

Understanding resistance: Lessons from a river

By Jim Eck with Bryan Goodwin

What do you do, as a school leader, when you encounter resistance to a change? Perhaps you steel your jaw and declare, like the famed Civil War naval commander Admiral Farragut is believed to have said, “Damn the torpedoes. Full steam ahead!”

Maybe you steam off in the other direction. Or do you cut your engines and sit, dead in the water? Perhaps you take the path of least resistance, not unlike the advice an experienced principal received during her first year as a principal. Her mentor told her to think of a change agent as a “river of change,” explaining that like a river, leaders encounter “stones,” people who never change. The best thing to do is “flow over the stones,” ignoring them and focusing on those who are willing to change. The principal has since learned that this well-meaning advice is wrong. She now understands that the stones in the river can trap other stones and eventually become a dam, stopping the flow of the river altogether.

Unless your school demonstrates off-the-charts performance each year, you’re probably in the midst of leading a change effort. And unless your school operates in a school improvement utopia that eludes the rest of us, you encounter resistance, whether passive or outright hostile. At these times, you might want to issue an order for “full steam ahead,” or you might be tempted just to flow like a river over stones impeding your path, but there is a better and more effective action a school leader should take—asking why.

Change: Perception is Reality

McREL authors have written extensively on the “magnitude of change” (see *School Leadership that Works*, *The Balanced Leadership Framework*). In these publications, we note that stakeholders tend to view change efforts in one of two ways: as

Changes for Stakeholders

First-order Change When change is viewed as:	Second-order Change When change is viewed as:
An extension of the past	A break with the past
Within existing paradigms	Outside of existing paradigms
Consistent with prevailing values & norms	Conflicted with prevailing values & norms
Implemented with existing knowledge & skills	Requiring new knowledge & skills

incremental and routine “first-order” changes or as complex and values-challenging “second-order” changes (see table above). Whether they perceive a change as first-order or second-order has as much to do with their own knowledge, experience, values, and flexibility, as it does with the change itself. Consequently, the same change can be perceived very differently by people within the same school.

Know what to emphasize

Of the 21 school leadership responsibilities identified in McREL’s research, seven were positively associated with change perceived as second-order (see table below). McREL interprets these findings

Key Responsibilities in Second-order Change

Positively correlated	Negatively correlated
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge of Curriculum Instruction & Assessment • Flexibility • Change Agent • Ideals & Beliefs • Monitor & Evaluate • Intellectual Stimulation • Optimize 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Culture • Communication • Input • Order

[Understanding resistance cont. on page 2 ►](#)

Understanding resistance cont. from page 1 ►

as indicating there are seven responsibilities that effective principals should emphasize when leading a second-order change initiative. Provocatively, the research also suggested that four of the responsibilities (Culture, Communication, Input, and Order) were negatively correlated to change with second-order implications. Principals also should emphasize these four when leading second-order change, but they should understand that others' perceptions will be that they are not adequately attending to them. Although a leader's emphasis on the four may have a stabilizing effect during first-order change, emphasizing them during second-order change seems to destabilize an organization.

Leaders guiding "second-order changes" are rated more positively in some key responsibilities and more negatively in others.

Listen and ask why

Have you heard one of the following responses to a change you've proposed? "But that's not the way we *used* to do things!" "You *used* to listen to our input when making decisions." "We don't seem to have the same vision anymore." Don't be surprised when you hear such replies, but don't ignore them either. Leaders ignore "resistors" at their own peril.

Resistors often are informal opinion leaders who can undermine change efforts. Moreover, resistors can have valuable insights and reasons for their resistance. Understanding and addressing these reasons can help improve the effectiveness of change efforts. And, because there's no zealot like a convert, helping someone work through initial resistance can create a powerful new champion for the effort. So, rather than ignoring resistors, listen to what they are saying and ask yourself why they are responding that way.

Watch and adapt

As reported in *School Leadership that Works* (ASCD, 2005), McREL's researchers found that highly effective principals demonstrate an ability to understand how stakeholders respond to change,

seek to uncover and address reasons for resistance, and adjust their behaviors accordingly. Specifically, two of the 21 responsibilities are among those that McREL found to be directly associated with second-order change: 1) monitor/evaluate and 2) flexibility. Monitor/evaluate indicates the need to monitor instructional efforts, their impact on student learning, *and* the impact of a change initiative on everyone involved in it. Flexibility includes the practice of adapting your leadership style to the needs of specific situations and people, which is especially important in dealing with the personal transitions inherent to change.

Conclusion

The key is not to ignore stakeholders' perceptions of change and the sharp edges of their responses. Like a river, see yourself smoothing down the stones of resistance. When you encounter it, rather than brushing it aside, steamrolling over it, or retreating in the face of it, ask *why*?

There is a Buddhist phrase referring to water: "subtle pressure relentlessly applied." Water—fluid and dynamic—adapts to its landscape, making course corrections as it flows. Are these attributes of your leadership? **CS**

References

- Lashaway, L. (2001). Leadership for accountability. *Research Roundup* 17(3), 1-14. Eugene, OR: Clearinghouse on Education Policy & Management.
- Marzano, R. J., Waters, T., & McNulty, B. A. (2005). *School leadership that works: From research to results*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Waters, T., Cameron, G. (2006). *The balanced leadership framework: Connecting vision with action*. Denver, CO: Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning.

Jim Eck, a McREL Senior Director, can be reached at 303.632.5517 or jeck@mcrel.org. Bryan Goodwin, Vice President of Communications & Marketing, can be reached at 303.632.5602 or bgoodwin@mcrel.org.