

"Beastly People"

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Imagine that you are a principal leading a faculty meeting. After you explain a new staff development plan, one of the teachers looks up from his morning newspaper and remarks, "Will this be as much of a waste of time as last year's inservice?" Two teachers smile and seem to agree with the comment. Is this a familiar situation?

Ask principals what part of the job is most difficult, and many will mention working with negative people. Negative parents, negative students, negative teachers--the appearance of any of these persons is stressful for the principal, can ruin the best of days, and can negatively affect school climate. All principals need to know how to deal with negative persons because they infiltrate almost every school. Furthermore, because it would be almost impossible to fire an employee for "being negative," termination proceedings may not be a wise strategy.

The principal is the key person in developing and maintaining a positive, healthy, professional school climate. This involves establishing an inviting, cordial environment where people are confident, cooperative, and positive about their work. In order to build and maintain such a climate, principals must encourage individuals with positive attitudes and deal effectively with those who are negative. Both types of individuals require attention because both can influence organizational climate.

Principals shape school climate in two ways. First, principals are role models. Negative attitudes by principals are often noticed and may be copied by others. Similarly, principals who display a positive outlook may influence others to be positive, even when conditions are difficult. The process of building a positive school climate, therefore, starts with a principal who thinks positively and whose positive interactions with staff members become infectious.

Second, principals influence others in the organization by sending messages to school staff about whether their attitudes and behaviors are exemplary or tolerated, acceptable or unacceptable. This article focuses on this second way in which principals' behaviors affect school climate--through the messages they send and the ways they deal with both the positive and negative groups in their schools. In particular, we discuss the importance of learning how to deal effectively with negative individuals.

A Theory about Positive and Negative Individuals

The fundamental question is, "How does a principal promote positive behavior while dealing with those who insist on being negative?" Dr. Richard Foster, an educational consultant and former Superintendent in Berkeley, California, has a theory about negative and positive people in organizations.

Foster (1986) proposes that, in any organization, approximately ten per cent of the members are positive and innovative. He believes positive and innovative behavior are

found together because positive persons try new ideas, believing they will be successful. Foster also believes approximately 15 percent of an organization's membership is negative. Finally, Foster calls the remaining 75 percent the thinking majority. These individuals reflect on situations before they develop either negative or positive reactions.

Foster's theory forms the basis for the answer to the above question. It is our purpose to explain the implications of this theory for schools and to suggest ways principals can effectively encourage positive people and suppress negative ones. This is central to building and maintaining positive school climates.

Before making our suggestions, however, we provide clearer descriptions of positive and negative persons. Principals can probably picture individuals on their staffs who match the following descriptions.

Positive Persons

Positive persons view the world in a positive way. They are positive even in the worst situations. They are also innovators because they have a need to make things better. They believe that change is exciting and that new ideas will succeed. Positive persons maintain a bright outlook without encouragement from others. Their positive view comes from within. They have the capacity to believe that everything in life comes to a satisfactory conclusion even when experience may suggest otherwise.

Positive persons support the principal. In fact, they support all people, even negative people. They see all people as basically good and worthy of support. Because their support is consistent, administrators need not worry about the cooperation of this group. For example, even the most controversial idea, such as involving parents more in school governance, is likely to be supported by the positive people.

But a note of caution is necessary. Positive persons should not be taken for granted because they have an Achilles heel. They view most things in life as positive, so they tend to look for perfection. Unfortunately, this tendency may lead to stress for positive persons when things do not work out perfectly. Principals need to be supportive of positive individuals, especially during difficult times. Principals should inform positive individuals that their ideas are helpful, should accept their positive contributions, and should support them if things do not turn out as hoped.

