

**A SYSTEMS APPROACH TO COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL
REFORM: USING THE REALMS OF MEANING AND THE
BALDRIDGE MODEL AS A SYSTEMS FRAMEWORK**

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ABSTRACT

A system is a group of interacting, interrelated, and interdependent components that form a complex and unified whole. Systems thinking is a way of understanding reality that emphasizes the relationships among systems parts, rather than the parts themselves. Based on a field of study known as “system dynamics”, systems thinking has a practical value that rests on a solid theoretical foundation (Pegasus Communications, 2009). This study explores how the six realms of meaning coupled with the Baldrige model create a framework for comprehensive school reform.

Introduction

Systems thinking is a viewpoint that helps organizations view events and patterns in a new light—and respond to them in advanced ways. As a language, systems thinking has unique qualities that help organizations communicate about its many systems. Systems thinking emphasizes wholes rather than parts, and stresses the role of interconnections—including the role we each play in the systems at work in our lives. It also emphasizes circular feedback rather than linear cause and effect (Pegasus Communications, 2009). In today's schools, leaders have to operate in the realm of unknown circumstances massive complexities. Today's leader has to employ a different way of thinking about their organizations and ways to handle the challenges they face.

It is inadequate and often counterproductive for leaders merely to act as good workings in the machine (Reed, 2006). Leaders have to ensure that there is a process by which the engine works as well. Leaders perform a valuable service when they discern that a venerated system or process has outlived its usefulness, or that it is operating as originally designed but against the organization's overall purpose. Sometimes leaders forget that systems are created by people, based on an idea about what should happen at a given point in time (Reed, 2006).

Sociologist Robert K. Merton coined the term “goal displacement” to describe what happens when complying with bureaucratic processes becomes the objective rather than focusing on organizational goals and values (Reed, 2006). When there is a lack of systems, organizations tend to take on a life of their own leading to additional dysfunction and a lack of order. Because of their experience and position, leaders are invested with the authority to intervene and correct or abandon malfunctioning systems. At the very least, they can advocate for change in a way that those with less positional authority cannot. Leaders at all levels should, therefore, be alert to systems that drive human behavior inimical to organizational effectiveness (Reed, 2006). Leaders therefore need to see the parts along with the whole.

In her book, *Organization Theory: Modern, Symbolic, and Postmodern Perspectives* (1997), Mary Jo Hatch provides an introduction to general systems theory that is useful in thinking about organizations. She makes a point worthy of repeating: the language of simple machines creates blind spots when used as a metaphor for human or social systems; human systems are infinitely more complex and dynamic. In other words, it can be counterproductive to treat a complex dynamic social system like a simple machine (Reed, 2006).

Systems, like the human body, have parts, and the parts affect the performance of the whole. All of the parts are interdependent. The liver interacts with and affects other internal organs—the brain, heart, kidneys, etc. You can study the parts singly, but because of the interactions, it doesn't make much practical sense to stop there. Understanding of the system cannot depend on analysis alone. The key to understanding is, therefore, synthesis (Reed, 2006). The systems approach calls for the leader to identify a system; some of which are simple while others are complex. Leaders must also continuously focus on the whole rather than its parts. The systems thinker retains focus on the overall system, and the analysis of the outcomes.

Systems thinking is a holistic approach to analysis that focuses on the way that a system's constituent parts interrelate and how systems work over time and within the context of larger systems. The systems thinking approach contrasts with traditional analysis, which studies systems by breaking them down into their separate elements.

Systems thinking can be used in any area of research and has been applied to the study of medical, environmental, political, economic, human resources, and educational systems, among many others. According to systems thinking, system behavior results from the effects of reinforcing and balancing processes. A reinforcing process leads to the increase of some system component. If reinforcement is unchecked by a balancing process, it eventually leads to collapse. A balancing process is one that tends to maintain equilibrium in a particular system (Pegasus Communications 2009).

Purpose of the Article

The purpose of this article is to introduce the concept of systems thinking and suggest two frameworks that could work to support comprehensive school reform.

What Is Comprehensive School Reform?

Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) centers on reorganization and rejuvenation of schools, as opposed to implementing a certain number of focused, and potentially uncoordinated, school improvement initiatives. Generally, CSR efforts have targeted schools most in need of reform and improvement. Most often schools that engage in CRS are high-poverty schools with low student test scores. According to recent data from the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL), schools receiving money to implement CSR models through the CSRP have an average poverty rate of 70%. Further, nearly 40% of schools receiving CSRP funds were identified for school improvement under Title I regulations and more than 25% were identified as low-performing schools by state or local policies (SEDL, 2009). The Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, which also aims to expand and improve educational opportunities in the nation's high-poverty schools, has also provided a wealth of funding for CSR efforts.

The U.S. Department of Education frames CSR around eleven distinct components that, when coherently implemented, represents a “comprehensive” and “scientifically based” approach to school reform. Specifically, a CSR program must:

1. Employ proven methods for student learning, teaching, and school management that are grounded in scientifically based research and effective practices, that have been replicated successfully in schools;
2. Integrate instruction, assessment, classroom management, professional development, parental involvement, and school management;
3. Provide high-quality and continuous teacher and staff professional development and training;
4. Include measurable goals for student academic achievement and establishes benchmarks for meeting those goals;
5. Is supported by teachers, principals, administrators, and other staff throughout the school;
6. Provide support for teachers, principals, administrators, and other school staff by creating shared leadership and a broad base of responsibility for reform efforts;
7. Provide for the meaningful involvement of parents and the local community in planning, implementing, and evaluating school improvement activities;
8. Use high-quality external technical support and assistance from an entity that has experience and expertise in school wide reform and improvement, which may include an institution of higher education;
9. Include a plan for the annual evaluation of the implementation of the school reforms and the student results achieved;
10. Identify federal, state, local, and private financial and other resources available that schools can use to coordinate services that support and sustain the school reform effort; and
11. Meet one of the following requirements: the program has been found, through scientifically based research, to significantly improve the academic achievement of participating students; *or* the program has been found to have strong evidence that it will

significantly improve the academic achievement of participating children. (U.S. Department of Education/Comprehensive School Reform Guidance, p.5)

Strategic Planning: Through a Postmodernistic Systems Thinking Lens

Strategic planning determines where an organization is going over the next year or more and how it's going to get there. Once a leader sees the organization through a systems lens, strategic planning will take on new meaning. Typically, the systems thinking process is organization-wide, or focused on a major function such as a division, department or other major function. Most school board members and district administrators instinctively like the idea of strategic planning. Many districts, however, have no real understanding of what it is and what it requires. Strategic planning focuses on the organization's resources on mutually predetermined measurable outcomes. An effective plan, by this definition, encompasses an organization's entire resources and purpose (Cook, Jr., 1988). It must be constructed deliberately and thoughtfully (Peterson, 1989). Strategic planning enables people to influence the future. The very act of planning implies that schools are more than passive pawns in the hands of socioeconomic forces.

A strategic plan often begins with a mission statement. Most districts and schools also build in the vision statement to support the direction of the organization. Both the mission and vision process serve as the pillars of school or district-wide systemic change. The strategic plan also summarizes the district's purpose and operations, what it wants to accomplish, and what it does. It is recommended that schools and districts participating in the strategic planning process identify major trends affecting the organization as a foundation to launching the strategic planning process. Thomas Hart (1988) recommends using several small groups to begin the planning process. Within these groups participants discuss, combine, and rank their goals for the district. Representatives from each group report to the larger body so that everyone shares a sense of cohesion and consensus. Once the planning group enjoys a degree of consensus, it can release its goals to subcommittees that formulate objectives for each goal. They should specify when the task is to be completed and who is responsible for completing it.

Strategic plans are typically comprehensive. In schools today, almost all principals have to lead their school teams through the process of creating campus improvement plans, which have become a spin-off the strategic planning. These plans generally include everything essential to a district's or schools' mission. Strategic planning typically includes several major activities or steps in the process. Different people often have different names for these major activities. There are several post modernistic ways of conducting strategic planning activities: strategic analysis, setting strategic direction and action planning. Strategic analysis includes a scan or review of the overall environment of the organization. This can include elements of the environment including demographics, changes in social and economic forces, etc. Within this activity there is also an assessment of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats; also known as a SWOT analysis.

