EDUCATION WEEK
Published Online: October 2, 2009
Published in Print: October 7, 2009, as **Running Into the Fire**

COMMENTARY

Running Into the Fire

Survival Tips for Education's First-Responders

By David Maxfield

Back to Story

Sometimes the only way to save your life is to run toward the fire, not away from it. In 1949, the Mann Gulch forest fire near Helena, Mont., exploded out of control, accelerating toward a team of firefighters at 100 feet per second. Fifteen of the men turned away from the fire and ran for the ridge. But the foreman turned *toward* the approaching inferno and set the grass in front of him on fire. As the grass finished burning, he yelled for his comrades to drop onto the resulting ashes to save their lives. They ignored him, but couldn't outrun the fire. In the end, only the foreman and two firefighters who escaped through a crevice in the rimrock survived.

An educator's survival often hinges on facing the fire, even when every instinct screams, "Run for the ridge." Research shows that teachers are education's true first-responders. They are the first to know when the school's administration is failing, when a colleague is struggling, or when a student is in crisis. Their ability and willingness to face these fires can mean the difference between a successful school or a failure.

Unfortunately, instead of facing the fire, four out of five educators retreat. When they encounter failures or problems in their schools, they clam up and do little to improve their surroundings. And who can blame them? Under today's circumstances, many educators feel powerless, stressed, and completely overwhelmed. Often, they are also ill-equipped to properly fight these fires.

Let me be clear. I'm not talking about bystander apathy or teachers who don't care. I'm talking about teachers who are passionate and care deeply about their jobs, their colleagues, and their students. When these teachers encounter challenges, they aren't experiencing bystander apathy; they're experiencing bystander agony.

Running from such problems drives a series of catastrophic consequences. When educators retreat, they often cross the line between simple stress and more-serious burnout. In burnout, relationships become depersonalized. As teachers withdraw, they feel increasingly powerless and begin a downward spiral of pessimism that can seem impossible to escape.

The best way to fight the creeping depersonalization and pessimism that underlie burnout is to take active steps to address and

But not all educators are consumed in this cycle. Some cope well and remain

resilient in the same environments that overwhelm others. It turns out that a significant key to coping with stress in the classroom is akin to running toward the fire rather than running away. Specifically, the best way to fight the creeping depersonalization and pessimism that underlie burnout is to take active steps to address and resolve the problems that threaten to consume us.

resolve the problems that threaten to consume us.

These crucial conversations can be tricky to navigate. Sharing concerns with a school leader, confronting a poorly performing colleague, and dealing with an unsupportive parent all require skill. I've spent thousands of hours watching what teachers and other professionals do to succeed in these dicey moments. Here are a few approaches that will reduce stress and increase the chance of a good outcome.

Don't wait until you're angry. Some people mistakenly put off handling crucial issues until they are fit to be tied. For example, an assistant principal has been on your case about an important student-testing issue for weeks. Your patience is diminishing. You feel unappreciated, blamed, and defensive. Now is *not* the time to talk. But unfortunately, it's in these emotionally charged moments that most people finally speak up. The time to talk is when you see the problem emerging and have not yet become emotionally invested. Stop putting off addressing these issues and you'll start dealing with them when they're emotionally manageable.

Ask the humanizing question. When confronting a colleague who's not pulling his or her weight, don't open your mouth until you've opened your mind. When others let us down we make matters worse by villainizing them in our minds. We may tell ourselves that they are selfish, egotistical, lazy, or the like. Sometimes these judgments happen so quickly that we aren't even conscious of them.

If you find yourself losing patience with a colleague with whom you need to have a crucial conversation, this is a sign that you need to change your view of that person before starting to talk. Turn him or her from a villain into a human being by asking yourself, "Why would a reasonable, rational, decent person do that?" When you see slacking colleagues as people with flaws rather than villains with no souls, you'll approach them far more effectively.

Start with safety. Begin your crucial conversation by finding common ground. Demonstrate respect for the other person. Point out goals and interests the two of you share. When you do this before diving into a deep discussion of the problems, you create a condition of safety that enables healthy dialogue. When you fail to do this, you commonly provoke defensiveness. Creating safety is *the* key skill for succeeding at crucial conversations. Teachers who do it best build healthy relationships they can draw on when under stress.

Eliminate excuses. In my company's study on health-care workers, "Silence Kills," we found that the most common reason nurses don't hold crucial conversations is that they tell themselves, "It's not my job." The same tendency can be applied to teachers. For example, a teacher appears incompetent at her duties. A fellow teacher, who sees this colleague's problem most clearly, is in the best position to give her helpful feedback. But he doesn't. Why? Because "it's not his job." It isn't just teachers who tend to make this excuse for not speaking up. Administrators, district managers, and just about everyone else have found ways to rationalize away their responsibility to voice concerns.

Those who are best at holding crucial conversations don't consider whether it's in their job descriptions to

say something, they consider whether it's in their interest. Consequently, they tend to speak up far more frequently.

Seek out dialogue, not monologue. The most skillful teachers we studied have a different goal in their crucial conversations. The less skillful come at the conversation as though it is a monologue. Their goal is to speak their minds, and their hope is that the other person is committed to hearing them. This egocentric approach to crucial conversations inevitably provokes defensiveness, eventually convincing the teacher it was a waste of time to even try.

Teachers who seek out dialogue experience the reverse. They come to the conversation willing to share their views, but also interested in the perspective of others—in fact, intensely curious about others' realities. This leads to more genuine interaction. Their openness invites openness. Their willingness to be wrong makes it safe for others to admit shortcomings. When the goal is dialogue rather than monologue, crucial conversations lead to mutual learning, rather than dueling defenses.

The environment in our schools is not likely to become less stressful in the near future, and in fact, tensions may increase. The good news is that teachers who fight the natural human tendency to respond to stress by retreating from action and relationships can do a lot to keep pressure from building into burnout. Regularly engaging in healthy crucial conversations that strengthen relationships, improve teamwork, and influence positive change can be enormously helpful, not only in keeping teachers from being overwhelmed, but also in restoring much of the meaning and joy that attracted them to education in the first place.

David Maxfield is a co-author of the best-selling book Influencer: The Power to Change Anything*. He is also the vice president for research services at* ***VitalSmarts****, a corporate training and organizational-performance company with headquarters in Provo, Utah.*

Vol. 29, Issue 06, Pages 28-29

RELATED STORIES

"Making Every Educator a Learning Educator," April 16, 2008.
"Failing Schools Showed Progress With Most of the Same Teachers," April 9, 2008.
"'Working Smarter By Working Together'," April 2, 2008.