

In Praise of **Top-Down** **LEADERSHIP**

What drives your school improvement efforts — evidence of best practice or the pursuit of universal buy-in?

BY RICHARD DUFOUR

I have noticed an interesting phenomenon when I work with educators on strategies to improve student achievement in their schools. They sometimes confide in me that the central office has issued a “top-down” mandate that all their schools must embrace and model certain key concepts and practices.

The term top-down is uttered with disdain, a pejorative phrase used in much the same way Rush Limbaugh would use “liberal,” and they expect me to be appalled at this affront to the autonomy of educators. After all, isn’t there ample evidence that top-down improvement doesn’t work? (Michael Fullan argues that in the fourth edition of *The New Meaning of Educational Change*.)

Isn’t it clear that improvement initiatives will not occur unless there is buy-in, a willingness of those engaged in the initiative to rally around it? Haven’t researchers warned that without this buy-in you will only generate resentful compliance that dooms the initiative to inevitable failure? Shouldn’t the people closest to the action, those at the school site, decide the direction of their schools?

Unkind Criticism

In the ongoing debate of the efficacy of top-down versus bottom-up strate-

gies to improve school districts, top-down is clearly losing. Many district leaders are reluctant to champion improvement for fear of being labeled with the epithet “top-down leader,” the unkindest cut of all.

The glib advice given to superintendents and principals who actually hope to foster improvement is they must simply build widespread consensus for a concept or initiative before proceeding. But what happens when a well-intentioned leader does everything right in terms of engaging staff members in the consideration of a change initiative and makes a compelling case for moving forward, but the staff prefers the status quo?

Now add one more element to the scenario. The initiative unquestionably represents a clearly better way of operating than what currently is in place. Is the laissez-faire leadership of simply allowing people to do as they wish really the only alternative when collective inquiry, persuasion and attempts at building consensus fail to stir people to act in new ways?

The tension regarding “who decides who decides” how (or even if) a school will be improved ignores a more central question: Does professional autonomy extend to the freedom to disregard what is widely considered best practice in one’s field?

Educators have danced around this question rather than addressing it, and their inattention to the issue has fostered an unhealthy and unrealistic sense of what constitutes professional autonomy. District leaders have contributed to this peculiar view of professionalism because they have allowed teachers and principals the discretion to ignore even the most widely recognized best practices of the profession.

Considerable evidence from Fullan, Philip Schlechty and Richard Elmore indicates that leaving the issue of school improvement to each school to resolve on its own does not result in more effective schools. In other words, the bottom-up approach to school improvement does not work. Conversely, there is considerable research, notably the Harvard PELP Project, to suggest that high-performing districts have coherent strategies for improvement that hold adults accountable for having an impact on student learning in a positive way.

Loose and Tight

Leaders who create schools and districts capable of sustained substantive improvement are not laissez-faire in their approach to education but rather are skillful in implementing the concept of simultaneous loose and tight leadership. The concept also has been referred to as "directed empowerment" (by Robert Waterman in *The Renewal Factor: How the Best Get and Keep the Competitive Edge*) or a "culture of discipline within an ethic of entrepreneurship" (by James Collins in *Good to Great*). This leadership approach fosters autonomy and creativity (loose) within a systematic framework that stipulates clear, non-discretionary priorities and parameters (tight).

Of course, one of the most essential elements of effective loose-tight leadership is getting tight about the right things. Abundant evidence suggests that certain practices, processes and school cultures result in high levels of student



Consultant Rick DuFour wants leaders to exercise authority to adopt proven practices.

achievement. For example, students learn more when those who teach them are very clear and very committed to ensuring each student acquires the intended knowledge, skills and dispositions of each course, grade level and unit of instruction. They learn more when their teachers check for understanding on an ongoing basis and use frequent team-developed common formative assessments rather than individually created summative assessments.

Also, they learn more when their school has timely, directive and systematic interventions that guarantee them additional time and support for learning when they experience difficulty. They learn more when their teachers work in collaborative teams rather than in isolation if their teachers stay focused on the right work. They learn more when members of those collaborative teams work interdependently to achieve specific, results-oriented goals linked to student learning, goals for which they are mutually accountable. They learn more when each teacher has the benefit of frequent and timely information on the achievement of his or her students, user-friendly information that helps the teacher determine the strengths and weaknesses of various instructional strategies.

