Seizing Opportunities at the Intersection of Anticipatory Intentions (Planning) and Unanticipated Events (Reality)

By
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Overview of this Edition

In this edition, I address a basic fact of life for change leaders who envision the transformation of their school systems: As transformational change rolls-out opportunities and threats will emerge where unanticipated events intersect with anticipatory intentions (aka, strategic plans, goals, and objectives)!

You may recall change models that advise change leaders to 1) imagine a desirable future, 2) assess the present situation, 3) identify the gap between the present and the future, 4) develop an action plan to take you to the future, and 5) move toward the desired future. One of the more famous of those models is Lewin's (1951) "Unfreeze–Change–Refreeze" model. The implication of these traditional models is that the change path from the present to the future is linear and sequential. However, while transformational change has some linear aspects it is mostly nonlinear and usually chaotic.

Below, I will share some thoughts about the nature of transformational change in contemporary school systems–change that creates situations where educators can seize opportunities at the intersection of anticipatory intentions and unanticipated events.

The Puzzle

Many contemporary school systems find themselves in amazingly complex and puzzling environments. This complexity is expanding because of an increasing level of interest in transforming school systems to displace the old industrial age instructional paradigm with the knowledge age learner-centered instructional paradigm. But educators in school systems are resisting this pressure to transform because: the power of the dominant paradigm and mental models that control the field of education makes it extraordinarily difficulty to transform; they have negative mind-sets[1] about the need to transform; or they don't know how to transform. Combine

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[1] The terms "mental model" and "mind-set" are frequently used as synonyms. In fact, they are not synonyms. A mental model is an internal representation of reality. It is a mental framework for helping people make sense of their world (Wind & Crook with Gunther, 2005). A mind-set is a "A fixed mental attitude or disposition that predetermines a person's responses to and interpretations of situations."(http://www.answers.com/topic/mindset#ixzz1eIDzALjA).

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this observation with the fact that transformational change is never purely linear and sequential. And, to add to the complexity, there are three non-linear change paths, not one:

- Path 1: Transform core and support work processes
- Path 2: Transform internal social infrastructure
- Path 3: Transform environmental relationships

The True Nature of Change

High quality, well thought-out, data-based strategic plans notwithstanding, unanticipated events will emerge as a school system transforms. Unanticipated events (reality) occur in nonlinear, chaotic ways. Their appearance requires extraordinarily speedy response time if school districts are to transform in a timely fashion. This nonlinear and chaotic reality seems diametrically opposed to the traditional change models and strategic planning models that are built on a foundation of anticipatory intentions (planned change with goals, objectives, tasks, activities, success indicators, and so on) that assume change is mostly linear and sequential.

It's possible to illustrate graphically the intersection between anticipatory intentions (planned change) and unanticipated events (reality). This intersection is illustrated in the figure, below. In this figure you see a vertical line with "anticipatory intentions" at one end and "unanticipated events" at the other. You also see a horizontal line representing a time line. The intersection of these two lines creates four quadrants:

- NF^1 represents "anticipated events in the near future"
- DF^1 represents "anticipated events in the distant future"
- NF^2 represents "unanticipated events in the near future"
- DF^2 represents "unanticipated events in the distant future"

There are also three wavy lines representing the three change paths that must be followed if transformational change is desired (Duffy, 2010a):

- P^1 represents change path 1: transform core and support work processes
- P^2 represents change path 2: transform internal social infrastructure
- P^3 represents change path 3: transform environmental relationships

