How to Improve a School that is Already High Performing:
Innovation in the Field of Education March, 2006
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Many organizations talk about high achievement and even fewer actually know how to make high achievement a reality. Palos District 118 is one of those school districts that has worked diligently to make it to the top. In this case study, we will look at how they got there.

Background

I met Dr. Rosemarie Carroll at the World Future's Conference in July of 2002; she heard me speak and asked if I would coach her and her management team at Palos School District 118 in Chicago. They already had an excellent track record, so getting them to the next level of performance would be a worthwhile challenge. Dr. Carroll and I both have similar philosophie s of management. We both believe in the *Participative Approach* with regards to working with people. In addition, we decided that the concept of Flow was a useful model of learning to explore as we worked together with her team of administrators. I had first hand knowledge of the power of "Flow" when I was in graduate school and had the privilege of working with Dr. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, the originator of the "Flow" concept. I had conducted the first corporate study applying "Flow" at Allstate Insurance Company in Chicago in 1992. A "Flow" experience occurs spontaneously and effortlessly, when a person is deeply concentrating and completely involved in a task that is both engaging and challenging. This type of learning environment is ideal if you want to bring out the best in students and improve their achievement. We used the concept of "Flow" as one of the core learning models for the district's schools. "Flow" describes the spontaneous, effortless experience, you achieve when you have a close match between a high level of challenge and the skills you need to meet the challenge. "Flow" happens when a person:

- is completely involved in a task
- has strong concentration
- knows at each moment what the next task or step should be
  For example, if you play music you know what note will come next in the piece you are playing.
- You have a clear goal and you are getting feedback from what you are doing.
  This type of activity is very rewarding and people do it just for the sake of doing it.

Children are in "Flow", a great deal of the time, as they learn to walk and talk and learn other new things , . They choose what to do and they match their skills with appropriate challenges. When children begin school, they begin to lose this feeling because they can't choose their goals any longer. In terms of productive work and endeavor, the ability to choose is the most critical component of productive endeavor. At Palos 118, Dr. Carroll wants to incorporate "Flow", whenever possible, so students become "self directed learners" and take some responsibility towards their own development. Dr. Carroll's goal is to have individualized education plans for all students in her district. This goal was accomplished recently and has had very favorable results in the School District.

We decided that incorporating "Flow" and further developing a participative environment at Palos 118 would be the core of our work together. In addition, we wanted to develop a measurement process that would track both tangible and intangible measures. We know that intangible measures are actual indicators of tangible measures. Or another way of putting it is that the lead indicator is ahead of the lag indicator. CCI worked with administration and within a year **Palos118 improved their performance by 5%.** This placed Palos 118 into the top 10% of all Illinois elementary and middle schools. This was quite an accomplishment since they already had such excellent performance. Obtaining higher achievement scores was our goal.

Process: Palos 118 School District

Dr. Carroll is an innovator and believes in the conceptual model of learning. A large percentage of high school and college valedictorians from Illinois graduate from Palos 118 School District. These students after leaving Palos 118 become leaders in their communities.

We began with coaching Dr. Carroll on how to improve the performance of her management team. One of the first things we did was administer an assessment that would give us a baseline concerning performance. The assessment is the Ten Indicators of Superior Performance. The purpose of this instrument is to prompt exploration and optimize alignment in an organization regarding the internal motivators of work. The assessment results clarify areas for improvement. The ten indicators are:

- ž Control over pace, interaction with colleagues, use of materials
- ž Learning – clear goals and feedback
- ž Variety
- ž Mutual Support and Respect
- ž Meaningfulness
- ž A Promising Future
- ž Engage one or several of their preferred life interests
- ž Challenges that match and stretch individual skills
- ž Concentration and Focus
- ž Fun

When the ten criteria for superior performance are leveraged in an organization the performance will dramatically improve. This has been demonstrated over and over again in many organizations all over the world. Palos 118 Administrators scored very high when they took the Ten Indicators Assessment. We knew there was room for improvement at the school level. We worked with Dr. Carroll's management team and discussed their current situation and how they thought they could improve each school's performance.

Our next project was the following year. We decided that helping Dr. Carroll implement some of her goals would be a good next step. One of her goals was *continuous improvement*. In the process of continuous improvement, we needed to focus on a measurement system that would track a key indicator of performance. The intangible we decided to track was *trust.* We worked with the

Administrative team to design an assessment for the teachers and the students at Palos 118.

