

Effecting Change Through Leadership

MANY American schools have seen fit to build into organizational and administrative structures a host of "helping" or "facilitating" professional roles. Staff members such as principals, consultants, supervisors, special teachers, helping teachers, psychologists and the like, all eagerly await their respective opportunities to help teachers. Other school systems, the British for example, have not found it as important to surround British teachers with coteries of well trained, highly specialized "helping" personnel. As a consequence, in some school systems in the United States, we may have contributed to a dependency relationship of teacher on superior, as well as on other staff personnel, that has had less than a positive effect on teaching.

We seem to have created extensive educational bureaucracies and there appears to be little hope that we can shed the mantle of bigness and complexity. Apparently we find it difficult to conceive of the teacher as a professional person capable of comprehending the totality of the teaching role. The complexity of the institution in which many of our

teachers are imbedded seems to conflict with our larger purpose of "improving instruction." All protestations to the contrary, we do not place much confidence seemingly in our teachers' capacities to reflect upon their own teaching behavior, to assess their own progress in teaching, and to render modifications in their teaching based on self and situational assessments. Thus we increase the dependency on supervisory and administrative leadership.

If these are accurate observations, the problems of those who perform supervisory functions in our school systems are increasing in difficulty as dependencies and interdependencies grow. Whereas supervision in the past may have been directed at maintaining levels of performance within schools, now the supervisory function includes defining and redefining goals, clarifying personnel relationships, elevating levels of aspiration of people in our schools, assessing the performance of teachers and other staff members and, most important of all, establishing a climate for innovation and change.

The "leader" emphasis is pronounced in supervisory behavior today. Concomitantly the expectations for effect-

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ing change are growing. Given these circumstances, what notions are available to the supervisor who is willing to lead and who wishes to understand more clearly the dimensions of his role? A description of concepts helpful in creating change is the purpose of this article.

Supervisor as Change Agent

One useful way for a supervisor to conceive of his leadership responsibility is to define his role as that of "change agent." Dissatisfaction with the status quo is given in such a definition. The "change agent" concept is not new, although it may not be understood generally among supervisors in schools. The notion was first described by Kurt Lewin¹ and has been used extensively since that time by many others.

As an agent of change, three additional concepts are helpful. These are *social system*, *diagnosis*, and *intervention*.² Each of these will be described briefly and then applied in one example.

The concept *social system* is a powerful and valuable concept for the supervisor. For our purposes a social system might be defined as an interrelated, interdependent assemblage of persons, objects and ideas that tend to function, operate or move in unison, often in obedience to forms of authority or control.³ School systems are complex social sys-

tems. The concept of social system is a solid analytical tool because it permits the supervisor to look at his work environment in a dispassionate way.

Supposing a principal wants to think about his school as a social system, how is this of value to him? He may choose to think of his school as a large, involved social system made up of many subsystems. Getzels and Thelen⁴ have described classrooms as subsystems; familiarity with their systems analysis of classrooms would provide insight into social systems in general. In secondary schools, departments may be considered as subsystems or the administrator's cabinet can be thought of as a different order of social system, which ties together or integrates other subsystems within the school. In terms of the earlier definition, one must keep in mind that social systems and subsystems within broader systems are interrelated, interdependent, and tend to operate in response to various forms of authority.

People with supervisory responsibilities should be able to set themselves apart from their schools, to get outside of their professional settings and look at the whole as well as the parts of their enterprise. Schools are in motion, dynamic; and in the everyday conduct of school affairs the person with supervisory responsibilities can be swept along with the tide. The appeal here is for the person to separate himself conceptually from his work and think about his situation and himself in new terms.

By combining the two terms *change agent* and *social system*, we are ready

⁴ Jacob W. Getzels and Herbert A. Thelen. "The Classroom Group as a Unique Social System" in *The Dynamics of Instructional Groups*, 59th Yearbook, National Society for the Study of Education. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960, p. 53-82.

¹ Kurt Lewin. "Frontiers in Group Dynamics: Concept, Method, and Reality in Social Science; Social Equilibrium; and Social Change." *Human Relations* 1: 5-41; June 1947.

² These concepts have been described by the author in "Effecting Organizational Change," Report of the 1962 Principals Leadership Course, Department of Educational Administration, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, 1962; and in "Viewing Change in School Organization," *Administrator's Notebook*, Vol. XI, No. 1; September 1962.

³ *Ibid.*

then to consider the two other notions—diagnosis and intervention.

Diagnosis and Intervention

Superintendents, principals, supervisors, and all other personnel with supervisory responsibilities are "internal" change agents. That is, they are parts of the social system, and subsystems, of the school. As internal agents of change they are seeking to direct, control or modify a social environment of which they are very much a part. Because they are a part of the broad social system that is the school, as well as many subsystems within the school, they are not as capable of seeing the "big picture" as would an external change agent. A consultant, for example, who might be invited in to view a school, or a problem within a school, functions as an external change agent. Lippitt⁶ and his colleagues have studied at length the impact of external change agents on various kinds of organizations. For our purposes we are interested in supervisors as internal change agents essentially, although professional people who travel about a district, working in many schools, can be conceived of as external agents of change to particular buildings, but internal to the total system.

