Implementing Best Practice Overnight Is Not Best Practice

Today's guest blog is written by Ross Cooper, Elementary Assistant Principal in the Williamsport Area School District.

The majority of teachers and administrators have been there at one point or another.

We discover something by attending a conference, reading a book, perusing a journal article, having a conversation with a big shot from somewhere else, etc.

Now, we are overly excited and we have to make sure that what we have learned is implemented in our school and/or district!

A situation such as this one is both an opportunity and a predicament. Yes, you can lead a change that positively affects many adults and children, but with one misstep you will end up being the only one who is passionate about what you are bringing to the table.

When attempting to generate such a difference, one of the most blatant errors that I have seen leaders make is thinking they have the right to railroad their ideas simply because at least one notable researcher says that these ideas are best practice. As a result, one of two things usually happens:

1. Everyone begrudgingly follows orders. The intended effects of the change are counterproductive because there is no empowerment, only accountability. (This result is typical of a district in which there is no system of checks and balances for its administrators.)
2. The initiative never gets off the ground, which results in a wasted opportunity. Eventually, the same ideas may come back around in other shapes and forms.

The lesson learned is that implementing best practice overnight is not best practice, because people - yes, real people with thoughts and feelings - are impacted by these changes. In order to navigate from Point A (discovering the idea) to Point B (a successful system-wide application), there are certain steps that could be taken along the way. Here are five of them:

Gauge the readiness of your system: Find out if your teachers are ready for the change by issuing anonymous surveys, attending team meetings, having "water cooler talks," etc. Make some observations of your own in regards to teacher preparedness. For example, you would not jump to a 1:1 iPad program before assessing the extent to which your educators are already using technology in their classrooms. Also, examine the vision of your district and ask yourself if it encompasses the initiative that you wish to implement.

According to Michael Fullan, "*The problem in education is not the lack of innovation and initiatives but*

rather the presence of too many fragmented, piecemeal, rapidly changing priorities." If your new ideas do not fall within the context of what is already taking place, maybe they should be shelved for a later point in time.

Be contagious: Get genuinely excited about what you have to offer, which should come naturally if your ideas are valuable. This concept may sound simple, but if you are enthusiastic about the possibilities then others will be as well. If it is boring for the teacher it is boring for the students, *and* if it is boring for the administrator it is boring for the teachers.

As a fourth grade teacher, I was able to impact students from across my district by actively talking about philosophies and resources with teachers and administrators while in the hallways, during staff outings, while at the gym, and even when attending weddings. Many small conversations over the course of time are often the best way to spark considerable change, as opposed to dropping a new initiative on teachers without any forewarning. The ultimate goal is to blur the lines (and dates) between when an initiative does and does not exist.

Involve as many stakeholders as you can: This is a point that may seem obvious, but it is one that is often ignored. David Weinberger writes, "*The smartest person in the room is the room.*" Keep this thought in mind, as in no way can a few people sitting behind their desks be able to operate more effectively on their own than with the help of various colleagues from throughout their organization.

Furthermore, most people do not appreciate having things "done to them." If teachers are a part of the change process, even if they are not able to significantly impact what takes place, they will be much more accepting of what they have to do. Empowered teachers results in empowered students. Also, do not ask for teacher input if you do not plan on taking it into consideration. Morale will be damaged, as they will be able to detect this false sense of collaboration

Empower those with strengths that compliment yours: True leaders care about progress, and they do not worry about receiving credit for their actions. The odds are there is at least one person in your organization with strengths that compliment yours in every education-related area. Know who these players are and take advantage of them, especially if they are well respected by others.

Even if they do not execute your plans exactly as you had envisioned, the results will be powerful than if you attempted to do everything by yourself. My former curriculum supervisor believes, "It's all about knowing who you have and how to use them to the best of their abilities. In a sense, you're using people while being respectful at the very same time." Real leaders check their egos at the door and focus on building the leadership capacity within their organization.

Evoke emotions: According to John Kotter, one of the biggest mistakes you can make when attempting

to achieve buy-in "is to communicate with all 'head' and no 'heart.'" In other words, the odds are not in favor of teachers saying, "*Well, if Robert Marzano says this is what's best, then we should all be doing it in our classrooms*!" Be contagious with your excitement, and also evoke emotions through photographs, videos, games, role playing, etc.

Try modeling inquiry-based learning by only revealing the research until you have clenched the attention and curiosity of your educators and made them realize that there just might be a way for them to improve upon a particular area of their practice. For some teachers this research can provide reassurance that their leader is not forcing them down the wrong path, but either way this information should not serve as the focal point of what you are offering.

The five points that have been listed do not necessarily encompass everything that could be done before "*implementing best practice overnight,*" but they can serve as a starting point for anyone who has hopes of making an impact within a school district. In one way or another, each point can be associated with having empathy, or identifying with the feelings, thoughts, and attitudes of others. As leaders, it is already a win if we are self-aware in realizing where we are and where we need to be on the spectrum of being able to put ourselves in the shoes of others.

What tips do you have for promoting change?

Connect with Ross on Twitter.