

"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