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whole-system transformational change in school districts

## Removing Hidden Blocks To Systemic Change

By  
John Jensen, Ph.D.

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Systemic change can be viewed from many angles that bear on the quality of education. Planners exert a constant effort to foresee how conditions will play out, and to make them clear and reliable. And as a new educational conception takes hold, the new conditions are expressed in teachers making changes. Their different actions in the classroom, their new ways of intervening and designing student activity, are intended to enable students to learn more and better.

Yet often it occurs that changes at the teacher level do not carry out the systemic change desired. Despite intensive efforts to structure all the concrete and manageable resources, some conditions are less directly manageable, harder to channel into a new plan. Many are teachers' attitudes, values, assumptions and beliefs, that do not align with the changes desired. This by itself is a distinct zone of need within the process of systemic change: how do we "bring on board" this hidden zone of potential problems?

One way is to start small and scale up while watching carefully what we do. If we can't solve the simplest problem that embodies our difficulty, we face even greater risk if we grapple with the more complex. Changing anything, human or mechanical, we can begin with observing how the simplest instance of it works and then scale up, expand it in size and complexity, and watch how the changes affect its operation.

We might begin at the simple, often-repeated experience of a principal welcoming a new teacher. For the teacher, this is a new system, so aligning her with it is "systemic change" in its simplest form; one system, one person. The principal opens the school plan binder and explains it page by page. The teacher agrees, has no questions, and carries out the plan.

This appears easy enough so we scale it up and do the same with five new teachers in the room. It works again just as well, we congratulate ourselves on our string of successes, and imagine the same process with a hundred teachers.

But we try it and are blindsided. People appear resentful, cliques form, skeptical questions come up. We find ourselves facing unhappy campers, even though we did things correctly. Our plan worked with one and with five, so what happened in the interval between five and a hundred?

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7404 Bucks Haven Lane ♦ Highland, Maryland 20777 ♦ 301-854-9800

[www.thefmduffygroup.com](http://www.thefmduffygroup.com) ♦ E-mail: [duffy@thefmduffygroup.com](mailto:duffy@thefmduffygroup.com)

Maybe it didn't work with the five either but we don't find out right away. Whether they surface soon or later hidden conditions lie in wait to thwart our plan:

- Teachers have reservations that don't show up immediately.
- They don't feel safe to voice the reservations they have.
- They misunderstand the plan.
- Requirements of the plan go counter to their group norms.
- Values that the plan emphasizes seem dissonant to them.
- Means of judging compliance are not spelled out.
- Impacts on the individual are not apparent at first.
- The plan leaves gaps to be filled by guesswork.

Summing up such issues, we might say that our problem is rooted in *what is initially hidden*—gaps, assumptions, unexpressed thoughts and feelings, misunderstandings, emotional attachments, reactive or compliant attitudes, and qualities absent from our communication. A plan for change needs a way to bring up such issues and deal with them effectively. We need to recognize the energy tied up in potential distractions from our plan, and reorient it—in essence, aiming for objective thought in place of subjective thought.

Those devoted to objective thought examine the conditions of the world around them. They commit to finding the reality, the truth of the matter, and building on it. They recognize the difficulty of thinking well and are alert to how their own impulses may skew their judgment. These are the people Beardsley Ruml, twentieth century economist, referred to when he said, "Reasonable people always agree when they understand what the other person is talking about." To be rational, we try to grasp the nuances of meaning with which another forms their view so we can say, "I get it now. From *that* perspective, I see what you mean."

Subjective thinkers instead regard their own viewpoint as the axis of meaning, impairing their judgment about the external world. Objective evidence weighs less for them because they select what supports their previous ideas. They form their personality by deciding what they will assert (rather than by what is true), so that even flawed views become entangled with their identity: "I'm a person who believes X." Confuting evidence gains little traction with them because they discount it as belonging to someone else. In a boating analogy, these are the reefs threatening the changes pursued by the speedboats (the innovators) and the barges (the majority who keep the system going).

Objective consciousness is the ground where our plan must take shape, where a common language enables broad communication, and accumulating data leads to sound conclusions. Yet each of us lives also in our own subjective consciousness where forces gather energy that could sabotage our purpose. *Marrying these two effectively* can be a challenge for systemic change.

In three days, a presenter might explain all aspects of a change to the hundred educators until they are understood, welcomed, and committed to—as rational people do when they have all the information. They go directly to the best outcome and agree on it. But many color their thinking with issues of identity—"Am I a person who can do this?" "Don't I have a right to say no to this?"

