

# TEPSA News

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## Best Practices/Tom W. Many, Ed.D.



### Buy a Dog: Confronting Toxic Behaviors in Your School

*During a team meeting, a teacher complained about the newly adopted curriculum. Her negativity was loud, persistent and continued until she announced, “all the research says this program is bad for kids and I won’t teach it!” When asked where she had read such a report and if she would be willing to share her source, she became indignant and stormed out of the meeting. After a moment of stunned silence, the team continued with their meeting.*

Unfortunately, this story is not unusual. In too many schools, too many teachers are allowed to opt out of teaching the agreed upon curriculum, to disregard the results of common formative assessments or to ignore the needs of struggling students.

Too many teachers are forced to tolerate colleagues who arrive late for team meetings, come unprepared to work, are passive aggressive or disrespectful. It takes only one ‘bad actor’ to ruin the culture for everyone else, and yet in schools with negative and ineffective cultures no one—not even the principal—does much of anything about it.

Far too many schools still operate under the premise that it is better to “go along to get along.” In these schools, good, caring and dedicated teachers feel they have no one to turn to for help and simply quit trying. They give up and just accept that they have to live with the ‘crazies.’ Why, they ask, would anyone want to create an adversarial relationship with someone you will have to work with for the rest of the school year?

In these schools, teachers and principals simply shrug their shoulders and walk away rather than confront their col-

leagues about toxic behaviors. Therein lies the tragedy of this story. That is the bad news. The good news is that we only need to look in the mirror to find an answer to this dilemma.

#### Confrontation Takes Courage

It takes great courage to confront toxic behaviors, but effective principals understand and accept the importance—even the inevitability—of conflict. Confrontation can be difficult, but it need not be negative. As Rick DuFour said, “It is possible to be tough minded and adamant about protecting purpose and priorities while also being tender with people.” (*Learning By Doing*, p. 230)

Principals in schools with healthy cultures are “relentlessly respectful” and never embarrass, belittle or condemn individuals in public. At the same time, they are “respectfully relentless” around the cultural norms that support learning. When important cultural expectations are violated—or worse yet sabotaged—by individuals, principals accept their responsibility to confront and redirect these individuals. In fact, “a defining moment has occurred [in a school] when a leader chooses to confront rather than avoid saboteurs.” (*Learning by Doing*, pg. 239)

Michael Fullan assures principals that “it’s ok to be assertive,” but DuFour and Bob Marzano take Fullan’s notion a step further and argue that, “it is not only okay [for principals to be assertive]; it is imperative.” DuFour and Marzano were speaking specifically to the importance of principals being clear, direct and explicit about “the goals that are to be achieved and a few critical conditions they expect to see in every school.” (*Leaders of Learning*, p 33.)

Of the goals and conditions DuFour and Marzano were contemplating, surely their list would include such things as a culture focused on learning, teachers contributing to the work of collaborative teams, delivering a guaranteed and viable curriculum, using common formative assessments to drive instruction, and creating schoolwide, systematic pyramids of intervention to provide more time and support for students. In effective schools, principals do not allow teachers to engage in behaviors or ignore practices that do not align with what we know is best for students.

### Confronting Toxic Behaviors

Kerry Patterson defines confrontation as “holding someone accountable, face-to-face.” When confrontations are handled well, problems are resolved and relationships improve. When confrontations are avoided, problems linger and the potential damage to a school’s culture is enormous.

The ability to confront unproductive behavior successfully is one of the principal’s most important assets. Our best hope is that principals will recognize the importance of confrontation and keep working to get it right. Paraphrasing from the book *Crucial Confrontations* by Patterson, et al. (2005), the following strategy helps principals successfully deal with confrontation.

- 1. Choose What and If:** Clearly identify what is to be addressed and stay focused on the behavior(s) when confronting the individual. Consider the implications that confronting or not confronting the behavior would have on your school.
- 2. Master My Stories:** Illustrate the impact that the negative behavior(s) has on others, on the culture, and ultimately the students of the school using specific examples. Clearly articulate why the behavior is *not* acceptable at your school.
- 3. Describe the Gap:** Describe the gap between what you expect and what you have observed. End with a clarifying question like, “Am I clear about what needs to happen next?” to check that your expectations are understood.

**4. Make it Motivating and Easy:** Explain the natural consequences of failing to meet expectations and explore whether the skills are present to be successful. Setting some short term, attainable goals encourages effort and motivation.

**5. Agree on a Plan and Follow Up:** Agree on specific actions and timelines for follow-up. At this point it is *important* that the plan is both fair and firm, but it is *imperative* to follow through with the plan.

**6. Stay Focused and Flexible:** Continually monitor progress. Check in regularly, but be ready to listen and respond with more or different kinds of support if the circumstances of the situation change.

Effective principals recognize that the culture in their school is only as healthy as the most toxic behaviors they are willing to tolerate. They realize they cannot ignore or condone behaviors that are not aligned with the goal of learning for all. These principals not only accept confrontation as a part of the job; they recognize it as a necessary aspect of a high performing school and take steps to plan for and manage it successfully.

### Good Advice I Never Forgot

Every principal understands there will be times when he or she will need to make difficult—even unpopular decisions—or confront teachers about unacceptable behaviors. Confronting others is never easy, but early in my career my mentor helped me understand that confrontation was necessary and a part of the job. He explained that principals had to become comfortable with ‘less than universal love and affection’ if they hoped to be successful in what was, and always will be, a very demanding role. My mentor suggested that if a principal were the kind of person who needed unconditional love, she/he should ‘buy a dog’. In all my years, I never forgot that advice. ■

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*During the course of a career spanning more than 30 years, Dr. Tom W. Many has served as a classroom teacher, principal and superintendent—all at the elementary level.*

### Resources

- DuFour, R., DuFour, R., Eaker, R. & Many, T. (2006). *Learning by doing. Solution Tree: Bloomington, IN.*
- DuFour, R. & Marzano, R. (2011). *Leaders of learning. Solution Tree: Bloomington, IN.*
- Patterson, K., Grenny, J., McMillan, R. & Switzler, A. (2005). *Crucial confrontations. McGraw-Hill Companies: Columbus, OH.*