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Changing Your School? First, Work on the Culture

By: Craig Ross

Reforming their school has become just as much an expectation for school leaders as balancing the budget, managing the operations and improving student achievement. Reform initiatives are most often launched with excitement, passion, and a pledge of unwavering administrative support, yet they frequently are short-lived and drift unnoticed into the background and quietly disappear. The sad truth is that the parts of the initiative likely disappeared from the behaviors of teachers and administrators even earlier.

As the principal of an alternative high school near Kalamazoo, MI I recently worked with my teachers and community to implement a Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) program. As a result of this experience I learned much about the importance of understanding my school's culture and the underlying norms and values that shaped its practice. I also identified several important lessons for other principals working to implement change in their school.

The Expectation of Failure

DuFour (2004) describes attempts at school reform by cycles of initial enthusiasm, eventual frustration, and ultimate desertion of the reform initiative:

In this all-too-familiar cycle, initial enthusiasm gives way to confusion about the fundamental concept driving the initiative followed by inevitable implementation problems, the conclusion that the reform has failed to bring about the desired results, abandonment of the reform, and the launch of a new search for the next promising initiative. Another reform movement has come and gone, reinforcing the conventional educational wisdom that promises, "This too shall pass." (p. 6)

"Fighting an uphill battle" resulting in disillusionment is the way Fullan (1993) describes the process. "We have never really recovered from the profound disappointment experienced when our expectations turned out to be so far removed from the realities of implementation" (p. 1).

Why do so many efforts begin with such promise, yet end in disappointment? What makes the "reality of implementation" such a formidable obstacle? Too often, much attention is given to the nuisances of the reform with too little attention given to the needs and concerns of those charged with initially accepting and then implementing the reform: those teachers, parents, community members and administrators who collectively make up a school's culture. As Schein (2004) points out:

Any social unit that has some kind of shared history will have evolved a culture with the strength of that culture dependent on the length of its existence, the stability of the group's membership, and the emotional intensity of the actual historical experience they have shared. (p. 11)

Understand the Reform, Focus on the Culture

Every school possesses a unique culture. Not only does each school share a history, their history is linked to the history of the district and the larger community. Employment guarantees relatively stable group membership, and the challenge of dealing with students, parents and the community provides emotional intensity. Understanding your school's culture is essential if you are to successfully lead change.

As leaders we constantly search for the "silver bullet," the reform that will solve major problems. Ironically this search may pose the most significant threat to your success. On a rational level, school leaders understand that the ideal solution doesn't exist; however, the excitement surrounding locating, embracing and implementing a "solution" may distract from the important work focused on the school's underlying culture. The reform itself may distract the leader from working with staff to address norms and beliefs that may conflict with the goals of the reform.

Thus, when the reform itself becomes the center of attention, failure will be blamed on the initiative and its implementation, rather than on norms and values embedded in the culture. The staff will shrug it off as yet another failed program, while they move predictably toward the next reform. It is as if the gardener plants a seed on a cement slab, and then when nothing happens, assumes that the seed is somehow defective.

Learning Requires Unlearning

Adoption of a reform almost always is accompanied by initial, robust training of school staff. Experts who tout the advantages of the reform and make a compelling case for its adoption conduct the training. The focus is often on understanding the logic behind the reform as well as its technical requirements. Although these presenter/advocates may have a sound understanding of the reform initiative, they rarely know much about the unique environment into which the reform is to be integrated. These "One Size Fits All" training sessions fail to acknowledge the importance of a school's culture: a culture that is already in place and may or may not embrace the change.

Most reforms are designed to address needs already identified. Few focus on needs that have been overlooked or neglected. Therefore, adopting a reform involves not only learning new strategies and behaviors, but perhaps even more importantly, unlearning well established and long accepted strategies and behaviors. As Schein (2004) points out,

Transformative change implies that the person or group that is the target of change must unlearn something as well as learn something new. Transformative change will therefore almost always involve culture change to some degree. Most of the difficulties of such change have to do with the unlearning, because what we have learned has become embedded in various routines and may have become part of our personal and group identity. (p. 321)

This process of "unlearning" is not going to happen spontaneously as the result of unbridled enthusiasm for the reform initiative: it must be intentionally guided by the leader as you work to implement the change. Schein (2004) points out that it is critical that leaders recognize that changing culture doesn't occur overnight. It is a process, and he offers a number of specific suggestions about how this process can be systematically implemented. It includes things like deliberate and intentional role modeling, teaching, and coaching (p. 246). Activities such as ongoing coaching occur after the initial wave of guru-led trainings, and are seldom integrated into implementation plans. All too often, reforms end with direct instruction, and the need for guided practice, monitoring, and ongoing feedback is neglected.

What Leaders Can Do . . .

