



Dealing with Difficult Teachers

By Dr. Phillip R. Silsby

Overview

The pressure to improve the quality of instruction in schools may be higher today than any time in the history of education. The intense pressures enacted on schools by the state and federal government has increased during the past ten years at such a rate that many schools are having a difficult time finding and retaining “effective” classroom teachers. The principal’s role within the instructional setting of a school has always been critical, but in today’s society that role has become more important and diversified requiring the evaluating, remediating, coaching, and dismissing of teachers who fail to meet the standards of the school, state, and federal government.

The challenge for us as educators is to remember that we have chosen the most important profession, and it is essential that we remind ourselves of this every day. The critical challenge for educational leaders is to help those we work with feel this level of importance

DR. PHILLIP R. SILSBY is the retired Principal of Belleville West High School in Belleville. He is a frequent IPA presenter on numerous topics including *Dealing With Difficult Teachers, Staff Morale, and Evaluating Certified Staff.*

each day. Thus we must consistently and continually build and cultivate a positive climate throughout the faculty and staff that encourages, rewards, and remediates teachers in their primary responsibility – educating the students under their charge.

The key to a great school is an outstanding teaching staff. As a building principal, I valued my teaching staff and their dedication to doing the best job they could in the classroom each and everyday. However, one of the greatest challenges for a principal is getting past the assumption that everyone is in the field of education for the right reason – to do what is best for the young people in our schools. It is our hope that each member of the staff has the right motives about their job and the effect it has on each individual student both now and in the future. But, unfortunately, our hope is sometimes “dampened” when we face people whose behavior suggests a different agenda. Then the most challenging tasks principals face in dealing with difficult teachers is moving out of the nurturing role into one of trying to alter the negative behaviors of staff members or removing them from working with students.

Dealing with difficult teachers is never easy. Making a difference in kids’ lives is also not an easy job either. But effective principals tend to find a way to accomplish both.

Expectations of the Instructional Leader: Promoting Excellence, Teaching, and Learning

The leader’s most potent weapon is “the power of vision.” Everything rises and falls on leadership. Your leadership skills determine the level of your success and the success of those who work around you. In a Newsweek (1987) magazine article the president of Hyatt Hotels stated: “If there is anything I have learned in 27 years in the service industry, it is this: 99 percent of all employees want to do a good job. How they perform is simply a reflection of the one for whom they work.” The service industry is no different than the field of education. In fact, educators could also be considered “service providers.” Just as the president of Hyatt indicated, it is the leader’s responsibility to “lead and cast vision” for those who work for him or her.

According to John Maxwell, leadership has to do with casting vision and motivating people. Thus, the building principal must learn to be a leader and not only a manager. Management is the process of assuring that the programs and objectives of the organization are implemented. Leading means that you as the principal must cast vision on your “expectations” for learning and teaching. It is only then that the teachers and staff can know how to

perform their classroom responsibilities in ways that positively affect the learning of students.

Vision is the fuel that leaders run on. It's the energy that creates action. Such action is what keeps the school moving forward meeting the goals and expectations of the local community, state regulations, and federal guidelines. Even more important than those items, it is the "map" that gives the individual classroom teacher the direction to engage the students in a learning environment that results in achievement.

Teachers have a right to know what is expected of them both in the classroom and around the school. Such expectations allow the teacher to develop his or her own philosophy and strategies to coincide with the beliefs and values illustrated by the principal's vision and mission of the school district. Without vision energy ebbs low, deadlines are missed, personal agendas begin to surface, production falls, and people leave. Helen Keller was asked, "What would be worse than being born blind?" She replied, "To have sight without vision." Unfortunately too many principals are placed into leadership positions without a vision for the organization that they will lead. All great leaders possess two things: They know where they are going, and they are able to persuade others to follow.

Leaders can never take their people farther than they have traveled. Like leader, like people.

So, the first thing a principal must do is to develop his or her vision for the school and then communicate it to the stakeholders (teachers, staff, parents, students, and community). Once developed and communicated, the principal takes the responsibility to implement it within the environment of the building.

