



Working Productively

With Difficult and Resistant Staff

By employing strategies for getting the most out of eight employee types, principals can successfully move ahead on school improvement efforts.

By John F. Eller and Sheila A. Eller

Effective leaders must find ways to motivate their employees to provide maximum success for the organization. In today's world of high accountability, this ability is paramount to the success and survival of our schools, and is an especially important skill for early career principals to master. Consider for example, Jim Collins' explanation of getting the right people on the bus from his book, *Good to Great*. His analogy would be perfect for schools if we always had the opportunity to select who we are picking up at the bus stops. In many cases, however, we are limited to the employees in our building, and kicking unproductive employees off the bus (terminating them) is not always an option. Normally, we have to find ways to work with existing staff to help them gain the needed skills and strategies to be successful.

Context Is Everything

Knowledge of the factors that might have contributed to some of your employees becoming difficult in the first place will help you to select the proper interventions. For example, if a new idea is philosophically different from a staff member's belief, principals need to provide information to help the staff member see the new way. If a staff member has learned that he or she can use negativity to just resist and not implement the new idea, principals need to confront the negative behavior. Here are some of the more common issues based on our experience and outlined in *Working with Difficult & Resistant Staff*.

Frame of Reference. We all develop our ways of thinking based on our experiences as we

grow. The unique way we look at the world shapes our behaviors and attitudes. Incoming information is filtered through this frame of reference. Experiences and information that fit into this frame of reference reinforce the thought pattern and a comfort zone is established. However, as the work environment changes, some staff become uncomfortable with the new environment because it doesn't fit the frame of reference. Because they are trying to fit the new information into an old frame of reference, they can become resistant to the new thought patterns, behaviors, or information coming to them.

Winners and Losers. If you take the time to think through the potential winners and losers in your change process, you might be able

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to head off” problems before they start. Normally, those winning (gaining) from the change don’t present an issue; it’s those who lose something as a result of the change that can be problematic. It’s important to recognize the loss and, if possible, try to find something to replace that loss for that person.

For example, we recently asked a teacher to coordinate an after-school program, a position that would require the teacher to use existing preparation time differently. We worked with the teacher to change his schedule so he could leave earlier on the days that he was not coordinating the after-school program. He agreed that this accommodation helped to minimize his loss resulting from the program assignment.

Previous Experiences With Change.

Another factor that can make people resistant to a new idea is their previous experiences with changes. In many cases, resistant people have had a bad experience with a poorly implemented change process, thus making them resistant to the proposed change in your school. Taking the time to find out the issues or problems related to the previous change effort, and then working to minimize the possibility of this error happening again can help them be more accepting of the change.

We recently encountered a senior staff member who was undermining

a change effort we were trying to put into place in a school. Upon further investigation, we found that she had been a part of a previously unsuccessful change effort and was in the “firing line” when several angry parents confronted the school about the change. We asked her to describe her previous experience and then work with us to develop a strategy to minimize the chances of this negative situation from happening again. She suggested that we employ a series of parental input strategies, including having discussions with the parent teacher organization, using the website and a blog to gather feedback, and holding community forums to gain parental perspective. Her negativity was reduced and we were able to do a much better job as a result of her input on the process.

Minimize their Impact

One way to deal with negative and difficult staff members is to directly confront their behavior. This can be highly effective because other staff members see that you are concerned and doing something about their issues. In addition to this, you should work to develop the strengths of the other staff members to minimize the development or impact of the difficult and resistant staff. Here are two strategies we have found helpful in building the strength of a school’s employee base.

Individual Meetings. Meet with staff on an individual basis to talk with them about their perceptions, ideas, and aspirations about the school. At times, we have used this strategy during the summer before starting a job assignment, but it can also work once you are on the job. We schedule 30-minute conferences with teachers, asking them to respond to the following:

■ What are the positive aspects of the school that you think we should continue to maintain as we move forward?

■ What changes or adjustments do you think we need to make to keep the school moving in a positive direction?
■ What ideas or strategies do you think would be most effective for us to use in implementing these new ideas?

As we conduct these conversations, we keep track of the answers, tabulate them, and share them with the staff at a future faculty meeting. We use these ideas in our future planning and to help hold people accountable as we implement changes and ideas.

Difficult Conversations. When conducting difficult conversations, principals need to set a serious tone for the conference, clearly describe and provide examples of the problem, tell the person exactly what needs to be changed or addressed, make sure these directives are understood, and let the person know that follow-up strategies will be employed to make sure the expectations are implemented. These conversations can be difficult because they, by nature, are confrontational. The most successful difficult conversations are well planned, clear, and let the employee know that the principal means business.

Even though negative and difficult staff members might make up a minority of your staff, their influence can be large if not addressed. As you work to address these negative aspects and build the positive attributes of your staff using the straightforward strategies outlined in this article, you will see a real change in your school. 

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Access the following Web resources by visiting *Principal* magazine online: www.naesp.org/SeptOct12

 Find resources, peer-to-peer help, and networking opportunities on NAESP’s **early career principals’ portal**.

 Purchase a copy of the authors’ book, *Working With Difficult & Resistant Staff*, from NAESP’s **National Principals Resource Center**.

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