Emotions such as fear, resentment, hurt, jealousy, irritation, and anger can cause worthy ideas to be dismissed out of hand while turf and dominance absorb attention. Problems that don't occur in a rational environment erupt just because people invent them.

Planning our route around these problems can be difficult because their sources may remain hidden until the moment they emerge to do their damage. Because we "don't know what we don't know yet," preparing for change may legitimately include staging for later ways to respond. Here I outline perspectives and skills that might be of use.

**Group norms.** People change with difficulty, but do so easiest as members of a group who want to do it together. Solidarity channels perceptions, and "everyone doing it" removes inhibitions. As people are also recognized, appreciated, approved, and complimented for change-oriented activity, they more readily adopt it. They align themselves with a group as they value it, agree with its aims, and find their identity enhanced by their expression of its values--internalizing the group's thinking and making it their own. Then when others propose actions that diverge from the group, they resist this because they value their mutual bond.

A limitation on employing group loyalty in the service of change, however, is that most teachers are already in a group. They likely experience reinforcement for upholding its values (such as by adopting its enemies and allies as their own), and may be strongly dissuaded from separating from it. We want to create affiliations consistent enough with the past that teachers won't refuse to join, yet are soundly oriented toward the changes proposed by the new plan.

One can solve this problem at a surface level and hope for the best. We assemble our hundred teachers, and ask them to group themselves with others who have a similar teaching task. By the training activities we offer, we hope they will form personal bonds and support each other in the changes needed. Doing only this much, many do rise to the occasion and fulfill our hopes, but others don't. We want to design how a group *can successfully address its own divergent thinking*.

**Uncovering the influence system.** The latent influence system can be a powerful ally. We want to find out who teachers will welcome influencing them. If I were to ask the reader, "Among the teachers you know, who would you like to be in a group with?" and "Who could you best learn from?" would you be speechless? My guess is that in a minute you could name those at the top of both lists. The first question identifies your optimal social-emotional leader and the second your task leader. If we wanted to integrate you seamlessly into an existing school plan, you have just told us how. We can do no better than call on those whose influence you welcome. If you name Jennifer and Hector as your preferred mentors, your principal says to them, "Geraldine is looking forward to working with you to learn the school plan. Could you compare schedules and spend some time with her?"

We can easily scale this up. Teachers put their own name on a piece of paper and then, mulling over the teachers in their own school, answer the two questions above. They list as many as they like in both categories, keep their nominations to themselves, and give you (their designated change-agent) their lists. Privately, you make up a chart on which each teacher has both a row and a column. Taking one list at a time, you note the name of the teacher at the top, and go to

their row. To the right of their name, you make a tally mark in the column for each other teacher they list. While different tallies could be made for the two questions, they probably collapse into a single meaning--those I welcome influencing me.

The tallied results graphically portray the influence channels in the school. Those with most tallies in their column are most widely respected and liked, and hence ideal for delivering your message. For school-level training, you first spend time with them so they can help you convey your plan. When you train the whole staff later, they are your group leaders, perhaps one for every 6-10 other staff.

Your group design matters. You want a mix of members in each that enables it to work together smoothly. In weighing group composition, *first identify those named least on the chart*. They have the fewest nominations from others and tallies in their column, and are more likely to be the resisters hardest to bring on board. Try to place others around them who make it easy for them to align with group direction.

Do this *by giving them their first choices of those named most*. Place them with people they respect who will not reinforce recalcitrant views but rather will help them expand their thinking. For all others receiving a sprinkling of nominations, place them as best you can with those they choose and particularly with a leader who chose them in return.

For district-wide change, this process can be taken to a second level with a three-day conference for the top nominees from each school. Its stated purpose is to convey (or develop) the projected plan, but your further aim is to identify the most constructive, influential people in the whole district.

In this larger group where they may not know everyone, provide participants with a name tag in letters large enough to be read ten feet away. Allot time for maximum individual and group interaction: random one-to-one pairings to discuss specific problems, triads for other issues, and working groups of six to eight people with changing membership for others so that everyone becomes acquainted with many competent, attractive people outside their own school. Cut presenter talk to the minimum.

Concluding the last day, explain that for the next phase of implementation, you need some information. Do the same sociometric as before. Have everyone name anyone they met in the conference whom they would welcome "being in a group with" or "learning from." Correlating all their responses as before identifies those most widely welcome to carry out a district change process. You may already know who these people are, but having later group membership reflect people's conscious choices increases their buy-in significantly.

