

# **Leading School Change**

Todd Whitaker  
Indiana State University  
(812) 237-2904  
[www.ToddWhitaker.com](http://www.ToddWhitaker.com)  
[T-Whitaker@indstate.edu](mailto:T-Whitaker@indstate.edu)  
Twitter: @ToddWhitaker

# **Leading School Change**

- Identify The Change You Want To Make
- Make Sure The First Exposure Is Great!
- Determine Who Matters Most
- Find The Entry Points

- Reduce The Resistance

- Harness The Power Of Emotion

- Look Past Buy-in To Action

- Reinforce Changed Behaviors

- Fit It All Together

# Setting the Tone

*Todd Whitaker*

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Great principals treat all people with respect every day. They also understand that it's not possible to give too much praise, as long as the praise is authentic.

One of the hallmarks of effective principals is how they treat people. Like effective teachers, effective principals treat people with respect. Now, it's not difficult to treat some people with respect, or even to treat most people with respect. It's even possible to treat all people with respect quite a bit of the time. The real challenge is to treat everyone with respect every day--and great principals do.

## **How is your day going?**

As principals we get asked the question, "How is your day going?" many times a day. Our response can determine not only how others view us, but can also impact the frame of mind of the person who asked us this.

If a teacher says, "How's it going?" you have many choices in how to respond. If you say, "Things are great! How about with you?" you have given her a positive perception of the school.

If you respond, "That Jimmy Wallace is getting on my nerves!" you have sent a completely different message. All of a sudden Jimmy Wallace is getting on that teacher's nerves too, and she does not even know who Jimmy Wallace is.

Now some of you may be thinking that you could never lie. That is interesting. So, when the developmentally disabled second grader asks if you think she drew a good picture, what do you tell her? It is always up to us to determine what gets through our filters and what does not. Each of us has to decide, but the most effective principals are well aware that they are the filter that will set the tone for many things in their school.

## **The angry parent**

Here are two ways to filter the same scenario. Let's examine what happens under each. When I was a principal, every once in a while I would deal with irate parents in my office behind closed doors. And, like so often happens, they are really irate at the world--I just happened to be the one sitting there at the time of their venting. Once the irate parent has left and I walk out of the office, I have some filtering choices that I have to make.

If a teacher says innocently, "How is your day going?" I can choose which filter to kick in. If I say, "Things are great, how about with you?" that teacher feels good about the world and moves on to face his students. Even if he is concerned about

something, I have not added to his worries.

But, if I respond to "How is your day going?" by saying, "Oh, I just dealt with that whacko parent, Mrs. Smith. Man, she has some temper! I hope I never have to meet with her again. Yikes!"

Now, what have I accomplished? Well, I have made that teacher terrified of Mrs. Smith. And, pretty soon, if I tell enough people about Mrs. Smith, every teacher in the school will have some degree of concern about potentially meeting with this evil demon. And, to varying degrees, many teachers will be less confident about potentially working with all students whose last name is Smith just in case that demon happens to be their mom.

I have shifted the teachers' time and energy to unproductive worrying and away from confidently approaching their students. Additionally, my teachers will now be hesitant to contact parents (especially named Smith) because I have raised their level of concern.

My response as a filter impacts the school one way or the other. By protecting others from unnecessary bad news, we can create a much more productive environment. Not only does this apply to working with people

outside of the school district, the same thing applies to filtering those within.

### **Unpleasant memories**

All of us can remember at least one occasion in our professional lives where we were treated inappropriately by someone in a leadership role. And, no matter how long ago it was or how often that person has treated us well, we remember.

The same thing is true of everyone in our school. The one day a month or year we choose to be sarcastic or cutting to a student or staff member will be etched in stone in their memory bank. Though they may pretend to have forgotten, they never will. And if this happened in any kind of a public setting, it probably will not slip out of the memories of others who witnessed it.

### **Take a positive approach each day**

One of the most critical responsibilities of an effective leader is to consistently and continually take a positive approach each day of the year. There are so many things that potentially bring teachers down. It can be an upset parent, a troubled student, or working with not enough resources. These are facts of the job and of life. Our role as leaders is to continually take a positive approach. Understanding the impact and power of praise is essential.

