Dynamic Leadership for Systemic Change in School Districts

This article is an excerpt from my newest book, *Power, politics and ethics: Dynamic leadership for whole-system change in school districts*. Leading Systemic School Improvement Series. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Education.

Introduction

The term systemic change has many definitions. So, it is important for you to know right at the start that when the term systemic school improvement is used in this article it refers specifically to transforming an entire school district and its relationship with its external environment. I'll elaborate on this definition later in the article. This kind of transformation requires dynamic change leadership that is colored brightly by the ethical use of power and political skills.

It is also important to define the term dynamic leadership. Dynamic leadership means leading with courage, passion and vision (Duffy, 2003). Dynamic leadership means doing the "right thing" even when the right thing is politically incorrect or unpopular. Dynamic leadership requires a change leader to step out in front of her colleagues and lead.　Dy-

namic leadership is about influencing relationships between and among individuals, teams, schools, and clusters of schools within a school district. Dynamic leadership is partially a function of a change leader's ability to earn and maintain the trust and respect of his colleagues. Dynamic leadership is enacted with technical knowledge and skills for leading change and turbo-charged by using power and political skills in ethical ways. Dynamic leadership means orchestrating change much like a conductor arranges and manages a symphony orchestra.

Yet, despite the significant need for dynamic leadership for systemic change in school districts and despite what we know is needed to provide dynamic leadership for that kind of change, there remains a leadership conundrum that blocks the emergence of effective dynamic change leadership. This conundrum can best be characterized as a failure of change leadership.

A Leadership Conundrum

We all know them. They are our colleagues who move into leadership positions and then become intoxicated with their

new authority and power. What is it about a leadership position that inebriates practitioners with their newfound power? What is it about leaders drunken with their power that brings them to use negative political acts to hurt others and ultimately hurt their school systems? Where and when in their careers do some education leaders lose their moral compass–their personal code of ethics; or, worse yet, did they ever have one? And what is it about leadership for change that magnifies these negative leadership dynamics? These questions, and others like them, present a leadership conundrum–a failure of leadership. Let's see if we can unravel this mystery to understand why it exists.

One of the answers to the above questions lies in preparation programs for education leaders. The premise for the existence of these programs is that leadership can be taught. Cook (2000), Block (2003), Farson (1996) and others including Ackoff (1981), believe leadership *cannot* be taught. Leadership, they believe, is a matter of who a man or woman is as a person. Therefore, how a person behaves in a leadership role may be more a function of *who she is* rather

than a function of *what she knows.*

The "who, not what" conceptualization of leadership suggests that there is a set of qualities that are somewhat analogous to human personality. People are born with their core personalities in place. Over time personality qualities are refined until the personality is relatively unchangeable. Leadership qualities, like personality qualities, are not trainable, but they can be enhanced. Therefore, leadership behavior emerges as leaders act in ways that are congruent with their core values and beliefs. They behave this way almost unconsciously. Therefore, the content and orientation of their core values and beliefs will define how they lead.

The answers to the above questions must also include a variation of the adage, "teachers teach the way they were taught." Education leaders probably lead the way they were led. Thus, another way to understand the leadership conundrum is to suggest that some education leaders are probably significantly influenced by negative role models for leadership in school districts.

A more cynical explanation of why an education leader may use power and political acts in negative ways is that this behavior works. It produces results. Ethical behavior, however, never gets applause because it's tacitly expected. Even though ethical behavior can positively affect one's reputation over the long run,

short term praise and rewards for being ethical are not forthcoming.

Since unethical behavior creates results it is sometimes tolerated. It is only punished when it is unashamedly and unskillfully used. And, when tolerated unethical behavior produces valued results it is rewarded with extended contracts, merit pay increases, and promotions. Experience shows, however, that unethical behavior only works for the short-run. In the long-run, there are negative consequences such as the destruction of trust, the decline of morale, and the withdrawal of commitment. A more personal side-effect of the unethical use of power and political behavior is that the reputation of the unethical leader can be permanently damaged for the remainder of her career within a school district. When this happens, a "damaged" leader may quit or be fired, but then, quite disturbingly, he gets hired by another school district where he repeats his patterned unethical leadership behavior (I often wonder about how and why this happens.).

