REACH *for the* HEART AS WELL AS THE MIND

BY DENNIS SPARKS

Individuals and organizations have an amazing capacity to maintain their current beliefs and practices in the face of massive, well-intentioned efforts to change them. Here are two facts that cannot be ignored if teaching and learning are to be improved for the benefit of all students: First, the majority of teachers know more about effective teaching than they regularly practice. Second, exposure to research as provided in traditional inservice programs seldom results in significant and lasting improvements in practice. New habits of mind and practice require robust forms of professional learning. These two facts are at the heart of the knowing-doing gap.

The term "knowing-doing gap" was popularized by Jeffrey Pfeffer and Robert Sutton (2000) in their book, *The Knowing-Doing Gap: How Smart Companies Turn Knowledge Into Action.* "[O]ne of the great mysteries in organizational management," they write, is "why knowledge of what needs to be done frequently fails to result in action or behavior consistent with that knowledge. We came to call this the *knowing-doing problem*" (p. 4).

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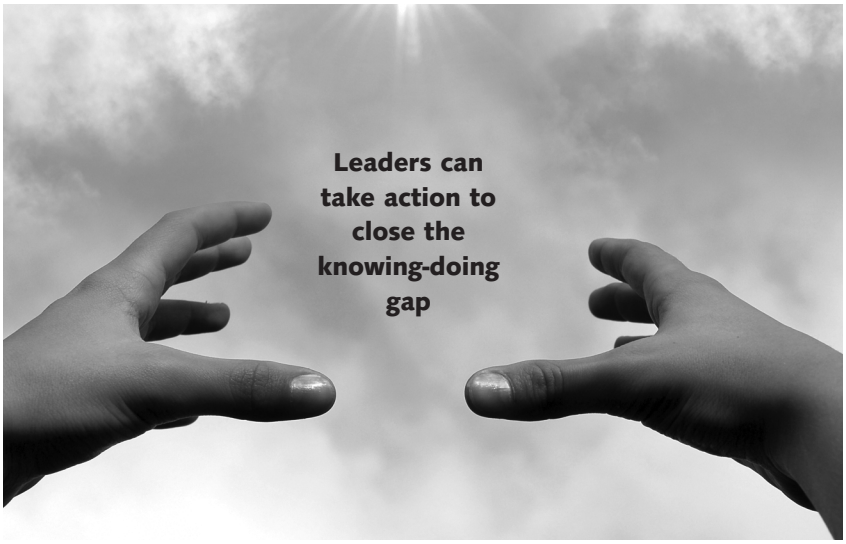

TWO BIG IDEAS

My suggestions for closing the knowing-doing gap are informed by two big ideas:

Idea 1

Methods commonly used in schools to spread and develop good practices are too weak to continuously improve teaching practice.

In the language of *NSDC's Standards for Staff Development* (2001), *process* trumps *content* when it comes to teachers applying research in their classrooms — the learning process must be sufficiently robust to ensure that the content has been understood and acted upon. When it

comes to all teachers in a school using research to continuously improve teaching and learning, *context* trumps both *content* and *process* — a school's culture and structures either enable or disable the application of new knowledge and skills. Put another way, the school context and the professional learning processes used in schools have more influence on day-to-day practice than research and professional literature. Consequently, it is essential that administrators and teacher leaders create cultures, structures, and processes that require teamwork and the continuous improvement of practice.

If the threat of crippling illness or even death itself doesn't produce change, what will?

Two common approaches to change are "telling" and "forcing." In *Building the Bridge As You Walk on It: A Guide for Leading Change,* Robert Quinn (2004) points out that, "Telling is not as effective in situations requiring significant behavioral change because it is based on a narrow cognitive view of human systems. It fails to incorporate values, attitudes, and feelings" (p. 70). Regarding force, Quinn writes, "The forcing strategy usually evokes anger, resistance, and damage to the fundamental relationships. Thus it is not likely to result in the kind of voluntary commitment that is necessary for healthy and enthusiastic change — change that will sustain the system" (p. 71).

