Why Change Is So Difficult and How to Navigate It

When I realized that our environment—our physical space, activities, schedule, even our social climate—had contributed to Andrew's behavior, I started doing research to figure out what we needed to change. What I didn't realize was how hard this process would be for some of the teachers. Some were excited about new possibilities, but others thought that Andrew's behavior had nothing to do with the physical space, their planning, or their teaching methods and that changing those wouldn't make any difference. Even though in some cases it was an uphill battle, the mountain gradually turned into a bump in the road as the staff developed skills to move gracefully forward, and the behavior of all the children, including Andrew, began to improve.

Recognizing the Need for Change

Change is hard. It alters roles and responsibilities for you and your teachers, and it's often difficult for people to think of doing things differently. Initiating and implementing effective, sustainable, systemic change takes thoughtful preparation. You must also recognize that it may not happen even though you see the need for it.

Sometimes a government or school board mandates change—such as an increase or decrease in required ratios, a new curriculum, or different rules for discipline—but it's more often associated with new research or an internal crisis at the center or school that makes it apparent that you need a better way to do things or even a totally new approach.

The project approach is a good example of how new research and ideas brought about change in many early childhood programs. "Directors who are successful in their administrative role view change as an integral component of a thriving center," says Paula Jorde Bloom (1991). "They see it as a continuous and never-ending cycle of identifying problems, exploring change options, and implementing new ideas" (22). The real challenge for every leader of a program is to bring about change that is sustainable and makes a substantial difference in the quality of learning and life for the school learning community—you, the children, teachers, and families.

Change is a process, not an event that happens in a day, a week, or a month. To a very large extent, it depends on what your teachers think and do, and it is more likely to take place and be effective when they are the ones who identify the need for it. For example, when one teacher at a staff meeting worried that the boys in her classroom weren't participating in the dramatic play area, thereby missing an important chance to role-play and understand their world, her colleagues chimed in with several ideas. With a lot of ingenuity and aluminum foil, within days the teachers created a space station—complete with a planetary destination, spacesuits, and helmets—that teemed with both boys and girls.

When the administration or the government demands change without consulting them, teachers can feel powerless, manipulated, and defensive and may well conclude that the new rules or practices won't serve the best interests of the children and their families. They may find it hard to commit to implementing the changes or consider them "the flavors of the month," and they may quietly block a new proposal without ever explaining their views (Johnson et al. 2014).

Why Do Educators Resist Change?

Some teachers will be on board immediately and feel excited at the prospect of expressing their concerns about teaching style, discipline practices, the daily schedule, physical layout, and curriculum. But you should also be prepared for grumbling and disagreements. Regardless of how small or necessary the change seems to you, some educators and staff will experience a sense of inner turmoil at the thought of it. Your job is not only to guide and ensure the implementation of the change but also to support all your teachers and help them understand and feel more comfortable about the need for it and what it will mean to them. Bear in mind that those educators who don't believe change is necessary and don't see any reason to let go of their previous practices and beliefs probably won't maintain any changes that they seem to accept initially. Your responsibilities include understanding why some educators are resisting. What are their assumptions, fears, and worries?

Most of us prefer the known to the unknown, and teachers are no exception. They have worked hard to become who they are, and they feel comfortable and invested in the current state of things. Some will say that they don't see the need for change, especially for a major overhaul, but it's likely that they're frightened by the idea that they'll have to give up tools and practices they've relied on, perhaps for years, and replace them with something new. They don't want to unlearn the old ways, and they're offended by the implication that the old ways were wrong or bad, even if they know deep down that they don't really work. The old techniques may stop a child's challenging behavior in the moment, but they don't really teach her the skills she needs in order to behave in ways that more appropriately get her needs met.

At the same time, teachers facing change may fear that they'll fail—that they won't have the skills or understanding to cope with the new ways, such as eliminating the impulse to say "no," "don't," and "stop" and telling children what to do instead—leading them to question their own abilities and diminishing their self-worth. They may feel bereft on some level, grieving for the old ways and for their own competence, relevance, and self-esteem, which they're afraid they'll also lose. Change will be especially hard for anyone on your staff who's experienced trauma (Bruno 2012).

Collaborate, Collaborate, Collaborate

Because of these concerns, a first step in creating change is to develop a culture of collaboration where you are the lead learner whose strong relationship with your teachers enables you to establish a deep sense of trust and to share power, responsibility, and decision making with them (Fullan 2016). There is more energy, accountability, and motivation when people work toward goals they've helped to set. And by empowering teachers to act, the leader becomes more influential and effective (Johnson et al. 2014).

Teachers shouldn't feel that change is being done to them, but that they're making the change with you. This is a time when facilitative leadership (see Chapter 1), which develops a partnership between you and the members of your staff and grants everyone power and responsibility for supporting all children, including a child with challenging behavior, will help you to create a common goal rather than divide your staff. Collaborative leadership gives you

a way to understand the emotions your teachers are experiencing and gives your teachers the chance to share their concerns, learn about educational best practices, and discuss and reflect on what they're experiencing.

The next step is getting your educators to understand the need for change. Timing is important—you will have to determine whether they're ready for change—and so is data, which can strengthen your case. The need must be real—that is, everyone must agree that a problem exists and define it in the same way. Your behavior incident forms will help you to figure this out. (See Appendix 2.) Then it's essential to decide on goals together. This requires listening carefully to the concerns of each member of your staff and at the same time reassuring each of them that the change will be based on a shared vision for the program, that they'll all be involved in figuring out what exactly the change will be (Fullan & Pinchot 2018), and that you'll support them throughout the process.

When change feels personal, it can evoke an emotional response that makes it difficult to accept information and reason, so it's crucial to help your educators work through these feelings before you can expect them to understand the need for a different approach—or to implement it. Of course, each person will react to the change in her own way. But emotions are bound to appear at some point during the change process, usually early on. Look out for shame (a by-product of the fear of failure) (Berkowicz & Myers 2017a), shock, anxiety, anger, frustration, passive-aggressive behavior, eye-rolling, cynicism, avoidance, disrespect, noncompliance, helplessness, or some combination of these; and without judging the individuals who have these feelings, accept all of them as natural and okay (Aguilar 2017).

What Can You Do About Resistance?

The most important thing you can do to secure buy-in from your educators is to keep on listening to them, even if they're resisting the change (Berkowicz & Myers 2016). They are offering you insight into how they—the people at ground zero—perceive what you're asking them to do. Express empathy for them and let them know that their perceptions are valid and important. Consistently show that you have faith in their abilities to do what you're asking and be sure they understand that they're making a difference in children's lives. Change in attitudes involves values and therefore emotion (Bloom 2015), so be sure to pay attention to each educator's beliefs and values, culture, life experience, and priorities.

All of this work will require what Bloom calls "a delicate balance of providing direction yet suppressing the urge to overmanage" (2015, 35). So, for example, if you come into a classroom to observe how the teacher is using a new strategy and find a child sitting by himself apparently in time-out, a strategy that you've all agreed to change because it is ineffective, you must address the situation carefully. As hard as this may be, it is imperative that you do so—because if you don't, the teacher will feel free to ignore all of the goals and changes your team has forged together. There is no formula for how to do this; every teacher and every program is different. But it's important to try. The remedy may be more listening—more one-on-one conversations in which you attempt to help the teacher understand why she's finding this change so difficult and figure out how to make things work for her.