

Not Just Another “Thing on the Plate”

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We can't keep rejecting solutions because they require us to change our behavior.

- Margaret Wheatley

Community of Caring challenges schools to include all learners in the activities of the school and community - something difficult to accomplish by simply hosting the occasional workshop. Moving beyond the perception that we are “adding to the plate” requires a shared commitment to *be* a Community of Caring. Transforming a school culture that asks, “*Who* can best meet the needs of this child?” to one that asks, “*what do I need to learn in order to meet the needs of this child?*” requires profound personal learning and change - something very difficult to sustain.

“We used to do Community of Caring,” I’ve heard teachers, principals, or parents say. It seems that one could substitute many research-based programs into this sentence - Whole Language, Box It and Bag It mathematics, Qualitative Reading Inventories, etc. The statement is usually finished with words like, “The kids are different now. The training we had five years ago is no longer relevant. Besides, with the state tests, we can’t afford the time.” Shelves around the country are filled with binders containing “research-based” programs now collecting dust. So, why did these improvement programs fail?

Research has begun to zero in on why some initiatives succeed while others fail (Marzano 2003 and Marzano, Waters, McNulty 2005). The research can be summarized like this: people, whether adults or children, don’t easily change their behavior unless they are deeply and passionately inspired to do so (Collins 2001, p. 200). People change when they are held accountable for monitoring the reality of their performance through data (Collins 2001) and when the feedback on this data is specific and personally meaningful (Marzano 2003). In short, it’s all about building *personal meaning and an individual sense of purpose in our common work*. (Wheatley 1994 p. 136, Collins 2001, p. 200, Kouzes and Posner 1995, Heifetz 1994).

The most common error in leadership is to *underestimate how the change will impact those affected by it* (Marzano, Waters, and McNulty 2005). While coaching and supporting school leaders, I’ve often heard them express that unless they are generating new ideas, staying current on the best programs, or talking about research, they are not doing enough to implement the change. In focusing on providing momentum and content around the change, they forget to support the personal impact of the change. The subconscious belief seems to be “I need to be the expert here. People expect me to answer their questions and to motivate them.” Programs implemented from this perspective often have limited results. For some, the change will be manageable. For others, it will be overwhelming and become just another binder on the bookshelf.

In my work with leaders around the country, I have seen that the most successful change agents:

1. Work collaboratively with others to build strong values for the work
2. Recognize that “change” is not the same as “implementing programs.” Real change is what you model, not what you implement
3. Pay attention to the change research

When successful, change is personal. Change agents use processes and structures to provide accountability while *allowing each person to grow in his or her way*.

We value what we build ourselves. This is why we need Community of Caring now more than ever. Unlike many reform initiatives the *means to the end* lie within Community of Caring itself. The five values of Family, Trust, Responsibility, Respect, and Caring are foundations upon which people of all cultures build meaning. These values are the touchstones for the discussions that lead to shared agreements, accountability, and progress monitoring. These are the values that connect us gently and in the present to each other. By examining these values, we learn to recognize the interdependency of our individual strengths. Community of Caring values, when defined, debated, re-examined, monitored, built upon, and internalized by all, become the foundation for *transformative personal learning and living* for all members of our community.

If you would like more ideas about how to deepen your Community of Caring professional development, please contact Penny Keith at Community of Caring.

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