

# Change Workshop: A Principal Manages his Entrance

The new administrator who shows interest in faculty concerns and acts on priority issues starts the year on the right track.

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Carroll Manor Elementary School, in rural central Maryland, was about to have its third principal in as many years. Concerned about the effects on the faculty, the new principal, with the help of a consultant on meeting effectiveness, planned a workshop to accelerate the transition and develop good relationships.

The immediate challenge of a newly assigned administrator is to manage the transition so that leadership is quickly assumed, disruption minimized, and changes smoothly implemented. A practical approach to this problem is the "Transition Workshop," which has been used by business and the military to get new managers and commanders off to a good start.

Developed by Mike Mitchell at Kaiser Aluminum in 1975, the workshop model was designed to shorten the six-month grace period needed by new managers to become fully productive. The workshop was then adopted by the U.S. Army where it is now used extensively for changes in command. Transition workshops, up to two days long, are spreading to other businesses and government agencies.

## The Workshop in a School Setting

The success of a new principal depends largely on what happens at the beginning of the school year. School opens with the principal trying to identify school issues and develop positive relationships with the faculty, which will affect school climate and willingness to

work together. Meanwhile, teachers have information and viewpoints the principal needs, and are wondering about the principal's leadership style, educational philosophy, and how their work will be affected.

In this situation, a special type of staff meeting, called a Change Workshop, fulfills the information needs of both leader and staff and gets everyone off to a quick and positive start. In a two- to four-hour workshop, concerns and expectations are clarified, stress is reduced, and the new leadership is clearly established.

At Carroll Elementary School, the principal and the consultant planned a Change Workshop by developing the purpose and objectives and mapping an agenda to achieve them. Prior to the workshop, the principal met informally with each teacher and then sent a letter announcing the agenda for the first two working days of school. The workshop was scheduled for the afternoon of the second day, the day before school opened. As a climate-setting activity, two quotations relating to the theme of the transition were posted in the faculty room:

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*The Future is something we use our freedom to determine, rather than something that is lurking out there, and will happen to us unless we are mighty smart; We can make, rather than prophesize, The Future.*

—Stafford Beer

*Analysis and vision can be inspirational, and that is essential but they are not determining. We now understand that we must build the future we want, step by step capacity by capacity. This will take concerted, dedicated effort.*

—de Bivort

## The Workshop

On the afternoon of the change workshop, the following information was prominently displayed in the meeting area:

**Purpose:** To accelerate the development of a positive relationship between a new principal and the school faculty.

**Objectives:**

1. To assist the principal by providing necessary information
2. To communicate the principal's interest in the faculty's priority issues
3. To prepare a foundation for the principal and faculty to act on priority issues

#### Agenda:

1. Opening and presentation by the principal
2. Small-group identification of issues
3. Issue presentation by the faculty
4. Response from the principal
5. Questions from faculty
6. Critique of workshop
7. Closure by principal

The faculty sat at round library tables as music played softly in the background. After presenting the purpose, objectives, and agenda, the principal discussed likely fears regarding the unknown expectations of a new administrator and the shock of change as exemplified by a new manual and schedule. Next, he specified the immediate task: to list possible problems arising from this change. He asked each group seated at a table to generate as long a list as possible (quantity), and then to circle the three or four problems considered to be most important (quality) during a 20-minute period.

To ease the groups into brainstorming, the principal led a brief "warm-up" exercise. Holding a library book, he encouraged each participant to name a use for the book other than reading. Teachers responded in round-robin fashion three times. Then the principal signaled for the groups to start listing school issues. Twice the principal returned to determine if groups had finished ahead of time. On both occasions teachers were eagerly on-task and demanded the full 20 minutes.

When the groups had finished, representatives reported their most important issues. The principal listed all problems on display charts, using the groups' own words. After the reports, the principal read the problems aloud for clarification and expansion. At this time the faculty interacted among themselves to explain more fully the nature of their concerns. Several groups discovered that they listed common problems. New teachers found that their fears were also held by experienced staff. At the same time, primary teachers realized that some of their concerns were unrelated to those of upper-level staff.

The principal then explained his position on each issue. Several changes, such as minor schedule adjustments for primary physical education and intermediate lunch times, were made. A

major discomfort with assigned reading and mathematics periods was beyond the principal's control and could not be changed. Another faculty concern was the principal's stance on discipline. In response the principal agreed to hold a schoolwide assembly on the first day of school to clarify school rules, expected behaviors, and consequences, to be followed by a rousing rendition of the school song. On a related problem of cafeteria monitoring, the faculty believed that more people should be assigned duty. The principal did so. The staff wanted to publish a newsletter to parents: writers and an editor volunteered. Answers to minor questions about access to classrooms over the weekend and repair of equipment concluded the principal's response.

Having no further questions, the faculty gave a brief but positive oral critique of the session. The principal reiterated promised actions on problems and the teachers returned to their classrooms.

#### Follow Up

Several actions resulting from the workshop showed the principal's and faculty's commitment to deal with issues identified at the workshop. The assembly held the next day set the tone for school discipline. Expectations of students that were enunciated by the principal and refined by the faculty were communicated to students. Following

the workshop, disruptive behavior was quickly dealt with by both faculty and principal. The newsletter to parents, first in a bimonthly series, was published.

Sharing concerns in the workshop set the tone for later developments, such as an exchange of instructional ideas. In the fall, the principal and faculty together selected topics and speakers for the first professional inservice day. At the winter inservice, faculty members presented subjects in their areas of expertise. An atmosphere was created in which both the principal and faculty could express concerns and suggest instructional improvements.

#### Evaluation

The meeting consultant conducted an evaluation 11 days after the initial workshop. He randomly selected five teachers out of the 11 participants and administered a questionnaire by telephone. The teachers, guaranteed anonymity, responded to three types of questions: open-ended, rating scale, and personal judgment. The following is a sample of responses to open-ended questions:

*Pluses of the Workshop:* "He made us feel he was part of our team, not an outsider." "We felt we had definite input to the ways things will be done." "The principal legitimized concerns. None were trivial, all were important." "I heard problems others were having. I

Photo: John George



felt empathy, we're all in the same boat." "Results showed instantly or the next day." "The faculty was relieved. It produced a feeling that this, too, could be a good year."

**Minuses:** "I felt pressed. I needed to prepare my classroom." "The intermediate and primary concerns were not the same. We had to sit through each others' concerns."

Teachers concurred that the workshop had met its three objectives: (1) it informed the principal about school issues; (2) the principal showed interest in the faculty's issues; and (3) it enabled the principal and faculty to deal with priority issues immediately.

Teachers were asked whether or not they would hold a change workshop if they had authority to decide. All sampled teachers responded "yes." When asked how they would change the workshop, the two responses were: "Have it at a better time—we were looking at our watches on Friday afternoon (school started the following Monday)," and

"No changes. It really helped me. It needs to be held before school starts."

#### Conclusion

The workshop was successful in shortening the time needed for the principal and faculty to adjust to each other and provided a supportive forum for identifying issues that affect the quality of education. An additional benefit was the good feelings generated by the faculty's sharing of concerns and the principal's interest in those concerns.

The compressed nature of the workshop design requires careful agenda planning and preparation by the principal. It is important for the principal to create an open and candid environment during the workshop. The principal's active listening skills help encourage teacher participation.

Principals and other educational leaders will find little guidance on planning a change workshop. A few articles have been published, but most of the knowledge resides in consultants on or-

ganizational development and meeting effectiveness. Some general books on meeting effectiveness may be helpful too. □

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