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Faculty Professional Development: A Primer for School Leaders

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Effective professional development programs engender an atmosphere of excitement, intellectual stimulation, and collegiality. They bring about an innovative and exhilarating culture. They invite invigorating partnerships. They generate faculty enthusiasm, and there is a "trickle down" effect: an energized faculty leads to energized students.

Intellectual stimulation is infectious. Yet, many independent schools lack these programs. And many of those who have them have them in name only. Why would schools whose ostensible commitment is to education fail to develop a "community of life-long learners" among the faculty?

What are the obstacles to the design and implementation of effective professional development programs? And how can these obstacles be overcome? What are the critical ingredients of effective programs? Why should schools create these programs? What are their benefits? How might independent schools partner with universities and community agencies to establish a dialectical relationship in which each enhances the other? How can these programs aid in faculty recruitment and retention? Each will be addressed in turn.

What are the obstacles to the design and implementation of effective professional development programs? And how can these obstacles be overcome?

Why would schools devoted to creating innovative learning environments for their students fail to do the same for their faculty? This is neither a trivial nor an inconsequential question. A failure in this particular arena flies in the face of what we might predict. So why aren't these programs more prevalent? From this description, professional development programs seem like a very good idea. So why do so many schools hobble along without them? We have identified the advantages of professional development programs. But, in considering the dearth of professional development programs in independent schools, we need to consider a bizarre and curious question: What is the advantage to NOT having such programs? That is, we can readily appreciate the benefits of these programs, but what are the drawbacks?

I am not talking about the everyday pedestrian sorts of drawbacks that are obvious. I am not talking about the fact that they take time and cost money. We squander our time and money in all sorts of profligate ways, so why not invest in a seemingly growth-enhancing program? Nor am I talking about a dynamic inherent to all independent schools, the tendency to operate in crisis mode so that time to reflect and plan is limited. No. I am asking about the resistances to such programs. I proffer this hypothesis: effective professional development programs are avoided precisely because they are effective. That is, they are avoided because they lead to change. They disrupt the status quo. When these programs are effective, then the organization and the individual change. Therefore, we must ask: What are the organizational and individual resistances to change?

Organizational resistances - A "culture of unaccountability"

The Nature of the Mission Statement

Organizations vary to the extent to which they have articulated for themselves who they are. A sense of mission can serve an organizing function: people are drawn to the community or repelled from it because they accept or eschew its mission. For many healthy schools, a mission statement is a "work in progress." Faculty participate in its creation in an active, ongoing way. This process holds faculty members

accountable in two ways. First, because they participate in the creation of the mission statement, it reflects a part of themselves. Second, they are expected to embrace and, in a sense, "grow into" the mission statement. That is, they need to change in some way in order to achieve its goals. Toward this end, a professional development program is essential.

A hallmark of "schools in crisis" is the absence of any thought or attention given to a mission statement and/or faculty evaluation. The mission statement may be conspicuously absent, or it may exist but be ignored. In such settings, the focus is often on "survival." With everyone in "survival mode," faculty are left to their own devices.

Another indicator of a "stagnant" environment is a mission statement that has remained unchanged despite the passage of time.The absence of a mission statement and/or an effective professional development program is often indicative of a profound resistance to organizational change. Without a mission statement that is tied to faculty goals and faculty evaluation, in effect, no one is held accountable. The environment can become a haven for anyone who is frightened of or resentful about being held accountable. A lack of organizational and individual purpose leads to demoralization, apathy, dysfunction, and worse. The absence of a mission statement may signify a "culture of unaccountability".

Scapegoating

Another indicator of a "culture of unaccountabilty" is persistent scapegoating. In these sorts of cultures, when confronted with the need to be responsive to ordinary, everyday changes, the culture responds by targeting a culprit. A dip in enrollment, difficulty recruiting or retaining faculty, shifts in student demography are not accepted as part of the "nature of the beast", rather, they are blamed on someone. And that someone is hunted down and punished.

To wit, undoubtedly anyone who has devoted her or his career to independent school life will be familiar with this common scenario. A school's failure to be responsive to changing needs is often attributed to and indeed blamed on the head. The head is ousted, and the board searches out a new head to "right all wrongs." Attributing difficulties to the former head has its advantages. It lets everyone: the board, the faculty, the parents, the students, and the community, "off the hook." They need not assume any responsibility for the school's difficulties. Everyone knows that it's the former head's fault. This approach allows everyone--except, of course, the former head, to remain comfortable.