## **Why People Don't Praise More**

When I work with educators I often ask them why we as people do not praise more. After all, we determine how much we praise, and every time we praise someone, at least two people feel better--and one of them is us. With this in mind, why is it principals and teachers are so hesitant to praise? Here are some of the most common responses I get from principals and teachers.

### **Reason: If I praise someone, he or she will stop working.**

**Response:** If a student says how much she enjoys your class, do you automatically show a video the next day? No, you try even harder. If you have just finished mowing your lawn and a neighbor compliments you on how nice it looks, do you mow it less carefully next time? Quite the opposite. Next time you might even trim! If you question whether praise works, why don't you come over to my house and look at my neighbor's lawn.

What is it that keeps you on a diet more? Is it when people mention how good you look, or is it when people say, "It's about time." As long as it is authentic, praise is a very powerful reinforcer and motivator.

### **Reason: If I praise people, I might miss someone and hurt their feelings.**

**Response:** I guess it is better to never praise anyone. That way you miss everyone and you can make sure you hurt their feelings--and everyone else's, while you're at it. Ironically, it might not be their feelings we are worried about. It could easily be that we don't want to feel bad because we miss someone or because we might be afraid of their response so we don't take a chance on any type of acknowledgement.

The biggest reason people resent others being praised is because they do not feel valued themselves. The solution to this is not to praise less, but to be much more inclusive and effusive in your efforts to recognize and praise others.

### **Reason: I don't have the time.**

**Response:** After all, we barely have time to get in all the griping, whining and complaining we need to do, don't we? Name the three teachers in your school that you praise the most. Now, name the three best teachers in your school. Is there any overlap there? By setting a positive tone, the principal can help direct the interactions of everyone in the school. Making sure we do this, even when we least feel like it, is essential.

The other thing to keep in mind is that it is fun to praise and very rejuvenating. By focusing on all of the positive things in our schools, and there are many, we can have more drive and energy to help get us through some of the less positive times. If we do not set this tone, it is very unlikely that it will get set. And, maybe even more importantly, if this productive focus does not become intrinsic in the school, then the voices of the nay-sayers are likely to become even more dominant.

-- Todd Whitaker

## **Techniques for effective praising**

In books, I have outlined some of the techniques used in effective praising (Whitaker, Whitaker and Lumpa, 2000). One concept that is essential to praise is the fact that praise must be authentic. It is also important to understand that the word is "authentic"--not world-record. It just has to be true, that is all.

None of us mind hearing praise. As a matter of fact, if we praise correctly it is impossible to praise too much. And if you question this, ask yourself, "Have I ever been praised too much?" Of course not. You may have been falsely flattered by someone you knew was not genuine, but if it was authentic then you could not be praised too much.

### **Too much nice?**

I know that everyone reading this has a multitude of demands

they face. And the pressures continue to grow. We need special education, alternative education, drug-free education, sex education, and--oh my--we cannot forget the new state standards. All of these things have some effect on our schools and an impact on our responsibilities. Each of these may even be essential. Whether we have enough of one or too much of another is an endless debate. But there is one thing that I am sure about. We never have too much nice.

Effective principals always have to understand that the most important thing teachers can do is model appropriate ways to interact with students. And with all of the challenges we face in school and so many of us face at home, nice may seem trivial. Yet, if our schools and classrooms can have that as a foundation, many of the other things can be accomplished with much less resistance.

As principals, consistently modeling the expectations that we have for how people should be treated is a valuable gift we can give our school. And in a short period of time we will find that it is a gift that everyone in the school will also give each other.

If everyone in your school is treated with respect and dignity, you may still have nothing special. However, if everyone in your school is not treated with respect and dignity, you will never have anything special. Of that, I am sure.

*Todd Whitaker is a professor at Indiana State University.*

*He has written several books, including "What Great Teachers Do Differently," "What Great Principals Do Differently," "Dealing With Difficult Teachers" and "Motivating & Inspiring Teachers." He may be contacted at*

*[t-whitaker@indstate.edu](mailto:t-whitaker@indstate.edu).*

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