Remember why we do this. We take the added steps because we know hidden issues will continue to come into view that may undermine the change unless we understand how to contain and correct them. We initiate a failsafe process by selecting the very best people available to us who can carry it out, those already known and respected. These we take aside for special training

to equip them to handle the issues certain to arise, developing change-agents capable of sustaining our new organizational direction and ameliorating resistance.

Having identified this competent team, what do we teach them (or insure that they already know), and how do we expect them to apply it?

**Specialized change-agent skills.** From an extensive array of information about communications, the skills I touch on here help specifically with emergent problems. They combine the roles of saint, leader, psychologist, promoter, and salesman.

“Saint” is placed first because unselfishness is needed. If you are a teacher on the receiving end of a proposed change and the person offering it to you is just “doing their job,” you have no personal reason to comply. But if you believe instead that “he really cares about me,” and you experience a measure of warmth between you, then your relationship becomes an independent motive for cooperating. You adopt the plan just because you like this person who offers it and helps you assimilate it.

The “Leader” lays out goals and organizes means of obtaining them, but also stands as an exemplar of the values of the organization, and an emotional linch-pin tying the individual to the emerging purpose. Any group benefits as the leader has a strong relationship with each member individually (think of retail politics). This enables him or her to spot better the unspoken agendas and elicit unvoiced reservations. A prior relationship constitutes tacit permission to say, “Let’s you and I talk about that later, okay?” carving away from the group a distraction that could burden it.

The “Psychologist” focuses on the inner work of bringing emotions into balance and developing realistic plans for living. This priority suggests a deep awareness of and respect for the individual; in practice, valuing them beyond their service to our plan. Really understanding their feelings, thoughts, life issues, and current conditions, we take time to help them think through implications. Their need just now may differ from our plan. They may have to settle an issue they wrestle with before they can even think straight about their occupational role, so the change-agent goes where they need to go. We may help them weigh a child-custody issue, relocating to another city, a conflict with another staff member, stresses that affect health, and so on. We deal with what the other must address in order to free their mind even to consider what we are there for. We place their needs and wants first.

The “Promoter” and “Salesman” sell the individual’s participation in a purpose. The former role may appear in presentations, interviews, and conferences—a voice giving a clear overall picture to people who will be affected by it. The latter is in a sense the most basic role—that we can face one person at a time and make sense to them about a change contemplated, that we can bridge across their skepticism or hesitance and enable them to be comfortable with new direction.

A change agent is invited to be “all things” to the need of the moment. If someone doesn’t understand or buy into the proposed direction, we supply what’s needed to effect the change. Sometimes we’re the leader, another time the saint, and another time the salesman. Our

effectiveness depends on our ability to recognize the aspect of our armamentarium that fits the moment. A few tools have wide application:

**Rapport.** A significant contribution to psychotherapy came from the work of John Grinder and Richard Bandler in developing Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP). They sought to decipher exactly how great psychotherapists achieved their results, and sat in on sessions to observe the fine points that made such a difference.

A factor they found that colors all relationships was the rapport their therapists experienced with clients that might seem almost magical to an observer, yet was obtained by a simple activity. It draws on the human need to be socially safe, which we determine by our harmony or matching with others. The greater the harmony, the safer we perceive ourselves to be, and the more we tend to trust the content of our exchange. Our mind tells us that same is good, differences are bad, and instinctively sizes up those qualities in all available categories. People compare the sound of their voices; their respective pitch, abruptness, tone, and speed; eye contact, common phrases, and greetings. The words people use may label them an outsider to the other's reference group.

Gestures and physical activity may separate them—a hyperactive, quick-speaking therapist disconnects from a placid client. Similarity is enhanced with an equal posture eye to eye rather than a dominant one of standing and looking down, and by mirroring the other's body position and moderating one's tone to align with them.

A psychotherapist entering smoothly into the spectrum of cues exhibited by the client, Bandler and Grinder found, was welcomed into their frame of reference at a subtle level. The client realized unconsciously that "This person is meeting me on my ground," and opened greater access to their thinking and feeling.

If you speak with another for a time and want to know if you are in rapport, mirroring cues can tell you. If you nod, tilt your head slightly, or wrinkle your brow and they automatically do the same, you're in rapport.

**Total listening.** Many subjective blocks to our plan are convictions that run counter to it. People plant themselves on certain ideas and claim them as their own—perhaps even at some cost. They may have endured argument from others, undergone self-questioning, and even acknowledge that they create their own unhappiness, yet hook their identity to an intransigent idea and score it as a discount if they "give in." And though thoroughly embedded in their mind, their views may not be overtly expressed. When stressed about our ideas, we are more likely to fence them off or delay addressing them. Others may recognize an unassailable edge to our thoughts and avoid bringing up certain topics.

