

Principals WHO Learn

Asking the Right Questions, Seeking the Best Solutions

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	vii
INTRODUCTION	ix
PART 1: LISTENING TO ALL VOICES	1
1. The Noisy Minority: From Loud Voices to All Voices	3
2. No More Bad Guys and Good Guys: From the Comfort of Agreement to the Wisdom of Diversity	29
3. Missing Persons: From an Open Door to an Open School	49
PART 2: SEEING POSSIBILITIES	77
4. To Change or Not to Change: From Avoiding to Embracing Risk	79
5. Lemonade Opportunities: From Mistakes to Possibilities	99
6. Keeping the Rubber Band Taut: From Seeking Calm to Valuing Tension	119
PART 3: ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS	139
7. What Do We Know? From Expert to Learner	141
8. Little Things Mean a Lot: From Isolated Details to Connected Leverage Points	159
9. What Counts: From Intentions to Results	177
PART 4: CREATING COLLABORATIVE CULTURES	203
10. Developing a Collaborative Culture: From Command and Control to Collaborative Responsibility	205
11. Redesigning Meetings: From Administrative Details to Engines of Reform	227
12. A Shift in Thinking: From Looking at Parts to Seeing the Whole	247
AFTERWORD	265
REFERENCES	273
INDEX	276
ABOUT THE AUTHORS	287

PART 1

Listening to All Voices

People who seem peripheral to your goals now may be central to them in the future. Be open to everyone.

Eleanor Roosevelt

What a principal doesn't know can be problematic. What is even more dangerous is when principals don't know that they don't know. When a principal assumes more agreement than actually exists, receives polite but incomplete feedback, or listens only to the loudest voices, he or she can be blindsided. Hidden information needs to be allowed to bubble up to the surface and find expression in legitimate forums. In Chapter 1, we explore the need to listen to all voices. In Chapter 2, we pay particular attention to listening to dissenting voices. And in Chapter 3, we discuss the need to establish policies and organizational structures that provide forums for open, inclusive communication.

The Noisy Minority

From Loud Voices to All Voices

Beverly Nance

*It is this spontaneous interlocking of ideas
which is the magic of dialogue, and a key
to successful learning organizations.*

Robert L. Masten

As a beginning principal, I fell victim to two underlying assumptions. First, in an effort to be collaborative, I assumed I needed 100 percent agreement to move forward on a decision. Second, without input to the contrary, I thought the loudest and most assertive teachers represented the majority opinion. These underlying assumptions, sometimes called mental models (see Figure 1.1), prevented me from hearing all perspectives and allowed a vocal few to maintain the status quo.

As a teacher, collaboration with colleagues was effective. We talked about what we wanted to accomplish, discussed what was best for students, and sought unanimous agreement on decisions.

Figure 1.1

Mental Models

Mental models are assumptions that people make about the world. These assumptions, based on previous experience, provide lenses through which we see and interpret events in our lives. The lenses we create help us focus attention on information that is important to us and cause us to ignore other information. New experiences influence us to examine our assumptions and change mental models, often by including information previously ignored. Mental models become problematic when people think they are the only possible truth. As Senge notes, "We always see the world through our mental models and our mental models are always incomplete" (1990, p. 185).

Source: From *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization* by P. M. Senge, 1990. New York: Doubleday.

Those who had differing opinions spoke up and shared their thoughts. We learned together and built positive relationships.

As a new administrator, I approached collaboration with teachers in the same way. I presented an idea and asked people to share their thoughts, suggestions, and recommendations. Some people spoke; many did not. The process usually ended with a vote regarding implementation. Later, regardless of what decision was made, a few people always stepped forward to express their concerns or disagreement. I found this frustrating; why didn't they speak up before the decision was implemented, when I had asked for input?

I discovered that there is a simple explanation. As human beings, we learn to speak, often by the age of 2. As we grow up, we begin to use conversation as a means of communicating. We believe we communicate effectively, that we know how to do it well. Why not? On the surface it seems to work. We speak and people respond. They speak and we respond. The only problem we notice is that sometimes our audience does not seem to understand what we said, or we are surprised when they disagree or later react differently than we expect. What I have learned is that effective conversation is an art. Protocols for effective conversations exist to ensure that all individuals

at the table offer their perspective, that people listen for understanding, and that everyone hears the intended message.

This chapter discards the two underlying assumptions and proposes a shift in thinking. First, collaboration does not imply reaching 100 percent agreement. Instead of using voting to determine the level of support for a decision, we will examine consensus building. Consensus does not imply a unanimous vote or that everyone got their first choice. It does indicate, however, that everyone agrees to support a decision and not sabotage it. In majority voting, unless the decision is unanimous, many people “win,” but some people “lose,” feeling no commitment to accepting the final vote. Implementation of a decision can be at risk if people do not support it. The process of consensus building can be more effective than voting and create less difficulty when implementing a change effort. Strategies exist to help a group to listen to all voices, express differing ideas, reach consensus, and make decisions. Fist-to-Five is a tool that allows people to express concern but agree not to sabotage a decision.

Second, a few loud voices do not represent a majority opinion. Team learning, one of the five disciplines in organizational learning, emphasizes the need to hear all voices. We will examine two strategies—“check-in” and using guidelines for dialogue—that help engage all members of a group in conversation. We will also look at two types of conversation—dialogue and discussion—and discuss how each is necessary to reach a decision that represents the input and support of all members of the group.

BUILDING CONSENSUS FOR CHANGE

When I became the principal of a suburban middle school, I encountered a faculty with low morale. The previous principal, who had been on the job only eight months, was found guilty of a serious crime and fired. The assistant superintendent served as the interim principal for the next four months. The faculty had had three principals in two years. When I arrived as the fourth, they were emotionally drained and had little trust in leadership. Teachers were prone to retreating to their classrooms for safety and stability.

In an effort to begin rebuilding a sense of community, I decided to host an all-faculty dinner at a local restaurant. I wanted teachers to regain their sense of optimism, re-establish former relationships, and build new ones with me. I took this idea to the school governing body, the Team Leader Council (TLC), whose members represented every grade-level team and every department. I was sure that this group of faculty leaders would be thrilled. I did not expect a long debate.