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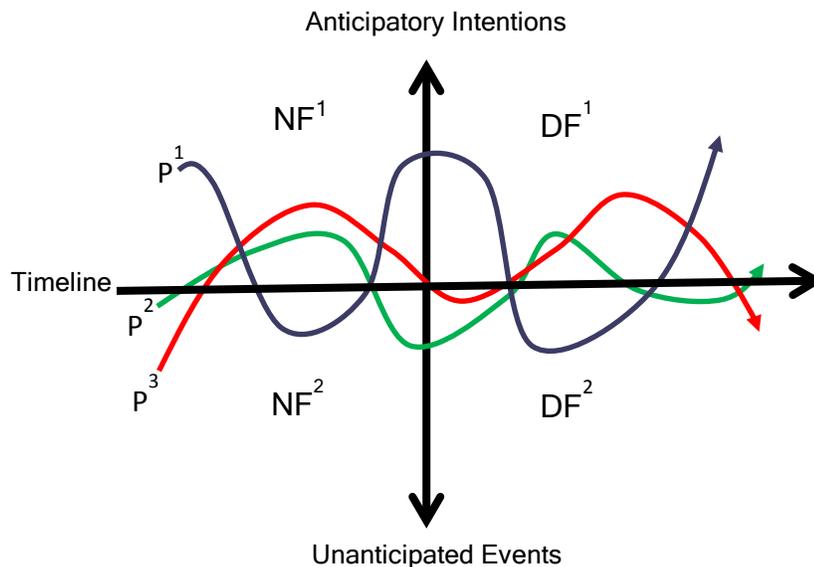
As illustrated in the above figure, transformational change proceeds along a timeline starting in the present and moves into the future following the three change paths toward a vision of a transformed school system. Change leaders create strong strategic plans with clear achievable goals, attainable objectives, sufficient resources, and indicators of success. These strong strategic plans are called "anticipatory intentions." As a strategic plan is implemented and as changes begin to roll-out along the three paths unanticipated events impact the change process and bend the three change paths. Where the unanticipated events intersect with the strong strategic goals and objectives unexpected opportunities and surprise threats will emerge. Minimizing or eliminating the threats while seizing the opportunities will help change leaders move their system toward its desired future.

The nature of systemic transformational change as portrayed in the above figure is a serious challenge for change leaders who want to transform their school systems. The traditional change models that assume that there is a single, linear, sequential change path will not and cannot result in transformational change. Further, how can districts continue using linear, time-consuming change models when reality requires school systems to act speedily while moving along three serpentine change paths that, like streams, often suddenly dive underground and resurface in unexpected places? If school districts try to transform by moving along what they perceive to be a single linear change path they will suddenly find themselves off the true paths and lost. When off the true change paths and lost educators and their systems will revert to their old ways of doing things thereby validating the old French adage, "The more things change the more they stay the same."

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Solving the Puzzle

Although the three paths toward transformation will always be serpentine, school districts will continue to need tools for planning transformational change. Its nonlinear nature notwithstanding, for transformational change to succeed there still must be beginning and end-points and recognizable milestones along the way to help organizations stay on the three change paths. So, what's the solution to this puzzling situation? What kind of methodology can help school districts simultaneously anticipate future events (using planning methods) and respond to unanticipated events (reality) quickly and effectively? I believe one answer is found in *The School System Transformation (SST) Protocol* that Charles Reigeluth and I created because this approach can build into school systems the capacity to plan for and move toward an idealized vision of the future while developing the flexibility to respond quickly and effectively to unanticipated events along the way.

The School System Transformation Protocol
Builds Capacity to Anticipate the Future and Respond to Unanticipated Events

One of the factors contributing to the rapid expansion of nonlinear change processes is the nature of the environment within which school districts find themselves (Duffy, 2010b). This environment is increasingly complex and unstable. In complex and unstable environments organizations need to be able plan for the future while also being able to respond quickly to unanticipated events. Furthermore, the capacity to anticipate the future and to respond quickly to unanticipated events is a function of an organization's internal social infrastructure which includes its culture, communication patterns, reward system, policies and procedures, and organization design.

A transformed social infrastructure is created while using **The SST Protocol**. This social infrastructure has three distinguishing characteristics. First, it favors skill-based work, knowledge, and peer relationships. Second, it is anchored to a network of redesign teams, their knowledge and talent, and their resources. Third, the new social infrastructure created using **The SST Protocol** creates participation and communication that is deep and wide.

The goal of creating this kind of networked social infrastructure is to create a school system that is self-regulating and self-optimizing (as opposed to being externally regulated and externally forced to improve). This kind of social infrastructure produces superior performance in a turbulent environment. When a school system's external environment is turbulent and change happens fast and furious, if the system has networked teams and resources a web of relationships is woven that collectively keeps the district on course toward its vision of transformation.