Of course, in addition to sacrificing the former head, this strategy has its own costs. Blaming the school's difficulties on the former head is simplistic. Still more insidiously, it prevents change: it allows everyone to remain as he or she was. Moreover, it is dishonest. Scapegoating the former head allows other members of the school community to deny what they all know: the difficulties are the result of a complex constellation of factors that likely involve everyone. These factors are unlikely to be altered by changing only one of the cast of characters.

Moreover, attributing all of the responsibility for difficulties to the former head places the new head in a precarious position. She must make changes seamlessly with very little information and very little support and without causing anyone any discomfort at all. This is magical thinking, and it is unrealistic. In a scapegoating culture, failure will culminate in her extrusion.

A systemic approach views the "sum of the whole as greater than the sum of the parts" and consequently considers the complexity of interactions between all individuals and groups within the organization. A caveat of family systems theory is that when you change one member of the family, then the entire family changes. Take, for example, the adolescent who is terrified of leaving home for college. Treatment helps him to become more assertive and self-confident. As he enthusiastically prepares for college, his mother becomes depressed.

This caveat is equally true for independent school families. To truly create systemic change, one must examine how the entire system and the players in it function. Identifying systemic factors that contribute to school struggles has several benefits. It alters the focus from "blaming" to problem-solving. It allows everyone to own her or his piece of the difficulties and to take steps to rectify them.

An effective professional development program can pose a considerable threat because it will change the culture. However, the nature of these changes is often difficult to predict. People may harbor the apprehension that they could lose status, a valued role, or, in the worst case, their jobs. The more dependent faculty members are on the school for their sense of identity, the more frightening this sort of program will be. Moreover, independent schools attract caretakers by virtue of their very mission. Even those who are enthusiastic about their professional development may be worried about and protective of their more vulnerable colleagues.

Individual Resistances

Consciously and unconsciously, we tend to seek out environments that will meet our needs. Individuals are drawn to and remain in organizations that gratify their needs. A head who has a high need to be involved in the lives of others will be drawn to a school that values the emotional life of the child. Similarly, a head who cannot tolerate emotional affect may be pulled toward a school that prizes structure and discipline. Mismatches can lead to terminations and/or growth for the school and the individual. Since no school provides a perfect "fit," over time administrators and faculty create their own optimal fit. They begin to learn what they can expect from each other.

Heads get to know their faculty. Faculty may have de jure titles but, in the mind of the head, they acquire de facto titles. That is, the head learns, as do colleagues, whom he can count on and for what.

Administrators and faculty learn how to work around individuals and obstacles to meet their needs and goals. An effective professional development program threatens this predictable, albeit imperfect, structure because in an effective professional development program, people change and the organization changes.

I have discussed elsewhere (Friedman, L.V., Organizational Change in the Independent School: Promise or Peril) the constellation of factors that draw faculty to the independent school. These include many things that are consistent with the goals of professional development: the desire to develop one's own curriculum, a wish for colleagues, the opportunity for innovation, a chance to work closely with talented students, and the wish for autonomy. But not every dynamic that draws faculty to these settings is entirely consonant with the primary goals of professional development: growth and change. Many people are drawn to independent schools because of the family-like, secure community that they offer. While in moderation these are reasonable motivations, they become problematic when faculty experience the school as if it were their entire life. Some faculty treat the school as if it really were their "family." They rely on the school to take care of many of their needs of adult living.

Those who have worked in boarding schools are undoubtedly acquainted with this phenomenon. Some faculty attach themselves to schools with almost a monastic-like devotion. They rely on the school for a sense of identity. For these faculty, the prospect of change is likely terrifying. It may be experienced as tantamount to divorce or even, in extreme cases, annihilation.

A professional development program allows faculty members to differentiate themselves from the school. These programs promote autonomy. Faculty assume increased responsibility for pursuing their own professional goals. They become less dependent on the school for a sense of who they are. That is, they develop a more refined sense of their professional identity. They are able to identify and recognize the school's mission as separate and distinguishable from their own mission, though (we hope) overlapping. They are able to assess whether and how they can achieve their professional goals within the school setting. Ultimately, if or when they grow beyond the school's mission, they are able to separate and move on to the

next leg of their journey. Success means that faculty change and that they come, and they go.

How can these obstacles be overcome? What are the critical ingredients of effective programs?