Negative Persons

Negative persons find fault with even the best of plans. They are critical of people, places and things. You name it and they find fault with it. Negative persons recognize only the negative in situations. They routinely vote "no" on improvement suggestions. Members of the negative minority feel it is their responsibility to warn others of failure, so they love an audience. In their minds, change will be unsuccessful, so new ideas are dangerous. The worst of negative persons can be seen as "toxic." They ought to wear a sign that reads, "Caution: communication with this person may be hazardous to your attitude." Remember the newspaper-reading teacher in the faculty meeting. Both the verbal and non-verbal messages sent by this kind of person can damage school climate.

They will not display such a sign, however, because they believe they make productive contributions to the school. In fact, administrators need to be cautious not to label negative persons as unproductive. Negative individuals can be productive teachers, parents, and citizens. They sometimes seek leadership positions because they believe their views should be adopted by others. More will be said about this later.

Although the qualities and skills of negative persons may be varied, their common characteristic is a negative outlook on life. Principals should learn to recognize this characteristic among their staff members. Once negative persons are identified, principals can proceed with the business of building a positive school climate by anticipating the problems and objections that may surface among the negative members of the organization. Principals need to learn how to act in ways that circumvent and neutralize the influence of negative individuals. For example, in the faculty meeting situation described earlier, we suggest that the principal ignore the remark of the negative teacher and call on one of the positive teachers to comment on the new staff development plan.

The Thinking Majority

The remaining 75 percent is the thinking majority. They follow and react to the viewpoints of the positive and negative minorities. They often act only when a position is clear to them. They love research, facts and common sense. According to the thinking majority, positive persons are not realistic, and negative persons are just unhappy.

Although it is difficult to change positive innovators or toxic, negative people, the thinking majority can be the key to developing a healthy, productive school climate. And this is a key to effective leadership. Effective leaders supply the thinking majority with accurate information about school issues. Failure to do so permits negative individuals to fill the information void, which negatively affects school climate. Therefore, principals should promote the flow of positive school information as a way to influence the thinking majority.

Theory into Action: The Plan

We suggest that principals develop a plan for dealing with both positive and negative people in their schools. Before making our suggestions for such a plan, however, we emphasize that principals should not attempt to change negative people. Psychologist Christopher Peterson (1991) recently reported that, "pessimism is a part of a belief system and cannot be changed by reasonable arguments or in isolation from other beliefs." Truly negative individuals will not be changed by a principal's good intentions. Negative people will only change when they become dissatisfied with their behavior. Principals should leave the door open for change, but remember that personal change is an individual's own responsibility.

Understanding the 10-15-75 theory enables principals to deal with the different behaviors of individuals within their schools. The following suggestions are based on this theory and are aimed at helping principals build and maintain positive school climates. The first two suggestions focus on ways to deal with positive individuals. The other four suggestions focus on how principals can deal with members of the negative group.

1. Be familiar with the strengths of positive persons and assign them to leadership roles. Positive persons can be chairpersons, planners, honorees, and models of exemplary attitudes and behavior. They should be placed in situations where they can lead the thinking majority.
2. Reward positive persons. Do not take their behavior for granted. Congratulatory notes and verbal messages can fortify their belief system.
3. Avoid the work place of negative persons. Don't enter their rooms or offices.

School leaders cannot afford to listen to demoralizing, negative viewpoints. Wise principals reduce the influence of negative people by ignoring them, which is the only way to deal with them without spending the energy that would be wasted trying to change them. Truly negative individuals are only fifteen percent of the staff, so it should not be hard to practice strict avoidance.

4. Walk away when negative individuals approach. In most cases, principals can simply walk away when a negative individual is seen coming. If contact is unavoidable, principals ought to express positive greetings and move on to positive turf and positive people. Some principals may find it hard to follow this suggestion because they feel it is rude, or because they value cordial relations with all members of their staff. Principals should remember, though, that negative individuals are present in every group, and their attitudes are beyond the control of the leader.

5. Never ask a negative individual, "How are things going?" Remember, the plan is to avoid communication and contact. This is why it is essential that principals identify individuals in the negative group. Unless those who poison the school atmosphere have been identified, a principal cannot practice strategic avoidance.

