

Making Diamonds

Top-Down Pressure and Bottom-Up Support

“Educational leaders must provide both pressure and support if they are to play a role in improving their schools and districts.” -Richard DuFour

Last summer a principal shared his frustration with his school’s lack of progress implementing Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). He said, “It has been drilled into me that if teachers do not buy into an idea, the idea is doomed to failure. But what if they just don’t want to change? Do I force them to become a PLC or be patient and hope they eventually come around?”

His question resonated with me because for years I was also told that substantive change must reflect a nearly universal buy-in by the faculty. But what if, as this principal lamented, the faculty liked things “just the way they are” and did not see the need for change? Should principals wait and hope that some kind of spontaneous enlightenment will come upon the faculty or should they press forward with what they believe is best for kids—regardless of the consequences?

Rick DuFour posed a similar question of principals when he asked, “What drives your school improvement efforts—evidence of best practices or the pursuit of universal buy-in?” The answer, according to DuFour, is that “educational leaders must provide both pressure and support if they are to play a role in improving their schools and districts.” Put another way, if principals intend to shift the culture of their schools from teaching to learning, they must be willing to “make diamonds.” And just as

diamonds are not created
unless and until

they are subjected to significant pressure deep within the earth, neither can a school’s culture be changed without significant top-down pressure and bottom-up support from a savvy principal.

Making Diamonds in Our Schools

To appreciate the analogy of “making diamonds” in our schools, it’s important to recognize that top-down pressure need not be conveyed through heavy-handed tactics or overbearing directives from the principal. Top-down pressure can come in the form of great clarity, careful guidance and consistent direction by the principal. In fact, the principal who doesn’t apply such pressure must recognize that there are costs and consequences in failing to do so. A lack of top-down pressure—as manifested by a lack of clarity about what is important—can result in teachers embracing questionable initiatives that generate only marginal improvements in student learning.

Principals must recognize that a part of their role is to exert positive pressure by clearly and consistently communicating what is important while simultaneously providing the necessary guidance to direct legitimate school improvement efforts. Shirley Hord and Stephanie Hirsch echoed this notion when they said, “A PLC expects that individuals will have a voice and choice in their work together, but they will need guidance in how to exercise their new opportunities.” Principals provide that kind of guidance by relentlessly pressing for greater and greater clarity around those practices that benefit student learning.

Of course, exerting pressure from the top will be fruitless if the faculty does not have sufficient support to respond to the challenges that the pressure creates. Teachers have a right to expect, even insist, that principals provide the support they need to succeed. Support can take on many forms, such as increased time for collaboration or specific training on new protocols for data analysis and lesson design.





As Maurice Elias observed, “The stronger and more visible the support from the building administrator, the more likely it was that the program would remain vital and infused throughout the school.” Principals model the behaviors and skills expected from teachers while advocating on behalf of the faculty and staff as they seek out new and novel ways of ensuring that all students learn. The principal takes the responsibility of providing teachers with the right kind of support at just the right time very seriously. Richard Elmore describes this concept as “reciprocal accountability”; as principals ask teachers to work together in the implementation of PLCs, so, too, can teachers expect principals to support them in their work. In a PLC, the relationship works both ways.

The answer to the original question posed by this frustrated principal lies in the concept of “making diamonds”. The choice is not pressure *or* support; it is ensuring that a combination of both pressure *and* support is present in the school. I believe successful principals know that meaningful school improvement cannot be achieved by the pure logic of “brute sanity” alone. Neither do successful principals embrace hope as a strategy that will ensure lasting improvement in student learning. These effective leaders recognize that there are some big ideas in a PLC that are non-negotiable. The importance of a guaranteed and viable curriculum, common formative assessments, and

systematic pyramids of intervention are not up for debate. Teachers working together interdependently on collaborative teams is not optional, it is expected.

There has never been a clearer consensus or greater agreement on what schools should do to positively impact student learning. Principals need not apologize for having high expectations and holding teachers accountable for implementing the big ideas of a PLC. Indeed, given what we know now, I would argue that it is unconscionable to allow teachers to ignore best practice or sabotage legitimate school improvement efforts that reflect the big ideas of PLCs. It is equally irresponsible, however, to expect teachers to change their practice substantially without the necessary time and support they need to succeed. Setting clear expectations that teachers will pursue best practice while simultaneously providing the necessary support they need to be successful strikes the right balance.

I am confident many terrific principals have wrestled with the conundrum presented in the question posed by this principal, but the answer lies in the concept of “making diamonds”. It is the process of making diamonds—the combination of top-down pressure and bottom-up support—that ensures our students will have the best opportunity to succeed. ■

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Ken Davis, Lamar CISD, Elementary Level Texas 2009 NDP and Gabe Trujillo, Duncanville ISD, Middle Level Texas 2009 NDP. Read more on pages 12-13.

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