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Navigating Perceptions of Risk

What It Is

- ▶ Emotion and feelings of vulnerability may be expected responses to new learning.
- ▶ Perceptions of risk are personal, dynamic, and multifaceted.
- ▶ Risk is an inherent part of change that involves uncertainty and vulnerability, and it is as important as cognition when considering responses to change.
- ▶ Risk involves thinking about the quality of relationships, the school and wider culture, and level of knowledge and confidence.
- ▶ Risk involves vulnerability, which can be positive (open and prepared to take risks) or negative (protective and unwilling to take risks).

Why It Matters

- ▶ People's willingness to engage with change can be reduced by reducing perceptions of risk.
- ▶ Perceptions of risk are changeable.
- ▶ Learning is reduced when the perceived risk is high.
- ▶ Nonengagement may relate to perceived risk rather than resistance.
- ▶ Leaders and facilitators can reduce perceptions of risk.

How I Do It

- ▶ Engage in talk about risk and change.
- ▶ Identify and reduce unnecessary uncertainty in the context.

- ▶ Consider own and others' impact, and share responsibility for learning.
- ▶ Deliberately build knowledge and confidence in others.
- ▶ Provide a culture of support and safety for learning and risk taking.
- ▶ Promote new learning as possibly uncomfortable.
- ▶ Develop learning-focused relationships of trust and respect.

Key Challenges for Me

- ▶ Not making assumptions about others' actions
- ▶ Acknowledging and navigating own perceived risk
- ▶ Noticing beliefs that ignore or contest risk in learning
- ▶ Challenging beliefs that view emotion as a weakness and nonengagement as willful resistance
- ▶ Navigating own and others' emotional responses

What I Should Notice

- ▶ How do people frame their own and others' emotional responses?
- ▶ What is the quality of relationships? Do they include mutual trust, respect, empathy, and support? Are people willing to ask for help?
- ▶ What are the gaps in teacher knowledge, and how big are they?
- ▶ Is there evidence of a supportive culture?



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Navigating Perceptions of Risk

What: Description of the Concept

People are generally thought to have a conservative impulse (Marris, 1986), preferring the status quo over change to something unfamiliar. This may be because change demands intentional effort and may be accompa-

"[Risk is defined as] uncertainty about and severity of the events (or outcomes) of an activity with respect to something that humans' value."

(Aven & Renn, 2009, p. 6)

nied by feelings of uncertainty and emotional responses including feelings of vulnerability. Indeed, perceptions of risk are an inherent and inevitable aspect of change, as change involves creating a degree of uncertainty about the processes and outcomes for those effected by the change. People can experience the feeling of losing something that is familiar (Ponticell, 2003) and have a sense of uncertainty when they are engaged with change. Perceptions of risk are mental constructions based on a person's judgment of the "uncertainty about and severity of the events (or outcomes) of an activity with respect to something that humans value" (Aven & Renn, 2009, p. 6). As such they

involve both ones' emotion and cognition. Perceptions of risk are personal, based on multiple factors including those from past and current experiences and contexts as well as uncertainty toward the future. Perceptions of risk are complex.

An individual's perceived confidence and competence in their knowledge and skills to be successful in what they are expected to do in the future also contributes to teachers' perceptions of risk, as does perceived failure in a previous event (Twyford, 2016). In this study, the teachers with lower confidence in their knowledge experienced increased feelings of vulnerability toward forthcoming events. These feelings can impact either negatively or positively on individuals. On the one hand, feelings of vulnerability can lead to unwillingness, insecurity, and self-protective actions, while on the other hand, vulnerability accompanied by relationships of mutual trust and respect can encourage a willingness to engage and take risks in learning new practices.

Perceptions of risk when engaging in PL for change are thought to be common. The majority of teachers involved in a PL initiative "experienced perceptions of risk, albeit at different intensities" (Twyford et al., 2017, p. 91). Facilitators may also feel perceptions of risk in carrying out their work. Aspects of facilitators' work that influenced perceived risk revealed in our research are potential threats to credibility, especially given the public nature of the work; the continual pressure to facilitate improvement; and challenging others' beliefs and practices, especially in a way that leads to learning and change.

Although perceptions of risk are highly personal, they are impacted by the organizational culture; the quality of interpersonal relationships, particularly in relation to trust; and what others say and do or do not do. It is easier to take risks in a culture that supports mistakes, with someone we trust, and when the amount of new learning is perceived as attainable rather than overwhelming. This makes perceptions of risk dynamic and therefore challenging to predict, notice, and understand.

What: Description of the Deliberate Act of Facilitation

Navigating perceptions of risk starts with being aware that the teachers and leaders with whom facilitators work may perceive uncertainty and risk in changing their practice. Next, it requires taking notice of teachers' and leaders' responses, being prepared to consider perceived risk as a contributing factor, and then taking deliberate action to reduce the uncertainty or perceived risk. This is not easy as different individuals may respond differently to the same context and expectations of change. While negative emotional responses and reluctance to engage in the PL are readily observable indicators of perceived risk, other risk-related actions such as being

overprepared or highly cautious and anxious about what is observed and who does or does not ask for help may also be indicative of an individual's perceptions of risk.