Creating a networked web of relationships, however, doesn't mean that authority and control are surrendered to the networked "mob." The voice of senior leaders must still be present and heard. Without some element of governance and leadership from the top of a school system bottom-up action freezes in place when there are too many options to be considered. Without some element of leadership at the top, the many at the bottom are often paralyzed by an overabundance of choices. The creation of a social infrastructure that honors and uses senior leadership roles while simultaneously creating and sustaining networked teams will provide extraordinary moments for seizing opportunities at the intersection of anticipatory intentions and unanticipated events.

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When transformational change is created within a networked social infrastructure, small efforts yield large results. This is because of the curious mathematics of group size (Kephart, 1950). As the number of people in a networked social infrastructure increases, the value of that "web" increases exponentially (a term used in the vernacular to mean explosive compounded growth; in mathematical terms growth increases in polynomial patterns). For example, if there are 4 people in a network, there are 25 possible relationships among those people. If just 3 people are added to the network bringing the number to 7, the number or relationships increases to 966. Here's the mathematical formula for making this calculation:

$x = \frac{1}{2}(3^n - 2^{n+1}) + 1$, where
x = total number of possible relationships in a group
n = number of individuals in a group
e.g., What is the total number of relationships in a group with 7 members?

$x = \frac{1}{2}(3^7 - 2^{7+1}) + 1$
$= \frac{1}{2}(2187 - 256) + 1$
$= \frac{1}{2}(1931) + 1$
= 966 possible relationships

Stunning, isn't it? And this is just for real-time, face-to-face groups. This calculation doesn't begin to capture the power of a web of relationships connected using technology where people can have complex many-way relationships simultaneously.

The networked social infrastructure created with **The SST Protocol** also stimulates creativity and innovation by using principles of participative work design (see Emery & Purser, 1996). Creativity and innovation presents opportunities for district-wide transformation. The more opportunities generated and taken, the faster new opportunities will arise. This is called compounded learning– the more we create something, the easier it becomes to create more of it. Therefore, change leaders need to allow people to build their success around the success of others which creates compounded organizational learning.

The Illusion of Peak Performance

In nature, successful organisms adapt to their environments by evolving to a peak of success at which the organism is maximally adapted to its environment. Successful school districts are like this too because they have evolved to their current performance peak. In the 21st Century environment for school districts, however, there are multiple peaks that evoke images of the Rocky Mountains where some peaks are lower than others. What if the peak a district sits atop is a low compared to others, but educators inside the district don't realize it? Wouldn't this lack of perspective create a false sense of success? It is possible, therefore, for educators in a school district to "think" they are at peak performance, when in fact they are on a sub-optimal peak? As Kelly (1998, p. 84) observed, "...an organization can cheer itself silly on its way to becoming the

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world's expert in a dead-end technology…." And, in fact, many "revolutionaries"[2] who envision school systems transforming to adopt the knowledge age learner-centered paradigm believe that school systems are already sitting atop sub-optimal peaks. They believe that these school systems have reached the upper limit of their capacity to perform effectively within the old industrial age instructional paradigm.

Another problem for successful school districts is not too much success, but too little perspective. Great success creates a wall that obstructs the view of opportunities to move toward higher levels of performance. If educators in a district can't see or imagine the next higher peak of performance, how can they go there? They can't go to what they can't see or imagine.

A third problem for school districts that perceive themselves to be at peak performance is that these districts become remarkably creative in defending their status quo. They argue against the need to improve because they see themselves already at their peak. In these situations good becomes the enemy of great (Collins, 2001). But, sitting too long on any performance peak when there are higher peaks in the distance won't be tolerated by our 21st Century society.

When a school district is a high performing system it sits atop a peak. If people in that district want to move to the next higher peak, the path to that new performance level is not a "as the crow flies" straight line. Change leaders in high performing school systems should not mistake a clear view of the next higher level of performance as a straight shot forward and upward. There is only one way to get to the next higher peak–systems first go downhill before they can go back up; that is, they must become temporarily less effective, less skilled, and less successful as they are learning new knowledge, skills, and mind-sets. This is a basic principle of learning theory. When people first learn a new skill they are not good at using it. Their performance level declines along the familiar learning curve. And then, as they practice and get better, their skill level climbs upward. This principle applies to organizational learning too–first down, then up.

