

How Superintendents Lead Change that Transforms Culture

Cultural change begins only when the leader and others address the process of reform personally. As Covey (2004) teaches, you must first effectively lead yourself before you can lead others. An effective leader develops a personal mission, which is aligned with the vision/mission of the organization s/he serves. Leaders are proactive in their work, choosing how they will respond in any situation to achieve their goals. They prioritize their work with their mission and goals to ensure they spend their time doing what matters most. This requires thoughtful reflection by the leader. Additionally, effective leaders have mentors and critical friends who can give them constructive feedback.

A leader's actions speak the loudest. One of the most effective ways to change cultures is to model the behavior, beliefs, and values important to the school. People see and feel the behaviors of others, particularly their leaders. Leaders whose actions make beliefs and values evident and visible inspire others to follow their example (Stolt & Smith, 1995).

It is essential to remember that cultural change is a collaborative process. An effective leader must develop and foster relationships with others to move the culture in a positive direction. This takes an investment in time and resources. Therefore, leaders must design and execute logistical structures that bring people together to talk and understand one another (Stolt & Smith, 1995). Leaders who want to improve the culture know they must model and use empathic listening to deeply understand the people they lead. This is critical as culture is the result of the values, beliefs, and assumptions of the people in the organization (Deal & Peterson, 1999).

Change leaders understand it is the people, not the programs that make the school. Choosing the staff who will work with and around the students is an important part of the change process for many reasons. Effective leaders ensure the hiring practices are aligned to the vision, mission, and cultural attributes of the organization (Stolt & Smith, 1995). They use the interview process as an opportunity to communicate the organization's culture to each candidate. They also pay close attention to dispositions which have proven successful in hiring the most highly effective teachers. Finally, after they hire a new staff member, they provide an induction process to acculturate the new hire with the core values of the organization.

Changing organizational culture is a delicate operation and requires leaders to first investigate and understand the existing culture, and realign the old culture with the new vision and goals. Change adept organizations are described as occurring when investments create the capability for continuous innovation and improvement, embracing change as an internally desired opportunity before it becomes an externally driven threat, and by mobilizing people in the organization to contribute (Schlechty, 2001). This concept is in contrast to what occurs when changing projects and programs.

Change projects are discrete, specific streams of action designed to address a particular problem or need. These can succeed in the short-term. However, they will not typically have a long-term impact. While, change programs are interrelated projects designed to have major cumulative organizational impact, Schlechty (2001) explains that these often fail because they are isolated from on-going business activities, contain too many projects that don't fit well together, or are carried out by an elite of converts who expect everyone else to stop what they are doing and join the cult. Finally, change adept organizations use projects and programs as part of the process. However, the efforts in shaping the culture go deeper into the organization's systems and must impact hiring practices, induction and training programs, as well as communication systems to name a few. Effective superintendents will lead the organization toward a change adept culture to capitalize on innovations that will reinvent the systems needed to realize improved student achievement results and exceptional performance by all staff members.

In *Managing Transitions*, Bridges (2003) describes the importance of cultures that have successfully institutionalized the philosophy of continuous improvement. These organizations are constantly being changed to increase productivity, improve efficiency, and reduce costs. Little transitions are going on all the time. Additionally, there is an expectation that every status quo is just a temporary solution until an improved or innovative way of doing things is created. All of these little improvements, which cause transitions, reaffirm the values and procedures that cultivate continuous improvement. People must have a clear sense of purpose for how their contributions will fit into the larger change initiative. Therefore, change leaders must provide clarity of purpose to everyone in the organization.

Kotter (1996, p. 21) details the 8 stage process for creating major change:

1. Establishing a sense of urgency
2. Creating a guiding coalition
3. Developing a vision and strategy
4. Communicating the change vision
5. Empowering broad-based action
6. Generating short-term wins
7. Consolidating gains and producing more change
8. Anchoring new approaches in the culture

Creating a strong sense of urgency usually demands bold and sometimes risky actions. Bold moves that reduce complacency tend to increase conflict and create anxiety, at least in the short-term. Real leaders take action because they have confidence that the actions they initiate can be directed to achieve important goals. In fact, Phil Schlechty (2001) always likes to describe the superintendent's role as the chief disruptor. It often takes a disruptive event or force to make real change occur.

One of the main enemies of change is complacency. We often underestimate the power of the subtle and systematic forces that exist in virtually all organizations. The magnitude of these forces that reinforce complacency and that help maintain status quo can be quite powerful. In fact, people will find ways to be uncooperative if they think the change is unnecessary. On the other hand, a leader can shape and cultivate a relentless culture of discipline. When this occurs, the organizational culture can counteract complacency for an urgency and commitment to quality and excellence.

It is essential the leader intentionally creates a sense of urgency for change to start. Change leaders will often bombard employees with information about problems, potential problems, or potential opportunities. They do so by setting vastly ambitious goals that disrupt the status quo. They strategically create enough disequilibrium in the organization to cause people to want to change. They act as the chief disruptor to drive the change process and achieve the desired outcomes.

Culture is not something you can manipulate or change easily. Culture only changes after you have successfully altered people's actions, after the new behaviors produce some benefits over time, and after people see the connections between the new actions and the performance results. Because behavioral changes must occur first, the shift in the culture occurs most often at the latter stages of the change process (Kotter, 1996). This does not mean that an awareness of the cultural issues is not necessary at the beginning of a transformation. The better you understand the existing culture, the more easily you can figure out how to push the urgency up, how to create the guiding coalition, how to shape the vision, and so forth...

Anchoring change in a culture (Kotter, 1996, p. 157):

- Comes last, not first
- Depends on results – it's got to work
- Requires a lot of talk
- May involve turnover – changes in key people
- Makes decisions on succession and hiring crucial

21st Century organizations (Kotter, 1996, p. 161-173):

- Must have consistent medium to high sense of urgency – need performance info systems
- Teamwork at the top
- People who can create and communicate a vision
- Broad-based empowerment
- Delegated management closer to the front lines
- No unnecessary interdependence
- An adaptive culture

21st Century leaders practice (Kotter, 1996, p. 175-186):

- Lifelong learning
- Risk-taking – willingness to push oneself out of comfort zone
- Humble self-reflection – honest assessment of successes and failures
- Solicitation of opinions – aggressive collection of info and ideas from others
- Careful listening – empathic listening
- Openness to new ideas

These fundamentals of the change process are important skills for 21st Century superintendents. As educational change accelerates with new technologies, advances in brain research, and shifts in the demands of our consumers, effective superintendents must be adept at leading change in our school systems. Twenty-first Century superintendents aspire to lead their school systems to greatness, which will require significant change. As Collins (2005) stated, the enemy of good is great. In order achieve greatness, we must be willing to say no to good and change only for great.

Resources

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