Supervisory leadership requires continuing reflection upon the status or performance of the organization for which the leader is responsible. The concept of diagnosis, which has to do with the art of discerning the current state of affairs

⁶ Ronald Lippitt, Jeanne Watson and Bruce Westley. *The Dynamics of Planned Change*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1958. For further help in understanding the change agent concept see the volume: Warren G. Bennis, Kenneth D. Benne and Robert Chin. *The Planning of Change*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1961, p. 193-94.

within an organization at any given point in time, is appropriate.

Diagnosis calls for:

... skills in observation, listening, analysis and assessment of forces and factors, and the prediction, as best one can, of trends, potentialities and apparent, current directions. It is not unlike what doctors engage in with their patients, except that in the case of school leaders, the tools for diagnosis are much more primitive than those available to our doctors. The concept "diagnosis" is an action concept; it is something that change agents ought to do.⁷

An important part of situational diagnosis is self-diagnosis. Of value to most leaders would be the thoughtful review of three leadership styles described by Moser:

1. The *nomothetic* style is characterized by behavior which stresses goal accomplishment, rules and regulations, and centralized authority at the expense of the individual. Effectiveness is rated in terms of behavior toward accomplishing the school's objectives.

2. The *idiographic* style is characterized by behavior which stresses the individuality of people, minimum rules and regulations, decentralized authority, and highly individualistic relationships with subordinates. The primary objective is to keep subordinates happy and contented.

3. The *transactional* style is characterized by behavior which stresses goal accomplishment, but which also makes provision for individual need fulfillment. The transactional leader balances nomothetic and idiographic behavior and he judiciously utilizes each style as the occasion demands.⁷

The terms *nomothetic*, *idiographic*, and *transactional* may sound like some

⁷ Cunningham, "Effecting Organizational Change," *op. cit.*, p. 108.

⁷ Robert P. Moser. "The Leadership Patterns of School Superintendents and School Principals." *Administrator's Notebook*, Vol. VI, No. 1; September 1957.

new kind of gibberish designed to confuse rather than clarify. This is far from the case. Leaders do differ in terms of their behavior. Although space does not permit a full dress review of the three styles described here, it should be emphasized that familiarity with these descriptions and research thereon enhances a leader's insight into his own leader behavior. It would be unfair to say that one leadership style is superior to another leadership style. Under one set of circumstances one style may work well; under other circumstances another style may be needed.

On the basis of the diagnosis a change agent makes of the social system in which he is imbedded, and after he has decided on the nature of the change he wishes to effect in his school system, he must decide "when," "where," and "how" he will intervene in the ongoing processes of his organization to achieve his objective. The systems and subsystems that make up his school are dynamic, not static. People are at work, or should be at work. Patterns of behavior have been established; roles have been defined; formal and informal communication systems have been formed; expectations for performance have been developed. The introduction of change introduces disequilibrium into the social system and may be threatening to many persons who occupy important roles in the school. The consequences of intervention in an ongoing enterprise should be weighed carefully. The "when," "where" and "how" of intervention are crucial matters. The meager evidence that exists relative to the introduction of the notion of merit salary plans suggests that intervening with the merit notion is hazardous indeed but may be less so if leaders diagnose their organizations

properly and consider carefully problems related to intervention.

Applying the Concepts

Let us try to apply the concepts used thus far. Some of the most perplexing problems facing America's schools are those found in our large school districts where our bureaucratic structures frequently work against the achievement of the schools' purposes rather than in support of the schools' objectives. School social systems behave in ways identical to, or at least similar to, other large social systems. Business and industrial enterprises, hospitals, public agencies of various kinds can become sick, even pathological. Schools too can become sick or pathological in terms of how persons behave in the social systems and subsystems of the school. Morale can deteriorate; performance levels can be reduced; personnel turnover rates can increase; community dissatisfactions with the school can mushroom.

Deterioration of the effectiveness of any organization can be organization wide, or it can be limited to one unit within the organization.⁸ School districts too can experience district wide deterioration or it may be confined to one or a few buildings within a system. Suppose I have just been appointed supervising principal of a school that is known to be deteriorating. What do I as the person with supervisory responsibility for this building do? Can the concepts introduced in this article serve me in any way?

I might begin by becoming familiar

⁸ For a most insightful analysis of the problems of supervisory leadership in a "sick" organization read: Robert H. Guest, *Organizational Change: The Effect of Successful Leadership*. Homewood, Illinois: Richard D. Irwin, 1962.

with the notion of internal change agent. To accept this notion I would have to accept simultaneously the idea that if affairs in my school are to be changed, I am going to have to be the pivotal figure—this is my job in fact. As change agent I need to understand the nature of complex social organizations; and to expedite this understanding the concept of social system and subsystems within larger social systems will be useful to me.

