



ADAPTING

# The challenges of change

*Dennis Sleigh* says change can be good but needs to be handled with care

**W**hen an Education Minister announces “wonderful changes in education”, my cynical mind asks two questions: “Will the changes benefit the students?” and “What about the teachers?” Sadly, as we know, the promised benefits are not always forthcoming. Sometimes the students end up short-changed, as they struggle with new approaches that will prove to have a short life-expectancy; at other times, it is the teacher who suffers, watching the latest idea being introduced without the necessary support to blend this new process

with earlier learning. Fortunately, there are exceptions to this disappointing pattern, with teachers and pupils gaining from the innovation, and I believe the good ones outnumber the others.

Recently I asked a group of experienced teachers “In your experience what innovations provided the most valuable educational change for your pupils or colleagues?” Perhaps these hard-working educators were feeling tired – it was near the end of term – but for some time no-one could suggest anything they rated as valuable. For some minutes, their minds recalled well-known disasters, some near-misses and a few trendy issues

that had absorbed their time – and their enthusiasm – without offering any compensatory features. However, after a while they did come up with some answers, and while views differed on individual selections, they eventually compiled a list. When I wrote down this surprisingly brief list (after all, the group members had each taught for at least 15 years), one participant asked “Can we now list things that didn’t work?”

I won’t spell out either record in detail, but the negative items seemed easier to recall and actually outnumbered the positive ones. I couldn’t help thinking about the effort that had gone into presenting





some of these changes over the years, and of the money spent on introducing them. As a Principal and a consultant I vividly recall introducing these ideas to staff at various schools. The ideas came from varied sources – local initiatives, government regulation, commercial innovation, to name a few. Some were difficult to sell, but I could justify my efforts primarily because I believed in what I was advocating. Was I delusional?

Some innovations turned out to be poorly conceived and sloppily executed but as teachers and administrators we were trying to do the right thing. I would say that the search for improved techniques helped enrich the education program of our students but in the end, our sometimes-misguided efforts had two major disadvantages: they cost a lot of money and they soured teachers on the change process.

As principals, many of you have probably presented new ideas to your staff and

met with no objections in the process. This could be a sign of good communication on your part, the selection of a very worthwhile development, or a very enthusiastic staff. That is the positive side of the change story. Now reflect on the times when you were told by your system authority to introduce a new program. How did you react? Did you jump up and down excitedly and rush into the staff room to share your joy? If so, I guess our paths never crossed. My peers usually tended to be as overwhelmed about change as I was, and our subsequent conversations made this clear. Funnily enough, we rarely communicated our feelings to the authorities.

Do we really believe that our seemingly enchanted staff react any differently? Won't they respond the way we often do when presented with a *fait accompli* by immediate superiors? Answering this question honestly brings us to a new realisation: a failure by staff to express concerns about a new project or a revised policy

does not mean they endorse the innovation. Their silence does not imply they will happily implement or even support the new idea. They too have learned there is no benefit in objecting once decisions are made. Our over-stretched classroom teachers know that changes, whether system-wide innovations or school-based modifications, come from above and they also know their reservations, based on classroom implications, are usually played down or even ignored by authorities.

If you accept this claim, three consequences follow: in encouraging mandated change for teachers, it is useful to engender an open approach to the idea of change, enhance the consultation model, and listen carefully to feedback. Let us consider each briefly.

#### **An open mind about change**

The first step is to address the general negativity that many of us harbour about educational change (and indeed any change that



makes us review our behaviour). Without doubt many people find change unsettling, and one reason for this discomfort is that too often change is presented as something done **to** us, rather than **by** us. In other words, we are dominated by change, rather than in control of it. If we educators can gain a more positive perspective, one that we can then pass on to our pupils and their parents, we will have come a long way to overcoming this phobia.

To achieve this, we need to take the stakeholders into our confidence, and that means letting them know the plusses and minuses of the proposed change, with all the details shared openly. This doesn't mean that if we meet opposition we have to retreat from our suggestions, but if we find that we cannot provide convincing arguments for change, then we must go further into the issue until we find stronger reasons to support our call for change. If such arguments don't exist, why are we bothering about the change?

Change for its own sake is wasteful, and system authorities must learn this by hearing honest and informed comments from schools. A frantic pursuit of novelty is not the same as moving forward. However, an improved future means that improvements are essential, and so we must embrace the idea of modifying our behaviour. If we assess change maturely, we

will move forward and lose our fear of entering new territory. In schools, the Principal must respect the importance of the staff's feelings, explain the implications of the proposed changes, and ensure that implemented changes are supported as fully as possible by appropriate resources. In this way, there is some hope of nurturing a positive view of change, thus ensuring that the school does not stagnate.

### **Listen very carefully to the stake-holders**

We know the importance of hearing from the people who will implement the change, but do we limit our thinking in this matter? The group should involve parents, students and teachers, but above all Principals should listen to the teachers because without their active co-operation the finest ideas will wither and die. This fact is so obvious some principals may dismiss it, saying "I listen carefully to my staff and I know their thoughts already". They will explain that they hold staff meetings, distribute staff memos, even use Survey Monkey to allow individual responses. I'm sorry, but this is not necessarily listening to staff. Just as we might think we know what our staff think about certain issues, they know what their leaders think. There is a risk they will tell principals what they think them want to hear, rather than rock the boat. Perhaps

the most important thing is to read the silence of the staff. As Mozart wisely commented "The music is not in the notes, but in the silence between."

### **Assess silence accurately**

At all levels of consultation, expect pockets of silence; this is not necessarily bad but neither does it represent agreement or support. Some of my worst decisions were based on misreading this silence. Because I felt strongly on issues like the need for a new approach to mathematics or the importance of revising a Vision and Mission Statement, I simply assumed staff support because they expressed no objections. I was dismayed to learn that this assumed endorsement was not followed by active engagement. In truth, I was the one who has failed, not the staff.

Faced with silence, or minimal response, dig deeper, individually or collectively, and make sure that you are hearing what is not being said as well as what is. It can save later embarrassment and avoid a situation where, despite open discussion, the Principal sees a pet project torpedoed within weeks of being launched.

Change is important, it is valuable, and it must be treated seriously. To give it its value, recognise it as a delicate flower that can be destroyed if not handled respectfully.



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