Even though there is a learning curve that must be followed to move to a higher level of performance, the more successful a school district is the less inclination there is to let go of what they do well and move downward toward the edge of chaos. This capacity to let go has to be built into a school system and **The SST Protocol** does this.

The journey down from a performance peak and then upward toward the next higher peak requires educators to question their success. Not everything they do well has to be abandoned completely, but everything they do needs to be questioned thoroughly--everything. During this examination of what a district does, it is also imperative to search for opportunities for innovation. Change leaders need to continuously search for opportunities at the intersection of anticipatory intentions and unanticipated events. Searching for opportunities allows educators not only to anticipate future events but also to respond quickly to unanticipated ones.

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[2] For example, see Duffy, F. M. (2011). The revolutionaries: A directory of informed critics, creative innovators, and system "architects" and "builders" who are advocates for the transformation of education systems and their component school systems. Available at www.thefmduffygroup.com.

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From Change to Flux

Organization improvement theory is moving away from the concept of change to the concept of flux (Kelly, 1998). Flux is best imagined as a flowing stream of planned and unplanned events. While change focuses on creating differences, flux is about managing creative destruction followed by nascence. Flux breaks down the status quo while creating a temporary foundation for innovative puzzle-solving and rebirth. Innovation destroys the status quo by introducing paradigm-shifting changes to a system. The quest for innovation is never-ending. Robust innovation sustains itself by poising on the edge of constant chaos.

Innovative systemic flux is a dangerous and thrilling ride to the edge of chaos for a school system. Yet, there is a need to sustain this kind of innovation so school districts can move continuously toward higher performance peaks. By teetering at the edge of chaos, systems can find stunningly creative solutions to the puzzles they are trying to solve–puzzles like "How do we provide children with a customized, personalized learning experience?," "How do we provide our teachers and support staff with a motivating and satisfying work life?," and "How do we establish positive and productive relationships with our community"? To create and sustain transformational change educators must build into their districts the capacity to exploit, not outlaw, flux.

Tools and Structures to Anticipate the Future and Respond to Unanticipated Events

The SST Protocol is not a reform to be installed in a school district. It is a comprehensive process with a set of change leadership tools and structures that can help educators transform their systems. **The SST Protocol** is a five-phase process used to transform an entire district by simultaneously creating innovations along three change paths: the core and support work processes; the internal social infrastructure; and environmental relationships.

The **SST Protocol** also uses some really powerful and effective tools for envisioning a school district's transformed future. Examples of these tools are the Community Engagement Conference (designed using Owen's 1991, 1993 principles of Open Space Technology; the System Engagement Conference using Emery and Purser's 1996 Search Conference principles; and Redesign Workshops based on Emery and Purser's, 1996, Participative Design principles). The Community Engagement Conference is used to engage a district's external stakeholders in conversations about "their" ideas for creating transformational change. The System Engagement Conference is used to engage educators and support staff within a district in the process of creating an idealized vision for the future of their system. And the Redesign Workshops are used by educators and support staff within individual sub-systems throughout a school district to identify and seize innovative opportunities for transforming their unit's core and support work processes, their unit's social infrastructure, and their unit's relationships with the outside world.

Conclusion

Old change theory is linear, expects stable equilibrium, is piecemeal, installs improvements rather than creates innovations, and emerges out of centralized, hierarchical control that views school systems as mechanistic entities. New change theory is based on the concept of flux. It is nonlinear and requires living on the edge of bounded chaos as educators seek continuous disequilibrium to create innovative opportunities that are aligned with a school system's

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transformation goals. New change theory tells us that to transform a school system must first move downhill before it can move up to a higher level of performance. New change theory requires school districts to question everything they do using a networked social infrastructure where innovations are grown from within and used to create systemic transformational change. New change theory requires a simultaneous ability to anticipate the future and to respond quickly to unanticipated events. **The School System Transformation Protocol** is an example of this new change theory-in-use.

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