One organizational response is to identify such people, assume they won't change, and either fire them or transfer them to roles where they do the least damage. In our model here instead, we invite them into a harmonious group with people they themselves welcome. We try to help them

develop a personal relationship with a group leader they admire, and agree to use the group as a vehicle for change.

Arranging total listening, we hope to enable them to bring up what they usually avoid, and feel free enough to reconsider it. The conditions mainly are a sense of safety, rapport with a listener, and the listener's total attention to them long enough for them to talk out their views. A correlation holds. As we experience personal safety and another's full attention, our unconscious mind reaches into troubling thoughts that otherwise seem unsafe for us to reveal. The depth we can go in rethinking them is proportioned to the safety we feel with the listener in front of us.

A change-agent might provide such attention to a teacher personally, or arrange a periodic working-group activity in which participants do this for each other in pairs. They first designate one as speaker and the other listener for half the time available (e.g. thirty minutes apiece). Instead of discussing as people usually do with both offering comments each uses his or her time to go deeper just into their own ideas.

The listener first adopts fully the cues of the speaker so they enter rapport, gives total, quiet attention with praise or compliment the only responses invited; and at the end offers an accurate summary of what was said. A helpful form for the latter is for listeners to place themselves in the speaker's position as "I." If the speaker's name is Sally, the listener begins their summary with "So I, Sally, observed that..., and felt that..., and did this..." narrating a summary of Sally's comments so perfectly reflecting her thought that someone reviewing a transcript later could not distinguish who spoke a particular phrase.

For our purpose, the least outcome we are after is people's willingness to take the next step of change with the group, so we try to make each experience a solid jump-off for the next. If someone relinquishes their customary cautious stance to say "Okay, maybe I'll try this," *and if that step is unsuccessful*, they may return immediately to a guarded state. By itself, membership implies "I'll change too" even though people may not foresee how different they may become.

Done repeatedly in a training group, this activity conveys a significant value—*that we want people to think deeply and personally. If there are problems, we want to bring them up and resolve them.* Even a single experience of this may turn a corner.

**Thought changing.** Another tool focuses on a small set of personal thoughts. Many of our ideas vary with our current activity, but a few we recycle to organize our mind. A bare handful of descriptors may sum up the major tendencies of a personality, with some of them divergent from our optimal direction. We want to identify them and show people how to alter them. The following technique is easy to arrange for one person or many together.

Ask everyone to take out a pencil (with an eraser) and a blank sheet of paper, and draw a line down the middle of the paper. Ask them to list in the left column all the thoughts they have had in the past week more than once. You might say:

Write down any thoughts that occurred repeatedly. Some are positive aspects of your life you're pleased to think about, and others probably are about concerns that carried a familiar feeling. Since our mind can sustain only a limited number of feelings, the thoughts you list will probably top out between eight and fifteen. But because they come up so often, they can soak up 90% of our mental energy. Maybe you remember times in your life when just one thought preoccupied you. Sometimes we can make an important change just by altering a single one of these into a more helpful form.

When people have made their list, ask them to mark the thoughts that are positive and affirming. Transfer these to the column on the right. For those remaining on the left, rephrase each one so that, while addressing exactly the same situation, they affirm our ability, take charge, follow a plan, or reframe the situation. We want the modified thought to carry a positive, proactive feeling.

Many strategies for coping with a negative situation invite us to turn our attention to something else, but if the situation itself doesn't change, it may constantly pull us back to our habitual viewpoint about it. Because of this, we make sure that we change *our thought about it* rather than expecting the situation to change.

As we reconstruct each thought, we need to know that the new version is valid. It may help to talk this out with someone else in order to find the words that fit best. Group leaders can wander among participants and assist them at this so participants are confident that they can use the new version: "Yes, I could go to that thought instead. I know I can use it when the time comes." In the following examples, the altered version is italicized underneath the original thought.

My principal is an idiot.

*He's in over his head, but I can tell him some things I appreciate about him.*

Too many unreasonable expectations, too much to do.

*I could probably prioritize my time better.*

These kids don't want to learn.

*At least someone in their life shouldn't give up on them.*

I think my husband is moving away from me.

*If I want this marriage to last, I better take a look at myself.*

Why can't these people be more considerate?

*They probably don't know the effect they have. I could mention it.*

This project really isn't fair considering everything else I'm doing.

*They probably asked me because they know I'll do it well.*

I get so stressed about whether my lesson is going to work or not.

