

No More Heroes: Creating Systems to Support Change

Administrators can help ensure that improvement efforts don't fall apart by providing teachers with time and recognition for their participation, guarding projects from competing distractions, and building new practices into the daily routine.

Improving an educational institution—whether a school, district, or other agency—is difficult. All too often the success of improvement activities rides on the shoulders of a few heroes. If no heroes emerge, improvement may not result. This need not be the case.

Heroes and Improvement

Heroes invariably capture our attention—perhaps because hearing heroic stories enables us to join vicariously in struggles against adversity or because such tales simplify otherwise complex and seemingly inexplicable social developments. Great women and men

acknowledged as the driving forces behind startling turnarounds dot the research literature and permeate the folklore of education. The wide acceptance of the hero approach to improvement is reflected in the popular belief that the school principal is the



key actor, the hero, in making a school effective. In other words, to rescue a program or turn a school around, get yourself a hero.

This simple formula has a downside, however. Heroes can move up, travel on, or burn out. A general theme in the change literature is that most improvement efforts die when special support disappears (Berman and McLaughlin 1976). Although this special support usually refers to funding, it may apply to special people as well. Unless someone steps into the void, a period of perceived and real deterioration accompanied by lowered morale often begins with the hero's departure.

Our reading of the change literature and our direct experiences in working with school improvement programs convince us that change efforts typically demand that the *majority* of staff participants become heroes since organizational conditions often impede improvement. That is, the time it takes to understand an innovation and translate it into practice conflicts with the time staff members need to perform their duties. Improvement priorities compete with one another; incentives for making changes are glaringly absent, and participants rarely see evidence of a systemwide commitment to an improvement.

Educational improvements should not have to rely on heroic efforts. We must begin to think about how to support innovation systematically. At least four organizational conditions can facilitate improvement: (1) available time, (2) cushions against interference, (3) opportunities for encouragement, and (4) recognition of the need for incorporation.

Available Time

Available time is time not already committed to official duties or to preparing for those duties. For change projects, the importance of such time cannot be overestimated. Clark (1984) argues that the availability of uncommitted time is one of seven distinguishing features of excellent schools. Available time enables staff to venture beyond the tried and true, to confer with peers about special or routine problems, to teach demonstration classes for new teachers, or to participate in change projects.

In most cases, administrators make time available either by changing schedules or altering the structure of work arrangements. For example, administrators can rearrange teachers' assignments so that improvement project participants have common planning periods. Alternatively, by recognizing that teachers usually have little opportunity to discuss instruction with their peers, administrators can create new work groups or encourage existing ones to use already available meeting times for productive discussion, for instance, rather than for catching up on paperwork. We have seen both approaches used effectively to facilitate change.

Arranging for substitutes provides project participants with available time and some flexibility, but this arrangement seldom proves satisfactory. Teachers mistrust substitutes, feel more competent than the stand-ins, and regard time away from students as time stolen from learning. Moreover, substitutes are a temporary rather than permanent means of making time available.

Cushions Against Interference

Too often principals revamp discipline policies at the same time that they revise lesson plans; superintendents standardize the curriculum and initiate special reading projects; state agencies launch a new testing program while altering graduation requirements and curriculum standards. That is, the most bothersome distraction usually comes from the system itself in the form of competing projects. Staff members have a difficult time determining what is most important and foreseeing what will last long enough to be worthwhile. They do not know where to put their already nearly depleted energies.

Fullan (1985) argues convincingly that changes in attitudes, beliefs, and understanding usually follow changes in behavior. Our experience supports this. It takes time for commitment to develop. Along with some initial ambiguity, participants experience confusion, frustration, anger, and exhaustion when they begin using new practices. Even where implementation is successful, users go through a series of steps, including:

- initial undifferentiated use and day-to-day coping;
- stepwise and disjointed use;
- initial coordination and consolidation of basic routines;
- coordinated practice and differentiated use; and
- refinement and extension.

It may take up to 18 months for staff members to achieve the higher levels of use. In the meantime, the improvement effort needs a kind of life support to give it a chance to survive early confusion and frustration.

Opportunities for Encouragement

Another element vital to success of a change effort is rewarding staff members for their participation. In the business world Peters and Waterman (1982) identify a paradox of human nature—a need to stand out and the desire to be on a winning team. In education the existence of this paradox underscores the significance of encouragement and recognition from peers, experts, and supervisors. Encouragement and recognition signal to participants that what they are doing is good for their own development and important to the institution they serve.

Such continuous incentive requires systematic, conscious effort, but it need not be time-consuming. The administrator or improvement effort leader can easily incorporate it into routine but informal staff interaction. Peters and Waterman call it "management by wandering around." Rather than relying on formal supervisory visits, the manager learns what staff members are doing and stimulates desired behavior through daily circuits around the work place. The length of an encounter is not critical, but the message given is. In excellent organizations, the message is consistently related to their core value—that is, what they want to stand for above all else.

Supportive leaders can apply this principle to school improvement efforts by frequently inquiring about the endeavor. They can routinely emphasize its priority as they interact with staff throughout the day. The heart of the activity is an informal message that the improvement effort addresses key organizational goals. Such a signal re-

inforces, as well as encourages, staff efforts. To use a hectic administrator's schedule to advantage requires only a conscious focus on this message. In systems where staff are routinely encouraged, giving special recognition for improvement should not present any problems; rewarding good work is a well-established habit.

Recognition of the Need to Incorporate

Ideally, new practices should survive until they are evaluated and their effectiveness is demonstrated or refuted. Realistically, changes rarely last that long. Too often they disappear through accident or neglect unless staff members continue to receive incentives for new behavior and unless the behavior is incorporated into existing policy (Corbett et al. 1984). Incorporating new practices and supporting procedures into regular school operation gives them a place in the routine and protects them if the original implementors depart. Indeed,

staff turnover is one of the more calamitous events to befall a project at any level of the educational system. Because new practices require staff to rearrange what they do, the practices often have to replace, or be shoe-horned in with, the old ones. Without changes in guidelines or procedures, staff members will likely view the new practices as add-ons and tend to neglect them. Unincorporated practices tend to be quickly neglected.

For these reasons, special attention should be paid, from the outset of the project, to incorporating changes into the daily operational routine to ensure that they will last. This can be done by (1) classifying the practices as rules, (2) encouraging curriculum revision, (3) establishing a training program for newcomers, and (4) supporting improvement-related activities as a line item in the school budget (rather than through special funding). The underlying theme of these strategies is that formal, substantive changes must accompany encouragement if the improvement effort is to stick. Such

changes also symbolize to staff that the improvement project merits their attention. New rules, revisions, and training programs also establish an organizational climate in which systematic renewal becomes a preferred alternative to crisis-induced change.

Creating Conditions for Change

The obstacles to improvement are enormous: little available time, few cushions against interference, limited staff encouragement, and a barely acknowledged need for organizational change. Only a hero can overcome them. If no hero steps forward, the system all too frequently smothers the effort.

Alternatives to heroism exist. Rather than expecting educators to struggle to change unresponsive institutions, we can design an educational system that gives educators the time, protection, encouragement, and support they need to improve schools. □

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