The Beliefs-Behavior Connection: Leading Teachers Toward Change

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The key to changing teachers’ behavior is to change their basic beliefs.

With expectations for teachers climbing to new heights each year, professional development has become more important than ever. Even so, many teachers remain within their comfort zones, admitting that their instructional practices do not change much as a result of professional development activities.

How Do People Change?

Prochaska, DiClemente, and Norcross’s 1992 study of addictive behavior, describing five stages of progression to achieve permanent change, gives important insight into the process of behavioral change:

- **Precontemplation.** In the first stage, a person is not yet ready for change. The individual may not be convinced that there is a problem, or may be aware of a problem but has no intention of making a change. People in this stage often make superficial changes as a result of pressure from others, only to return to old behaviors as soon as the pressure subsides.

- **Contemplation.** At this stage, the individual develops an awareness that a problem exists, seriously considers changing his or her behavior, but is not yet ready to make a commitment to change.

- **Preparation.** During this stage, the individual attempts small behavioral changes but is not able to sustain them over an extended period of time.

- **Action.** In the fourth stage, the person’s behavior, experiences, and/or environment are modified enough to motivate a change in behavior for at least a short period of time.

- **Maintenance.** In the final stage, an extension of the action stage, behavioral changes become established. While it is still possible and even likely for a...
person reaching this stage to spiral back to earlier stages, the longer the changed behavior is actively maintained, the lower the likelihood of relapse.

In an attempt to discover why teachers may get stuck in the early stages of the change process, let’s look at some of the reasons why teachers may not be ready to take action when instructional leaders want them to.

Why Do Teachers Resist Change?

One reason why teachers may resist change is lack of motivation. This is usually a temporary condition caused by one of three factors: negative associations related to past experiences (Jensen 1998; McCarty 1993); distracting environmental or situational conditions (Jensen 1998); or negative beliefs about their ability to use particular knowledge or skills in the future (Jensen 1998; McCarty 1993). Whether rooted in the past, present, or future, any of these factors can cause teachers to simply endure a professional development experience rather than engaging as an active participant.

Teachers’ levels of knowledge, experience, and comfort may also cause them to resist behavioral changes. According to Loucks-Horsley and Stiegelbauer’s Stages of Concern scale (1991), teachers typically focus on developing awareness, gathering information, and looking out for personal concerns when first presented with a new task or expectation. While experienced teachers often move quickly through these stages in attempting to implement an innovation, younger or less experienced teachers may take much longer. It is important for principals to recognize the varying concerns that teachers bring to the professional development setting so that they are better able to provide various levels and types of support.

A third factor to be considered in teacher resistance to change, beyond motivation and stages of concern, is the role that moral and ego development play in affecting a person’s ability to change. Kohlberg identifies three stages of moral development: preconventional, conventional, and post-conventional (1981). In the first stage, people are primarily concerned with meeting their own needs and are highly focused on obeying rules in order to avoid punishment or gain reward. At the second level, they conform to group norms in an attempt to be accepted by society, showing respect for authority and helping to maintain societal order. At the third stage, individuals come to understand that rules of society must be obeyed for the good of all, while at the same time realizing that their conscience must dictate personal decision-making.

In the first two stages of moral development, individuals are not yet capable of the complex thinking and reasoning required to consider multiple options in regard to solving problems and resolving issues. As a result, teachers settled in these early stages may appear self-centered or even selfish, and may not be skilled at cooperating with others. This can make the design of effective professional development a real challenge for instructional leaders.

Adding to the problem is that fact that some teachers also exhibit low levels of ego development, which can lead to difficulty in working with others. Teachers with underdeveloped ego tend to devalue the viewpoints of others and often require coaxing to express opinions or make independent decisions.

Leading Teachers Toward Change

Permanently changing teacher behaviors through professional development is most likely to be successful when instructional leaders focus their efforts not on action but on changing teachers’ beliefs. Bocchino (1993) explains that this can be very difficult because a person’s core values and priorities have been established over an entire lifetime. However, teacher beliefs, which are expressed through classroom behavior, tend to be more open to change. It is these beliefs that should be the target for principals seeking to change teacher behavior (Bocchino 1993; Borko and Putnam 1995; McCarty 1993; Shulman 1999).

Changing a teacher’s beliefs requires that new information be presented repeatedly over time, to the point that the person begins to feel disequilibrium between current beliefs and new information (Jensen 1998; Nuthall and Alton-Lee 1993). Whether the new information is presented through reading, dialogue, classroom observations, or assigned tasks, successful professional development efforts are those that help teachers acquire or develop new ways of thinking about learning, learners, and subject matter (Borko and Putnam 1995).

Even following the most zealous efforts to target teacher beliefs through professional development, some teachers may still need months and even years to fully accomplish a change in behavior (Loucks-Horsley and Stiegelbauer 1991; McCarty 1993). McCarty (1993) explains that successful teachers usually have a record of success behind them, providing a cushion to fall back on in the event of failure. Teachers who don’t have that cushion are much more likely to avoid change because it places them too much at risk.

Changing teacher behavior is no easy task, but by becoming familiar with the process of change and the reasons why teachers resist change, instructional leaders can gain a better understanding of how to proceed. It is important to remember that the change process involves a slow progression through stages that lead to eventual readiness for change. Only by patiently and persistently aiming professional development toward changing teacher beliefs will lasting behavioral changes in teachers be likely to occur.
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Human Motivation and Change Process:
http://chiron.valdosta.edu/whuitt/col/regsys/maslow.html
www.hafmc.org/hr/diclemente.html

Developmental Stages of Teachers:
www.nas.edu/rise/backg4a.htm
www.nsdc.org/library/publications/jsd/horsley194.cfm
http://education.utoledo.edu/par/Stages.html

Ego & Moral Development:
www.psychodiagnositics.com/Egomain.htm
http://facultyweb.cortland.edu/~ANDERSMD/KOHL/CONTENT.HTML

Teacher Beliefs:
www.teachersmind.com/beliefs2.htm
www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/envrnmnt/cs/cs1lk4-2.htm

Encouraging Change in Teachers:
www.hr.nd.edu/prodevelopment/tips_3.shtml
www.essentialschools.org/cs/resources/view/ces_res/101
www.electronic-school.com/0398f1.html

References

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