Also, they learn more when professional development in the school is job-embedded and structures are in place to help teachers learn from one another as

part of their routine work practice. These practices are supported by research, proven to be effective in hundreds of schools and endorsed by professional organizations. Most importantly, they are not counter-intuitive. They pass the test of common sense.

For simplicity sake, let's call the conditions described above the practices of a professional learning community. How might district leaders attempt to integrate these practices into their schools?

Three District Tales

I witnessed the following change processes in three districts that attempted to implement professional learning community concepts in their schools

► District A: *The autocratic approach*

This rural county school district of 15 schools located in the Southeast had shown little interest in professional learning communities until one of its schools demonstrated remarkable gains in student achievement. When the faculty attributed the gains to their implementation of professional learning community concepts, the central office announced every school now would be required to become a PLC. Unfortunately the pronouncement was not accompanied by any attempt to clarify the term, by training, by time for faculties to do the work of professional learning communities or by resources of any kind.

The central office made no effort to monitor the progress of the initiative in any school and did nothing to model its own commitment to PLC practices. This central-office approach had no effect on student achievement, but it did cause a great deal of resentment toward the school that had been singled out for its success.

► District B: *The laissez-faire approach*

The superintendent of this East Coast district, one of the largest in the country, became convinced of the merits of the PLC concept so the board of education stipulated in its annual goals that every

school would become a PLC. The district devoted considerable resources to the initiative, offering ongoing training for all principals and for a teacher team from each of its schools.

Unfortunately, the central office did not speak with one voice regarding the priority of the initiative. Some assistant superintendents supported principals, clarified expectations, monitored the progress of each school and worked with the district's professional development department to coordinate training according to the specific needs of each school. Other assistant superintendents left the initiative to the discretion of each principal. Many of their principals opted not to attend the training. No effort was made to monitor the progress

of their schools.

At the end of two years some schools had made remarkable progress while others had made none.

► *District C: Loose-tight leadership at work*

The superintendent of this district, comprised of 27 schools in suburban Chicago, had become convinced the concept of professional learning communities offered the best hope for significant, sustained school improvement for his district. He arranged for two days of introductory training for the principal and a team of teachers from every school. He advised the teacher union representative of the training and invited her to attend. He actively participated in all of the training, and his entire central-office

leadership team attended as well.

The training was specifically designed to create a common vocabulary, build shared knowledge about the PLC concept, make a compelling case for the benefits of the concept and give all participants the opportunity to express their concerns and questions to the consultants providing the training.

A segment of each day was devoted to "ask the superintendent," and everyone in the room was invited to present a question directly to the superintendent for an immediate and public response. The superintendent made certain to check in with his central-office staff, principals, and teachers during lunch and breaks to get their perspectives on what they were learning.

Changing the Minds of Others

Effective leaders will encourage rather than ignore or squash disagreement among school district staff because they recognize that when managed well, disagreements provide an opportunity to draw out assumptions, build shared knowledge, clarify priorities and find common ground.

Effective leaders also recognize more than one way exists to solve any given problem and they remain open to exploring alternative strategies or timelines for implementation.

On the other hand, they hold firm to the core principle that professionals have an obligation to seek out and implement the best practices for achieving the purpose and priorities of the school and district. Toward that end, they are willing to use every strategy that Howard Gardner, professor of cognition and education at Harvard University, has identified for changing someone's mind.

In his 2006 book *Changing Minds: The Art and Science of Changing Our Own and Other People's Minds*, he offers these strategies (the words are not Gardner's but the categories are):

► *Reasoning and rationale thinking.* "Doesn't it make sense that we can accomplish more by working together collaboratively rather than in isolation, by checking for student understanding through formative assessments rather than waiting for the

results of summative assessments, by creating timely schoolwide systematic interventions when students experience difficulty rather than expecting each teacher to try to figure out how to respond?"

► *Research.* "I have shared the research with you that supports this initiative. I found it compelling. Do you interpret it another way? Do you have any research refuting it we could look at together?"

► *Resonance.* "I know you believe in equity and fairness. Wouldn't it be more equitable and fair if we could assure students they would have access to the same guaranteed curriculum no matter who their teacher is, that their work would be assessed according to the same criteria, that we have a consistent way of responding when they struggle to understand?"

