WORKING WITH VETERAN STAFF

In a Nutshell

There is as much variety of competence, professionalism, and motivation among veteran staff as among any group of employees, regardless of their age or experience. Experience may make veteran staff less compliant, but working effectively with them boils down to the same fundamental approaches that get the best effort from anyone in the school: respecting their experience and their opinions, listening to their voices, and engaging them in meaningful ways in the innovation and reform initiative in the school.

Old Dogs, New Tricks

Conventional wisdom dictates that it's hard to teach an old dog new tricks. In schools, that often translates into "it's hard to get veteran teachers to learn or adopt new approaches to teaching and learning," the mainstay of school reform efforts.

At the same time, the success of an innovation often depends on how it is viewed by veteran staff. Experienced teachers usually have a lot of "street credibility" among their colleagues, and, either formally or informally, probably mentor new staff members into the norms of the school – "showing them the ropes." New teachers are much more likely to ask a senior teaching colleague for advice on how to handle a problem – such as classroom management – than they are to approach a principal or other supervisor with the same kind of question. As a result, while school leaders have the authority of their position, veteran teachers have a much more subtle, and somewhat more powerful, experiential authority that can shape the opinions and actions of the rest of the staff.

Why Do [Veteran] Teachers Resist School Reform Innovations?

A lot of researchers have studied how an innovation succeeds or fails in a school. The reasons are very complex and often unique to specific school settings, but there are some broad issues that seem to underlie teacher resistance to reform. Some of these are more descriptive of experienced teachers, but virtually all those who studied the problem conclude that age and experience alone are not sufficient to explain why some people adopt innovations and other don't.

I'm Being Fixed. "Reform" is a loaded word; it implies the need to fix, repair, amend or otherwise remove flaws, faults and abuses. It can even suggest the need to mend one's evil ways – as in "reform a drunkard." If a teacher has been working for many years in a school, and that school suddenly needs to be "reformed," it's a short leap for them to conclude that "I must be part of the problem they are trying to fix." That motivates these teachers to cling even more tenaciously to their existing practices, because to do otherwise suggests that they are, indeed, part of the problem.

Not this again! School reform is cyclical – that is, it comes back to the same issues and problems again and again. Some teachers (perhaps when they were students) can remember the post-Sputnik frenzy to boost math and science performance, the toughening of math and science graduation requirements during the *Nation At Risk* era, programs to promote women in math and science careers, and now STEM initiatives that dominate much of the educational conversation. It's easy to imagine veteran teachers saying "here we go again!"   Unfortunately, that view fails to recognize the very real gains made during each of these initiatives: more people *were* prepared in math and science in the 1960s; graduation standards *did* increase significantly; more women *do* enter math and science careers; and STEM programs have produced some excellent, engaging interdisciplinary learning.

Lack of Support. Too often, teachers are expected to embrace an innovation without proper training, support or opportunity to plan. Veteran teachers have seen too many innovations fail because no one had the expertise, resources, or time to make them work. As a result, teachers who have been around for a while know, sometimes all too accurately, that "this too shall pass."   The problem is when that attitude is applied indiscriminately, even to those new demands and practices that will, in fact, not "pass," but which will become the "new normal" for the school.

Who Innovates? Who Doesn't?