An additional caution is offered for times when a principal encounters negative persons in the presence of positive people or the thinking majority. Comments by negative individuals should be followed by silence. Wise principals do not engage in public debate with negative persons. When this situation arises, they end the exchange as soon as possible.

6. Do not assign negative individuals to leadership roles. Principals should exercise their right to appoint persons to leadership positions by appointing those whose attitudes are exemplary. Avoid asking for volunteers when this would provide a negative individual with the opportunity to influence others.

Many people do not have a plan for dealing with negative people, so they tolerate and sometimes encourage their behavior. The principal's job becomes more difficult when others encourage negative persons to assume the role of spokesperson, or leader. Members of the school staff sometimes allow negative individuals to assume leadership roles. The wise principal anticipates this possibility and finds every opportunity to reward positive behavior, so positive persons will be more likely to seek leadership positions.

This is an important part of the strategy because negative persons sometimes volunteer for committee assignments. This is most likely to happen when positive persons believe things will turn out fine without them, and the thinking majority hesitates, hoping that additional information will become available.

Of course, it is not always possible to appoint school committees. Should negative persons attain committee appointments or leadership positions, the principal must revert to the portion of the theory that calls for polite non-recognition. Let negative persons have their say but refuse to acknowledge negative comments unless they are shared by the thinking majority. This qualifier can help a principal judge the legitimacy of a negative comment--only when a concern is shared by members of the thinking majority, does it deserve attention.

Other Applications for Principals

Theories become useful when they can be applied to real situations. Foster's (1986) theory is helpful not only as principals deal with negative people, but also as they engage in other efforts to build and maintain positive school climates.

Consider the current emphasis placed on reaching consensus during the decision-making process. According to some, voting is no longer acceptable because it leaves an unhappy minority, which may work against the success of a project. In reality, most school improvement projects would never be started if total consensus were a prerequisite.

If, on the other hand, principals accept the theory that 15 percent of the group will vote “no” on any issue, they realize pure consensus is impossible. Therefore, “consensus” can be defined as the agreement of 85 percent of the group. Educational leaders should be skilled in the art of consensus building, but it is not productive for them to spend time and effort trying to accomplish the impossible.

Second, understanding this theory can help principals conduct faculty meetings. The negative minority can make faculty meetings stressful for principals and others. If these meetings become gripe sessions, everybody leaves unhappy. Seen through the lens of this theory, however, the behavior and comments of individual teachers take on new meaning. During faculty meetings, principals can expect 15 percent of the faculty to express negative thoughts and can expect the negative minority to disrupt the flow of improvement ideas. This expectation enables principals to keep negative comments in perspective and to plan ways to circumvent their negative consequences. When more than 15 per cent express negative thoughts, however, the principal should be concerned. This means the thinking majority has a concern. In summary, principals who understand this theory can react appropriately to concerns which emerge in faculty meetings.

Faculty evaluations of principals are a third situation when this theory can be useful. Principals should remember that, no matter how hard one has tried, members of the negative group will be dissatisfied. Many principals have received evaluations from staff members who have written up and down the margins and added additional pages to complete the “slaughter.” Again the 10-15-75 theory can save the principal unnecessary concern. This theory suggests that principals should ignore both the most negative and the most positive evaluations. The thinking majority evaluations are the ones that should be given the most weight. Evaluations from staff members can be kept in perspective when the 10-15-75 theory is applied.

Conclusion

Principals’ energies should be directed toward improved learning, human welfare and growth. The attitudes and behavior of negative persons are often counterproductive to the achievement of these goals, so principals sometimes find themselves struggling to overcome attitudes which stand in the way of school improvement. Armed with Foster's (1986) theory and suggestions for dealing with negative persons, principals are in a better position to deal with negative staff members and lead their schools toward improvement.

REFERENCES

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