

Photo: Pam LeBlanc



BY DENNIS SPARKS

Leaders First Change Themselves

One key to successful leadership is continuous personal change. Personal change is a reflection of our inner growth and empowerment. Empowered leaders are the only ones who can induce real change.

—Robert Quinn

School and district leaders often invite me to speak to groups whose beliefs or understanding they would like me to change. For instance, principals may ask me to speak to faculties to enlist teachers' support in professional learning communities. Or district leaders may ask me to speak to principals to encourage their increased engagement with teachers on issues of teaching and learning.

I usually respond to such invitations by saying that I believe it's essential that senior leaders first make significant and deep changes in themselves before they expect change in others. (The September/October 2007 issue of *EDge* elaborates on my views.) I tell them that I believe it is important that leaders lead through learning, beginning with their own learning, and that I would prefer to work with them to affect their beliefs, understandings, and skills so that they can more effectively create change throughout the organization. I also add that I think it's important that the organization's definition of "leaders" includes

teachers who play both formal and informal leadership roles in their buildings and districts, as well as principals and system leaders.

Sometimes senior leaders confide in me that they don't feel like their learning or actions will make much difference because their influence is severely limited by forces more powerful than themselves — such as federal or state legislation, lack of resources, or union contracts. In response I share my conviction, based on years of experience, that what leaders consistently think, say, and do matters, and that significant changes in teaching, learning, and relationships in all schools and classrooms occur when leaders adopt new beliefs, deepen their understanding of important issues, and consistently speak and act in new ways.

It is a common human tendency to see the shortcomings of others before noticing our own complicity in maintaining the status quo. It's also natural for leaders to believe that the barriers to change reside outside themselves rather than in their current ways of thinking and behaving. But when leaders recognize that substantial changes in teaching, learning, and relationships in schools begin with deep changes in their own beliefs, understandings, and actions, they have truly made a commitment to lead through learning.

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