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# The Underminers

In almost every school, a personality type exists that can threaten the climate and culture of trust and slow down implementation efforts. We call this type “the Underminer.” While Underminers’ exact behaviors can be variable, in general they act supportive in your presence but make negative comments about you or the school behind your back.

As you read this chapter, you will learn the following:

- Typical behaviors of Underminers
- Strategies for handling Underminers
- The principal’s role in creating Underminers
- Ways to help develop the skills of other staff members to effectively deal with Underminers in their midst

## Behaviors of Underminers

Here are some of the specific behaviors that are typical of Underminers:

- Agreeing with you in your presence but criticizing the program or implementation behind your back
- Sitting in a meeting and not sharing any comments or feedback but organizing or engaging in negative conversations in the hall, lounge, and parking lot
- Telling you they will try the new idea or strategy in their classroom but failing to follow through or even attempting to sabotage the effort
- Working to stir up negative sentiment against the change or new idea

Underminers are particularly difficult to deal with because of the power they can have over the other staff members. They are good at expressing

some of the reservations that other staff members may be thinking but don't have the courage to say out loud. They also create fear in others because their behavior can go beyond just being negative about the change or new idea. They might work to undermine *anyone* who is positive about the change. This behavior can cause problems as Underminers try to shift the power balance and recruit other negative staff members.

Let's see how one principal handles a small group of Underminers who threaten to derail a school improvement project.

## Scenario: We Don't Believe It

At Hughes Middle School, the principal, Scott, calls a meeting to share some bad news about the latest student achievement results. It seems that even though the school updated both the language arts and math curricular areas, purchased new materials, and provided professional development for teachers during the last three years, the results of the latest state assessments show that HMS students are still lagging behind their peer groups in these areas. Scott has decided that something needs to be done to examine and remedy this situation. As he presents this information, he tells the staff he wants to wait for comments until the end of the presentation. He also shares that he is planning to involve the school improvement team in looking at the data and reacting to his ideas for improvement.

Scott asks the staff members if they have any comments or questions about the issue and his proposal to begin to address the situation. Several staff members say that they think his plan has merit and that they support it. Many don't state their opinions.

After the meeting, Scott notices clusters of teachers gathering in classrooms and in the school parking lot to share their real feelings about the situation. When he approaches these groups, the conversations stop. Over the next couple of days, Scott begins to hear from teachers and some members of his school improvement team that three to four teachers are complaining about the plan and Scott's leadership on the issue. Scott decides that he has to address this situation and get the concerns out into the open.

## Lessons From This Scenario

Scott needs to find ways to confront the negativity of the situation, ensure that everyone understands the truth behind the situation, and provide a way for people to get their feelings out on the table. Here are a few approaches that Scott could take to deal with the scenario:

# Influencing Your Staff Members' Behaviors

As we all know, if we react to issues that have already developed, we may be less effective than if we had been able to prevent them in the first place. The preceding chapters have offered strategies for dealing with the eight types of difficult and resistant staff members once they have emerged and begun to present a challenge to you, the rest of the staff, and the school improvement initiative you are trying to implement. This concluding chapter will focus on ways to prevent difficult and resistant people from emerging in the first place and ways to minimize their impact if they do emerge.

As you read this chapter, you will learn the following:

- The importance of thorough planning
- Tips for staying alert and being proactive
- How to focus your energies for maximum effectiveness
- How to build a positive school climate and culture
- Ways to keep building your own skills and those of your staff members

## The Importance of Thorough Planning

In previous chapters, we have pointed out ways that principals themselves might contribute to the development of particular difficult and resistant behaviors. What we want to stress here is that *ill-conceived plans related to program implementations* are often the root cause of negativity among staff members. A lack of forethought or a failure to have the necessary structures in place before launching school improvement initiatives gives staff members legitimate reasons to complain.