Being alert for and recognizing perceptions of risk as a response to new learning and change requires a mental shift from framing emotion and nonengagement as evidence of resistance (Twyford, 2016). Perceptions of risk are multifaceted and as a result we need to consider what contributes to the levels of uncertainty surrounding the PL, such as the quality of the relationships between teachers and leaders (and us), the level of knowledge and confidence of individuals, and the organizational culture in terms of how risk-taking actions are supported and responded to.

Perceptions of risk occur systemically across each layer of participants in PL, so, first and foremost, an awareness of the impact of our own and then others' perceptions of risk is necessary for effective facilitation. Perceptions of risk are further exacerbated by the specific PL context. The sensitive and sometimes political nature of working to develop LCR practice can evoke perceptions of risk that, if ignored, can interrupt the capacity for people to change and improve practice. Facilitators have an important role in navigating their own and others' perceptions of risk.

Why It Matters

Perceptions of risk impact people's willingness and capacity to learn and as such they can be a "significant roadblock to engaging in educational change" (Le Fevre, 2014, p. 6). Teachers with high perceptions of risk, especially if unrecognized or unacknowledged, are likely to avoid or resist engaging in change. Perceptions of risk impact the type of actions individuals take, especially the level of risk that they take when getting under way and trying new practices.

Perceptions of risk are further exacerbated if our practice is exposed to others and we place our "confidence and perceived competence on the line" (Hargreaves, 1998, p. 324). It is important, therefore, to recognize and understand how perceptions of risk are formed, who and what mediates their formation, and how to deliberately support teachers who may be experiencing them in order to improve both their PL and student outcomes.

Leader, teacher, and facilitator data from our research revealed that when greater risk is perceived, participants' willingness to engage in a new practice was perceived to be less. This inverse relationship between risk and willingness was consistent across factors and participants and supports the theory that risk is an important concept to which to attend in educational change. While teachers may understand and agree with a practice in principle, if they perceive these practices as too high a risk to engage with, they will likely avoid doing so (Le Fevre, 2014).

"I hadn't considered risk . . . I had thought about some teachers being 'anti.'"

(Facilitator)

How I Do It

Fundamental to navigating perceptions or risk is to be aware of the role of perceptions of risk and to make this transparent to those with whom you work. In addition there are some specific actions that can be taken to reduce perceptions of risk. Perceptions of risk reduce with increased confidence in one's knowledge. The development of relevant knowledge and skills is also a critical component of what leaders and facilitators can do to reduce perceptions of risk and increase the engagement of teachers in PL for improvement. Knowledge reduces unknowns and informs new ways of working that increase confidence to act.

"It is important to empathize with how they might feel if there is uncertainty about where the PL is heading ."

(Facilitator)

A supportive environment for risk taking includes making risks transparent and building and modeling relationships of trust to work beyond one's comfort zone, where all participants are genuinely learners and where learning is shared. It is an environment where people feel safe to have a go or say I don't know. Learning-focused relationships, where leaders and facilitators are learning with and supporting teachers, provide opportunities for building greater trust and a sense of shared vulnerability, which in turn increase willingness to engage. As a facilitator it is also important to promote new learning as potentially uncomfortable.

Showing empathy, trust, and respect toward others, as in the values of being open to learning, contributes to the building and maintaining of quality relationships. All interactions, including not taking action, have an impact on trust in relationships. This involves looking beyond any emotional responses to inquire into the support that individuals may need to take risks. Do not assume everyone has the same triggers or response to perceived risk. Recognize that teachers and leaders may not share their concerns with you, for example, by not asking for help or appearing invulnerable, and recognize emotional responses as possible indicators of perceived risk.

Key Challenges for Me

Perhaps the biggest challenge in navigating perceptions of risk is connected to the often-unexpected emotional outbursts and behaviors that appear to intentionally disrupt the PL. These responses can feel personal and can feel difficult not to react to and respond to emotionally. This requires that leaders and facilitators recognize the possibility of underlying perceived risk and understand what may contribute to the response. Reframing resistance as risk is a more agentic position to take.

Our own perceptions of risk can also create some challenges, especially when we are new to a school or working in areas where we are not confident in our knowledge and skills. Treating these situations as potentially risky can help us consider what we are uncertain about, then deliberately make decisions about the most appropriate action(s) to take.

What I Should Notice

Emotional responses are an expected response to learning-related events in schools and generally easy to notice but not often understood. It is important to check whether others label teachers' resistance to change a result of their emotional responses. The concern is that they may not inquire into this emotion and perpetuate incorrect beliefs regarding reasons for nonengagement in change.

