

ORGANIZATIONAL DISSENT

Understanding the importance of school culture to organizational success is essential to facilitating improvement efforts that positively influence student achievement. It is natural for individuals or groups within organizations to resist change, and schools are no exception. Fear, loss of power and autonomy, close-mindedness, traditions, values, ethics, and the desire for predictability are some of the reasons why school employees may resist change. Principals who understand the importance of building relationships and harnessing the potential of everyone in the school community are more successful at facilitating a school culture where change is not only accepted but also an expected and necessary component of the school improvement process.

Building relationships and facilitating change in schools can be enhanced with a fundamental understanding of organizational dissent as a legitimate means for teachers and other employees to express their reluctance toward and resistance to change. As administrators in two rural Virginia school districts, Gloucester and Northumberland, we welcome constructive feedback from teachers and staff members and have implemented communication structures that acknowledge and encourage articulated dissent regarding organizational actions and administrative decisions.

What Is Organizational Dissent?

Organizational dissent can be defined as expressions of disagreement or contradictory opinions regarding contextual phenomena (Kassing, 1997) and is a form of communication that provides organizations with an appropriate conduit for feedback regarding employees' frustrations and discontent with organizational actions or administrative decisions. Education researchers have focused on similar behaviors when they talk about voice, job satisfaction, trust, and negative norms, but the construct of organizational dissent has not been sufficiently studied in the school context. Sensitivity to and acceptance of dissent in schools have the potential to improve principal-teacher interactions and provide insights into behavioral triggers, manifestations, motivations, consequences, and implications.

Conversely, a failure to recognize organizational dissent may cause leaders to mistakenly label forms of dissent as negativity or negative norms. Such misunderstanding can result in diminished teacher motivation, increased disengagement, and other unwanted dispositions that deter efforts to accomplish school goals and objectives that are related to improving student achievement.

Types of Dissent

Kassing (1997, 1998) divided acts of organizational dissent into three basic types: articulated, latent, and displaced. By gauging the type of dissent they encounter, principals can build relationships and improve school culture; therefore, it is important for principals to view dissent as an opportunity for feedback and adjustment regarding decision-making processes and the direction of services and programs.

Articulated dissent refers to the degree of constructive disagreement expressed upward or directly to a supervisor. In general, articulated dissent is thought to have a positive influence on organizational change and adjustment. Kassing (2001) determined that employees who communicated dissent upward to supervisors were perceived as having influence and possessing high levels of organizational commitment and job satisfaction. Examples of articulated dissent in schools may include teachers identifying a problem and recommending solutions to school officials, teachers sharing facts and evidence to support conclusions during a faculty meeting, and teachers scheduling appointments with their principals to