Inside out leadership: leadership strategies when resistance is high

Donna Evans on minimising change fatigue

In their roles, school leadership teams are consistently confronted with the task of implementing a range of policies and reforms, which they know can jeopardise the smooth running of the school and the professional 'happiness' of their staff. One of their most difficult challenges is to change direction from a place where staff feel professionally comfortable. Reticence on the part of the leadership team and resistance on the part of the staff are both reasonable responses in situations like this. A state of tension emerges as leaders, understanding too well that positive professional relationships with staff, usually developed over long periods of time and/or experiences, are fragile and can quickly erode if they get the strategies and procedures for implementing change wrong. They are very cognisant that the profession is heavily populated with teachers struggling to manage high stress levels, professional fatigue and even burnout. Therefore, it is vital that the leadership team implement reform effectively rather than just adding another layer of work.

Embedding responses to change as a 'way of working' is one way in which teachers can develop the skills and strategies to respond to change and minimise negative change responses. This strategy requires the leadership team to build teachers' skills and strategies around engaging with, negotiating and mediating, and contextualising reform. This approach focuses on a strategy which could be called *inside out leadership*. Rather than leadership that is reactive, consumed by mopping up

Self-efficacy is influenced in four ways

1 The actions, views and values of trusted peers   **2 Our past** experiences

3 Our emotional and psychological state

4 The social and visual cues we derive from our interactions with our environment

negative responses to change, putting out bushfires and accepting that stress in professional relationships is just the expected fallout of anything new, *inside out leadership* is directed towards developing teachers' skill sets. Its central tenet is that it's the kind of distributive leadership that encourages teachers to challenge and re-imagine initiatives so that it equips them with strategies enabling them to align educational policy and reform with their preferred best practices. Essential to *inside out leadership* is the engagement of teacher agency in the reform agenda.

The first act of *inside out leadership* is to gain an understanding of the way teachers engage with their professional world and, as a consequence, better anticipate their change response. This is not easy to do since teachers' responses can be quite varied and are often inconsistent. There has been quite a bit of research that endeavours to categorise change responses – laggers, early adapters (Rogers, 1995) or pseudo compliant (Adamson & Davidson, 2003). While these labels may be quite relevant, they describe a behavioural effect rather than a cause. Labels fail to explain why laggers are laggers or early adapters are quick to take up new challenges and opportunities. And, laggers are not always laggers in all change circumstances and may even be early adapters in some contexts. *Inside out leadership* seeks to offer a lens through which leaders can better understand and shape this behaviour using a range of strategies that nurture positive and engaged responses, even in situations where staff are reticent to change.

Reducing change fatigue, stress and burnout, and a growing sense of inconsequentiality, extensively researched in recent times (De Nobile, McCormick & Hoekman, 2013; Dilkes, Cunningham & Gray, 2014; McCormick & Barnett, 2011; Nias, 2003; Sass, Seal & Martin, 2011; Sikes, 1990; Woods, 1999), requires a shift in teachers' mindsets since change is constant in the education sector. The intention of *inside out leadership* practices is not something foreign to our thinking as teachers and educators. Most recently, the 'growth mindset' work of Carol Dweck (2016) has been shown to be a powerful tool for students in managing stressful environments, building their resilience and acting as an 'enabler' for them to achieve not only improved educational outcomes but also positive and sustainable life changes. Similarly, developing a 'growth mindset' in teachers offers the same kinds of positive outcomes, encouraging them to see challenges as opportunities, to identify and strengthen their own talents and capabilities and to openly engage with new learning opportunities that emerge from

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their interactions with these new situations and circumstances.

To develop this way of working, leaders need to dig deep in their thinking and understanding of change responses. A workable framework is derived from the thinking of Pierre Bourdieu (1977) who provides an explanation of how we make sense of our world through his construct of 'habitus'. Bourdieu contends that our habitus emerges our dispositions formed as we mediate our genetic dispositions with our interaction with multiple environments. An understanding of how dispositions are constructed enables *inside out leadership* to implement strategies that addresses negative dispositions, which act to intensify stress and burnout, to develop a more positive mindset.