*Once I settle on what to do, I can just run it and release the results.*

Sometimes I feel lonely even with all these people around.

*It just takes time to get to know others when you're new like me.*

I wonder if I fit in.

*I'm going to do my job and be nice.*

Some thought-processes relate directly to working out issues. We may be able to spot them and help people reframe them. Again, the reframed thought is italicized:

What are they pushing down our throats now?

*I'm part of a team, and we're trying to get this right.*

I'm so uncomfortable with the harsh tones people use.

*They're finally showing how they feel, so progress is at least possible.*

People just argue.

*As long as we argue respectfully, we work out better ideas.*

So-and-so expects everyone to follow his viewpoint.

*I could suggest a guideline that includes everyone's ideas.*

I know I have the best idea about this.

*For people to buy into a plan, they have to see their own thinking represented in it.*

Once a positive idea is listed on the right beside each original on the left, ask people to synthesize them all in a smooth paragraph, and read it daily. If your group meets weekly, take a few minutes each time to invite people (if they like) to share how their paragraph serves them, if it still describes how they want to redirect their mind, and the effects they noticed from focusing on the new picture.

**Behavior description.** An important aspect of implementing a plan is to be able to separate actions aligned with it from those that are not. Much data comes in numbers about instruction, but for the hidden material we usually must *look and listen*. Coming upon divergent feelings, thoughts, and actions, our role offering feedback to individuals is a first step in problem-solving.

Since a large proportion of the population is sensitive to criticism and becomes upset at corrective feedback, it can be important to meet their need for information considerably. Many qualities we want in our feedback are common-sense. We don't call out people in front of others, nor ask them to stand and be publicly embarrassed, nor speak to them in an accusatory tone. Our definition of our own action matters. If we think "I am correcting this person," a potential implication is, "I know better than you do. You are subject to my opinion, and just now, my idea is better than yours." Our desire to be helpful may not be perceived that way.

Redefining our action changes *us* first. Think how different it is to say to ourselves, "I provide this person information they might use to make a change if they choose to." Accusation disappears and instead we incline toward respect: "I cannot change you. My consideration for you leads me to offer you something you might use for yourself. You have the power to refuse if you wish. I respect your power and right to select and guide your own actions."

A behavior description applies this stance, and is the simplest and least threatening way to present feedback. It informs the other of what they themselves are doing with the implication "You may not have noticed what you did," or "You may not have realized its impact on others," or "You may have forgotten that your action diverts from the agreement we made."

Remove from your voice any emotional loading. Speak instead in neutral, informational tones. Describe in objective words what occurred, and turn the issue over to the other. This lets them know just that their act had significance and invites attention. A personal instance remains vivid.

I was working with a consultant team doing staff training at an institution. The last exercise in our three day conference divided everyone into fours to discuss a topic. Sitting with three others around a small table, I had just offered a comment when suddenly Elliott, on my right, spoke up.

*"John, when you said that, Ariana leaned back and crossed her arms over her chest."*

Startled, I looked at Ariana across from me. Her face bore a furious expression, and her body position signaled that she had taken my comment as a personal affront. Having no idea what the problem was, I hastened to obtain her agreement to meet with me later and talk it out.

Elliott's words have served ever since as a perfect example of a behavior description: 1) his tone of voice was completely neutral. 2) he suggested no judgment of me or Ariana. 3) he called attention to unarguable, observable data. 4) his words implied that just by receiving the information, I would be better able to make a constructive response and 5) he sought no further involvement himself but turned the issue entirely over to me.

A change process even benefits from the assumption behind this skill; that is, we must gather objective information constantly from all possible sources, and only by doing this can we determine how our plan is working.

**Perception check.** People want to be seen and appreciated for who they are. In our workday environment, we typically present our best face and tuck away an array of issues that may swirl within but that we would rather not open to others we see daily. This choice to rise to our better

helps sustain a constructive environment, and constitutes a worthy standard for an innovative, energetic group.

Yet as we noted above, the material left unexpressed may render our actions less helpful. So what do we do? We can leave the material under wraps where this person apparently prefers to keep it, and hope it doesn't endanger our purpose; or we can insist on dragging it into the open and possibly invite conflict. Could an alternative course help us here?

A skill easy to apply is a perception check. We use it when another person *manifests a clue* about something going on within that warrants our concern. We make a guess about it, and as a supportive, respectful party, check-out our guess with them.

