Issue #6 March 2011

Having Courageous Conversations

The Question:

"One of the hardest parts of being a principal is having to deliver a message to someone that doesn't want to hear it. How can I become better at this?"

The Answer:

Here are five Tips for Success:

- 1. Give yourself credit for accepting responsibility for "courageous conversations"
- 2. Approach it as a two-sided, "open-to-learning" conversation
- Take into account the reasons for resistance
- 4. Use "Conversation Starters"
- 5. Choose the time for conversation wisely

1. GIVE YOURSELF CREDIT FOR ACCEPTING RESPONSIBILITY FOR "COURAGEOUS CONVERSATIONS"

"Courageous conversations are about being true to oneself, doing what is right for students, and shaping an environment that supports learning." (*Abrams, 2009, in* Ideas into Action, Bulletin #2)

Yes, these conversations are hard and, yes, you must have them. Susan Scott calls them "fierce conversations" and advises, "Take your toughest challenge today. The problem named is the problem solved. All confrontation is a search for the truth. Healthy relationships include both confrontation and appreciation." (Scott, 2004, in Ideas into Action, Bulletin #2). Read Ideas into Action: Engaging in Courageous Conversations to learn about what the research says and for links to the Ontario Leadership Framework.

2. APPROACH IT AS A TWO-SIDED, "OPEN-TO-LEARNING" CONVERSATION

· Listen deeply, especially when views differ

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Robinson, Hohepa and Lloyd, 2009

3. TAKE INTO ACCOUNT THE REASONS FOR RESISTANCE

Often the need for a hard conversation stems from your desire to bring about a change that some staff are resisting. It is important for you to explore the reasons for resistance before deciding how to proceed. When asked to write about an instructional practice they were finding difficult to change, many participants in Principal Congress 2010 identified staff resistance as a challenge. Their reflections on the possible reasons for resistance included:

- · fear of failure in trying something new
- concern that students may lose out if the new instruction is unsuccessful
- lack of understanding or knowledge about new expectations for pedagogy.

Before you have the hard conversation, you should address some of the staff's fears and concerns about a change. Once supports are in place to address their concerns, the reluctant few may need time to talk with you. Sometimes, these concerns don't surface until you begin the courageous conversation, but once they do, you should respond to them rather than imposing a change that will be impossible for staff to make.