Another activity related to challenging the way in which organizations plan is the setting strategic direction activity. This activity includes assessing the state of the organization including the major issues and opportunities. From that, the organization is ready to set strategic goals and strategies to achieve those goals. Within this process, goals meet the following criteria: specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and timely. This process is also known as establishing SMART goals.

The final activity related to strategic planning is action planning. Action planning involves how the goals established will be accomplished. This process involves specific objectives and results the organizations seeks to accomplish. When establishing an objective, the method is established defining how the organization will succeed. The final stage to action planning involves establishing whose responsible and specific timelines to measure progress against the goals. Systems for monitoring and evaluation are also established during this activity.

The Baldrige Model: Applying the Realms of Meaning to the Strategic Planning and the Systems Thinking Process

Baldrige is a process of continuous improvement that has been used in business. Named after former Secretary of Commerce Malcolm Baldrige, the Baldrige criteria is a blueprint for developing quality business practices. In 1998, the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award was expanded into healthcare and education and an education application of Baldrige was developed called BIE (Baldrige in Education.). BiE incorporates Baldrige criteria into a framework through which local stakeholders and communities assume leadership in transforming their own education systems. It enables them to improve overall school effectiveness, use of resources and capabilities. It provides a blueprint for administrators, school boards, union leaders, businesses, teachers, parents and students to collectively take responsibility for implementing their own improvement efforts. The basic purposes of Baldrige include: helping improve education performance practices, providing basis for self-assessment and a process for continuous improvement feedback, facilitating communication and sharing of best practices within/among educational institutions- state departments of education, districts, schools and classrooms, fostering partnerships across sectors, and serving as a tool for improving education performance, planning, training and organizational assessment. The Baldrige model ((National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2006), is broken into seven categories:

- Organizational/Visionary Leadership
- Strategic Goals and Measures
- Customer Requirements (Student and Stakeholder Focus)
- Information and Analysis
- Human Resource Focus
- Process Management
- School Results/Learner-Centered Education

The Six Realms as a Fundamental Framework for Systems Thinking & Strategic Planning Using the Baldrige Framework

Understanding the modes of human understanding using the six realms of meaning offers a guide to improving organizational effectiveness and offers a strong opportunity to increase student achievement in schools across the country. These six patterns are designated as: symbolics, empirics, esthetics, synnoetics, ethics, and synoptics. Each realm of meaning and each of its constituent sub realms may be described by reference to its typical methods, leading ideas, and characteristic structures (Kritsonis, 2007).

Symbolics: The Language of Planning

The first realm, symbolics, comprises ordinary language, mathematics and various types of nondiscursive symbolic forms, such as gestures rituals, rhythmic patterns, and the like (Kritsonis, 2007). Principals who use the art of symbolics as a means of communicating their expectations, establishing rituals and patterns, and using the power of language have the ability to effectively move their campuses forward. In recent years, principals have begun to establish leadership teams; a core group of personnel who work to support the principal's agenda. Members of these teams lead other teams within the school, and generally the symbolic nature of the principal using those around him/her works to move the school forward.

Empirics: Knowledge as a Strategic Approach

The second realm, empirics, includes the sciences of the physical world, of living things, and of man. These sciences provide factual descriptions, generalizations, and theoretical formulations and explanations that are based upon observation and experimentation in the world of matter, life, mind, and society (Kritsonis, 2007). Through an understanding of empirics, principals are able to engage their stakeholders in the need to systematically change the way in which school reform efforts will impact the school as a whole. Principals do this by focusing in the establishment of systems, processes, procedures, and structures that work to impact students. It matters not what one's individual agendas are; as long as the principal can demonstrate a keen focus on the best solutions for students. It is equally as important for principals to arm their stakeholders with the knowledge, tools and resources need to empower change.

