

How Can I Help?

MY ROLE IN REFORM

by Claudette E.S. Coombs

Well, we are finally back to another year --; most likely another year of uncertainty, but definitely another year of change and challenge. Change always brings some level of apprehension but sometimes we forget that it is also an opportunity to effect positive transformations. Seeing the glass as half full (rather than half empty), we see that the current atmosphere around school leaves plenty of room for cooperative interventions. The key is to explore what I have to offer and determine how I can appropriately give it.

It doesn't require much time to list dozens of areas causing us personal and professional stress and to see the domino effect of each of these stressors. Just one issue, the weak economy, is causing people to "leave home" giving us declining school enrollments and fewer teaching staff. Because of this we have schools closing, positions lost, more crowded and multi-grade classrooms, restricted course selections, unwanted reassignments, fewer specialists, limited additional support or training, schools and communities in turmoil, and everyone counting up their losses, then trying to pick up the pieces. We do have an obligation, to ourselves, to salvage the best of what we have and together create something better.

Administrators and teaching staff within the education system can bring constructive assistance to the process of adjustment. Each of us possesses the expertise and has occasions, individually or jointly, to reinforce healthy attitudes and behaviours. We each may have our own reasons for not taking action but the present need causes us to think of reasons to become proactive.

Motivating factors which encourage action may include....

Apprehension: New teachers, experienced teachers and administrators benefit from a collective search for practical solutions. Withdrawing from, avoiding or criticizing a turbulent situation serves to generate mistrust and fear of the final outcome. Instead we need confidence and assurance. We have always had the ability to create this positive atmosphere, now we have the motivation.

Leadership: We each know that there are some things that we do very well and, of course, there are some things that someone else does much better. Now is a perfect time to expose personal talents and interest in leading the way to constructive action. This also has the fringe benefit of presenting the school as an example of productivity in the community.

Morale: Remaining optimistic, looking for potential benefits and taking advantage of opportunities to be helpful to colleagues will boost the spirits of everyone! We are living through a transition period and can profit by the experience through creative personal and group efforts.

Opportunity: We are sitting at the base of our own Mount Everest. Why not climb it together? The rewards can be unimaginable --; even breathtaking. Each obstacle is a challenge for creative problem solving. Some of us are obviously more creative and adventurous than others, but we all have the opportunity to support exploration, question approaches and propose alternatives.

How can I create a positive difference? Let's start with examining our attitudes...

Acceptance: We are definitely not clones of one another, which is a good thing! We are also not perfect --; which gives us something to work towards if we are so inclined. Everyone is entitled to her/his own opinion. Of course we know these facts, but do we really accept them? Do we accept the eccentricities of our colleagues? Or the different values within a system or community? Can we coexist peacefully and contentedly and productively? Or are we struggling to establish a uniform environment which can never be?

Empathy: Yes, generally we understand that people have pain. But, have we taken time to discover what causes or eases it? Do we recognize that not everyone has the skills or internal cues that allow them to progress through change without difficulty? Can we identify when a colleague is in trouble --; or do we care? An important thing to remember --; it isn't

enough for us to know, understand or feel the plight of a colleague, we also have to let him/her know that we know! The next step, naturally, is to offer our assistance.

Now, to look for behaviour changes

Decision Making: The process of shared decision making, which accommodates the concerns of all people affected, allows for greater support of the final decision. Even though I may not prefer the selected outcome, I can live with it because I was involved in collecting, presenting and incorporating preliminary information, searching for options, debating alternatives and making choices. I developed trust in the process and in the people carrying it out.

Support: As teachers, principals, or board office staff, we can feel isolated and disheartened if we receive destructive criticism instead of sensing collegial support. Showing support and encouragement does not mean we agree with every action, nor does it mean that we pretend to agree. But it does mean that we try to understand the circumstances, we acknowledge the difficulties and we show respect in challenging decisions and actions.

Trust: Trust is developed over time and is generally a personal judgement based on our interpretation of the information we take in. Unfortunately, we lose trust very quickly --; also a personal judgement. Too often we then become unwilling to trust again. If we believe something was done with "bad" intentions we tend not to trust the person nor the actions; however, if we believe someone did something "bad" but with good intentions, we are willing to give them a second chance to rebuild their credibility. This leaves a lot of room for mistaken conclusions. Right now we can't afford those risks. We need each other in order to achieve our highest potential as professionals. We can't do this without first beginning to trust the integrity and professionalism of others.

Learning to adapt to a changing environment does not mean that we lose our values or lower our standards. What it does mean is that we limit our distress by altering expectations. We adopt a practical and reasonable understanding of what can be achieved. By not expecting the impossible of ourselves, or our colleagues, we begin a healthier acceptance of our roles in life and the value of our individual contributions. A friend caused me to think a little differently when I overheard the comment "We're all in this ship together. Let's not make it the Titanic!".

Claudette Coombs is an EAP Coordinator with the Employee Assistance Program for teachers. For confidential assistance, contact Claudette Coombs (Ext. 265) or Kathy Burford (Ext. 242).