- Recognize the need to use an inclusive process for planning any change;
- Provide opportunity for teachers to talk about the change and discuss the implications for their work;
- Be intentional in how you talk with people and how you interact; use each encounter as an opportunity to model the behaviors you desire;
- Commit to opportunities for continued discussion of the reform once it is implemented;

Consider School Culture When Training Staff

Today's economic realities mean that, too often, professional development is restricted to only a portion of a school's staff. For example, the eagerness and enthusiasm of younger staff may be leveraged for training. Unfortunately, these less experienced teachers may have minimal influence on school culture and consequently are ineffective advocates when dealing with their more experienced colleagues.

Teachers are socialized into your school's culture in a number of ways and it is often the veteran staff that orchestrates this process. Yet it is often these veteran teachers who may be

most resistant to changing their patterns of behavior. Thus it is important that veteran teachers fully understand and accept new directions. The support of veteran staff is often overlooked when implementing new programs, and as a result, there is a tendency to emphasize the training of new staff members at the expense of building ownership and support among veteran staff that influence the socialization of new members (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979, p. 248).

What Leaders Can Do . . .

• Talk with teachers about their beliefs about students, their learning and their behavior;
• Walk the halls of your school and conduct an informal assessment of the norms and values that currently guide school programs and interaction with students;
• Recognize the importance of building ownership and support among all elements of your staff (less experienced, more experienced, varied content areas);
• Talk with teachers, students and parents about your beliefs and assumptions about students and schooling;

Thus school leaders hoping to implement a change initiative must understand the school culture into which the initiative is to become embedded and must also understand how they can influence that school culture to make it more receptive to the reform. School leaders must not allow themselves to become enamored of the specific reform initiative to the point that they are distracted from attention to the organization's culture, a culture that will ultimately determine whether the initiative succeeds or fails. Additionally, it is important that the school leader recognize the importance of perpetuating the new "assumptions" inherent in the reform initiative that have become integrated into the school's culture. In particular, it is important to make sure that veteran staff members have a solid understanding of and confidence in the innovation so that they can effectively socialize new members into the culture.

Doing Requires Undoing

A school leader wanting to implement a reform must also understand that not only does changing a school culture involve unlearning established ways of addressing issues, it also involves undoing some of the organizational and logistical structures that do not effectively support the demands of the new reform. As Supovitz (2006) notes, teachers operate within a framework of "abundant constraints":

Teachers must work with a curriculum they did not formulate, accept crowded and inflexible schedules, and have little time within the workday to prepare new lessons or reflect on past

ones (Labare, 2004). Furthermore, teachers often have added responsibilities like hallway or lunchroom monitoring, coaching, or other tasks when they are not teaching (Sedlak, Wheeler, Pullin, & Cusick, 1986). (p. 103)

The problem of "constraints" must be addressed if the reform is to be successful. Ever-increasing expectations and requirements, without any reductions almost guarantee the failure of new ideas and initiatives. The predictable result of this accumulation of demands is that without relief "not enough time" becomes the rationale for rejecting the innovation. Teachers and administrators need time to learn, time to collaborate, and time to reflect when introducing a change. Senge et al. (1999) acknowledge the ever present challenge of "not enough time" available to implement a change initiative:

Every successful learning initiative requires key people to allocate hours to new types of activities: reflection, planning, collaborative work, and training. "Core teams" must take the time to design the next stages of the initiative. Work groups need a day or two every month for "skillful" discussions about business issues. Being part of a network of committed people can take up a great deal of time, not just in meetings but also in conversation, e-mail, and reading. Without enough time to spend on regular practice of conversational or systems thinking skills, profound change cannot occur, even if there is strong interest. (p. 67)

Thus, a significant challenge facing school leaders attempting to integrate a new program into their school's culture is not only to find ways to decrease task and activity demands that have been unchecked for decades, but to also find innovative ways to address the challenge of insufficient time. While there are no easy answers it is clear that no matter how attractive and potentially beneficial the school reform appears, it will not likely succeed unless established ways of "doing" the school day are "undone" and replaced with structures that support the reform.

What Leaders Can Do . . .

- Examine the school schedule to identify time that groups of teachers can collaborate;
- Change how you conduct staff meetings and devote the time to collaboration among staff;
- Model collaborative skills when working with your teachers and other staff;
- Align resources (time, people, space) to focus on achieving your school's vision and goals;

Concluding Thoughts

Implementing any school reform initiative is difficult. School leaders who understand not only

the reform but also their school's culture are more likely to have a greater chance of success. When considering the fit between the reform initiative and the school's culture, it is important to address the necessity of "unlearning" old behaviors in order to replace them with new ones, and of "undoing" established expectations and time constraints that may not support the reform.

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