Effective faculty development programs take time and cost money. Perhaps most importantly, they require a viable commitment on the part of senior leadership, and they require substantive expertise. Each will be addressed in turn.

Time and Money

Often heads, attempting to implement professional development programs, expect faculty to engage in professional development on "their own time." After all, they reason, "It is for them." While at first blush, such an approach appears reasonable, it is unrealistic when one considers how frightening change is for all of us.

Those planning professional development programs ask themselves the obvious questions: "What are our goals for the faculty?" They will no doubt generate a list of the sorts of goals that they would like their entire faculty to achieve. Also, they will have some notions as to the benefit of those goals. As an adjuvant to those steps, they should ask themselves a more difficult and puzzling question as it relates to their faculty: "What is the downside to the successful achievement of these goals? That is, how will success hurt the faculty person?"

For example, the head who wants to make the seismic shift from a militaristic setting to a child-centered milieu must consider why his faculty were drawn toward the former and not the latter. In this situation, he may be asking faculty who have avoided their feelings for decades to change their very character.

With respect to individual faculty goals, it is important to consider what the person has to lose by succeeding. For example, a faculty person might want to pursue an administrative position but may fear that success in that endeavor might mean a geographic move. Or he or she may worry that obtaining this sort of position within the school will elicit the envy of his or her peers. Or he or she may be apprehensive that a promotion may threaten his or her spouse.

When success is terrifying, it is unrealistic to expect faculty to take the initiative "on their own time." Rather, it is more effective to model the same sort of behavior that one hopes for with students. Frightened students are encouraged, cajoled, and rewarded for taking baby steps and are provided with extra support.

Ideally, faculty professional development programs should take place during school time, and/or faculty should be compensated for attending them. The rewards are great enough to make this sort of investment. Moreover, doing so sends a powerful message to the faculty as to the head's commitment to faculty development.

An effective faculty development program requires time. Professional development needs to be viewed as an ongoing process, not just as one more training session to be endured. A pilot program can provide an excellent way for tailoring a program to your faculty's specific needs.

Support of Senior Leadership

Beyond providing financial support, senior leaders can support faculty development in many ways. They can provide feedback as to faculty strengths, and they can identify areas that warrant improvement. They can send faculty to training, provide tuition reimbursement, recognize faculty accomplishments during evaluation, and provide merit raises.

They can acknowledge outstanding performance through awards and other forms of recognition. They can help faculty to create innovative learning opportunities. They can help faculty to establish links to the broader school, college/university, and local community. Finally, they can support these endeavors by providing "release" time for them.

Expertise

Professional development is an area requiring considerable expertise. Ideally, these programs should be developed and led by someone with the requisite background. Even where expertise exists within the school, it can be quite useful to have these programs led by an external consultant, one perferably familiar with independent schools, professional development, and organizational dynamics. If there has been a history of significant organizational resistance, and/or if these sorts of programs have been unsuccessful in the past, it can be useful for the head and key administrators to meet with an organizational consultant. This meeting can be devoted to clarifying organizational dynamics and potential obstacles to the implementation of such a program. In this way, consultant and staff can develop a strategy for effectively overcoming obstacles.

Structuring Effective Programs

Ideally, programs should meet off campus in a spacious setting with a lot of uninterrupted time for thought and reflection. Moreover, the agenda should be exclusively for professional development.

There are numerous effective formats that can be used. These include monthly structured group meetings with 10 to 12 members or quarterly day-long retreats, in which faculty break into small groups. A key here is to strive to ensure a demographic, socio-cultural, academic mix. The reason: diverse groups have been found to be more creative. A critical ingredient is a collegial, nonjudgmental group in which the members make a commitment to supporting each other.

It is important to recognize that goal setting is the purview of both administrators (heads, department chairpersons, etc.) and faculty. Administrators can identify some goals for the entire faculty. For example, if the school is planning to convert to coeducation, all faculty members might be expected to become knowledgeable about the developmental milestones of both sexes. If administrators are truly committed to the achievement of certain goals, it is important that they "put their money where their mouths are." That is, faculty must be given support for achieving these goals. And their success must be assessed in the context of faculty evaluations. For those goals that are specific to each individual faculty member, they should be discussed in the context of regular faculty evaluations.

Faculty who have participated in codifying the school's mission or in generating departmental goals are in an excellent position to articulate the unique contributions that they might make. Moreover, they are in an excellent position to point out talents that their colleagues might contribute. Finally, and most importantly, faculty can and will create their own goals if they are provided with a fertile ground for doing so. That is, there are numerous ways in which faculty can be helped to identify professional goals that might serve both the school and themselves.

