Change Leadership Challenges

[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.]

Navigating large-scale, district-wide change is challenging work. Yet, there are examples of it happening; for example, in the Chugach School District in Alaska, one of the first two school districts in the United States to win the prestigious Baldrige Award for Quality in Education (2003); and the Metropolitan School District of Decatur Township in Indianapolis, Indiana,[1] facilitated by Dr. Charles Reigeluth from Indiana University. Navigating change at this scale requires change leaders who are courageous, passionate and visionary using power and political skills in ethical ways.

Change leaders focusing on whole-system transformation, in spite of their ethical use of power and political skills, will

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[1] You can visit the website for their transformation journey at http://www.indiana.edu/~syschang/decatur/index.html.

inevitably face significant challenges during their district's journey toward a desirable new future—a future that captures extraordinary opportunities to improve student, faculty and staff, and whole system learning. In this article, 21 key challenges that change leaders may face while leading transformational change in their districts are presented. The challenges are described below.

Challenge #1: Learning Change Leadership Knowledge and Skills

One of the key reasons why large-scale change fails is that those trying to lead it are sometimes not well-versed in the theoretical knowledge and practical skills they need to lead this kind of change. Graduate programs preparing future school administrators ought to develop a specialty area in change leadership; for example, at Gallaudet University the faculty in the Department of Administration and Supervision recently re-tooled their Education Specialist program to offer an Education Specialist Degree in Change Leadership in Education; and their Doctor of Philosophy Program in Special Education Administration has a set of 5

courses focusing on organization improvement.

In the absence of formal graduate programs focusing on change leadership, educators (teachers as well as administrators) with an interest in leading change in their school systems could design and implement a personal learning plan. This plan would bring them to books, articles, and perhaps courses in graduate schools of business where they could learn what they need to know to lead change effectively.

Because foundational knowledge and skills are so important to effective change leadership it would be a serious mistake for change leaders to launch a large-scale change effort without that knowledge and those skills. In fact, it can be predicted that if these leaders do not have prerequisite change leadership knowledge and skills their change effort will fail.

Challenge #2: Becoming Systems Thinkers and System "Changers"

To transform an entire school system, change leaders in that system must know what a system is and how it functions;

they must understand what it means to be a systems thinker; they must be able to define the system to be improved; they must understand the dynamics of critical system archetypes; and they must be skillful in using a set of systems thinking tools. And then they must use that knowledge to transform their school systems.

Challenge #3: Overcoming the System's History With Change

The field of education is littered with the debris of failed change efforts. When people working in a school district repeatedly experience failed change efforts at best they become cynical about the newest change proposal. At worst, they become hard core guerrilla warriors working to undermine the latest "fad" that change leaders are trying to introduce to their systems.

When educators experience either a pattern of failed change efforts or frequent change brought on by each new superintendent, they become resistant to change, angry, depressed, burned-out, or a combination of these emotions. If change leaders are in a system where these kinds of emotions are prevalent, then they must take time to work with people to help restore hope and optimism and ultimately strengthen commitment to the change process that is being proposed–*before* launching the change effort. If change leaders try to launch a change effort without identifying these emotions and then taking steps to work through

them, the change effort will fail.

Challenge #4: Becoming Willing to Break or Bend Rules

Rule-breaking or rule-bending is a hallmark characteristic of effective change leaders. It is only through the circumvention of rules that true innovation can happen because the rules almost always protect the status quo.

The only rules that I know of that were sent directly from God are the Ten Commandments. All other rules were created by people to protect their self-interests, their ideas, and their turf. Of course, not all rules should be broken or bent because the consequences of breaking or bending them are severe; e.g., it is probably unwise to break rules associated with local, state and federal laws although there may be laws that should be protested and perhaps disobeyed if they are seriously flawed or inherently unfair.

Even though it is important to identify rules that can be circumvented, it is challenging for change leaders to do so. It is especially challenging for change leaders who like rules and believe in them. These people can make rule-breaking easier by using the principle of "outside-in analysis" (Beckhard, 1983). With outside-in analysis, change leaders identify those rules that are not required by law and that are defined as policies. They search for policies, especially within their school district, that are potential obstacles to change. Then they

figure out ways to change the policies or to circumvent them. If these policies are not changed or circumvented, then when change ideas are proposed people will say, "We can't do that because the policy says…."