What is vision? Vision is a clear picture of what the leader sees his or her group being or doing.

Within the vision are a set of beliefs and expectations for the teachers and

staff in regards to learning, teaching, and behaving within the school climate. These beliefs and expectations are the "core principles" for achieving at a level that will bring success and excellence to students and the school. According to *Leadership* magazine, communicating a vision is one of the most frustrating areas of leading an organization.

It is during this phase of leadership that the "difficult teacher" will begin to surface and make his or her presence felt within the climate of the school. The principal must keep an open mind regarding these teachers and their beliefs. It must be remembered that there are three payoffs to casting vision:

Increases Energy and Moves People Into Action

Increases Ownership

Provides Focus

It is extremely important that the teachers and staff understand where you are going and how you are going to get there. It is from this knowledge they can make a "choice" to "buy" into the vision or "ignore" it and go on their own. It is at this moment of "choice" that the principal must determine how to proceed with building a "shared vision."

"We cannot become what we need to be by remaining what we are."

~ Max Depree

Creating and perpetuating a shared vision is the beginning of an exciting journey for a school. The school leader is to foster the creation of the vision, plant it carefully in rich soil, nourish the soil continuously, and watch the vision prosper and thrive.

What is a Difficult Teacher?

Most leaders do not like to deal with the most frustrating, resistant, ineffective, and negative staff members in the school, but principals must. Terms and phrases most often used to describe difficult teachers include:

- lazy
- lack of preparation
- negative
- resistant to change
- defensive
- inflexible
- unprofessional
- unorganized
- can't get along with others
- content centered vs. student centered

Hopefully, this list does not describe the type of candidate you would be interviewing for a teaching position in your school. Unfortunately many of these traits are not discernable during the interview. They only tend to surface once hired and the school year begins. As you further analyze this list, it is evident that this type of individual would not be successful in any job he or she was hired to do.

If you take another look at these characteristics, you see that they are "personality traits." They all can be used to describe the personalities of negative individuals. If they are traits, then perhaps this difficult individual has a choice to be this way or not. It is up to him or her. Each one of us determines how we will react to situations; each one of us chooses to be positive or negative. While this may be a frustrating list to review because you have teachers or staff members like this in your current building, there may be some reason for optimism. They could choose not to express these traits if given a reason not too. Thus, your role as the building principal now has become clearer if you are to see your vision fulfilled within the school.

Todd Whitaker describes six general areas that cause you to label teachers difficult. These include:

Classroom Behavior. It is important to determine what the teacher is actually doing in the classroom. Does he or she work well with students on a daily basis? If this isn't the case, then you must work with this teacher to develop a different approach with the students. Student achievement is the most

important issue when dealing with teachers. The teacher and the principal may not get along, but if the teacher and the students are having difficulty, something must be done immediately.

In analyzing the situation, we must determine the reason for the difficulty with the students. Many times, the teacher is getting ready to retire and behavior or procedural change is not likely. However, if students are not learning, then as the principal it is your responsibility to take some action to remediate or remove if necessary. We are not like other professions where you

The challenge of the principal is to reduce their influence without losing credibility with the remainder of the staff. Todd Whitaker advises that diminishing the relationship between the principal and the negative teacher might diminish the relationship between the principal and other staff members who look to this negative leader for guidance. However, do not allow this possibility to be a reason for inaction. In order for the staff and school to move forward, the positive staff members must gain the momentum and direction for the entire faculty.

ibility and reputation of the school.

Resistance to Change. Enthusiasm for new programs and activities at the school can often be the momentum needed to change an environment from negative to positive. Change is scary and not often embraced when first considered. Such reluctance is normal because of all the unknowns. However, some individuals go beyond this initial reluctance. They fight, attack, and sabotage the idea or improvement. Many times the change does not even affect them or their classroom. Such actions tend to stop the momentum before it gets going. The principal must try to develop an understanding of their methods of resistance and the informal dynamics they have that affect so many others in the school.

