

Fact sheet 5

Disposition: Perseverance



Perseverance is the “...voluntary continuation of a goal-directed action in spite of obstacles, difficulties or discouragement”.¹ It is motivated by a deep internal commitment to the improvement goal, rather than by, for example, bureaucratic requirements or the desire for recognition and advancement.

Perseverance is a desirable disposition for excellent educational leaders because it may take several conscientious attempts before difficult problems can be resolved.

Improvement attempts can fail because of a culture of repeated initiation and adoption of new approaches, rather than perseverance with the more difficult work of sustaining consistent, high-quality implementation of one or two well thought out strategies.²

Perseverance must be exercised in conjunction with open-mindedness, so the excellent leader can recognise when a well implemented strategy is proving ineffective. Perseverance should be directed towards improvement rather than towards sustaining strategies that are not working.

Perseverance is also supported when a culture rewards persistent effort, has an understanding that failing is part of learning. This positive environment supports risk taking, innovation and learning from failure. Evidence-based initiatives are the expectation and implementation is monitored closely and evaluated.

Exploring together

Explore the scenarios below. Discuss together how perseverance is represented in these scenarios. What would be the outcome if the disposition of was not activated?

A class teacher learns from failure

A middle school teacher has been trying for six months without success to lift the reading comprehension of a student. Rather than persist with the current approach which is not working, reaching for yet another strategy, or even giving up, the teacher decides to persevere with their goal to improve the student's reading comprehension. They begin by asking the student what would help them to understand. The answer was “..., you talk too fast”. The simple act of asking the child enabled the teacher to learn how to be more focused on persevering with the right work for the right reasons.

A principal perseveres to learn more

Despite three years of professional learning and expenditure of close to \$100,000 on a popular math programme, a primary school has seen no lift in its students' math results. Rather than carry on for a fourth year, the principal decides to inquire, with the help of a leadership facilitator, into the reasons for the lack of improvement.

Multiple causes were identified including poor communication between senior leaders and the external facilitators, incomplete assessment data, middle leaders who did not understand or use the programme themselves, and a culture of high expectations for teachers combined with low accountability. The principal learned few of the preconditions required for any type of sustained improvement were present in the school

¹ Zaki, J., & Ochsner, K. (2016). Empathy. In L. Feldman Barrett, M. Lewis, & J. Haviland-Jones (Eds.), *Handbook of emotions* (Fourth ed., pp. 871-884). New York: Guilford Press

² Peterson, C., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2004). *Character strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification*. Washington, D.C./New York: American Psychological Association and Oxford University Press, p.229

and began to systematically address each cause of the failure³. Meanwhile, the school did not give up or lose focus on math because the principal cared deeply about the consequences of the lack of improvement in math on the children in the school. By persevering with that goal while radically rethinking the strategies for how to get there the school was able to move forward.

Practice reflection

1. Think of improvement efforts you have led. Did you and your team persevere until you reached the goal, or did you give up, switch to a different goal or get distracted?
2. What encourages you to persevere in your professional role with something that is difficult, and what leads you to give up, or give it away?
3. When have you demonstrated perseverance? How clear was your objective or intention when you started, how clear was your objective when you eventually succeeded?
4. Think about a moment of 'failure' in your career, what impact did it have on you in the short term, and the long term. If you had the same situation arise again, what would you do differently?

Skill building

Think about an important educational goal you have been pursuing but have not yet attained.

1. Identify:
 - a. what success will look like
 - b. what has already been done to pursue the goal
 - c. what has worked and what hasn't and why
 - d. current knowledge and skills for pursuing the goal, as well as any gaps
2. Then, consider and document:
 - a. the key actions and milestones needed to pursue the goal
 - b. a project timeline
 - c. potential risks or challenges and any mitigation strategies
 - d. who will be responsible and accountable for the actions and success
 - e. how everyone will be held accountable to their actions
 - f. the regular checks and routines you can implement to ensure progress
 - g. how you will celebrate along the way

³ Murphy, J. (2013). The architecture of school improvement. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 51(3), 252-263.