Detours on the Road to Site-Based Management

The faculty and administration at John Glenn Middle School found themselves not sure of the way to change to self-governance. Here they share a few lessons they learned, to make the going smoother for others.

Restructuring a school is quite similar to learning to drive on the left side of the road after you've been driving on the right side your whole life. Similarly, shifting from traditional top-down management to shared decision making is wrought with conflict, confusion, and disorientation.

At John Glenn Middle School in Bedford, Massachusetts, we lived through a series of critical incidents while moving into site-based management. By analyzing these ordinary occurrences, we hope to help illuminate the subtle, dynamic conflicts involved in learning how to "drive on the other side."

The (In)famous Minutes

Recently our school has been governed, in part, by an elected faculty council. Six voting members of the faculty council are elected by their peers, and the principal serves as a non-voting ex-officio member. The faculty council collects agenda items from the faculty, studies problems and issues, generates solutions, provides information, and presents proposals. The faculty has the ultimate power to make decisions, so faculty meetings generally involve the presentation of a council proposal, followed by discussion and possible modification, and eventually an up or down vote.

The school is organized around interdisciplinary grade-level teams, who usually devote their meetings to individual student issues, special education cases, administrative coordination of field trips or report card schedules, and curriculum planning. Until 1989, we never kept minutes, making it difficult to verify agreements or decisions that might have been made several months before.

In January 1989, the faculty council recommended that minutes of team meetings be kept and that the responsibility for taking minutes be rotated among all team members. At first, the presentation of the proposal at the faculty meeting seemed routine. Some teachers said that they took their own notes during team meetings and saw no need for minutes. Others argued that taking the minutes would be a distraction from fully participating in the discussion. Another felt it would be difficult to discriminate between what was critical or trivial. How might the minutes be confidentially distributed? Should the minutes be typed and by whom? Eventually someone suggested that perhaps the school secretaries could sit in on the meetings and take the minutes. At this point the principal reminded everyone that there were six team meetings per week and that just sitting in represented one day a week of one secretary's time. Including the necessary follow-up, he estimated that the minutes work would total 40 percent of a secretary's job. "Not a very good use of time," he concluded.

When some faculty members pointed out that taking minutes might not be a good use of their time either, the principal became obviously frustrated. The meeting, though still civil, became distinctly tense.

The faculty voted down the original proposal with a two-to-one vote. A teacher moved that the secretary record the minutes and that, on a rotating basis, members of the team should edit down the secretary's min-
The principal, of course, agreed but told them that he had no choice but to otherwise, the concept of shared decision making and teacher empowerment would be dead. Only if a large contingent, perhaps a majority, of the faculty asked for a quick reconsideration vote could one occur. Otherwise, the policy would remain in effect for at least a full month, until the next regular faculty meeting.

The secretary began taking team minutes. She generated 12-15 pages of typed notes for each meeting, which she then passed along to the designated teacher for editing. Word spread about the prolific nature of the first draft and the challenging editing job.

After three days, an outspoken member of the faculty approached the principal to say he would like to call a faculty meeting to discuss the possibility of reconsidering the faculty's vote. The principal replied that the teacher could certainly invite colleagues to his own room for an informal discussion and offered to call an official meeting if the majority of the faculty agreed.

Without the principal in attendance, the informal gathering took place the next day. More than half the teachers asked that a faculty meeting be promptly called and the vote reconsidered.

At the called meeting, the principal remained an impartial moderator throughout the debate. The faculty voted to reconsider their action on the minutes issue and accepted a proposal that the minutes be taken on a voluntary basis. The meeting took fewer than 20 minutes.

In retrospect, it now seems clear that the minutes episode was really the faculty's way of reality-testing our new system for making rules. We had not fully accepted the reality that we could, in fact, not only disagree with the principal's point of view, but also reject his position. The principal passed the test when he refrained from vetoing the faculty's decision. A veto, or any sabotaging of the faculty's plan, would have severely damaged our site-based governance process. Similarly, the faculty passed a test in responsible and effective rule-making by initiating a timely reconsideration of its first vote and by settling on a sound solution to the minutes problem.

We learned a major lesson involving the redefinition of our roles and responsibilities. In a democratic, site-managed school the principal's role shifts from ultimate decision maker to facilitator; there is a concomitant shift in the faculty's function from advising to legislating. Principals must be especially careful about how and when they express their opinions. Otherwise, they will fail in an important new responsibility that they share with the faculty, the responsibility to implement and protect an innovative governance process. And, in moving toward site-based management, the credibility of the process is of paramount importance.

