



Can We Afford Inaction?

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In our busy daily teaching and living environments, with our hectic mix of professional duties and personal responsibilities, there are many things that demand our attention.

We *act* when this demand is for immediate attention. We know these things and we act as needed. The fire alarm, a classroom incident and a kitchen spill all cause us to act. We facilitate a safe exit from the classroom because lives may be at risk; we intervene to provide appropriate discipline in the classroom because control, acceptable behaviour and leadership are essential; and, we quickly clean up the spill to avoid a slip, bacterial growth or a sticky mess! We act because we are aware of the urgency to prevent further complications. Our lives, safety, health or well-being are in jeopardy.

We *plan* for the things that we accept as needing action, but not immediate action. Those actions we delay until the circumstances are more convenient. We pick up groceries on our way home from work or a meeting, or after payday, or when we have a comprehensive shopping list. We prepare lessons when the students have left, the resources are at hand or we have the time and space to think or work uninterrupted.

Unfortunately, we *resist* other things within our environments that would benefit from change. Our action is impeded by personal factors that make “inaction” the temporarily preferred choice. For those, we avoid, ignore, neglect or procrastinate taking, or even contemplating taking, any real action. These commonly include: personal well-being issues; career questions; relationship challenges; and, financial management. In many areas of our lives we experience varying levels of discomfort, which may be persistent or transient. Either way, we learn to live with that discomfort if we are less comfortable with the idea of engaging in one of the obvious alternatives.

Challenges to Action

Teachers choose not to act on some of the demanding issues because of a sense of hopelessness. School discipline, changing curriculum, increased paperwork and documentation, disrespectful behaviours, physical and psychological abuse of teachers and negative

relationships and conflict can fall into this category. Areas of personal lifestyle or well-being also represent issues where we become stuck. We either choose to spend our energy on things that we feel are more urgent or we decide to delay taking action because of the emotionally disruptive cost of action.

Why Not Take Action?

Teachers may initially attempt to correct unhealthy conditions but may find that they do not have the authority, influence or support to create the needed change. When faced with repeated failure, teachers may eventually give up trying and may even feel that it is useless to attempt to correct similar situations. Awareness of unsuccessful attempts due to ineffective strategies or insufficient information, direction or support may inhibit us from trying again. We may also avoid initiating action because we don't know where to start or how to go about creating a more positive environment. We may even believe that maintaining calm is the most important thing at the time. Not taking immediate action also means that we can temporarily avoid confrontation and some conflict. Another significant source of our inability to act is psychological. Sometimes this comes from our fears of: failure, rejection, resistance, the unknown, (or the known), conflict, or other emotionally challenging reactions. However, knowing why we resist taking action can help us change that behaviour.

What are the Costs of Inaction?

When components of our daily lives cause discomfort, we put ourselves at further health risk by permitting the discomfort to continue and grow. When we allow our workplace conditions to foster unhappiness, there is often accumulated frustration, increased dissatisfaction and decreased productivity. The problems are likely to escalate; complications will compound and the personal consequences flow over into our personal lives. Discontent, fear, illness, decreased morale and increased irritability, are early signs that the issues, and our inaction, are costing us too much. This drain on our physical, emotional and mental energy robs us of the fullness of life. If action

is not taken, the effects can progress to more serious health ramifications and prolonged work absence.

Why Do We Finally Take Action?

We decide to act for positive or negative reasons. We are motivated to act when we see the value and believe that with our intervention, change is possible and probable. We also choose to take action when the current situation or conditions become either unmanageable or unbearable. In either scenario, we overcome our propensity toward inaction.

Although it is in our best interests to take action because it would be “good for us”; we often don’t act until we feel forced to minimize the influences which are “bad for us”. We know that appropriate rest, relaxation, nutrition, activity and social contact help us feel healthy. However, we often ignore that knowledge and change behaviour only with strong negative motivation. Finally we act to avoid a heart attack, minimize medication or decrease the physiological, psychological and behavioural responses to excess stress.

Taking Action Toward Change

Whatever the motivation, when we finally decide to act, we need to have a plan! We must know what we want, who and what resources are available to assist and, what to do if changes cannot be implemented. What works for one person may be completely inadequate for another. Therefore the strategy for achieving success must be unique to our individual needs, resources and situations. Additional supports are available to assist with creating change. We need not handle workplace or personal challenges alone. To begin, we accept responsibility for personal decisions or actions that created or maintained the situations; and we accept responsibility for creating change. Without accepting responsibility, we claim no control over our situation and are directed to inaction.

This guideline can be used to initiate action:

- Select one issue requiring action. Choose one that will have a great impact and will free up energy and resources, thus encouraging you to then take on another. Examples can be to: quit smoking; find a satisfying job; improve relationships. These are big things that interfere with a general sense of wellness.
- Understand why this is an issue and why change has not yet happened. Reasons for inaction could include: nicotine withdrawal; previous failed attempts; time and energy to plan and act.
- Identify reasonable and available options. Here we need to call upon our own skills, past experiences and successes, and the existence of external supports. We may need new knowledge or skills, the support of other people or expertise and a definite plan.

- Clarify the consequences of Action and continued Inaction. This will help us make the most reasonable choices in planning an action strategy.
- Define factors that hold us in place. Then we can be prepared for the resistance when we start to act. This can prevent us from yielding to obstacles along our action path.
- Evaluate the motivation for change. Whether it is the gain or loss of money, health, relationships, resources or even our job, when the consequences of action or inaction become significant enough, we will be motivated to act.

Now we know what can be done, why we should do it and how to get it done. What will it cost to act?

You Choose

Identify your energy drain. Can you afford inaction?

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