► *Representational re-description.* "I have presented you with the data regarding the fact that large numbers of our students are not being successful. But let me put those numbers in human terms. Let me tell you some stories of the impact their failure is having on their lives."

► *Rewards and resources.* "I acknowledge this will be difficult. That is why I ask your help in identifying the resources you will need to be successful — time, training, materials support, etc. Let's work together to identify them and I pledge I will do

everything in my power to make them available."

► *Real-world events.* "I understand you have misgivings and predict negative consequences if we implement this initiative. But let's visit some schools and districts that have done it successfully. You will hear the enthusiasm of the teachers as they explain how they and their students have benefited."

► *Require.* "I understand you remain unconvinced, but this is the direction in which we are going, and this is what you must do to help us get us there. My hope is that, as you work through the process it will be a positive experience, and you will come to have a more positive disposition toward it."

Effective leaders must recognize that school improvement cannot wait for everyone in the organization to have a favorable attitude toward the proposed change. There is abundant evidence in the fields of psychology, organizational development and education that changes in attitudes follow rather than precede changes in behavior. When work is designed to require people to act in new ways, the possibility of new experiences are created for them. If those new experiences are positive, they can lead to new attitudes and assumptions over time.

— Richard DuFour

By the end of the two days there was palpable, widespread enthusiasm for the concept. Then, in the midst of the initial enthusiasm, the union representative posed a critical question to the superintendent: "This all sounds fine, but are you saying we will be *required* to do this? Is this a top-down mandate?"

It was a pivotal moment in the improvement process. His answer captured the essence of loose-tight leadership.

He said: "Why wouldn't we do this? Is anyone aware of any evidence that this is detrimental to student learning, teacher effectiveness or positive school cultures? This concept is supported by research, endorsed by our professional organizations, implemented with great success in schools around us, and it just makes sense. Knowing the commitment of the teachers in this district to do what is best for kids, how could we not go forward with this? I admit I am not certain as to all the details of implementation, and I will need your ideas as to how we can help all your colleagues become familiar with the concept. I know all of us will need time and resources to move forward, and we will need to consider what we will remove from our plates if we take on this challenge. But I propose this is the work we should be doing, and we need to build on the energy and enthusiasm in this room today and commit to doing whatever it takes to make this happen in our district."

Over the course of the next two years the school district supported ongoing training for every school in the district. Practices were aligned with the initiative, schedules were adjusted to provide teachers with time to engage in the work of professional learning communities, and the focus of administrative meetings changed to support principals in their implementation efforts. Central-office staff met with concerned faculties and groups of teachers to address their questions. In two years, the district had the greatest gains in student achievement in the state.

High Leverage

If some regard the scenario described in District C as top-down leadership, then I come to praise top-down leadership, not to bury it. One of the most essen-

tial responsibilities of leadership is clarity — clarity regarding the fundamental purpose of the organization, the future it must create to better fulfill that purpose, the most high-leverage strategies for creating that future, the indicators of progress it will monitor and the specific ways each member of the organization can contribute both to its long-term purpose and short-term goals.

"One of the most essential responsibilities of leadership is clarity ..."

If educational leaders contend that the purpose of the organization is to ensure all students learn at high levels (as virtually all our mission statements contend) and then they allow people throughout the organization to opt out of practices and processes that are clearly more effective at promoting learning than the prevailing practices, they send mixed messages that will suc-

ceed in creating confusion and cynicism but will fail to improve their schools and districts. Thus they will fail as leaders.

Leaders should certainly use every component of an effective change process and commit to what Elmore, in his 2006 book *School Reform from the Inside Out: Policy, Practice, and Performance*, refers to as "reciprocal accountability." This principle calls upon leaders to help build the capacity of the members of the group to accomplish what they have been asked to accomplish.

For example, if teachers are being asked to collaborate, leaders have an obligation to create structures that make collaboration meaningful rather than artificial, to guarantee time for collaboration during the contractual day, to establish clear priorities and parameters so that teachers focus on the right topics, to help teams make informed decisions by making the essential knowledge base easily accessible to them, to provide meaningful and timely training based on the specific needs of each team, to offer

templates and models to guide their work, and to specify clear expectations and standards to help them assess the quality of their work.

In this sense, the leader functions as a servant leader, asking, "What can I do to give people in this organization the tools and skills to ensure their eventual success as they undertake this challenge."

