

Turning Resistant Teachers into Resilient Teachers

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Resistant teachers can have a profound effect on the school climate and culture in both positive and negative ways. In the book *Leading in a Culture of Change* (2007), Michael Fullan says resisters deserve respect both because they present ideas we might otherwise miss and because their influence is crucial to navigating the politics of implementation. By using situational leadership, the ability to fluidly interchange among a variety of leadership styles as the situation demands, administrators can shape teacher resistance into resilience and develop powerful partners in school initiatives. Goleman (2004) says situational leadership can mitigate the negative and enhance the positive forces influencing school climate. Effective school leaders know when to use a different leadership approach based on the behaviors and personalities of their teachers.

Types of Teacher Behaviors

I have found that resistant teachers usually fall into one of the following categories:

- Those who believe administration will not help or understand them.
- Those who don't have confidence in their teaching and don't know how to improve.
- Those who prefer traditional methods and believe change would require too much work.
- Those who lack the desire or motivation to improve.

Most reluctant teachers fall into the first three categories and can be developed into resilient teachers. The fourth category is much more rare and requires a steadfast administrator. In the next sections, I outline some ways I've worked with these different types of resistance.

Resisting the Administration

We all know that focus and expectations can change with a shift in administrators. Most educators, however, will adapt to their bosses like they adapt to their students each year. Resistant teachers differ from most teachers because they tend to remain static in the face of change. They view change as a process that happens to them, rather than with them.

An example of this comes from a teacher I used to work with. Her resistance was passive; I was a new supervisor, and she said she wanted to do what it took to make me happy. My goal was to help her improve her instruction, but her goal was to do the minimal amount to get my approval. Her attention was on me, rather than on her students, and the implied sentiment was, "Because I am not good enough for you, just tell me what you want, and I will try to please you."

Coaching this teacher involved taking the focus off of me as the leader and putting it back on students and learning. During this process, I had to build a trusting relationship with the teacher, so she trusted that I saw her value within the organization. I made progress with this teacher by coaching her to self-reflect on lesson effectiveness and learning outcomes, redirecting the focus from administrator feedback to teacher efficacy around student learning.

Resisting Out of Lack of Confidence

Consider the typical classroom situation when a student acts out because he does not understand what is being discussed. Students would rather seem disruptive than incompetent. Teachers and other adults aren't so different; resistance is a natural response when we lack knowledge or confidence but are pressured to perform.

To find out if resistance is motivated by lack of confidence or knowledge, get teachers to open up about their understanding in a one-on-one setting. For example, if teachers are resistant to a new technology initiative, individually ask concerned teachers, "What training or support would you need to teach students how to blog about their reading using an iPad?" The depth of the answer can provide clues, much in the same way that probing questions can reveal student learning gaps in the classroom. Because fear and reputation are at stake, the school administration will want to approach this problem with confidentiality and support. Possible solutions include

- Professional development opportunities in the content area of need.
- A peer buddy to collaboratively plan with in the content area.
- A one-on-one book study between the teacher and another teacher or administrator.
- Online courses in the skill needed, with follow up after completion (this allows teachers to pursue professional learning in the privacy of their own home, protecting their reputation).

The point here is to deepen the teacher's knowledge base in the area of resistance. If after becoming more informed, the teacher still resists, she will have knowledge and evidence to better frame her case.

Resisting Change

Veteran teachers are likely to resist change because they believe that traditional methods are best. These teachers are not simply trying to be difficult; they've most likely had success with their tried-and-true lessons and strategies, and so change may seem unnecessary or overwhelming. A new curricular initiative might seem like just the latest wave of change that will eventually pass. However, if you coach these teachers to understand the long-term goals of a new curriculum or initiative and discuss the possibility of the teacher piloting the new program (with lots of support from administration), you can create a powerful ally to help lead change. By having experienced teachers pilot a new program, you will get insight that may help improve whole-school implementation. At the least, even if these experienced teachers are not fans of a change, trying it first will empower them to own it and make it better.

Even teachers who support change as necessary for the good of students in the long run may feel overwhelmed by the amount of work needed to implement the change. Providing frequent feedback and unrelenting support will be crucial to helping teachers like this become robust. Rather than simply mandate the change, administrators can support the teacher with resources, professional development, and work groups to build grit and persistence. Here's how administrators can help teachers develop the grit to get through major changes:

- Offer peer-led work groups after school.
- Provide teacher leaders to spearhead support efforts.
- Furnish detailed examples, resources, or instructions.
- Pay for substitutes so that teachers can attend professional development.
- Offer a weekly feedback form for teachers to communicate their challenges.
- Provide regular feedback to teachers after walk-throughs.
- Offer online professional development.
- Model the change during staff meetings, give model lessons, provide video footage of high-quality teaching examples, and find other ways for teachers to see the change in action.

Resisting Out of Apathy

Teachers in this category need specific directives, measurable goals, and outcomes to achieve. Holding unmotivated teachers accountable will make every other teacher in your building resilient because most teachers appreciate leaders who can recognize the difference between someone who disagrees and someone who doesn't care. In most states, it can take a lot of documentation and tireless work on the part of administration to remove ineffective teachers, but the other teachers in the building will notice your tenacity in holding people accountable. This is crucial because school administrators establish the foundation for school culture through their actions.

How you tailor your approach to resistant teachers can have a powerful effect on school culture and morale. Start by assessing which type of resistance these teachers are exhibiting, and then align the supports and interventions that target their areas of need. Ultimately, by engaging resisters, you will foster a culture of resiliency that will permeate the school, from the teachers to the students.

References

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