I was standing outside a school one morning as students collected around the door prior to the bell. Two walked up. One had his head down covered with a hood, and the other was a couple steps behind. The first reached a stopping point near the door, knelt with his head still down, and did not respond to the other's comment. The second student looked at the one kneeling and asked, "What's wrong?"

This in its simplest form was a perception check. The first boy's behavior offered clues about his state. The second made a guess and tried to check it out. Using a few more words, he might have said, "You look like you're feeling bad about something. Are you okay?"

A question has the drawback of an assertive entry into another's attention. When asked a question, social etiquette says, we are impolite not to answer even though we may wish to be left alone. The more gentle contact of a behavior description, on the other hand, lets him know only that we notice something about him: "When I said something to you, you didn't answer, and you usually answer. And you have your head down."

Relaying observable information lets the other know they are noticed and their actions mattered to someone, although they remain free to respond or not. Often when people feel down, they cannot abide superficial advice or cheery comments, but still wish deeply to be seen by someone who genuinely cares about them. The feeling tone you bring to the perception check and behavior description matters. Once communication has been opened, options for developing ideas become available.

**Summarizing.** On a surface level, summarizing another's message benefits us by clarifying details we may need to know. As we put in words what we believe the other said, we ask in essence, "Do I get this right?" Both parties then possess the same version of their communication to draw on.

For our purpose, summarizing is even more valuable. People may consciously process issues that can interfere with our plan. Yet the pieces may not be organized well enough in their mind that they can call them up deliberately. They may need help in assembling their own thoughts before they can even begin to integrate others' concerns. Summarizing their words and feelings helps bring order piece by piece to their ideas. Once they have explained a piece in words, their mind is free to range further for the next chunk to dwell on.

When our intent is to summarize, a critical aspect of our listener role is to limit ourselves to the speaker's expressed message, and not divert into giving our own suggestions, associations, or ideas, nor institute a problem-solving agenda. These actions may be appropriate later, but are more likely to succeed after a description of the problem fully incorporates the salient evidence in the speaker's mind. The listener facilitates this by summarizing the speaker's message piece by piece *and remaining within it*.

The import of this last condition showed up in a training I conducted for a dozen experienced teachers who wanted more work on communication skills. We were all seated on the carpet in one's living room.

I explained the idea of summarizing and asked if anyone had a problem they could talk about in front of the group to demonstrate. Sue, the host, volunteered, and we sat facing each other in the middle of the circle.

Her problem, she said, was that her 70 year old uncle was escorting a woman in her twenties and the family was worried about it. Having said that much, her thinking stopped there and could proceed no further. She essentially repeated the same thought three times.

*"So you're worried about your uncle going out with this girl,"* I said, summarizing her thought and feeling.

*"Yes,"* she affirmed, and said the same thing again.

*"You and your family are anxious about how this will turn out,"* I said.

*"Yes,"* she emphasized, and again restated her original idea about her uncle escorting the girl and the family had concerns about it.

A third time I also said the same thing in slightly different words. If it was so important to her to say one idea over and over, then it was important to me to summarize it back to her. Suddenly she broke off her train of thought.

*"Oh, I know what I'll do,"* she said. *"I'll just go talk to him."*

At that point, another teacher in the circle fell backward on the carpet laughing. Everyone turned toward her in astonishment. As she sat up, a look of glee creased her face. She was the host's best friend. She said, *"Don't you remember, Sue, that's what I was telling you last week?"*

*Sue couldn't remember the conversation with her best friend!* A week ago, she had to block out her friend's advice and instead reach the conclusion by processing her own thoughts. Restating her simple understanding of the problem and having it mirrored back to her three times *brought her to the next point* in her thought process. Often our mind must work through an idiosyncratic maze before it can discover what to another may have been obvious from the start. About half of

all interpersonal problems appear to be resolved by this practice alone, listening to and summarizing carefully what each other expresses.

**Perfect understanding.** Summarizing may be taken a step further to solve seemingly intractable problems. A clue to the need for an added step is that people have already tried to talk out their issue *but do not feel understood*. Somehow, they think, this other person is not getting what I am saying. By focusing more carefully, we can usually elicit the critical nuances missing:

Speaker one says something.

Speaker two summarizes it and concludes with a question: “Do I understand you perfectly?”

If speaker one says “Yes, you do,” then a message was transmitted in one direction without distortion and received as the sender intended. Since sending and receiving were successful with that leg, the turn shifts to the other person.

Speaker two then responds as he or she wishes.

Speaker one summarizes and concludes with, “Do I understand you perfectly?”

If speaker two says “Yes you do,” then two complete ideas were exchanged accurately, and so far both parties feel their meaning was grasped.