The organization design of school systems also contributes to the unethical use of power and political acts. The dominant organization design in school districts is a mechanistic hierarchy organized as a bureaucracy. Leadership in bureaucratic hierarchies aims to enforce rigid chains of command, to control resources tightly, and to exercise strict command and control. This kind of control is not necessarily a bad thing, but it

can be if people in the power positions fall victim to its temptations—the temptations associated with power and ego gratification.

While rigid chains of command worked well in the past when organizations like school systems required stability and little change, this design seems not to work in organizations within complex, rapidly changing environments and staffed with highly educated, semi-autonomous workers. These kinds of organizations are called knowledge organizations (Duffy, 2002). In knowledge organizations, leaders need commitment from followers, not compliance.

Negative leadership dynamics also are magnified during times of great change. This may happen because education leaders sometimes do not know how to lead large-scale change. They learned old fashioned, outdated change theories that no longer work. In fact, these old theories probably never worked consistently to produce desired outcomes. Then, as they are repeatedly frustrated in their efforts to lead change with non-existent or outdated change leadership skills they resort to the negative use of power and political acts to force change; which, of course, fails more often than not.

Transforming Leader and Follower Roles

I am not suggesting that education leaders should avoid using power and political be-

havior. They should and they must. What I am suggesting is that power and political behavior must be used in ethical ways to create good outcomes for entire school systems. Furthermore, I am not suggesting that leadership positions should be abolished and transformational change turned over to a leaderless "mob." The voice of leadership is needed and will continue to be needed to guide whole school systems along winding paths toward desirable new futures. Instead, the roles of leaders and followers must also be transformed. This transformation will redefine leader and follower roles in ways that allow each to act differently toward each other as they collaborate to improve student, faculty and staff, and whole-system learning in their school districts.

The transformation of leader and follower roles will not automatically create desirable and effective behavior. A school system's reward system will also need to be re-tooled to reinforce desirable behavior. Edward Thorndike (1966) taught us that behavior that is rewarded is repeated and behavior that is repeated is learned. This principle is reinforced by Richard Farson (1996) who suggests that people do not learn from their failures–they learn from their successes (success is rewarded and therefore the behaviors that created success are repeated and learned). Unfortunately, this principle applies to bad behavior as well as good. So, it is important to reinforce the right behaviors. The right behaviors

will be those that support a district's code of ethics, its grand vision, and its strategic direction.

The reshaping of leader and follower roles must occur at all levels of a school district, including at the level of the school board. Superintendents won't change their leadership behavior unless their school boards change how superintendents are evaluated and rewarded. Central office staff won't change their follower behavior unless their superintendents change how they evaluate and reward their staff. Principals won't change their leadership behaviors until their superiors change how they evaluate and reward the principals. Teachers won't change their follower behaviors until building principals change the way they evaluate and reward teachers. Unlearning dysfunctional and ineffective leader and follower behaviors is everyone's mandate.

Changing school board members' behavior is difficult. Often, people in these positions have political aspirations beyond the school board meeting room. These aspiring politicians have goals that create short-term wins for them, sometimes at the expense of their school systems. In creating their short-term political wins school board members of this class sometimes use their school districts and its leaders as scapegoats. In responding to or anticipating scapegoating, district leaders can then fall into one of two response modes: they either become defensive or they take aggressive preemptive actions. In

either mode, district leaders can easily find themselves using power and political skills in unethical ways; e.g., using their language skills to spin mendacious webs to destroy or sully someone's reputation.

Another reason why changing school board behavior is difficult is finding a lever to motivate them to change. This lever is not easy to find. Who evaluates school board members? To whom are school board members accountable? For elected school boards, some would argue that voters hold them accountable by periodically going to polling booths. Despite the prospects of being voted out of office, experience shows that some school board members thumb their collective noses at the voters and their communities. They, too, are drunk with their power. We see this behavior in how they treat people who show up at public meetings. We see it in their arrogance and condescension. We see it in the controversial decisions they make in closed executive sessions. And then they are re-elected–more often as the result of their election campaign rhetoric than of the outcomes of their work. Fortunately, this is not true for all school boards.