Dampen Enthusiasm/Damage Climate. Good staff morale and school climate are essential to a productive and successful school. Teachers who continually complain and dampen enthusiasm and drain excitement must be handled quickly. Complaining teachers in the faculty lounge have negative effects on the overall climate of the school. Confrontation at faculty meetings tends to strain relationships with the principal and the overall staff. It is critical that the principal be aware of these inappropriate behaviors and reduce their impact on the overall climate.

Parade of Students to the Office. Many principals can predict which teachers will send the most students to the office by the end of the first week because of their past practice. We know that the teacher's behavior is generally more of a determinant of office referrals than the student's behavior. Thus, changing behavior of these difficult teachers will reduce time spent dealing with students in the office and more time working with teachers on improving instruction. During my years as a principal, it was evident that ten percent of my teachers generated 90 percent of the discipline referrals in the school. Caution must be taken when reducing the referrals of the teacher, that the principal does not become viewed

“...the first thing a principal must do is to develop his or her vision for the school and then communicate it to the stakeholders (teachers, staff, parents, students, and community).”

could “hide” them in the organization until retirement day. Being an educator is too important an occupation to allow ineffective teachers to remain in the profession. If you believe it is too difficult to deal with such an ineffective teacher, just ask yourself the following question; If your son, daughter, or grandchild were in this teacher's classroom, how would you feel? If you would be upset, then your action is already determined. Altering the behavior, which often has been in place for many years, can be challenging and sometimes impossible for the building principal.

Staff Influence. There is nothing more discouraging or damaging to a school, than a negative teacher-leader. Such individuals not only fight positive ideas and actions, but also influence others on the staff to follow their negative feelings and opinions. Often new and inexperienced teachers are greatly influenced by experienced teachers who have been at the school for a long period of time. It should also be noted at this time that these teachers might not be ineffective teachers in the classroom.

Public Perception. Everyone wants to be on a winning team. If the team has success, there is much greater chance for fan support and positive relations with all members of the community. Losing teams don't gain much support, but gain critics and loss of momentum for the future. If parents and the community perceive the school as a successful and caring environment for their children and their leaning, support and involvement is much more likely. Thus, it is imperative that a positive image and feeling permeate throughout the school and community.

Teachers who continually do things that offend parents and others outside the school are hurting the credibility of the principal and the school. Having to continually “fight fires” because of these ineffective teachers is time consuming and often futile if not handled immediately and satisfactorily. Anything the public perceives as negative about the school reflects poorly on all teachers, staff, and the principal. Thus, we have to help alter the behavior of the teacher in order to build the cred-

as unsupportive of the teacher.

Dealing with negative teachers involves a variety of strategies. Each strategy used should take into account the six areas of concern just discussed.

Motivating the Difficult Teacher

We are all aware that positive staff morale has a high correlation with a positive school climate. If the climate of a building is upbeat, enthusiastic, and productive, then the staff within the building finds it an honest pleasure to come to work. If the climate is negative and full of tension, it eventually will exhaust any positive energies that might have been present. The establishment of an environment that allows teachers to develop and blossom as leaders is a climate where collectively all individuals, students, and teachers are interacting critically. If you want to effectively diminish the influence of the difficult teacher, then have a building where collectively all individuals, students, and teachers are interacting positively and working to increase learning daily.

John Maxwell states in *Developing the Leader Within You*, the more people you develop, the greater the extent of your dreams. If you want to change the behavior of individuals, especially difficult teachers, you must understand and practice these principles of people development. These principles include:

- **Value of people.** This is an issue of my attitude.
- **Commitment to people.** This is an issue of my time.
- **Integrity with people.** This is an issue of my character.
- **Standard for people.** This is an issue of my vision.
- **Influence over people.** This is an issue of my leadership.

Successful people motivators make the right assumptions about people. What I assume about people is what I look for. What I look for is what I find. What I find influences my response.

Therefore, negative assumptions about others will stimulate negative leadership of them. Positive assumptions about others will stimulate positive leadership of them. Thus, if I assume negative things about the difficult teacher, my leadership of them will be negative as well. Positively motivating them to change their behaviors will produce much more effective results for the students, staff, and school.