The quality of relationships and a supportive culture contribute to the level of risk one is prepared to take. It is important to notice whether there are relationships of trust and respect, for example, shown through lesson observation outcomes being kept confidential and used for the purpose of supporting learning. A culture of trust is operating when it is acceptable for everyone to share mistakes as learners rather than only sharing successes. Leaders play an important role in being prepared to be vulnerable, so it is important to notice whether we default to wanting to appear invulnerable.

Further Reading

- Le Fevre, D. M. (2014). Barriers to implementing pedagogical change: The role of teachers' perceptions of risk. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 38*, 56–64.
- Twyford, K., Le Fevre, D., & Timperley, H. (2017). The influence of risk and uncertainty on teachers' responses to professional learning and development. *Journal of Professional Capital and Community, 2*, 86–100. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1108/JPCCC-10-2016-0028>

Vignette 9a: Navigating Perceptions of Risk

P

Penny has begun a new program of observing teachers in their classrooms. She and the vice-principal are visiting each class to observe a science lesson and provide feedback to the teacher. Before they observe, they meet with the teacher to talk about what they are looking for in the lesson, giving teachers a chance to talk about their intentions in the lesson and to co-construct the area of focus for the observation. Penny is talking to Amy, one of the Grade 3 teachers, about her forthcoming observation.

	Amy: Which day are you coming? Next week is going to be fairly messy because of the sports day. It might not be a good week to come.
	Penny: Oh, I see. So you won't be teaching a science lesson next week?
	Amy: I will, but it might not be the same as it usually is. The lesson might be a bit shorter or simpler, to fit it all in.
Responding to individual's possible vulnerability	Penny: Uh-huh. I see. I do want to come at a time when you are comfortable, but it doesn't need to be a "special" lesson. I just want to see you at work with your class and provide some feedback that is useful to you for your development.
	Amy: I still don't really think next week is a good week because we won't be doing much science in the class. Actually, the following week is a bit tricky too as we have the school production stuff going on.
Thinking about emotion as well as cognition	Penny: I'm just wondering . . . I've noticed some people feel a bit worried about being observed. How do you feel about being observed?
	Amy: No one likes it, do they? I mean, yeah, it makes me stressed. I just feel like I must be doing something wrong or you wouldn't be coming in. You can say you're "just looking," but I worry that judgments might be made about my teaching. I don't want to look like a bad teacher.
Responding to individuals Considering vulnerability and reducing uncertainty	Penny: Hmm . . . I can understand why you might feel like that—I am the principal—but I'd like to talk some more about what I think we are doing here and how you can use it for yourself, have control over it. And what would make it less stressful for you. Is that okay?

Vignette 9b: Navigating Perceptions of Risk

S

Sofia is talking to a principal from one of the schools in her district about their school participating in PL using an inquiry process. The principal has written in to Sofia to say that their school will not be participating in the PL because they are already using an inquiry process, and they do not want to learn more about it at this time. Sofia has looked at the PL plan for the school and can't see how inquiry fits in with the plan as it is written. She is wondering if there is something more behind the letter.

	Sofia: Thanks for your letter. I wanted to talk to you about it a bit more, just to understand more about what is going on.
	Mark: Sure, no problem. We've got a lot on, and we already use inquiry, so I just don't think it's a priority for us.
	Sofia: How have you used inquiry? I'm interested to know a bit more about that.
	Mark: Well, we've just dipped our toes in the water really. We've got teachers who are looking at various things, working with their teams.

Talking about risk	Sofia: It's usually quite a big change, implementing this way of working. It can sometimes feel a bit risky for people . . . it can make them feel unsure, maybe a little vulnerable.
	Mark: Yeah, which is why we haven't got far I guess. We're not ready to push ahead.
	Sofia: Hmm, not ready?
	Mark: To be honest, yeah, there's just a lot going on for my staff that means this extra stuff is a bit much, you know? They can't really deal with it.
Responding to emotion as well as cognition	Sofia: So, you feel like you are protecting them? They need a bit of support at the moment?
	Mark: They are telling me that they just can't make more changes, so I said I'd help them by trying to reduce our commitments and the number of things they have to engage with. I've got a couple of key leaders who I think are close to burning out actually.
Building confidence in others Thinking about vulnerability in the whole organization	Sofia: That's something we have to take really seriously—it's great that you are listening to the message behind what they are saying. Are you saying it's not that they are resisting change but it's that they feel they don't have the capacity to start something new and that's making them feel a little vulnerable? That's a bit of a different message from what you said in your letter, though.
	Mark: Yeah, true. It's hard to write that kind of thing down, though, especially to someone in your position. I feel a bit like the meat in the sandwich here.
Building a culture of support for change and reducing uncertainty	Sofia: That's not a great position to be in. We can change that. The district could support you with your reducing-commitments strategy. Would this help you? And the teachers? Or is there something else we can do? Then we can work out how to approach the inquiry material. We need to consider if the teachers are feeling vulnerable about inquiry and worry they don't know enough.