John Kotter and Dan Cohen agree. In *The Heart of Change: Real-Life Stories of How People Change Their Organizations* (2002), they write, "People change less because they are given analysis that shifts their thinking than because they are shown a truth that influences their feelings" (p. 1). Because emotions provide the passion and commitment that overcomes complacency and resistance to change, they contend that vivid stories, images, and experiences are more powerful than research and analysis intended to offer logical reasons for change.

In *Change or Die: The Three Keys to Change at Work and in Life,* Alan Deutschman (2007) explores what works and what doesn't work in individual and organizational change by offering compelling examples from health care, the criminal justice system, and major corporations. Deutschman dismisses as ineffective several widely used approaches to changing ourselves and others: facts (human beings are not as rational as we think we are), fear (at best it's a short-term motivator), and force (there are many ways it can be resisted).

Consequently, while research and reasoned discussion are necessary to inform and guide decision making and planning, by themselves they are usually insufficient to improve the quality of teaching and learning for all students in all classrooms.

Idea 2

Change is sufficiently demanding that people find it difficult to change even when their financial welfare or their lives depend on it.

In *Change or Die,* Deutschman (2007) reports that two years after life-threatening heart problems are diagnosed, 90% of patients have strayed from their doctors' prescriptions and their own good intentions to live healthier lifestyles. If the threat of crippling illness or even death itself doesn't produce change, what will?

Deutschman offers three linked elements he calls "relate," "repeat," and "reframe." *Relate* emphasizes the importance of having sustained relationships with individuals and groups that inspire and sustain hope and provide support. *Repeat* underscores the importance of learning, practicing, and mastering new skills until they become habitual. *Reframe* means acquiring new ways of thinking about a situation. Because deeply rooted beliefs and conceptual frameworks resist facts and reasoned arguments, they must be identified and altered to form new habits of mind that support desired changes.

Deutschman's analysis explains why many well-intentioned innovations in schools expire rather than thrive. Leaders often rely on facts, fear, and force to motivate change rather than provide hope that student learning can be improved and a sense of community and teamwork that supports individuals through the change process (relate). Teachers' learning is seldom sufficiently sustained to enable deep understanding of desired practices and the development of new habits of mind and behavior (repeat). And leaders often do not appreciate the power of underlying cognitive frameworks to resist new practices nor understand how new frameworks can be developed (reframe).

WHAT LEADERS CAN DO TO MINIMIZE THE GAP

Here I share six concrete actions that leaders can take as they work in a collaborative effort to change schools. These actions are intended to close the gap between knowing what will work to improve schools and doing what will work. I believe that in the face of the two big ideas I have just described, these purposeful steps can move educators toward continuous learning and the transformation of long-standing cognitive frameworks.

Action 1

Leaders cultivate simplicity regarding the ideas that are the substance of improvement efforts. They do so by continuously refining their ideas through writing and speaking to committed listeners who aid in the development of their clarity.

Rationale: In *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die,* Chip Heath and Dan Heath (2007) say that ideas stick when they are

expressed with proverb-like simplicity. They recommend stripping an idea down to its essence by finding its essential core.

Conversely, leaders sometimes employ complexity and jargon as a sign of status or to hide their lack of deep understanding of a concept. Pfeffer and Sutton (2000) note, "It is hard enough to explain what a complex idea means for action when you understand it and others don't. It is impossible when you use terms that sound impressive but you don't really understand what they mean" (p. 52).

Action 2

Through teamwork, leaders cultivate relationships that offer hope, provide encouragement and support in the acquisition of new practices, and stimulate new ways of thinking about teaching and learning.

Rationale: It is essential that school and system leaders view the cultivation of productive relationships as a primary responsibility. The starting point in "reculturing" schools is for leaders to develop relationships among themselves that embody the culture they seek to create and then to extend those relationships throughout the school community.

A powerful way to create new habits is to integrate "doing" into the learning process whenever possible.

In recultured schools, teachers can explain the school's overarching goals and how their efforts will contribute to achieving them. They work in teams rather than in isolation and are accountable to one another for continuous improvement rather than to district offices or state education agencies. Their relationships exhibit high levels of trust and appreciation. Rather than evading important issues, teachers speak with candor and courage. As a consequence, teachers are hopeful and energetic rather than mired in distrust, anger, and stress.

Action 3

Leaders establish new habits of mind and behavior in themselves and throughout the school community. The acquisition of new habits requires both intention and attention over many weeks and months.

