Supporting Building Administrators Through the Change Process

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Introduction

In a school district, there are several layers of administration, which ideally work in harmony to improve the system of education to best serve the needs of all its students. What does it mean to offer support from the superintendent's office for building administrators as they endeavor to lead their constituents through the process of change? What roles should be played by the building principal, building level curriculum coordinators, the assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction, and the superintendent? How can these administrators work most effectively together without taking over or undermining the distinct roles that each should play?

In the book, *Building Shared Responsibility for Student Learning*, Conzemius and O'Neill (2001) suggest ways in which the central administration can be supportive in encouraging and facilitating the change process:

> Central office administration must lead by creating the place, time, and expectation for interschool connections that will support systemwide learning. ....Some of the central administration's more important change-supporting functions include
> - *Eliminating system barriers to innovation.*
> - *Facilitating the development of system-wide standards.*
> - *Developing a district assessment plan.*
> - *Providing strategic staff development.*
> - *Coordinating data analysis for the sites to use in their planning.*
> (p. 123)

Perhaps no staff development is more strategic than that which helps to develop interpersonal skills. One of the traits of an effective administrator at any level is the degree to which one is able to perceive the interpersonal dynamics in the organization, and to be able to respond with the appropriate level and type of response to various situations. Much has been written on the importance of developing emotional intelligence. Stock (2001) concurs with the significance of refining these skills.

> Studies have shown that emotional intelligence is a greater indicator of success than almost any other credential. No matter where you are in the organization, every person must manage the stress of constant change and interact effectively with other people. Initiative, foresight, confidence and motivation are required of every person at every level today. The good news is that these skills can be learned. (p. 2)

It is sometimes the case that a building administrator may possess well-developed management skills, and has the experience necessary to run the daily operations of a school with efficiency, yet when faced with the challenge of leading change in the organization, just doing the right things isn't enough. Bennis (1969) identified one of the main issues in what he calls "*Bennis's First Law of Academic Pseudodynamics*: Routine work drives out nonroutine work and smothers to death all creative planning, all fundamental change in the...institution." (p. 35) He further suggests that "Managers are people who do things right; leaders are people who do the right things." What are those "right things" and can they be learned?

The Texas Department of Health has developed an interactive website based on the works of Goleman and Gardner which offers a list of the traits that an emotionally intelligent organization exhibits, including:

- *Organizational Self-Awareness of its internal and external needs;*
- *Management of Organizational Emotions through leadership, celebration, and environment;*
- *Organizational Motivation through meaningful work and the delivery of incentives;*
- *Organizational Empathy by maintaining effective and meaningful relationships with consumers and employees;*
- *Mentoring of Organizational Social Skills through training, productive personnel selection practices, and performance appraisal.*

(p. 5)

It is the mentoring aspect that a close working relationship between central office and building administrators can foster. Being able to have an objective view from above the routine affords a perspective that can be insightful to those entrenched in the mundane details day in and day out. However, mentoring will only be as effective as the relationship between mentor and associate. Therefore the first priority of central administration must be the development of a trusted relationship that is based on the goal of improving student learning outcomes, and not based on power struggle or egotistical need to take credit for the project.

The leaders who support administrators charged with inspiring building level reform must demonstrate "broad-based leadership" according to Fullan (2000), which "will require 'leaders of leaders,' i.e., those who can help create conditions for leadership to flourish." (p. xx). Some practical examples of how to support change include:

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- Helping the team to create a powerful vision for the ideal learning community that will challenge all students to meet their full potential;
- Reviewing the literature to find best practices to help make decisions based on scientific research and not on untested hunches and speculation;
- Making provisions for release time so that teachers and principals can get away for extended periods of time for planning change;
- Facilitating collegial dialogue with an objective lens that will reduce bias and minimize the subtle pressures that colleagues may unwittingly exert in their teamwork;
- Resisting the temptation to fall into "mismanaged agreement" by which teams come to collaborative agreement

for the sake of closure, yet do not all fully support the decision that had been made;
- Providing district resources to implement the necessary components of the change initiative;
- Communicating with other schools in the district and with the larger community to strengthen the support for the change.

