

## **Building a Team's Capacity to Engage in Systemic Conversations**

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Hargreaves' (1997) research reinforces the importance of viewing school reform from a systems perspective. After his review of the literature on educational reform from the last decade, Hargreaves (1997) cites the following reasons for educational change initiatives failing or faltering.

1. The reason for the change is poorly conceived or not clearly demonstrated. It is not obvious who will benefit and how. What the change will achieve for students is not spelled out.
2. The change is too broad and ambitious so that teachers have to work on too many fronts, or it is too limited and specific so that little change occurs at all.
3. The change is too fast for people to cope with, or too slow so they become either impatient or bored and move on to something else.
4. The change is poorly researched or resources are withdrawn once the first phase of innovation is over. Often there is not enough money for materials or time for teachers to plan.
5. There is not long-term commitment to the change that will carry people through the anxiety, frustration, and despair of early experimentation and unavoidable setbacks.
6. Key staff members who can contribute to the change, or might be affected by it, are not committed. Conversely, key staff might become over involved, as can administrative or innovative elite, from which other teachers feel excluded.
7. Parents oppose the change because they are kept at a distance from it. Professionals can collaborate enthusiastically, yet isolate themselves that they involve the community too little or too late, and lose a vital form of support that successful schoolwide change depends.
8. Leaders are either too controlling, use ineffectual tools, or cash in on the early success of the innovation and then move on to higher things.
9. The change is pursued in isolation and gets undermined by other unchanged structures ... conversely, the change may be poorly coordinated with and engulfed by a tidal wave of parallel changes that make it hard for teachers to focus their efforts.

One of the common denominators behind this list is the critical role that open thinking and quality communications plays in change initiatives. Weber (1993) states that the conversation is the intersection where knowledge is created "[Conversations] are the chief mechanism for making change and renewal an ongoing part of an organizations culture"

This session will review the findings of a case study of an elementary school site council use of communication and inquiry tools drawn from learning organization theory and organizations that are seeking to become learning organizations. The session will also explore how the tools can be introduced and practiced by parents, teachers, and administrators. The qualitative Ed. D. dissertation study occurred over a 19-month period was titled *Characteristic and Use of Inquiry and Communication Tool in Planning for Educational Change*.

Finding indicated that the learning organization communication and inquiry tools increased the site council members' individual and collective capacity to listen, engage, trust and work effectively with each other. These aptitudes were developed through the use of the tools in six areas: (a) becoming aware of one's own thinking, (b) making one's thinking visible and transparent to others, (c) understanding the thinking of others, (d) seeing one's interaction from a systems perspective, (e) engaging in collaborative decision-making, and (f) capturing and documenting learning. These aptitudes and activities increased the members awareness in three capacity building dimension: awareness of self, awareness of others, and awareness of the system.

The communication and inquiry tools exhibited the following operational characteristics: (a) they invite mindfulness and focus; (b) their potential comes from their application and the emerging skills of the users; (c) initial competence in their use can be gained from instruction, experimentation, ongoing practice, and reflection; (d) and they can be used to harness collective intelligence.