alike. It is usually more productive to demonstrate the benefits of collaboration with willing teachers of a particular course or grade level than it is to spend more time in conversation and debate. The pilot project is an action step, albeit a small one, to advance the concept in the school, but even a small step is better than standing still.

WE NEED MORE TRAINING

Imagine two school leaders, each of whom believes the best hope for a significantly improved school requires organizing teachers into teams to clarify essential learning outcomes, to create common assessments, to clarify the criteria by which they will judge the quality of student learning, to establish goals, to analyze student achievement data, and to identify and implement strategies to improve upon results. Imagine, too, that teachers in both schools are willing to create and participate in this collaborative team structure. The first principal sees the need for extensive training before he can ask teachers to begin working in teams. They will need training in writing curriculum, creating tests and rubrics, analyzing data, and developing goals prior to going forward — and that training will take years.

The second principal organizes teachers into teams immediately, asks them to initiate the collaborative processes described above, and provides training and support as teachers approach each task. They are not learning how to



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write common curriculum as an abstract exercise, they are fully engaged in the team process and receiving just-in-time training to assist them. Which school will have a deeper, richer understanding of the advantages and disadvantages of working in collaborative teams five years later? Once again, we learn by doing, not by talking about doing. The best form of advanced training in school improvement is to do school improvement.

WE NEED TO STRENGTHEN RELATIONSHIPS

Another common source of procrastination in implementing the concepts of a professional learning community is the idea that staff must focus on building collegial relationships before they begin to work as a team. They go through wilderness training to gain trust, attend conferences on strategies for arriving at consensus, participate in role-playing to learn conflict resolution, etc. The more effective strategy for creating effective teams is to put staff in the position in which they must function as a team. When people are assigned to groups that must work interdependently to achieve a common goal, when they are provided time and support, when they have access to relevant feedback, when they face and overcome obstacles together, they become more proficient in working as a team.

I have two friends who are tennis enthusiasts who took very different paths in learning to play tennis. John would drill for hours with a tennis professional — practicing forehands, backhands, volleys, overheads, lobs, serves, drop shots, top spins, and slices. He rarely played matches because he wanted to perfect his strokes before competing. Bob took a few lessons to become familiar with the basics and periodically attended a clinic, but he spent most of his time playing matches. He would challenge a more skilled opponent and ask for advice and feedback after each defeat. He would then continue to play that opponent until he could devise the strategy and develop the skills to beat him — and then he would look for another superior player with whom to compete. Over time, he challenged solid baseline players, serve and volley specialists, players with touch, and players with power. He learned to make adjustments during a match — to see which shots were working for him on a particular day and to probe his

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opponent for a weakness. Ten years later, John has still never beaten Bob, even though his strokes are far superior. While John focused on perfecting the pieces of the game, Bob played the game in its context and, as a result, became more proficient, knowledgeable, and confident in his ability to overcome adversity.

The same is true of those seeking to improve schools. Developing isolated skills or dispositions outside the context of the improvement process is no substitute for engaging in the process. As researchers both within and outside education note, true learning organizations have an “action orientation,” a willingness to try something new (Pinchot & Pinchot, 1993; Perkins, 1992).

I am more convinced than ever that leaders of effective professional learning communities are action-oriented. They turn aspirations into action and visions into reality. Not only do they act, they are unwilling to tolerate inaction. They recognize that learning always occurs in a context of taking action, and they value engagement and experience as the most effective of teachers. Even seemingly chaotic activity is preferred to orderly, passive inaction.

The Chinese proverb advises that the journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. The journey to improve a school will not truly begin until its leaders are willing to take that first step — to move beyond discussion and study and insist that the school and those within it begin to act in new ways.

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