Challenge #5: Unfreezing Mental Models [2]

One of the central challenges for change leaders in the present day environment for school districts is the challenging task of creating and sustaining systemic school improvement. Systemic school improvement focuses on making three sets of simultaneous district-wide improvements: improve a district's relationship with its external environment, improve how educators do their core and supporting work, and improve a school district's internal social "architecture." This kind of whole-system change requires educators to unlearn and learn mental models that inform their work, influence their internal social architecture, and affect their external relationships.

Challenge # 6: Creating Disequilibrium in the System

It's a fact–when a system is in a state of balancing or stable equilibrium, not much is changing. To create change, especially whole-system change, that stable equilibrium must be disrupted to create reinforcing or unstable equilibrium. With reinforcing equilib-

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[2] For more in-depth discussion of this challenge, please see Duffy, F. M. (2003).

rium change happens and happens quickly. The danger is that reinforcing equilibrium is like a neutral third party–it doesn't care if the change is positive or negative. Either way, it will make change happen quickly.

Challenge #7: Managing Organizational Entropy

Entropy is a law of physics. Systems of all kinds, including our human bodies, consume energy. The "energy" used by school systems includes human energy, equipment, money, books, furniture, and other supplies. The depletion of this energy is called entropy.

In living systems, entropy cannot be stayed and always results in death. In organizations, entropy can lead to figurative death. However, in organizations entropy can also be slowed or reversed by replenishing resources and human energy. This replenishment process is called negative entropy or negentropy. Change leaders must be aware of entropy and know how to create negentropy if they want to lead their school systems effectively toward desirable futures (see Duffy, 2003 for more about entropy and negentropy while changing school systems).

Acknowledging That The Best Time To Change an Organization Is When It's Doing Well

 "Deeply troubled companies don't usually seek help. And when they do, they have a hard time benefiting from it" (Farson, 1996, p. 95). Burke

(2002) says that "A paradox of organization change is that the peak of success is the time to worry and to plan for and bring about significant change" (p. 1). This suggests that the best time to transform a school system is when it is "healthy" and doing well and the worst time to do this is when a school system is failing. Healthy, well-functioning school systems are often easier to improve that failing ones.

Challenge # 9: Learning That The Path to the Future is Not A Straight Line Upward and Forward

The traditional approach to change management assumes that change rolls out according to a rational plan that is relatively straightforward and sequential. Experience, however, serves as a powerful counterpoint. Change rolls out in illogical, paradoxical ways that rather resembles winding paths coursing their way toward a future. Burke (2002) provides examples of why change is nonlinear and messy. He says,

> The implementation process is messy: Things don't proceed exactly as planned; people do things their own way, not always according to the plan; some people resist or even sabotage the process; and some people who would be predicted to support or resist the plan actually behave in just the opposite way. In short, unanticipated consequences occur. (p. 2)

And, these consequences are made even more complex because they often appear as paradoxes representing unknowable realities in human affairs (Farson, 1996).

These paradoxes, according to Farson, cannot be controlled or managed. Effective change leaders engage these situations by tapping into the collective wisdom of the "community" inside their districts instead of relying on their own unique perspectives. Farson (1996) suggests that change leaders wrestling with paradoxes find their strength as leaders "…not in control, but in their passion, sensitivity, tenacity, patience, courage, firmness, enthusiasm and wonder" (p. 35).

Challenge #10: Responding Quickly to the Unexpected Consequences of Change

The organization design of most school systems is bureaucratic and hierarchical. In turbulent times this mechanistic design (Daft, 2001) can create arthritic-like symptoms in a school district that prevent people from reacting quickly to seize unexpected opportunities (discussed later) or to protect the system from startling threats. A more appropriate organization design for today's school systems is what organization theorists call the organic design, which increases a school system's flexibility and speed in responding to opportunities and threats in its external environment.

Challenge #11: Working to anticipate and prevent iatrogenic effects. With transformational change, change leaders must be aware of iatrogenic effects. These dreadful effects are commonly found in the field of health care and they are defined as "physician induced," as when a patient dies of staphylococcal infection induced by a doctor not washing her hands before treating a patient; or the patient who becomes deathly sick with an infection caused by a surgical tool inadvertently left inside the patient's body by a surgeon. In school districts engaged in systemic change, with every "big" change or improvement there may be iatrogenic effects that are exactly the opposite of what you intended. Therefore, it is important for you to apply principles of systems thinking to anticipate unintended consequences of your planned changes.