What about appointed school boards? Who holds them accountable? The person who appoints them? Political appointees hold their positions because they kowtow to their benefactors' political agenda. As long as appointed school board members are in good favor with their benefactors, they stay on the board regard-

less of the kind of leadership they provide.

Teacher unions are another reason why education leaders sometimes fall into using power and political acts in unethical ways. Good and decent leaders descend into frustration and desperation in the face of their failed attempts to convince teacher union leaders to collaborate for change. Out of frustration and desperation, education leaders can resort to using power and political acts in unethical ways. The two teacher unions in the United States are infamous for their recalcitrance and negative political behavior. Instead of acting as partners for change, teacher union leaders occasionally act as combative adversaries who put the union's interests above those of children.

Every Leadership Act Is a Political Act

In the world of change leadership, every act is a political act. A political act is one that uses power to achieve some aim—either personal or for the benefit of an entire school system. Sometimes these political acts are ethical and sometimes they are not. To act in a political way that is also ethical means that change leaders strive to make sure people fit appropriately into the power structure of their school systems. Fitting people appropriately into the power structure means making sure that the right people are in the right positions, have the right amount of power to do their jobs well, and have the capac-

ity to use their power effectively.

Speaking of capacity to use power effectively, the concept of empowerment is insufficient. It is not enough to empower people. People need to have the *opportunity* to use their newly bestowed power, the *capacity* (i.e., knowledge and skills) to use that power, and the *willingness* to use it. Therefore, people need to be enabled to use power, not just empowered.

Some leaders are reluctant to share their power because of the mental model in their heads about the nature of power. They think their power is like the money in their wallet. If they share some of that money with others, they have less money and the others have more—a win/lose relationship.

Power is more like the knowledge we have in our heads. When we share our knowledge with someone, that knowledge interacts with the other person's knowledge and the potential to improve both the quantity and quality of the shared knowledge increases. Power sharing works the same way as knowledge sharing. But this is a hard-sell to some folks in managerial and leadership positions who hang on to the win/lose mental model as if it was their dying breath.

Although we all are familiar with power-abusers who use their political skills negatively, the more pernicious power-players are those warmhearted, touchy-feely, fuzzy-

wuzzy huggy bears and the "father knows best" types who are absolutely convinced that you do not know what's good for yourself, *but they do*! And by God they're going to lead you to their world view with warm smiles, gentle hugs and granite-hard dogmatism.

We also need protection from these good people who think they know what's good for us. As Paterson (1993, 1943) observes, "Most of the harm in the world is done by good people, and not by accident, lapse or omission." Paterson's quote is from her book originally published in 1943 which was a devastating critique of collectivism and a staunch defense of individualism. The quote is a searing indictment of those with a deep-seated Maslovian need to act "in the best interests" of others.

Power and Political Behaviors Are Needed to Reinforce Disequilibrium

Discontent or discomfort with one's current situation does not by itself stir a desire for change. In the language of systems theory, discontent or discomfort creates disequilibrium. Disequilibrium is a necessary antecedent of change. Kurt Lewin (1951) referred to the creation of disequilibrium as "unfreezing." However, if disequilibrium was the only ingredient needed to motivate educators in school districts to change, there would be a lot more change. A critical factor must reinforce disequilibrium: change leaders' willingness to use power and political behavior in ethical ways.

Change leaders who feel powerless and in a state of stupefaction about their situations cannot lead change, no matter how unhappy they are with the current state of their school systems. When change leaders feel powerless, when they feel like they have no influence, they predictably persist with what they know. They establish routines and habits of the mind that wrap them in the comforting delusion of being in control of their situations and this perception of being in control is fed by their nearly obsessive need to manage the minor details of other people's work.

To create and sustain whole-system change, change leaders must believe as a matter of deep faith that they have the power to lead their school districts' transformation journeys. Then, they must use their power because power held unused is remarkably useless. Furthermore, the use of power necessitates political behavior. Political behavior can be both negative and destructive, or it can be positive and constructive. Thus, the intent of political behavior depends on the ethics of the power-user. This dependency is analogous to a double-edge sword lying on a table. The sword is neutral–it is neither good nor bad. It is the ethics of the swordsman that will make the sword an instrument for good or one for evil. It is the ethics of the power-user that will make her political behavior an instrument for good or one for evil.