What typically occurs instead is that nuances important to the speaker are not yet included in the listener’s summary. Perhaps the listener gave their standard spin to the other’s message, read something into it, a feeling tone was missing (“You’re *really steamed* about this”), or a key element was overlooked. When such gaps occur, the sender of the message says “No, not quite. You don’t understand me perfectly,” and rephrases or restates their message.

The listener again summarizes, includes the correction, and asks a second time, “Do I understand you perfectly?” When people have long been at loggerheads over an issue, the one in the listening role may need several tries at summarizing and being corrected before they satisfy the sender that they understand “perfectly.” They continue back and forth in this manner until they fully and accurately understand what each other are saying.

Consider using this level of summarizing especially after communications have broken down. Because of its focus on correcting details *presumed* to be understood that weren’t, it may help turn a corner in a negotiation or problem-resolution. Even after people do say they understand each other perfectly, they may still disagree due to different values or priorities, but at least have removed unnecessary misunderstanding as a factor.

**Problem-solving.** Using the prior skills appropriately sets the stage for success with this one. Visible data has been taken account of, clues about people’s hidden feelings are checked out, and a field of shared understanding illuminates the problem. Next we want to resolve it.

A standard format is to define the problem, brainstorm solutions, assess their effectiveness one at a time, select one, make an agreement to carry it out, schedule a monitoring step to verify results, and agree to modify it as needed. In the context of our aim, other considerations may be helpful.

1. *Are the parties to the problem involved in the solution?* Often an aspect of a problem arises from the actions of people at a distance—someone at the district office, an impersonal requirement, an arbitrary rule. Decision-makers may not fully grasp the impact of what they insist on. A condition for a solution may be to obtain the presence of those who possess the decision-making capacity to carry out a solution.
2. *Is the problem expressed in a form everyone wants to solve?* A proposal expressing the interests of only a portion of the parties involved is more likely to fail. Everyone benefits by superior communications that enable them to view the problem in a form that includes everyone. The willingness to “see it as the other sees it” is half the battle. You accomplish this when each can use the same sentence to describe the problem and say, “Yes, that’s the one I want to solve.”
3. *Are we over-reaching?* Human systems constantly produce unintended, undesired, and unforeseen consequences. Some presume a political perspective, with their arena of action in broad-based social change. As Hunter Thompson aptly observed, “Politics is the art of controlling your environment,” an aim overlapping with our intent to bring a single institutional facet of our environment under control. But we don’t want to load a larger problem on a smaller level of resolution actually open to us.
4. *Can we solve our problem just by changing our viewpoint?* The world swarms with problems, and we can declare every one of them our own if we wish. The distinction between the circles of concern and control proposed by Stephen Covey helps to confine the problem to what we and our allies can solve. We proceed rapidly when all actionable facets are within the circle we explicitly manage. As our concerns expand beyond our control, we design frustration for ourselves. Every issue we worry about but over which we have no decisive power is simply a self-imposed aggravation. But because we choose it, we can also resolve it quickly by releasing conditions beyond our control as, for now at least, not our business.

**A working group.** Systemic change involves a basic shift from thinking as an individual to thinking as *we*. A general plan incorporating and redirecting the actions of a large number of people can fail unless they relinquish a certain ownership of their thoughts to the judgment of the group. The optimal place for this change is in small working groups that meet regularly to talk through everything affecting their common goal.

Their main constraint is just failing really to listen to each other and consider each one’s ideas deeply. The most obvious clues of this are habits of interruption. People do so not necessarily out of disrespect for others but from an innocent preoccupation with their own ideas. A thought floats through their mind and attracts them, and their enthusiasm for it impels them to say it.

The problem this creates for the group may be that it finished talking about that five minutes ago and went on to something else. A group perspective, a group mind, a group focus is everyone's creation but easily fractured when even one or a few depart from it. Because of people's natural desire to express their ideas, this occurs easily. We tend to hold onto our train of thought past when the group has switched to something else, putting everyone definitely "on different pages." Since everyone's best thoughts are not focused on the issue at hand, a time-consuming muddling occurs until people finally regroup around one topic.

A remedy for this is a group's agreement to apply guidelines. This came home to me when my wife then and I were invited to conduct a two-week workshop for a church group burdened by internal conflicts and threatened with breakup.

A month later when we arrived in their community, the group's board of directors was about to meet and we were invited to sit in. The meeting was so cordial and effective, however, that I was taken aback, and later drew aside one of the directors.