Though it is essential for administrators at both the school and district level to work together to implement change, there may be challenges that could impede optimal results. Constant communication is necessary to outline which steps in the process should be facilitated by which change agent. Care must be taken to respect individual roles, and caution must be exercised in finding the balance between levels of support. Too much central office visible presence, and it could be perceived that the change was being imposed on the building from an outside force. Not enough support, and the project could become myopic in its focus, losing its perspective about fitting into the larger organization. An inventory of personal strengths of each contributor might be a good first step in the planning process. Taking into account the diverse wealth of learning styles, multiple intelligences, and natural gifts and talents, an effective team will come together that takes advantage of the best that each has to offer.

Regardless of who is empowered to have authority, ideally, it should be the principal who leads the change initiative. According to Marzano (2003)

> *The principal's role is important. Reform requires a titular and conceptual leader. In fact, a great deal of research indicates that no one other than the school administrator can easily assume the role of visible head of a reform effort.*
> *(p 174-5)*

The challenge to the central administration is to mentor the principal behind the scenes and support

the principal in full view of staff. The temptation to control the situation must be resisted at the cost of undermining the principal's authority and creating a layer of resentment. The central administration must lead by serving the building leadership as they serve their staff as they, in turn, serve their students.

Consider the case of the reform effort to pilot a new instructional delivery model that was facilitated by the partnership between the principal and his assistant, and supported by the assistant superintendent for curriculum with full backing from the superintendent. On the surface, the team of pioneer teachers who

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came together for planning seemed to be enthusiastic and excited to move forward. However, midway through the year, resistance began to be exhibited in different ways, and their enthusiasm began to give way to expressed concerns and reluctance to continue. A cursory review of the process would show that central administration had provided release time, facilitation, and resource support for planning, and building administration worked on the logistics at the school level. What had happened to the initial momentum that would bring the planning process to such a tense place that a decision would be made to delay implementation by a year?

An outside facilitator was contracted to review the case to determine what had gone wrong and to restart the process for the next year's planning. Teachers revealed that they had felt extreme pressure by their uninvolved colleagues in planning this reform model, and that when they had expressed their concerns to their building administrators, they felt they were dismissed with a casual pat on the back and the superficial reassurance that "You can do it! Ignore the resistors!" from their principal. When this was

brought to his attention at a meeting with the facilitator and assistant superintendent, he reiterated the same resolve to press forward through resistance, and did not acknowledge the level of discomfort that they had been feeling. This deepened their dismay and three of four of the original planning team resigned.

It was at this point that communication to build trust in the mentoring process became crucial. A conversation between district and building administrators reviewed the scenario and prompted the principal to reconsider the value of getting the school curriculum leaders on board with the concept in an effort to minimize tension. At first he argued against the idea, holding fast to his strategy to press forward in hopes that they wiould eventually come aboard. However, after some trust-building dialogue, an agreement was reached that department heads would be consulted for their advice in making suggestions that would support the success of the model. Since the assistant superintendent was the district curriculum leader, these meetings were approached from the standpoint of a scheduling challenge, and not a major upset to the entire school. Once they were solidly behind the concept, they recommended replacement teachers to join the effort, and contributed suggestions for curriculum planning and scheduling that would minimize the impact on the entire school as the reform pilot went forward. Clearly, communication, trust-building, and interpersonal skills were very important components in this change process.

Kouzes and Posner (2003) illustrate the importance of "servant leadership" as the foundation for great results:

> *Leaders serve a purpose and the people who have made it possible for them to lead. They put the guiding principles of the organization ahead of all else and then strive to live by them. They are the first to do what has been agreed upon. In serving a purpose, leaders strengthen credibility by demonstrating that they are not in it for themselves; instead, they have the interests of the institution ... and its constituents at heart. (p. 185)*

It is this credibility that will help to build trust and enable mentoring of emotional intelligence skills in a non-threatening way. When a principal has had a chance to see that central administration has helped with his planning efforts and supported him behind the scenes, he is more apt to relax and trust advice when it is offered. The strengths of each will combine to create a collective wisdom that is greater

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than any one person's contribution. The students will be the beneficiaries of the willingness of administrators to overcome the challenges to change.

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