Helping Faculty to Establish Goals

There is an array of techniques that can be used to help faculty to establish goals. These include asking them to think about and begin to identify---in the context of a supportive environment---their goals. Faculty can be encouraged to identify (for themselves only) those tasks, both at work and elsewhere, that they do, those that they enjoy, those about which they are neutral, and those that they dislike. Similarly, they can be asked to identify their five-year goals with respect to profession, family, community, finances, hobbies and interests, spirituality, and other relevant domains.

In addition, faculty can be asked to identify their school-related goals. That is, where do they want to be in the next five or 10 years? For what do they want to be known and/or valued? How can they make their class a "state of the art" class in the next five years? What would they like to contribute to the school community? How might they serve as an ambassador for the school to the larger community? What sort of continuing education do they want to pursue? How might they partner with a college or university? How might they partner with cultural, religious, environmental, political, and other organizations on behalf of the school?

What skills do they already have that are relevant to their goals? What skills do they need to acquire? Are there individuals within the school community who might serve as their mentors? Are there individuals within the local, state, or national independent school community who might serve as mentors? Are there individuals within the academic, cultural, religious, environmental, political, or other communities who might serve as their mentors? As they achieve their goals, where will they present their work? Will it be to professional organizations such as NAIS? Or will it be to cultural organizations or elsewhere? Who within the school community can help them to achieve these goals? Who can help outside of the school community?

Why Should Schools Create these Programs? What are their Benefits?

Effective faculty development programs lead to healthy faculty and healthy schools. These, in turn, lead to a stimulating, creative atmosphere, one that generates intellectual curiosity, tenacity, and caring. Those involved in this sort of setting exude enthusiasm that stimulates interest both within the school and within the larger community. Healthy prospective faculty are seeking a setting in which there are many opportunities for growth. Consequently, they will be drawn to schools with effective programs. Just as importantly, healthy schools attract healthy partnerships. And healthy partnerships lead to more effective faculty recruitment and retention.

How might independent schools partner with colleges/universities and community agencies to establish a dialectical relationship in which each enhances the other?

Partnering with a College or University

Partnerships can enhance everyone's learning. A college or university partnership can be fruitful for everyone involved. Faculty can dip into the university well in many ways. These include: (1) enrolling in graduate courses; (2) teaching undergraduate courses; (3) teaching summer school; (4) pursuing graduate degrees; (5) tutoring undergraduates in their subject areas; (6) attending events such as concerts, talks by external speakers, etc.; (7) using the athletic center; (8) collaborating in research; (9) linking with the career center; (10) linking with the counseling center; (11) linking with the Office of Faculty Development; (12) partnering with the Office of Residential Life; (13) inviting the faculty to lecture to the school's faculty, etc.

Similarly, members of the university community (faculty, graduate and undergraduate students) can derive considerable benefit from involvement with the independent school. They can become involved in many ways. These include: (1) doing an internship in the classroom, on the athletic field, with the school paper or the school play; (2) tutoring within their subject area; (3) teaching summer school; (4) conducting research; (5) counseling (with supervision); (6) serving as a mentor; etc.

There is much to be said as to how to successfully establish and maintain these relationships. Having senior liaison people in both organizations increases the likelihood that the relationships will endure. Also, it is very important to establish ground rules within the school regarding school college/university interactions. A liaison person may be entrusted with helping school faculty to identify and be responsive to the mores of the other setting.

These relationships provide both parties with the opportunities to get to know one another. It should be noted that getting to know students in the context of an internship at your school is an excellent way to recruit junior faculty. Moreover, a relationship with a college or university provides independent school faculty with numerous opportunities for social and professional contacts. These relationships are a valuable antidote to isolation.

Partnering with Cultural and Community Organizations

As with a college or university, partnering with local organizations can be beneficial for both organizations. Schools can partner with an array of organizations representing groups in the arts, athletics, religion, politics, and the environment as well as with charitable and international organizations. This cross-pollination can serve as a valuable adjuvant to a professional development program. For example, in an arts organization, faculty can be students and/or teachers. They can serve as ushers or fund raisers, and/or they can participate in an array of other capacities, too. Also, these partnerships can and should involve students. In fact, these groups might be integrated into the classroom in various ways. Students can receive credit for volunteering their services to these organizations, and/or organizations and schools can partner in developing programs.

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