*"How could your group be having problems?" I asked her, "when you have that quality of discussion on your board?"*

She smiled, drew a piece of paper from her pocket, and handed it to me. It was a copy of the ten points I had sent to them titled "Successful Group Communication."

*"We just put this in front of us and follow it during the meeting," she said.*

Below is the list of the 10 points, slightly expanded:

1. Check your inner activity. Notice others' desire to speak, feel respect and consideration, wait your turn, focus on the one speaking, and don't interrupt.
2. Use short messages instead of long. Weave together many short messages like a tapestry.
3. Allow brief silence after each comment to let everyone think about it and consider if they want to speak next.
4. Summarize the previous comment before adding your own. Refer to others' names, thoughts, and words. Remembering what others say creates continuity.
5. Check your guesses about others' thoughts and feelings. If you don't understand what the speaker says, ask someone else to clarify and let the speaker verify or correct it further. Describe objectively what affects you.
6. Appreciation is central. Thank people, give compliments, and tell what helped you. Feelings have priority over thoughts. Mirror back others' feelings, clarify them and focus on the positive.
7. Complete a train of thought. Get group consent to switch topics. Review the progress of the discussion from time to time. Point out similarities and differences, and don't water down the latter.
8. Include everyone. Get their viewpoint and feelings and accept them all. Respect everyone's right to their opinion and draw in the hesitant.
9. Welcome correction. The quality of a discussion depends on everyone being able to say what they really think. Welcome others' challenges, feedback, and corrections gracefully and appreciatively.

10. Share leadership. People develop skill and confidence as they practice contributing to and initiating group thought.

The group leader can introduce such a list at the first meeting:

We all have our own ideas and we all think they're important. Our problem as a group is how to draw the best from each one's thought and combine our ideas. The list helps us keep on track with one train of thought at a time. Until we get used to it, I suggest that we pause our conversation every fifteen minutes or so, scan the list, and check ourselves on the points we personally used and those we could do better. Is that agreeable?

**Making the plan work.** Since in our time-space continuum events don't happen all at once, we rely on estimates. Activities require a length of time, conditions evolve and come together, assumptions about people wait to be verified, and so on. The power of hidden factors applies not only to individuals but also to our overall plan, suggesting that we regard our process as at least somewhat evolutionary rather than "do it once correctly." The following steps help achieve this:

1. *Plan.* An overall conception is our starting point, how an array of people, resources, and tasks can accomplish a purpose.
2. *Organize.* The activities of the plan are spelled out and assigned to individuals. Work is divided up, roles are clarified, checkpoints are determined, and agreements made.
3. *Act.* People do what they agreed to do. While the prior steps were conceptual, this one is hands-on. People carry out the actions that achieve the purpose.
4. *Monitor.* Monitoring the results of our actions makes our plan adaptive and flexible. We accept that our efforts may not conform perfectly to expectations. Estimates may be off, and assumptions may not pan out. To find out, *we must monitor the reality*, watch it in operation. We gather data, observe, get feedback, and count up our varied metrics to inform us of how our actions proceed. Doing so, we note instantly whether we are as efficient as we hoped or need to change our course.
5. *Correct.* Using the information gathered in the prior step, we modify our plan, returning to step one for a fresh cycle of the five steps of implementation. We acknowledge faulty guesses, identify how to redirect our plan to improve our results, and change accordingly.

All levels of an adaptive organization—from the overall phases of the plan down to an individual carrying out a single task—need to apply these five steps steadily. At all levels, unworkable ideas must be unfixed from their niche and reordered to serve the better idea of our plan. If our monitoring step reassures us unflaggingly that our initial plan worked just fine and no corrections are needed, we have the comfort of data verifying that our guesses were perfect out of the box.

Our theme to this point presumes implementing a plan, but it may not exist yet. In that situation, how might we draw on the ideas above?

An observant reader might note that just applying these ideas constitutes a sound beginning. Once people commit to eliciting and resolving hidden material, the result is a sharp gain in their collective rationality. Mediocre thinking is spotted and improved on, and the best ideas are

weighed by all regardless of their source. With their individual and group commitment to helping each other change, people are better able to make good judgments about the reforms most likely to benefit their students and school.

#### About the Author

John Jensen is a licensed clinical psychologist and education consultant. His three volume *Practice Makes Permanent* series is in publication with Rowman and Littlefield. The first book of the series due in February is *Teaching So Students Work Harder and Enjoy It: Practice Makes Permanent*. He can be reached at [jjensen@gci.net](mailto:jjensen@gci.net).

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*Francis M. Duffy*



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