Esthetics: The Beauty in the Strategic Planning Process Focused on Learning-Centered Education & Organizational/Personal Learning

Esthetics, the third realm, can be defined as the branch of philosophy dealing with beauty and taste (emphasizing the evaluative criteria that are applied to art). Esthetics contains the various arts, such as music, the visual arts, the art of movement, and literature (Kritsonis, 2007). Learning-Centered Education is where the focus of education is on learning and the real needs of students. The primary emphasis is on active student learning tailored to individual styles. Students are involved with self-assessment and chart personal progress. Organizational & Personal Learning is the continuous improvement of existing approaches and processes and adaptation to change. Learning is embedded in the organization and engages all faculty, and students as contributors and active participants.

Strategic planning is an art form. Principals must embrace and use the strategic planning process to provide stakeholders with a road-map for comprehensive school reform. It is only through the beauty of seeing a plan come to fruition and impact the lives of students, that the power of the work becomes real to those involved. Principals who have mastered this art generally have the most success in leading comprehensive school reform efforts. This explains why some principals are able to turn-around troubled schools, while others cannot.

The Realm of Synnoetics: Valuing Relationships with Faculty, Staff, and Partners

Interpersonal skills, planning skills, instructional observation skills, and skills in research and evaluation align with the fourth realm, synnoetics. Synnoetics embraces "personal knowledge" and signifies "relational insight" meaning having sympathy or feeling. This personal or relational knowledge is concrete, direct, and existential (Kritsonis, 2007). Valuing faculty, staff & partners is the practice of creating both internal and external partnerships that are learning-focused and accomplish overall goals. Mutual investments are made for the development of knowledge, capabilities, and motivation of faculty, staff, and students.

Interpersonal or people skills are essential for the success of being a principal. These skills maintain trust, spur motivation, give empowerment and enhance collegiality. Throughout the strategic planning process, promoting collegiality, sharing, cooperation and collaboration, are essential. Planning with clear identification of goals or vision to work towards as well as induce commitment and enthusiasm, and continual assessment of what changes need to occur.

Ethics: The Moral Barometer of Organizational Development

The fifth realm, ethics, includes moral meanings that express obligation rather than fact, perceptual form, or awareness of relation (Kritsonis, 2007). A list of competencies for principals recommended by a National Association of Secondary School Principals' task force includes problem analysis, organizational ability, decisiveness, effective communication skills, stress tolerance. NASSP has developed a statement of ethics for a principal that recognizes their important professional leadership role in the school and community. It states: "Principals must articulate a vision and values that they can use to transform or revitalize a school's atmosphere, according to the Office of Educational Research and Improvement's Principal Selection Guide" (1987, p.11). They should be determined, creative, and enthusiastic--willing and able to confront problems and seek out opportunities to inspire their school communities toward beneficial change. This growth needs to occur through empowerment rather than coercion, by delegating, stretching the ability of others, and encouraging educated risk (DuFour & Eaker, 1987). The principal must be the catalyst and champion of school improvement.

Synoptics: Visionary Leadership and Revealing Choices to All Stakeholders

The sixth realm, synoptics, refers to meanings that are comprehensively integrative. Historical interpretation comprises an artful re-creation of the past, in obedience to factual evidence, for the purpose of revealing what man by his deliberate choices has made of himself within the context of his given circumstances (Kritsonis, 2007). In order to ensure that schools can focus on systematic improvement, principals must arm their stakeholders with choices through empowerment. In regards to the artful recreation of the past, and obedience to factual evidence, principals need to prevent fragmentation and conflict, and focus on avenues for coherence, evaluation and improvement.

Visionary Leadership is setting and communicating clear and visible directions, and high expectations in a student-focused, learning-centered climate. There is a visible commitment to continuous improvement and modeling of continuous improvement principles and practices.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, both the *Ways of Knowing Through the Realms of Meaning* (Kritsonis, 2007) and the Baldrige Model provide a structured model for performance excellence. The Baldrige criteria are generally used as a framework for understanding, evaluating, and improving their businesses or schools. Without a framework schools will continue to find comprehensive school reform difficult to achieve. Both the six realms of meaning and the Baldrige approach provide an avenue to look at school reform holistically.

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