When we think of motivating the staff, our instinct may be to focus on improving the morale of our most difficult staff. The positive staff members already have an effective attitude; thus we shouldn't have to focus our energies on them. In reality, we need to start

“In order for the staff and school to move forward, the positive staff members must gain the momentum and direction for the entire faculty.”

with our most effective staff – your superstars. Todd Whitaker and other writers of staff motivation support the idea that there are three types of teachers: superstars, backbones, and mediocres. A superstar teacher is that rare teacher who represents the top three to ten percent of the teachers in the school. He or she is well respected by all members of the faculty. This teacher is dedicated to the students and vision of the school. He or she will go to great lengths to be a “team player.” In fact, this teacher goes beyond what is expected both in the classroom and around campus.

The second category of teachers is the backbones. Backbones are good, conscientious teachers, the heart of a faculty. They represent about 80 to 90 percent of the staff. They are stable, hardworking, dependable, and willing to help if asked by the principal. The third and final category is the mediocres. They are the teachers who do as little as they can both in the classroom and around the school.

They are the ones you would not have a hard time replacing if they were to leave the school.

Thus in working to improve and maintain the morale of the staff, the principal must continually maintain the level of enthusiasm of the “superstars” who are your high achievers. We must nurture the more positive people first, before we can shift our attention to the majority of our staff.

The goal of working with the difficult teacher is to make the environment so inviting for the majority of the staff that the voice of the difficult teacher is hard to hear or completely ignored. This is not to insinuate that some concerns of the difficult teacher are not le-

gitimate. The problem lies in their communicating the concerns to the administration and other teachers in the building. The focus of all educational leaders must first be on our most positive faculty members.

Making the Difficult Teacher Feel Uncomfortable

Ineffective teachers cannot be allowed to come to work and feel happy with their job performance. Such a feeling will encourage them to continue to operate in the same manner. There are several methods to raise the discomfort level among difficult teachers. These methods include: empowering the good guys, reducing negativity in the teachers' workroom, making teachers accept responsibility for their situations, and using peers to help make them more uncomfortable.

According to John Maxwell, developing relationships is the most important skill of the 21st century leader. Making

the difficult teacher feel uncomfortable does not have to damage relations with him or her. These methods can allow them to maintain their dignity while at the same time challenging them to grow as people and as educators.

One of the most effective methods to make less effective teachers feel uncomfortable is to empower the superstars and positive teachers. Most superstars and positive teachers want two things: autonomy and recognition. Caution should be taken not to control your ineffective teachers by implementing rules that affect all teachers. Allowing effective teachers to try new ideas and activities gives them the autonomy to find methods to positively affect learning in their classroom. Furthermore, recognizing them for these innovative methods of learning will give them the recognition to continue doing their best. Allowing their peers to witness this recognition further reinforces the positive contributions being made by the majority of the staff.

Addressing the negativity in the faculty lounge is another way to make the difficult teacher feel uncomfortable. The lounge is a place where negativity tends to surface and cultivate. It is necessary that the principal address this issue somehow in his or her opening faculty meeting. Stress the importance of using faculty discussions to positively affect students. Having inappropriate discussions in the lounge can't be healthy for anyone especially for those who have to leave the lounge and go back to their classroom and teach. Such a discussion at a faculty meeting can be uncomfortable, but remember that your vision doesn't have room for such inappropriate behavior by ineffective teachers.

Being an ineffective and difficult teacher does not absolve the individual from responsibility for his or her behaviors. Just as the principal is responsible for his or her leadership of the building; so is the teacher for all that occurs in his or her classroom. Motivating the less effective teacher to accept responsibility for student learning, behavior,

and interest in his or her classes is an important element in improving teacher performance. Stephen Covey (1989) describes this acceptance of responsibility as moving from a person's circle of concern to a person's circle of influence. In essence, the principal must not allow the difficult teacher to "pass the buck" to others in the building, society, or whomever he or she feels is more responsible.