Although veteran teachers may be more skeptical of proposed "reforms" than younger staff, it is also clear that some teachers embrace change and others resist it, regardless of their age or experience. Everett Rodgers described this phenomenon in 1962 as an "adoption curve" that shows the approximate percentage of people who embrace an innovation at different rates.
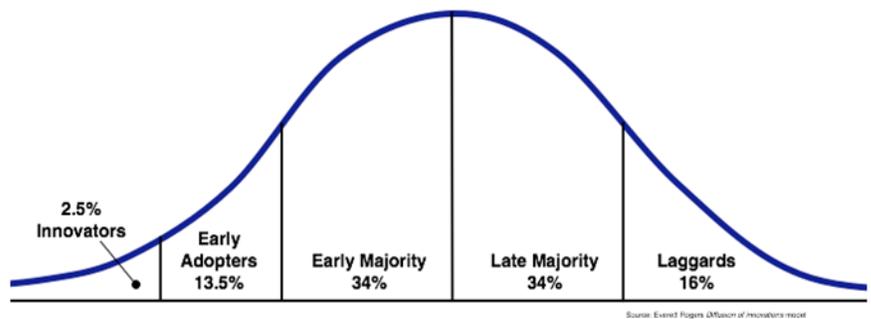
Williamson and Johnston (2012) suggest that school leaders conduct a "staff inventory" to determine who is most likely to adopt an innovation, who is likely to need more support and encouragement, and, frankly, who is unlikely to adopt it at all.

Take a Staff Adoptability Inventory

Go through a roster of your faculty and staff and try to identify the following "types" as they apply to innovation adoption: Innovators (I), Early Adopters (EA), Early Majority (EM), Late Majority (LM) and Laggards (L).   Keep in mind that different people may adopt different kinds of innovations at different rates. For example, a teacher may adjust perfectly to block scheduling, and still be terrified of technology.   Think about how you can use the I's, EA's and EM's to help promote the innovation under consideration. You may be surprised by some of the people who are likely to help promote the right innovation.

Innovators: Scan for new ideas and techniques and are quick to embrace them and try them out.

Early Adopters: Look for evidence that new approaches may work in their setting and are willing to give them a try. Often consult with Innovators for advice and help.

Early Majority: Based on successes of Early Adopters, and evidence of available support and assistance, even informal, will try new techniques in limited ways.

Late Majority: Wait until the "jury is in" with others who have tried the innovation. Look for training and evidence of substantial support before attempting innovation.

Laggards: Generally resistant to innovation, wary of the effect on their well-established and mostly successful existing practices. Need evidence of inevitability of innovation before attempting to use it.

What's Your Concern?

Researchers at the University of Texas proposed a "Concerns-Based Adoption Model" (CBAM) for Innovations. They claim that individuals follow a hierarchy of concerns in evaluating any innovation or school reform that may affect them.

Level	Description	Leader Strategies
Awareness	May or may not be aware of new technique or how they might use it. May show little interest or even resistance to learning about it.	Provide information that's not overwhelming, preferably from peers. Answer questions honestly. Involve teachers in open discussion and decisions about moving forward. Offer "escape valve" after fair trial.
Informational	Interested, perhaps marginally, in learning more about subject. Wants to know how it can be used with "my" kids.	Let peers present information on how they use it, with demonstrations. Convey enthusiasm for the innovation. Relate information to specific areas of teaching.
Personal	Concerned about own proficiency level. Doesn't want to look foolish or suddenly become a novice teacher again.	Affirm concerns as legitimate and real. Partner teachers with more confident colleague to explore new technique. Break learning into small, manageable steps with lots of support and practice.
Management	Wants specific, practical suggestions about how to use the innovative approach; requires on-demand help with specific problems.	Create "how to" sessions for teachers to share tips and strategies. Demonstrate practical uses and solutions to real problems. Help teachers match new techniques to specific needs, problems, concerns they have.
Consequence	Agrees with innovation personally, but not sure how to use it with students or in actual instruction.	Arrange visits to other teachers' classrooms who are using new technique. Conduct "lesson study" sessions involving innovation. Post lesson plans and student work on website. Provide resources requested by individual teachers for implementation of new technique in classroom.
Collaborative	Wants to share lessons and strategies with other teachers and get more information from them in return. May offer to provide support for other teachers struggling with technology.	Create system (e.g., Intranet, blog, faculty website) for sharing ideas, lessons and strategies. Look for chances for teachers to collaborate on interdisciplinary units or other projects. Use teachers as mentors, trainers and coaches for others.
Refocusing	Looks for ways to improve the innovation and its use. Looks for "cutting edge" and chances to innovate.	Encourage teachers to test new ideas and techniques. Provide access to all resources in the school so that they can incorporate them in their innovations. Encourage responsible risk-taking and embrace "failure" as opportunity to learn.