Having clarified my understanding of myself as change agent and my environment as a complex social system, I am ready to proceed with diagnosis. Before arriving on the job I have probably been reflecting on my situation and intuitively I have arrived at some understandings of what has been happening in the building. But intuition may not be enough. If the organization is deteriorating, it is apparent that something has gone wrong. As indicated earlier, a sound place to begin is for me to examine myself. Although I may be reluctant to admit it, I may become my organization's biggest problem if I fail to include myself in diagnosing the situation. If I were to assess my leadership style, this might in itself give me some valuable insights. And for that purpose it would be beneficial to study the Getzels-Guba model and some of the research generated by the model.⁹ Earlier reference was made to Moser's study of three leadership styles derived from the Getzels-Guba formulation.

Suppose my diagnosis of the state of affairs in my building reveals that teachers are dissatisfied with their working environment, parents are raising questions about their youngsters' progress, the central office is increasing its de-

mands upon the leader, and I have discerned that my leadership style is highly nomothetic or goal oriented. When, where, and how do I intervene in this situation to change present conditions?

By understanding more clearly my own supervisory behavior, I may have made a beginning. Further, having diagnosed my situation, I might have been able to establish some priority on the problems with which I am faced. Priority for problem consideration and the importance of problems in the long range are not the same, so I need also to think through problems in terms of their importance. With problems identified, priorities established, and importance discerned, I am in position to face intervention.

It would seem obvious that I cannot lick all of the problems by myself. I must involve my faculty and staff. If I am accurate in my self perceptions relative to my leadership style, if I am nomothetic in my orientation, I probably should continue to direct energies toward attaining the schools' goals. It is doubtful that anyone can shift his leadership style dramatically. Therefore, it would be incumbent upon me to capitalize on my strengths in dealing with problems facing my schools. Possibly one of the dangers in the idiographic or personalistic style is over personalizing relationships with teachers and failing to clarify expectations for teachers. As a goal oriented leader, I am capable of delegating and defining roles. Intervention then may best be achieved with the faculty and staff as a group in a setting where I can make my position clear and where I can share my objectives with my colleagues. The question of "when" is one of timing; the question of "how" is partially answered in the "where" re-

⁹ Jacob W. Getzels and Egon C. Guba. "Social Behavior and the Administrative Process." *The School Review* 61: 423-41; Winter 1957.

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tests mean that what teachers say and what they do are entirely different? If this is true, attempting to assess teachers' attitudes or effectiveness or philosophical outlooks by means of conventional instruments may be completely unrealistic. If teachers have learned to "say the right things" to the point that even they are not aware of the discrepancies between their stated sensations and their actual behaviors, the problems involved in helping teachers see where they are in relationship to where they want to go are formidable indeed. This problem should be explored much more deeply and with more elaborate design and procedures in future studies.

In this study the data were collected from teachers in communities which were selected according to certain criteria and which, therefore, were quite similar in some respects. It may be that such communities attract teachers with similar attitudes toward curriculum change. Or, it may be that the communities mold teachers' attitudes to such an extent that significant differences (of the sort examined in this study) cannot be isolated. The relationship between teachers' attitudes toward curriculum change and the type of community in which they are teaching would appear to be a fruitful area for examination.

There may also be a real question whether or not principals can identify teachers as most willing or least willing to consider curriculum change on the basis of the criteria employed in this study. On the other hand, it may be that some principals are actually much more accurate than others in classifying teachers according to these criteria.

This study was singularly unsuccessful in its attempt to isolate some differences between teachers who are willing to consider curriculum change and those

who are unwilling to do so. It is hoped that this lack of success will not discourage others from studies in what may be a very fruitful area. It may very well be that the dynamics of curriculum development can only be understood by probing deeply into the personal factors involved in acceptance of or resistance to the notion of change.

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sponse. After a few weeks a special evening faculty meeting following a dinner might be an appropriate beginning. On such an occasion the administrator might share his concerns for the school and invite faculty and staff participation and support in a program of self study and improvement.

Recognition of a deplorable state of affairs in a building will not come as a surprise to the staff. A confident and vigorous plan for solving some of the problems may be a surprise. People as a rule are more comfortable when their personal status is clear.

A supervisor must realize that definitive sets of rules do not exist to cover all of the "hows," "whens," and "wheres" that arise in effecting changes in schools. If the supervisor approaches his problems intelligently, thoughtfully, and persistently, drawing upon the concepts described above, he should be able to effect the changes he desires. The brief example given here is not a suggested pattern; it may not even be a desirable one. It is cited only as an example of the process a supervising principal might follow as he thinks through the problems of taking a new position in what seems to be a deteriorating school.

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