

# Why Teacher Buy-In Is Overrated



Schools need to focus less on transactional arrangements and more on psychological ownership.



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Tag along at coffee break time at a meeting of school leaders, and at some point you can expect to hear a lament that begins with something like, "If only I could get the teachers to buy-in to . . ." The need for buy-in as a prerequisite for change has become almost axiomatic among PreK–12 leaders, and yet I believe this consensus may overlook more powerful ways to generate engagement and promote lasting school improvement.

Think about the weight afforded to teacher buy-in in recent years. Many attribute the contentiousness surrounding Common Core standards implementation, for example, as a direct result of its absence. (Williams, 2014). A Google search for "teacher buy-in" returns more than 1.1 million results. Teacher buy-in is posited as a key ingredient for the site-based success of specific programs like Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support (PBIS) and social-emotional learning initiatives in general. Buy-in is believed to sit in the driver's seat of school improvement: with it, forward progress is possible; without it, movement grinds to a halt.

But is teacher buy-in the best route to the process of change? The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted how substantive change is possible without engaging in the difficult and often lengthy process of obtaining buy-in from faculty. In relatively short order, a massive instructional shift took place, as teachers moved from in-class presentations to various forms of remote teaching. Teachers certainly encountered difficulties during that transition, but no one can deny that the overwhelming majority adapted to the circumstances even as one of the fundamental components of schooling, the traditional classroom, was transformed almost overnight. The pandemic also changed how educators use new technology dramatically.

## The Limits of Buy-In

Of course, teachers' support for any initiative is ideal, but buy-in, as it is understood in schools, is highly complex and often not feasible. When we say teacher buy-in is required for the success of a new initiative, many picture faculty participation in the development of a particular program or policy, an observable commitment to implementing the proposal with fidelity, and a strong degree of comfort with that decision (Lee & Min, 2017). For many teachers, however, having the time required for such deep contemplation of issues facing their schools, let alone act on the findings, is a rare luxury. As one commentator notes, "Teachers are incredibly busy . . . usually trying to do three or four different things at once. Teachers even struggle to find the time to use the bathroom during the day—it's that busy." (Belli, 2016)

Even when time is available, teacher involvement in decision making may not guarantee buy-in. A study in New Jersey, for example, demonstrated that teacher participation in the selection of a school reform program was not a major predictor of short- or long-term buy-in. Instead, professional development, administrator support of the change, collegial assistance, and control over the classroom more often contributed to the successful implementation of school improvement initiatives (Turnbull, 2002).

Then there's the question of how much buy-in is enough. For the past four years, I've asked my school leadership students to identify the percentage of teachers buying in to a proposed change needed to have a reasonable chance for lasting success. Their answers? Basically guesswork, with estimates ranging from 15 to 100 percent. Research does not clarify the question: no conclusive "tipping point" has been found.

Buy-in often requires a negotiation, a process that may result in an accepted proposal that strays far from its original vision. Reluctant faculty members, the "hold-outs," are seen as opponents who must be enticed into participation, and the process can result in a multitude of compromises and delays. This dynamic creates a transactional relationship between leaders and followers, one that frequently relies

on rewards and sanctions rather than a shared vision of student growth and school community progress. It's also exhausting.

This has led some school leadership experts to question the need for buy-in at all. Because there are few agreed-upon understandings of quality teaching, cajoling, eye-catching presentations, data dashboards, and stories of success at other schools may not be enough to counter the heavy weight of existing beliefs, values, and assumptions. Given these circumstances, Douglas Reeves concludes, "If you wait for people to have buy-in, be happy, or change belief systems, change will never happen" (2006, p. 97).

## The Alternative: Psychological Ownership

I believe school leaders need to frame the issue in a different way. Instead of chasing elusive and perhaps fleeting buy-in, they should foster a sense of psychological ownership around new initiatives. Although the two concepts may seem similar, there are important differences in how they influence culture in school buildings and districts.

In contrast to negotiated agreements, psychological ownership instead relies on the growth of "a specific form of attachment in which individuals feel that a specific target is theirs" (Pierce, Kostova, & Dirks, 2003). Embodied in the exclamation "It's mine!", psychological ownership includes both a cognitive element (an understanding of how one has a claim to something) and an emotional one (a feeling of intense connection).

Psychological ownership emerges from three driving forces: a desire for efficacy or agency; an urge to create a self-identity; and a need for belonging. Unlike teacher buy-in, which risks compromising an initiative's goals in the name of superficial approval from colleagues, psychological ownership achieves collective success when educators develop deep knowledge of the target (e.g., through leading a pilot program for restorative justice, or the adoption of project-based learning), exercise control in implementation (e.g., having responsibility for determining criteria for program success), and forge a sustained connection with colleagues and the school, an effort that creates a literal or figurative sense of place or "home." We hear evidence of this kind of connection when teachers express sentiments such as, "That's part of who I am as a teacher," and, "That project is my baby."