Looking to our own life experiences provides an insight into how we might achieve this. What was it that led us to change a viewpoint or change direction. Fundamentally, it was a change in belief. We came to believe that this new position would enhance our wellbeing, secure our future, benefit ourselves and our family – in simple terms, we come to believe the new direction or view was better. *Inside out leadership* undertakes a process that generates new professional beliefs – beliefs that become embedded in our professional DNA.

Belief-making is a central leadership skill. Leaders who possess this skill direct their attention to teachers' perceptions of their capacity to undertake the task. This skill must work beyond the rhetoric and must also be evidenced in actions. While many would agree that this is a pathway to successful implementation of reform, where to begin?

Looking around the research landscape, Albert Bandura's (1997) construct of self efficacy and the influences on a person's self-efficacy provides a relevant framework for capacity building by addressing personal beliefs. Bandura contends our sense of capacity is based on our perceptions or beliefs about our ability to engage with the task. While we may appear capable and there may even be historical evidence that indicates we have been quite successful in the past, unless we believe ourselves that we are capable, our self-efficacy will be weak. It is apparent, therefore, that our beliefs around our capacity to engage with and implement reform will influence our responses to it. Put simply, positive mind sets, that build resilience in times of constant change, are built by building capacity and capacity is built by building self-efficacy beliefs.

Bandura's view is that self-efficacy is influenced in four ways – the actions, views and values of trusted peers; our past experiences; our emotional and psychological state;

and the social and visual cues we derive from our interactions with our environment. As these factors influence our sense of self, the beliefs that emerge are strong influences on our sense of capacity (or incapacity). By understanding how these four influences impact our beliefs in our capacity, leaders are in a position, and, more importantly, have the authority, to develop robust and sustainable enivironments that go some way in 'stress proofing staff' where changes in school feel constant. It also provides a 'safe place' where staff can share diverse points of view since multiple perspectives are acknowledged. Remember, resistance is not always a negative response, since it can come from a professionally informed point of view and provide an important check particularly when aspirations collide with capabilities. However, unattended-to resistance can not only sideline but derail relationships leading to workplace toxicity that lasts long beyond the current change. With a focus on *inside out leadership*, leaders have the opportunity to build belief in self and generate environments that embraces diverse points of view.

Much of the current research landscape has a strong relevance to this kind of leadership. Leaders can choose from a wide range of strategies that result in belief building. For instance, belief building requires trust and respect. There has been extensive thinking about how to generate professional trust (Browning, 2013; Evans, 2016; Fink, 2013; Tschannen-Moran, 2014; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). Professional respect requires an acknowledgement of the complexity of the work of teachers and encourages leaders to look at ways that support their work such as working collaboratively through professional learning communities.

Asking questions of our staff that provide a greater understanding of what their most successful career experiences are, their career goals, professional interests, stressors, and preferred way of working, as a simple example, provides important information for leaders to begin those 'too hard' basket reforms. From my research (Evans, 2016), teachers are more

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likely to positively engage with reform when policy and practice align; when time frames are explicit and acknowledge the way teachers work; have clearly defined outcomes; that aligns with site specific educational and professional values; that sees policy as an iterative practice responsive to workplace conditions; and, acknowledges in its implementation, the voices of teachers both as co-learners and co-developers since they are experts in educational practice.

Inside out leadership supports strategies and procedures that enable positive and engaged change responses become embedded in an organisation's 'way of working' It does this by building teachers' beliefs in their capacity to effectively engage with and negotiate any change that emerges on their professional horizon. *Inside out leadership* focuses on process rather than product, is proactive rather than reactive, and culturally embedded rather than externally imposed. Fundamentally, externalities of policy become less important than the procedure of practice.

In summary, our professional duty requires us to face head on the professionally soul destroying consequences of teacher stress and consequences of teacher stress and burnout. Burnout and stress not only have serious negative impacts for our current teachers but also discourage talented and capable young people from entering the profession. *Inside out leadership* provides a framework for developing strategies and procedures that acknowledges the specific school context rather than a 'one size fits all' way of working. It supports a re-imagining of contemporary educational research and reform that is not layered on top or tries to push aside what is already valued and culturally important. Essentially, the real success of effectively leading and managing change rests on the leader's ability to build organisational and professional belief. Thinking inside out enables leaders to generate such belief.

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