Challenge #12: Surviving environmental "tsunami." Another source of unexpected consequences is found in a school district's external environment. Some external forces roll over a school district like a flooding tsunami and it is very difficult, perhaps impossible, for people in the district to influence the direction of these forces or their consequences (for example, consider the impact of the No Child Left Behind legislation).

Challenge #13: Recognizing the difference between problems and predicaments. Unexpected outcomes come in the form of paradoxes. Some of these will be problems to be

solved and others will be true predicaments. While problems can be solved, predicaments cannot. Farson (1996) tells us that people can only muddle through predicaments. While problem-solving requires analytical thinking, muddling through predicaments requires interpretive thinking that puts a larger frame around the puzzling situation so its complexity can be understood. In fact, predicaments worsen if they are treated as problems to be solved. Change leaders moving their districts toward transformational change will need to interpret and work their way through predicaments more than they solve problems.

Challenge # 14: Accepting the Importance of Equifinality

Equifinality is a concept from the field of organization development (Cummings & Worley, 2001). In plain English it means there is more than one acceptable way to achieve the same goal. Within the context of systemic school improvement it means that given a strategic framework to work within, educators can be innovative in how they create improvements within their district. But, whatever innovations they imagine, changes must be aligned with the overall strategic direction of the district; that is, they must fit within the strategic framework. The opposite of equifinality is found in those situations where senior administrators identify changes to be made, issue directives that must be obeyed about what must be changed, and then tell people exactly how to make the changes. Giving people free-

dom to innovate within specified boundaries (the strategic framework) is not an easy thing for control-minded change leaders to do, yet when equifinality is encouraged and supported it gives people the delimited autonomy they need to innovate (complete autonomy would move a system toward anarchy). Autonomy, by the way, is one of six psychological requirements for creating a motivating work environment (Emery & Thorsrud, 1976).

Challenge #15: Managing Human Relations

Effective human relations in school districts are like glue–they can hold things together. Ineffective human relations are like solvent–they can dissolve the connections between and among people. Whole-system change in school districts requires glue, not solvent, because when change leaders are trying to transform their entire school district they need ways to bind people together in support of their district's new grand vision and strategic direction.

Effective human relations involve more than communicating better, although good communication is an important element of human relations. Effective human relations also create authentic opportunities for people throughout a district to participate actively and meaningfully in the transformation of their district instead of complying with directives to change. Effective human relations require change leaders to identify those who support change, those who object to it,

and those who haven't made up their mind about the changes. Effective human relations not only focus on people inside a district, but also on individuals and groups in the external environment. Finally, effective human relations help change leaders to recognize, honor, and work through resistance to change. Several examples of important human relations that need to be managed are highlighted below as challenges 16-21.

Challenge # 16: Enabling others to lead and contribute. There is no question that the superintendent of schools as the senior executive in a school district must lead whole-system change. Her leadership must be unequivocal and visible. However, her leadership alone is insufficient for creating and sustaining whole-system change. A superintendent's leadership is like a tree. To succeed in the transformation of a school system, there must be a forest of leaders throughout a school district. Creating a forest of leaders will require a superintendent to have a change of heart and a change of mind about how to involve faculty and staff in a district's transformation journey.

Challenge #17: Working with allies, opponents, adversaries, bedfellows and fencesitters. Peter Block (1991) advises managers about how to use positive political skills to work with five categories of people inside organizations. Block theorizes that managers can use two dimensions when making political decisions about how to interact with

people inside those five categories. The first dimension is "level of agreement." The second dimension is "level of trust." Each dimension runs from high to low. The five categories are:

- *Allies*–this group is defined by high trust and high agreement. You trust them, they trust you, and you are in agreement about what needs to be done.
- *Opponents*–this group is defined by high trust, but low agreement. You trust them, they trust you, but you disagree about what needs to be done.
- *Bedfellows*–this group is defined by low trust and high agreement. You don't trust these people and they don't trust you, but you agree with what needs to be done.
- *Adversaries*–this group is defined by low trust and low agreement. You don't trust these people and they don't trust you. Further, you disagree on what needs to be done.
- *Fencesitters*–this group is defined as the undecided, the uncommitted, the "I can't make up my mind" people.