Positive political behavior benefits individuals, groups and whole organizations. Destructive political behavior injures people, groups and organizations and is intended to benefit the power-users. Although destructive political behavior benefits the power-user in the short-term, in the long-term he will suffer from the consequences of that famous circular Karmic dynamic that is so familiar to many of us: "what goes around comes around."

The Context for the Ethical Use of Power and Political Skills

The concept of "systemic change" provides the context for the kind of change leadership needed to create and sustain whole-system change in school districts. Because the term has different meanings, I need to elaborate on the meaning to which I subscribe.

Squire and Reigeluth (2000) identify four distinct meanings of the term:

Statewide policy systemic change. This meaning focuses on statewide changes in tests, curricular guidelines, teacher-certification requirements, textbook adoptions, funding policies, and so forth. These changes are supposed to be coordinated to support one another (Smith & O'Day, 1990). This meaning is frequently used by policymakers when they talk about systemic change.

Districtwide systemic change. Educators subscribing to this meaning see systemic change as any change, including new programming, intended to spread across an entire school district. This is the meaning often held by preK-12th grade educators.

Schoolwide systemic change. Using this meaning, educators see systemic change happening inside single school buildings and it typically involves "…a deeper (re)thinking of the purposes of schooling and the goals of education" (Squire & Reigeluth, 2000, p. 144). This is the meaning that seems to inform the work of such groups as the New American Schools, Inc. and the Coalition of Essential Schools.

Ecological systemic change. This meaning sees systems as rich networks of interrelationships and interdependencies within the system and between the system and its "systemic environment" (the larger system of which it is a part, its peer systems within that larger system, and other systems with which it interacts outside of its larger system). This perspective recognizes that a significant change in one part of a system requires changes in other parts of the system. It also recognizes the need for changes in three interconnected aspects of a system: its core and supporting work processes, its internal social architecture, and its relationships with its environment (Duffy, Rogerson, & Blick, 2000). This view of systemic change subsumes the other three meanings, and it is how "systems thinkers" view systemic change (e.g., Ackoff, 1981; Banathy, 1996; Checkland, 1984; Emery & Purser,

1996; Senge, 1990). This is the meaning that I use.

Conclusion

The challenges, paradoxes, problems and predicaments that change leaders face while planning and implementing complex, system-wide change in their school districts require them to have the will and capacity to use power and political behavior in ethical and skillful ways. Without political awareness and skill, they will predictably become caught up in bureaucratic infighting, selfish politics, and destructive power struggles, which will greatly impede their district's transformation journey. If they use their power and political skills in unethical ways, they will almost certainly damage their reputations and injure their school systems.

Transforming school systems to create and sustain innovations that improve student, faculty, staff, and whole system learning requires focusing on a number of issues emerging from the interplay of power and politics. The way change leaders respond to these issues should be based on a personal and system-wide code of ethics. The issues will have a direct and powerful influence on their efforts to create requisite changes in three key areas: their district's relationships with its external environment, its core and supporting work processes, and its internal social architecture. The way in which change leaders resolve these issues will affect their system's overall performance in the three

areas just listed. Examples of these issues include:

• Implementing transformational change when people want their school system to maintain its status quo;
• Fostering innovative thinking and puzzle solving despite resistance to new ideas;

• Acquiring resources and political support from individuals and groups who may have a political agenda different than the change leaders' agenda;

• Managing conflict with others whose help and cooperation are needed; and,

• Diagnosing power relationships to anticipate and countervail negative politics by others.

This article provided an opportunity to think differently about power, politics and ethics to provide dynamic leadership for systemic change in school districts. The key to successfully implementing transformational change in school districts and improving the long term performance of these districts will undoubtedly rest upon dynamic leadership for whole-system change—leadership driven by the ethical use of power and political behavior.

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Thank you for your interest in these Reports.

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