

How to Work with an Opinionated Colleague (Who Is Wrong)

In this article in *The Language Educator*, Claudia Fernández (Knox College) lists the characteristics of an ideal academic team:

- There is frequent, easy communication.
- Assessment is an integral part of the culture.
- Changes are identified and readily implemented.
- New ideas are frequently discussed.
- Limitations in professional knowledge and skills are recognized and addressed.
- Professional development is seen as essential and it happens regularly.
- Improvement is continuous.

But not every team is like this, and not every educator welcomes new ideas about how to teach better. In her field, world languages, Fernández encounters educators who cling to outmoded and ineffective practices. “Why are they still doing mechanical drills?” she wonders. “Don’t they know that meaningless worksheets do little for language acquisition? Have they ever wondered if those memorized dialogues are really helping students?”

How to deal with colleagues like this? From numerous false starts, Fernández has gained these strategic insights:

1. Don’t just tell them they’re wrong. “Remember that we all have our pride,” she says,
2. “and telling other educators about their shortcomings is not going to take you far in addressing change in your program. You do not need enemies if you want change; you need allies.”
3. Evidence alone won’t work. People with incorrect beliefs can become even more entrenched when presented with facts that contradict their beliefs. To change people, you have to reach their hearts, and you can do that only by building relationships.
4. Listen. “As much as you like to be heard,” she says, “your colleagues also like to be heard. If you want to effectively address forces that resist positive change, you need to genuinely listen first.” Listen especially for common ground.
5. Be indirect. Use suggestive rather than declarative language. Let your colleagues come to their own conclusion and, better yet, think it’s their own idea. “Remember that the most important thing is not to identify ownership for the idea,” says Fernández, “but instead to make the idea happen.”
6. Have one-to-one conversations. “Go and grab a coffee with a colleague, ask questions, and listen to his or her opinions,” she says. You may discover surprising information.
7. Identify your allies. Look for like-minded colleagues, because you won’t accomplish much by yourself.

8. Change should be collective. Pushing for change by yourself won't work, especially if there are glitches along the way. Better to convince others and make it a group effort.
9. Identify the mission. Hopefully it's finding the best classroom strategies to make a positive difference for students.
10. Choose your battles. It's overwhelming and energy-draining to try to fix every problem, and this approach can turn off colleagues. Pick one or two key areas and focus on them.
11. Focus on your personal goals. The greatest satisfaction will come from accomplishing what's most important to you, and it can have a spillover effect on others.
12. Be patient, hopeful, and persistent. Stick to what you believe, but realize that change will not come overnight.
13. If change happens, expect things to get worse before they get better. "The adjustment, the learning of new tricks, the 'I'm not sure how this goes' phase may interfere with the immediate success of the plan," says Fernández. "You may need to give it more time."

Source:

"Effectively Addressing Forces That Resist Positive Changes to Improve Language Learning" by Claudia Fernández in *The Language Educator*, August/September 2016 (Vol. 11, #3, p. 50-52)