According to the negative teacher, the parents, the school system, the principal, the students are to blame for situations that occurs both inside and outside the classroom. Such an attitude tends to "cultivate" a "we against them" mentality. If this attitude is allowed to remain in a building, the overall climate will begin to become contaminated. Thus, again the principal must communicate to all staff members his or her vision of how everyone in the school is responsible for its successes and failures. Acknowledging the positives throughout the building is a powerful way to solicit the discussion of the faculty in discussing things that are working inside and outside the classroom.

Weakening the Influence of the Difficult Teacher

Nothing is more frustrating to a school and principal than a negative leader. These individuals not only fight good ideas, but they influence others to be negative also. The challenge is to reduce their influence without damaging your relationship with the other members of the faculty. It is also important not to damage your relationship with the negative teacher. It is impossible to achieve any change when the leader and the negative teacher cannot get along for the good of the school and students.

Empowering the effective teacher with committee leadership roles, staff development opportunities, and "perks" can send a message to those who want to be a "team member" that there are methods to advance and receive recognition. Unfortunately in some cases, the

difficult teacher has no desire to advance or receive recognition. Just leave him or her alone to do what he or she wants. Since that is not an option, the effective principal must empower the effective teacher by helping provide the momentum and direction for the school and staff as well as deal with the difficult teacher in an appropriate manner.

There must be an understanding of the dynamics of dealing with negative leaders. Some important concepts to developing this understanding will help avoid confrontational situations for the principal and the negative leader. One essential strategy is to avoid reacting to the teacher by arguing or getting into power struggles. Many times this is exactly what the negative teacher wants to happen. Arguing on his or her level may increase their power. In order not to lose the teacher's respect, the principal must "respond" in a professional manner. Another time will come when you can reduce their influence and strengthen yours.

The most effective way to reduce the difficult teachers' influence is to reduce his or her following. High achievers tend to seek out other high achievers with whom to associate. Difficult teachers often associate more with other difficult and negative teachers. Breaking up the group with assigned seating at faculty meetings or arranging for different lunch periods can force the difficult teacher to interact with high achievers who have little tolerance for those who whine and think only of themselves.

An effective principal must be confident enough in his or her own skills to address the negative leader "head on." If you believe in your own vision and there is a passion to see it implemented in the school, then you will not be intimidated or threaten by the negative leader. Don't change your beliefs and actions because of this one leader or even group of individuals. Remember, there are more people who believe in you than who don't. "Giving in" is exactly what the negative leader wants you to do.

Illinois Principals Association

2940 Baker Drive • Springfield, Illinois 62703 • 217-525-1383
Dedicated to Improvement of Elementary and Secondary Education

Eliminating the difficult teacher from the staff may be the last alternative to weakening the negative and destructive influence of the individual.

Summary

All the many positive and productive teachers in your school want you to deal with the difficult teacher(s). They are tired of hearing their complaining in the lounge and seeing how they work inappropriately with students. As a principal, your goal has to be to do what is best for the students. Never feel guilty about doing what is best for the students in your building. As long as you believe in your "heart" that you are doing what is best for the school, students, and

staff, then you proceed with the action that best allows the vision of the principal to be realized on a daily basis. Achieving the vision is never easy, but it is rewarding.

Taking a stand for excellence and "what is right" sometimes means putting yourself into situations that are uncomfortable and frustrating. But knowing in the end that the school will be better is a reward worth fighting for.

Andrew Carnegie said, "As I grow older, I pay less attention to what men say. I just watch what they do." Great leaders not only say what should be done, they show it!

Resources

Carmichael, F. and Moreo, J. (2002). *Conquer the Brain Drain*. Shawnee Mission, Kansas: National Press Publications

Hybels, Bill (2002). *Courageous Leadership*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan

Maxwell, John (1993). *Developing the Leader Within You*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

Whitaker, Todd. (2002). *Dealing with Difficult Teachers*. New York: Eye On Education.



Return Service Requested

Presorted
Standard
U.S. Postage
PAID
Springfield, IL
Permit #1054

Illinois Principals Association
2940 Baker Drive
Springfield, IL 62703