Adapted from My eCoach, A Division of Computer Strategies, LLC. (2009), and from Hord, S. M., Rutherford, W. L, Huling-Austin, L. and Hall, G. E. (1987). *Taking Charge of Change*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD

http://educationpartnerships.org/

How Do Teachers Evaluate Innovations and Reform Initiatives?

Ultimately, teachers evaluate any new approach with five types of questions. Savvy school leaders address these issues honestly and directly rather than trying to dismiss or minimize them (Williamson and Johnston, 2012).

1. Is it going to work? Is it reliable and can I count on it to enhance my teaching and student learning?

2. Will I lose control? Is this new approach going to put me in jeopardy of losing control of my class' behavior and the curriculum?

3. How much time will it take? Is it worth the investment of time necessary to learn the innovation, adapt my curriculum to it, manage it once it's in place, and trouble-shoot it if necessary?

4. Will I have support? Who is available to help me when I need it, and what resources will be provided to help assure my success?

5. Will my overall performance decline? I'm pretty good at what I do. Will this new approach make me a "novice" again and affect my evaluation?

Veteran Teachers and School Improvement

According to Renee Moore (2011), 'When it comes to teaching, experience matters. No matter how good the preparation a new teacher may have had (and that's still a subject of debate in many quarters), no matter how zealous the new re-cruit, no one comes into teaching a craftmaster. Teaching, like all professions, requires continuous growth and improve-ment by those who practice it.

Experienced, high-quality teachers are extremely valuable to a school because they provide the stability and local knowledge-base upon which innovation and consistent excellence can develop. Increasingly, research on student per-formance points to the benefits for students of having their teachers working together in teams.

At the core of these teams, the best teachers--those who have demonstrated the highest level of effectiveness working with students, and have rightfully earned the trust and respect of peers, students, and parents. These highly accom-plished veteran teachers are especially critical to schools in high-needs urban and rural communities, what we too-frequently refer to as "failing" schools. Current policies such as "turnaround" plans that require mass removal of teachers only serve to further destablize such schools.'

Moore continues, "These same teachers also often tend to be mavericks, innovators, outspoken advocates, or quietly effective loners." And that may be a problem for school administrators who are under such pressure to meet external achievement goals that they see these admirable qualities as interfering with the "progress" of the school.

Moore suggests several approaches to engaging veteran staff in school improvement efforts. Among these:

- Principals cultivate and embrace teacher leadership

- Leaders provide time and tools for teachers to learn from each other

- Make specialized preparation and resources available for the highest needs students and subjects

- Provide opportunities to try out new ideas and take risks (and showcase them with other teachers).

Denise Glyn Borders (2004) underscores the problem and the significance of working with veteran teachers as well. "[V]eteran teachers often feel they are viewed as part of the problem rather than valued as part of the solution. They face demands in the form of state standards, expectations for engaging and rigorous instructional practices, and the testing provisions and teacher-qualification definitions in the federal No Child Left Behind Act. Much of the burden of accounta-bility lands squarely on the shoulders of veteran teachers and their students. In many cases, however, they are not fully capturing their own potential to expand the boundaries, quicken the pace, or deepen the effect of instruction through technology and innovation. Too often, teacher-training models and school structures treat classrooms as isolated units, rather than engage teachers in the kind of meaningful collaboration that can benefit their own instruction and that of their colleagues, creating successful communities of practice.

Her suggestion is to create opportunities for reflection, collaboration, and peer-to-peer learning. In essence, make reform something that veteran teachers lead, rather than something that is done to them. And one of the most effective ways of doing that is to create professional learning communities of teachers.

(For more on creating and sustaining professional learning communities, see the list of resources at the conclusion of this brief.)

