



Back to School After an Extended Time Away

Get Back to Where You Belong

by JUDY BERANGER

“Get back to where you once belonged” – lyrics from a Beatles classic “Get Back”, could be a theme for teachers returning to the classroom after being away for an extended period of time.

Whether as a result of educational leave, maternity leave, deferred salary leave, or due to a death, illness, accident, or other happenings, returning to work can be challenging. It can simultaneously be both stressful and energizing – you may feel displaced, anxious and excited. Typically, the longer you have been off the more difficult the return. The trauma and pain experienced from an injury, for example, can be quite overwhelming and may affect many aspects of teachers’ lives as they get refocused on manageable and realistic goals. Nothing improves well-being and performance, for all involved, like support and validation of the whole team. Empowerment and hope through peer support/assistance and empathy needs to be at its best to re-engage the returning teacher.

Workplace health and wellness has always been about creating healthy environments, where optimal thinking and performance are nurtured and valued. The new advances in neuroscience teach us about how our brains adapt to change. It emphasizes the value of tapping our right brain for the intuition and emotional awareness and the left brain for the logical, objective thinking. There is no better time to watch this in action than in creating a plan to welcome back a colleague who has been away for a while. What an opportunity for growth and enhancement of the entire school team! The plan can be tweaked until it involves everyone coming to understand that the transition involved in leaving and returning has an impact on all staff members – not only on the person on leave, but also on those who stay.

Typically, teachers are still recovering and integrating the effects of the transitions when they return to school. Recovery is as unique and diversified as the person who is working through the recovery. It is about moving through and beyond what has been experienced and integrating it into our hearts with

new meaning. In *Broadening our Understanding of Wellness* (2005), White et al tell us that in the process of recovery “... individuals develop a positive and meaningful sense of identity separate from their condition, disability or its consequences on their life.” There is still recovery time needed to settle back into the new normal, to move beyond what has been difficult and to establish a renewed sense of quality and well-being. No matter why the teacher was away, they likely have a wealth of new wisdom, knowledge and stories to share that will add to and nurture the team. One teacher returning from educational leave offered a “lunch and learn” experience to her colleagues: *It went so well that I was invited to speak at our staff meeting. It made me feel part of things again, seemed to give us the catch up we needed and ended the “jokes” about my time away.*

Teachers returning from mental health leave may be reluctant to admit that they feel some stress on returning to work and may fear appearing “weak” to their colleagues. Having strategies in place for open communication can serve to reduce, if not eliminate inappropriate comments – intentional or otherwise – from critical team members who may be unaware of the impact of their behaviour or words. An undercurrent of sarcasm, critical comments “said in jest”, rumors, etc. can drain the necessary energy needed to be proactive. Few will argue that supportive relationships not only help the teacher returning but also contribute to the spirit of the team and school. For example, when one teacher returned to school: *My friend and colleague offered to do my lunch duty for the first few times after my return. She will never know how helpful that was as I had no intention of telling anyone that I didn’t feel up to it. The next term I did a few surprise “cover offs” for her and she was delighted!*

Schools that are intentional about their “welcome back plan” do much better at empowering meaningful communication in support of the re-integration of the returning teacher. Caring and effective administrators are usually quite mindful of the importance of checking in to see how the returning teacher is coping

and how the school team is adjusting. It is through a caring, clear, consistent action plan that teachers who return to work can adapt quickly, bounce back and along with their colleagues, come to understand how the team is directly impacted whenever people leave and/or return. They find new and life-giving ways to navigate successfully through any challenges that may arise. Arthur Schopenhauer's story of the freezing porcupines illustrates the value attained when we find ways to work together and nurture what each member of the team has to offer. Several porcupines crowded themselves very close together one cold winter's night so as to profit by one another's warmth and save themselves from being frozen to death. With the impact of each other's quills pinching and hurting if too close, the porcupines worked hard to find just the right distance where they could benefit from the warmth they could bring each other. Some became angry and impatient and moved away from the group to be alone while others persevered until they discovered just the right space where they could feel the warmth from each other but not the pain of the quills. In the morning those who had worked diligently to find that safe spot comfortably survived the night. Those who couldn't be bothered were found in various places across the field – dead and alone. Effective teams find the sweet spots and never give up.

The Research

Teachers returning to work know they need to take care of themselves while taking care of their students. Time away may have triggered career questions and spurred the renewal of personal and/or professional goals with a commitment to be more mindful of choices and decisions. On a continuum, teachers return to work with feelings ranging from excitement and passion for their chosen vocation to trepidation and dislike for their work. The latter may lead to seriously questioning if their chosen profession is a fit and feeling convinced that the impending stress will be unbearable. Research conducted by psychologist Mary Steinhardt (*The Journal of Quality and Participation* - Jan/Feb 1999) found that employees who perceived their jobs as full of stress were the least resilient while those who use problem-focused, coping strategies were the most resilient. This research confirms psychologist Richard Lazarus's assertion that those who constantly blame others and dwell on their unhappy thoughts and feelings are the least resilient, most unhappy in their work, and more prone to illnesses. Teachers who practice resiliency skills on their return to work have been noted to possess the following traits:

- a belief in their ability to be productive and successful;

- a belief that their school is a good place which they can make even better;
- a capacity to constantly observe what works and what doesn't with plans for improvement;
- a realistic focus on their circle of influence which allows teachers to control what they can and let the rest fly out the window.

Albert Schweitzer once said, "In everyone's life, at some time, our inner fire goes out. It is then burst into flame by an encounter with another human being. We should all be thankful for those people who rekindle the inner spirit." Teachers who return to work after time away often talk about one or more special colleagues who went the extra mile to help them get back to their new place of belonging within the team. Who are these people in your school? They intuitively know that how teachers welcome their colleague back is a main determinant of a successful return. Individually and from a school perspective there are many things we can contribute to a return to work plan. Consider including some of the following suggestions in your plan.

- Respect preferences about how much the teacher returning to work wishes to disclose about time away. Create environments where it is safe to speak and to listen.
- Check the environment to which the teacher is returning – is it strong on motivation and respect or is it volatile with peer pressure towards a negative status quo?
- Be flexible and accommodating like the porcupines – allow time for everyone to adjust.
- Develop a clear action plan to facilitate the return of teachers and consider inviting a committee of teachers who wish to work on the plan. Ideas and creativity flow when shared with many minds.
- Celebrate the return of the teacher; check to see if there are any concerns and where you can help. Value fun and grow humor throughout the team.
- Have good catch up plans to bring the teacher up to date.
- Find ways to help minimize any impact on student learning programs and normal school procedures.
- Be the leader in welcoming teachers back to work. Find their sweet spot and allow it to strengthen the team.
- Your Employee Assistance Program is available to provide individual, team or school support if needed.

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