Rationale: School leadership and teaching are complex tasks that to a large degree are governed by habits of mind and behavior that may operate beneath the level of conscious awareness. When those habits no longer serve the purposes of the organizations they lead, successful educators consciously develop new habits that support the achievement of important goals.

To that end, leaders ensure that professional learning is sufficiently robust to create new neural pathways or to enrich existing pathways so that beliefs are altered, understandings deepened, and new professional practices sustained as they become habitual. Passive sit-and-get activities seldom affect the brain. The development of new habits begins with an initial learning of new ways of thinking and acting, repetition of those thoughts and behaviors (often in the face of opposition from people who prefer the old habits), and eventual mastery in which new ways of thinking and acting have become routine.

A powerful way to create new habits is to integrate "doing" into the learning process whenever possible. Pfeffer and Sutton (2000) address this issue: "[O]ne of the most important insights from our research is that knowledge that is actually implemented is much more likely to be acquired from learning by doing than from learning by reading, listening, or even thinking" (pp. 5-6).

Deutschman (2007) reminds us that new habits are particularly fragile and require supportive environments. "Even while we're creating new 'neural pathways,' the old ones are still there in our brains," he writes. "Until the new ones become completely second nature, then stress or fear can make us fall back on the old ones" (p. 217).

Action 4

Leaders make certain that the school community understands the implicit theories underlying proposed initiatives to ensure they are congruent with those held by the school community.

Rationale: Pfeffer and Sutton (2000) again provide important insight: "Attempting to copy [from other organizations] just what is done — the explicit practices and policies — without holding the underlying philosophy is at once a more difficult task and an approach that is less likely to be successful" (p. 24). They recommend "making people think carefully about the assumptions implicit in the practices and interventions they are advocating. …. By bringing to the surface assumptions that are otherwise unconscious, interventions and decisions become much more mindful and incorporate what people know" (pp. 91-92).

Action 5

Leaders create new conceptual frames or mental models for themselves and others that enable continuous improvements in teaching, learning, and relationships.

Rationale: Our ability to change is often limited by deeply rooted systems of beliefs. For instance, a frame that views professional development as conveying information through presentations by experts is different than a frame that emphasizes team-based learning with and from colleagues while engaged in the everyday work responsibilities of planning lessons, assessing student progress, and determining alternative means of ensuring learning for students who have been unsuccessful.

While difficult to dispel, frames can be changed. Leaders can support

the development of new frames by creating awareness of existing mental frames, a process that can sometimes motivate the school community to begin the search for alternative frames. Leaders may then ask staff members to compare existing frames with alternative frames found in professional literature in terms of their ability to support the achievement of important school goals.

Action 6

Leaders consistently employ "next action thinking" to ensure that their intentions to think and act in new ways are realized and that momentum is maintained.

Rationale: Improvement is ultimately about turning ideas into actions that produce intended results. The knowing-doing gap is a manifestation of learning that has not been acted upon; next action thinking is a habit of automatically moving learning and planning into action.

Because authenticity is a hallmark of hopeful relationships, leaders cultivate their integrity, candor, and courage.

In *Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity,* David Allen (2001) emphasizes the power of habitually considering the next action. He writes, "Over the years, I have noticed an extraordinary shift in energy and productivity whenever individuals and groups installed 'What's the next action?' as a fundamental and consistently asked question" (p. 236). Allen argues that "shifting your focus to something that your mind perceives as a doable, completable task will create a real increase in positive energy, direction, and motivation" (p. 242).

LEADERS CHANGE FIRST

These actions require significant change in leaders (Sparks, 2007). Leaders begin by creating relationships for themselves that inspire hope, establishing new habits, and developing conceptual frames that are aligned with their goals. Because they understand from their own experience how difficult it can be to establish new habits of mind and behavior and the critical role of teamwork, they ensure a supportive environment for such learning. Because authenticity is a hallmark of hopeful relationships, leaders cultivate their integrity, candor, and courage. Likewise, these leaders speak from both their hearts and heads about their values, purposes, and ideas to the hearts and heads of those they lead. And they do so in the spirit of dialogue, knowing they cannot use force or fear to demand new ways of thinking and acting.

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