A Revolutionary Idea

Nancy Flanagan, a blogger for *Education Week*, suggests that school improvement is a two-way street, and that veteran teachers can actually make their leaders more effective and more responsive. She writes, "There are still lots of successful, functioning public schools--and lots of experienced teachers whose ideas would make their schools run better, if they were willing to step up." Then she offers 7 strategies to help leaders do a better job of leading school reform:

1. Don't go to your school leader with complaints only, or the expectation that administrators should solve all problems in the building. Grievances that are accompanied by proposed solutions-- or at the very least, your own detailed analysis of the issue--are more likely to be worked out to everyone's satisfaction.

2. Seek your own professional learning, and find networks of colleagues who do the same. Stay on top of current issues in practice and policy. Talk publicly about those issues--in staff meetings, in the lounge, in e-mail groups. Invite administrators to be part of your professional discussions; share ideas and concerns about programs, trends and policies.

3. Give credit where credit is due. Sincerely acknowledging a school leader's accomplishments and skills creates room for new capacities to emerge: *Nice job on the newsletter! Thanks for helping me think about that grading issue. I appreciate your support in getting the library opened on Wednesday nights.*

4. Give school leaders some cover and support when they make unpopular but necessary decisions. Controversies always emerge in school life, but don't hang your administrators out to dry when the situation is sticky and they've stuck their neck out for what is right. Co-accept responsibility and co-own problems.

5. Be willing to ask thorny, step-on-toes questions in front of your colleagues and administrators: *Why do we start the high school day at 7:15 when research and the kids' zoned-out behavior tell us they're not ready to learn then? Would it be better for students' mental energy to add a second recess--and what would it take to staff and schedule that? Our building policy on homework doesn't make sense for the kids we have now--can we find a better answer?*

6. Whenever possible, bring all players into solution-finding, even chronic grumps. There's nothing more irritating to teachers than the thought (true or not) that the principal or superintendent has collected a group of sycophants to make decisions. It's messy to deal with schoolwide issues when everyone's involved--but it builds trust.

7. Approach every issue with the mindset that teachers and administrators are co-equals, working together to solve problems. Don't mentally position teachers and school leaders on opposite, adversarial sides when difficult change is needed. Begin with the assumption that teacher perspectives will be valued, even if you think that seldom happens. Collaboration is not the default problem-solving approach in most schools, despite happy talk about collegiality. The goal isn't getting what you want--or preventing the "wrong" solution. Whatever the problem is--it's everyone's problem until it's solved.

The Bottom Line

There's no quick fix for working with veteran staff – nor should there be. There is as much variety of competence, professionalism, and motivation among veteran staff as among any group of employees, regardless of their age or experience. Experience may make veteran staff less compliant, but working effectively with them boils down to the same fundamental approaches that get the best effort from anyone in the school: respecting their experience and their opinions, listening to their voices, and engaging them in meaningful ways in the innovation and reform initiative in the school.

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Flanagan, N. (July 7, 2012). Seven Suggestions for Teachers to Make Their Leaders More Effective. *Teacher in a Strange Land Blog, Education Week.* http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/teacher_in_a_strange_land/2012/07/seven_suggestions_for_teachers_to_make_their_school_leaders_more_effective.html?qs=veteran+teachers+school+reform

Williamson, R. D. and Johnston, J. H. (2012). *The School Leaders' Guide to Social Media.* Larchmont, NY: Eye on Education. http://www.eyeoneducation.com/bookstore/productdetails.cfm?sku=7218-5

Resources

These resources provide information about two key strategies for working with veteran staff — creating professional learning communities and changing attitudes.

Celine Provini (2012). *Best Practices for Professional Learning Communities*. Education World. http://www.educationworld.com/a_admin/best-practices-for-professional-learning-communities.shtml

Johnston, J. H. *Shaping Beliefs and Attitudes*. http://www.coedu.usf.edu/main/departments/seced/Faculty/documents/AttitudeChapter_H_johnston.pdf