Psychological ownership grows from within rather than being imposed from outside. As a result, it facilitates the development of stable, long-lasting connections, including to one's workplace (Dawkins et al., 2017). Unlike buy-in, psychological ownership is not transactional: it does not require the offer-and-acceptance cycle that induces sustained negotiation between school leaders and teachers before they reach an agreement. Instead, psychological ownership cultivates intrinsic motivation because it addresses human needs; once established, it can become self-sustaining as educators invest in professional growth to fulfill the desire for agency and support deeper bonds with their colleagues (Yim, Moses, & Azalea, 2018.) Leaders seeking to nurture ownership of change concentrate on developing new mindsets and vision rather than compliance.

Psychological ownership can also be shared. Under the right circumstances, *collective psychological ownership* can result from the same drives for efficacy, identity, and belonging. Collective psychological ownership goes a step beyond addressing "Who are we?" by adding the question, "And what do we have together?" A common expression of collective psychological ownership can be witnessed on school spirit days, as school communities come together to embrace affirmations of their shared experiences.

Research suggests that collective psychological ownership evolves through work on collaborative activities or projects and requires members to actively participate and recognize their shared deep knowledge, control, and ongoing connections to the project with their collaborators. Over time, each

member comes to understand that interdependence is essential for their own efficacy as well as group identity and success.

Once established, collective psychological ownership can empower teachers to take risks, try new strategies in the classroom, and engage more extensively with colleagues (Pierce & Jussila, 2003). Similarly, it can promote group learning, encourage the sharing of responsibilities for task completion, and sustain higher levels of group effort, thereby creating a virtuous cycle of ongoing faculty involvement in school affairs and boosting individual teacher and schoolwide efficacy.

From a leadership perspective, facilitating individual teacher or collective psychological ownership requires a shift in strategy—and some risk-taking. Rather than press for quick but often-fleeting change from the top down, school leaders need a different mindset, one that includes patience as school improvement advances in starts and stops from the bottom up. Professional learning must also allow teachers to exercise considerable control over the agenda and provide coaching and needed resources that directly connect to their classroom experiences. Additionally, school leaders must offer faculty the most precious resource—time—so teachers can develop and sustain deep relationships with colleagues (and administrators).

## Recommendations for Practice

School leaders can play a critical role in promoting psychological ownership by supporting the three drivers of growth: deep knowledge, control, and a sense of place or home. For example, as an alternative to securing buy-in for curriculum change through cycles of faculty meeting presentations, lengthy discussions of best practices, and rounds of negotiation with staff power brokers, leaders can follow a model such as the one described below to support teachers as they design improvements emerging from:

- *Deep knowledge:* Teachers can develop individual or group research projects related to problems of practice aligned with school curriculum priorities. By engaging in data and information collection, intervention, assessment of results, and modification of practice, teachers can develop a thorough understanding of needed improvements and acquire the expertise needed to implement and sustain them. Then they can share results with colleagues to build organizational capacity.
- *Control:* Teachers can set their own professional learning goals related to desired curriculum improvements and aligned with their interests in specific problems of practice. To the extent possible, they can then choose their preferred mode of professional development delivery (in-person, hybrid, or fully online; synchronous or asynchronous; individual or group). Technology offers numerous possibilities to personalize professional development and provide "just in time" learning in response to classroom conditions and student needs.
- *A sense of place or home:* As educators' physical, social, and emotional connections to the school setting intensify, their sense of ownership grows. School leaders can help generate these ties by providing teachers with opportunities for peer feedback on their action-research initiatives, as well as meetings with colleagues to perfect teaching strategies, increase cultural competence, explore how technology can support learning goals, and determine the best ways to assess student progress in new curricula. To make these connections even more robust, school leaders can share stories that celebrate faculty accomplishments with the implementation of new curricula and provide recognition that honors those efforts.

## A Self-Reinforcing Cycle of Improvement

The complexity of the issues facing schools today requires whole-school involvement. Success in the long term cannot rise and fall on the shoulders of leadership alone, nor can high levels of performance be consistently sustained by reliance on appeals for buy-in from faculty. The engine of continuing improvement must be fired from within the ranks of those who work most closely with students. Psychological ownership and its sibling, collective psychological ownership, can create such a self-reinforcing cycle, resulting in a "home" for teachers that unites them through shared purpose, identity, and agency; raises levels of individual and group efficacy; and lets students reap the benefits of a schoolwide commitment to professional learning and collaboration.

### Reflect & Discuss

- Have leaders at your school sought teacher buy-in for new initiatives in the past? Could they have implemented those changes more effectively?
- In what ways does your school seek to establish a sense of “home” among faculty? How could it do this more successfully?
- How could leaders in your school offer teachers more control over their professional learning and ability to pursue personal goals?