Generating the Key Measure

Palos 118's Administration desired to expand on their current "Scorecard" activities by defining a key lead indicator demonstrating whether their educational efforts were on track for a superior learning institution. Consensus of the Administrators and Superintendent was that they aspire to provide a thriving environment for "self directed learners". They want to instill within students the passion, and eagerness to be actively engaged in their learning experience. Administration believes that students can learn to take ultimate responsibility for their learning outcomes. Administrators want to engender a quality learning environment that challenges its students to become confident, adaptive and productive life-long learners. Palos118 Administrators wanted to uncover a metric that would reflect whether educators were imbuing their students with a thirst for continual learning that would later translate to future adult learning excellence.

Prior learning research • revealed that trust was an essential characteristic of a high achieving environment. Though trust, in itself, between teachers and students is not enough, but without it, a school has "no chance of improving. Trust is a strong predictor of success." Caridas Consulting consultants, Evangeline Caridas and Mark Hammer, facilitated the Administrators in devising their own instrument for measuring trust within their district.

Define Key Elements	Define Lag Indicators	Define Lead Indicators	Measure & Monitor

Administrators were presented a Measurement Workshop: Tangible and Intangible Indicators, where they defined and processed key elements, lag and lead indicators. The workshop, put in plain words, how to devise the elements into a practical measure that they could use the next day. This was followed with an action plan to ensure follow through with follow up by the consultants as needed. The administrators had attended a "Balanced Scorecard" workshop before, where they had completed a comprehensive "Scorecard". The Measurement Workshop took the scorecard to the next level by finding the underlying drivers of achievement -Trust. By developing this metric the administrators were able to develop measures influencing their lag indicators (student scores) of success-achievement.

Basic Steps of the process:

I.   Define Key Elements - facilitators worked with administrators to define key elements on their current Scorecard. Administrators were asked, "What are the three most important Key Elements?" (Prioritize) This meant, they would identify the elements (includes tangibles & intangibles) that effectively drove the ongoing success and/or performance of projects. This may pertain to past defined elements or newly, proposed elements.
   a. Facilitators defined the concepts and how the team would work together.
   b. Utilized the past scorecard to build a continuous improvement scorecard and assisted the team in achieving stated organizational objectives.

      c. Used available data (past surveys, interviews) to determine potential gaps that the project wished to address.

II. <u>Define the Lag Indicators</u> - For each Key Element the administrators were asked to identify a tangible Lag Indicator. Facilitators assisted the team to define the most relevant Lag Indicators:

      a. Team utilized feedback and benchmarking information to determine correlations.

      b. Team, additionally, utilized measures and data that they already had available.

III. <u>Define the Lead Indicators</u> - For each prior defined Lag Indicator, administrators identified a relevant, intangible Lead Indicator. The administrators learned to create tangible measures for intangible indicators. This is a tricky step and requires assistance to pull this off. The importance of this step is that the team was enabled to find a key driver, or indicator, for their objective – self generated achievement. This group of administrators decided that trust is the lead indicator and drives student achievement. Steps:

      a. The administrators were given examples of intangibles with research behind them such as work satisfaction, commitment, trust, cooperation, and communication , etc. They were taught to redefine intangibles in behavioral terms and to form metrics critical to the administrator's success.

      b. The next step involved teaching a variety of metric examples. The process described simple measures and examples with graduated complexity as the administrators grasped the concepts. From the smorgasbord of metrics the administrators determined which structure was most relevant for their measure. They were introduced to:

         i. Ratio Metrics-single measures

         ii. Index Metrics-composite of measures

IV. <u>Measure and Monitor</u> - The administrators learned how to structure all metrics into one composite active matrix. Applying an action plan, administrators took on the responsibility to maintain the new Scorecard and deliver it to their teachers and students.

      a. They agreed on <u>reporting procedures</u> (who, when, where, why and how the results of the Scorecard would be communicated).

      b. This was followed up with a <u>monitoring process</u> (scorecard tracking). The tracking team watched for alignment or misalignment of the primary indicators. If Lead Indicators were out of alignment then the team could course correct before it became represented in the organization's Lag Indicators such as test results.

Benefits of the Metrics Workshop:

<u>Cost saving benefits of powerful metrics</u>:	<u>Metrics Development & Usage Planning Workshop</u>:
• Prevents mistakes • Anticipates needs • Aligns objectives and team	• Links to project charter objectives • Links to critical success factors • Focuses on the creation of intangible, lead indicators • Cost savings of 10-20%

The Next Step

The next step with this high performing group is to get the teachers and the students more involved with continuous improvement. We are planning participative sessions with all three schools for the purpose of getting all levels aligned with the overall improvement goals.
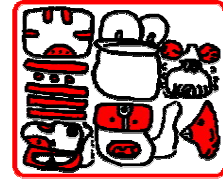
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، "Do Students Care About Learning?", Mihaly Csikzentmihalyi, Educational Leadership, Volume 60, Number 1 September 2002, pages 12-17

In Memory of Dr. Rosemarie Carroll (2005) who left us this great work to nurture and to improve further.

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