But just as certainly, leaders must be prepared to insist those within their organizations heed, not ignore, clear evidence of the best, most promising strategies for accomplishing its purpose and priorities. Educational leaders must provide both pressure and support if they are to play a role in improving their schools and districts.

Closing a Gap

I offer four assertions.

First, students will not achieve at higher levels unless the schools that serve them undergo significant changes in both their structures (policies, programs, procedures, schedules) and cultures (assumptions, beliefs, values, expectations and habits that constitute the norm for that school).

While it is relatively easy to implement structural change, it is very difficult to change the culture of an organization. Every existing system has a well-entrenched culture already in place. It is only natural that people working within that system typically will seek to preserve the status quo. They also will be inclined to filter improvement initiatives through the lens of the existing culture, distorting the initiative to fit the culture rather than changing the culture to align with the initiative.

Robert Marzano, Timothy Waters and Brian McNulty, in their 2005 synthesis of research titled *School Leadership That Works*, found in the midst of cultural change educators are likely to perceive their school has been weakened, their opinions are not valued and the stability of the school has been undermined. Periods of frustration and even anger are not uncommon. Conflict and disagreements are inevitable. In short, real cultural change is hard, and it is unrealistic to believe it will be universally embraced.

Second, cultural change will not occur without intentional leadership. Abundant evidence points to the positive impact on student achievement when the practices referenced earlier are in place. Furthermore, educators typically acknowledge the benefits of those practices. Often, however, they take no steps to implement them. Schools suffer from what Jeffrey Pfeffer and Robert Sutton in their 2000 book *The Knowing-Doing Gap: How Smart Companies Turn Knowledge into Action* call the "knowing-doing gap" — the puzzling mystery of why knowledge of what needs to be done so often fails to result in action consistent with that knowledge.

The key to improving schools is ensuring that educators do the right work, but too often leaders settle for the illusion of doing. Strategic planning isn't doing, training isn't doing, writing mission statements isn't doing, talking isn't doing, even making a decision isn't doing unless it results in action. Getting people to do differently, to act in new ways, remains the central challenge of every improvement process, and it takes intentional leadership to meet that challenge.

Third, leaders should fully engage staff in the consideration of a change process.

Leaders make a mistake when they say, "I have looked at the data and research, and I know what needs to be done." They are much more effective when they engage staff in learning together, building shared knowledge. It is clear that people are more committed to a decision if they were engaged in the process that led to the decision.

While large group convocations may be an efficient way for leaders to present an initial case for change, small group dialogues are more effective in engaging people in the decision-making process. During these conversations, leaders should honor the concerns and objections that are presented and be willing to compromise if the modification does not violate the fundamental principles of the initiative. But it is also legitimate for leaders to present evidence and arguments that are intended to convert those who resist the initiative. Howard Gardner's insights on how to change someone's mind offer helpful advice on this topic (see related story, page 40).

A Final Assertion

If, however, all attempts to persuade educators to do the right work fails to persuade them to do it, leaders should exercise their authority to *require* the work be done. A professional is someone with expertise in a specialized field, an individual who has not only pursued advanced training to enter the field but who also is expected to remain current in its evolving knowledge base.

A professional does not have the autonomy to ignore what is regarded as best practice in the field. We would have contempt for a medical doctor who continued to use a razor blade to perform radial keratotomy on a patient's eye rather than use the much more effective, pain-free process of LASIK surgery. We would not tolerate an attorney who continued to cite arguments from case law that had been overturned by higher courts. We would not support the notion that a airline pilot should have the right to fly a propeller plane rather than a jet because he has an affinity for propellers. Leaders within a profession have every right to expect people to seek and implement the best practice in their field.

Much is required of school leaders if they are to build the capacity of people throughout the organization to help more students learn at higher levels. They must encourage people throughout the organization to examine and articulate their assumptions. They must help build shared knowledge and encourage learning by doing. They must create new experiences for people that call upon them to act in new ways.

They also must build continuous improvement processes into the routine practices of each school. They must demonstrate fierce resolve and consistent commitment to a sustained direction over an extended period of time. And, very significantly, they must be emphatically assertive when necessary and use the power of their position to get people to act in ways that are aligned with the mission of higher levels of learning for all. ■

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