Block's "five category" concept dovetails with another important change management principle–the principle of "critical mass." Critical mass is physics concept given to us by Kurt Lewin (1951). It serves as metaphor for change leadership. A critical mass is that number of people needed to launch and sustain successful change. The critical mass number seen most often in the literature on change is 25%;

that is, change leaders need about 25% of their faculty and staff who are committed to and willing to support the change process (Block might call these people allies and bedfellows). About 50% of the faculty and staff will stand on the sidelines and observe what's happening, not yet ready to make a commitment one way or the other (these people might be called fence-sitters in Block's model). Another 25% will actively resist the change. Of that final 25%, some of those will be "opponents" whose minds and hearts can be changed and who may eventually support the change. The remaining people in that last 25% group are hard core "adversaries" who will probably never accept or support your change leadership and who may actively work to undermine your leadership.

Identifying the 25% critical mass in support of change, communicating with the 50% fencesitter group, and working to bring opponents into the ally camp, is one of the significant challenges that change leaders must meet before they launch system-wide change. This political work begins prior to launching a whole-system change effort and continues throughout the effort.

Challenge # 18: Working with external stakeholders. Earlier, I identified three paths that must be followed if you want to create and sustain whole-system change in your school district. One of those paths is "improve environmental relationships." A school district's external environment has two

parts: the general environment (the economy, world events, societal norms and values) that districts have no chance of influencing and the task environment (those individuals and groups that a school district interacts with directly and therefore can influence). Key players in a district's external task environment include: local community groups, state departments of education, parent groups, competitors (private schools, both non-profit and for-profit), critics, and suppliers (which include not only suppliers of text books, equipment and so on, but also colleges and universities that prepare future teachers and school administrators).

Change leaders need to improve their district's relationship with these and other key players. To do this, first they have to know who the key players are. Second, they must assess the nature of the relationship they have with the key players and develop strategies for working with each one. Third, they determine what the key players need, want, and expect. Fourth, they determine if, when, and how to respond to their needs, wants, and expectations. Fifth, they use effective public relations that are timely, accurate, honest, simple, clear, and powerful and that are tailored to each key player.

Challenge # 19: Managing resistance to change. Sometimes people and systems don't change quickly. There are different reasons for this "slowness"; e.g., inadequate

resources, weak or failed leadership, and lack of motivation. This slowness is usually characterized as resistance to change.

There are at least four reasons for resistance to change. The first reason is that people frequently resist the efforts of other people to impose change on them. The second main reason is related to human psychology and the need for stability or equilibrium in our lives. The third reason is fear–fear of losing prestige, losing power, losing relationships or losing a job. And, the fourth reason is related to an organization's reluctance to change. One of the most powerful ways to respond to all four sources of resistance is through involvement.

Challenge # 20: Building trust. One thing's for sure...if change leaders have the courage, passion, and vision to lead whole-system change they will get no where if their teachers and professional staff don't trust them. Trust is the foundation for respect. Respect is the cornerstone of professional influence. Influence is the essence of leadership. No trust + no respect + no influence = less than effective change leadership.

Challenge #21: Maintaining personal energy and commitment. System-wide change takes time. William Pasmore (1988) suggests it takes anywhere from 18-36 months. John Kotter (1996) believes it can take between 5 to 7 years. Common sense suggests a pragmatic estimate of the required time which is found in

the planning principle, "plan for the worst and hope for the best"; therefore, assume it will take your school system 5 to 7 years to complete its transformation journey. If transformation takes 5 to 7 years, then another challenge change leaders will confront is creating and deploying strategies for maintaining their personal energy and commitment, as well as the energy and commitment of their colleagues so all of them can persist toward their transformation goals.

Conclusion

School districts are systems. Systems are complex and sometimes mysterious entities that confound people as they attempt to create and sustain change. Leading transformational change predictably raises significant challenges that come in the form of paradoxes and problems. This article identified 21 key challenges that leaders may face when trying to transform their school districts.

Clearly, to navigate a river of complex change made dangerous by invisible system dynamics hidden beneath the surface and marked by the rapids formed by resistance to change, a map (your district's strategic framework) and a compass (a special methodology designed to create transformational change in school systems) will certainly be important. Yet, even though you have a map and compass, you still need people to move the vessel (your district) along the river and through the rapids. Helping people choose to

make the journey (rather than being directed to do so) will require your sophisticated and ethical use of power and political skills.

If you use power and political skills unethically, people will not make the journey effectively or maybe not at all. They will despise you and not trust your motives. Their resistance to your leadership will increase and some of them will figure out creative ways to scuttle the vessel so its journey to the future is ended.

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Thank you for your interest in these Reports.

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