An Inter-School Exchange:
Planning Gets Trickier

But just how should that process work amid the complexities of real decision making, with its time pressures and potential misunderstandings? We found another part of the answer as we worked on a student exchange with an inner-city middle school. The principals of our school and the inner-city school originated the idea of the exchange. After some discussion with parents, who generally applauded the notion, the issue came into the school governance process through the faculty council. Teachers from each school exchanged visits, after which planning teams from the two schools spent a day putting together a field day for the 6th graders of the two schools.

The planning team then reported its proposal to the council and suggested that the next step should be to seek the approval of our 6th grade teachers. The council agreed, with several members declaring their belief that the field day would encounter no opposition and so would proceed without difficulty.

Now, our self-imposed rules allow neither the faculty council nor the 6th grade team to make a decision for the school—only the faculty as a whole can do that. However, the planning team had worked hard on the project, and we had only about four weeks left in the school year to make the field day happen. Besides, the 6th grade teachers were the only ones who could have possibly felt any adverse effects.

In fact, no 6th grade teacher offered any objection to the field day itself, but some did object to the process by which the proposal reached them, noting that the whole faculty should have had a chance to vote on it. Not surprisingly, the exchange planning committee sought a way to get the process moving again as quickly as possible. At the suggestion of the faculty council chairperson, they decided to call an optional faculty meeting to remedy any defects in the process. If no one expressed any reservations about the field day, there would be no further objections to the procedure. However, for a variety of reasons, the optional faculty meeting drew fewer than a dozen teachers, all of whom had long favored the proposal, and so the meeting was less conclusive than its conveners had hoped. Indeed, when the school exchange item appeared on the next faculty council agenda, that group felt compelled to send it to the entire faculty for approval, even though the date of the proposed field day was only about two weeks away. Once
again, an unexpected and unwelcome hurdle had emerged. At the faculty meeting, the field day received nearly unanimous approval but not without much discussion of how flawed the process of developing it had been.

Despite the best of intentions, we had violated one of our own fundamental governance principles: the faculty as a whole is the school's sole policy-making body. We had surely not forgotten that principle—we were working with it daily—but we had looked for shortcuts in the interests of time and efficiency. Finally, of course, these attempted shortcuts saved no time at all, since the proposal did have to wait for a regularly scheduled meeting after all.

These mistakes taught us a worthwhile lesson about how strictly we need to follow the guidelines we create. In any system, balancing the demands of good process against the various constraints of reality is a delicate and persistent operation. Through the exchange incident, we learned that, as we change to site-based, democratic management, we need to lean far more toward process than is at first obvious in order to maintain our constituents' trust.

Closing a Communication Gap

During a meeting of the ASCD Consortium on Restructuring, we telephoned the school and heard the surprising news that the flap over the school exchange and field day was rapidly developing. Later that day, at a consortium session, we learned about "pyramiding," an approach by which people who represent others meet regularly with their constituents to ensure good communication up and down the organization's pyramid. We realized that, if we'd had that kind of interaction, we would almost surely have avoided shortcutting our governing process during the exchange controversy, because we would have known that at least some members of the faculty would insist on strict adherence to the system.

Our attempt to begin a pyramiding effort began when we returned to the consortium. We decided to invite people to attend informal meetings after school. As the pressures of closing school were already beginning, we were gratified when a group of eight gathered to share their thoughts and reactions. Attendance at subsequent biweekly sessions increased until, a month later, at our final meeting, 15 people assembled, about 40 percent of the faculty, all interested in sharing with each other.

The success of our communications effort left us optimistic about future dialogues. We had established a forum for the exchange of information and ideas. The exchange issue helped us see the need for exacting attention to group process as a means of maintaining trust among our colleagues. Similarly, our experience with pyramiding suggested that restructuring, in its initial stages, requires that large numbers of people make what may seem an inordinate effort at communicating.

Where Do We Go from Here?

We now drive with a new perspective on the road ahead. It is crucial to develop a sense of trust in order to establish a credible framework of self-governance, an integral part of site-based management. It takes time to establish new rules, define new roles, and balance new relationships. The governing process must be painstakingly adhered to, and new methods of communication must be developed and used.

We recognize that site-based management may seem inefficient and cumbersome at first, but the faculty is in the driver's seat—it has the ability to control acceleration and the mechanism to brake. When its members feel more comfortable with their roles and responsibilities, the road to self-governance should become a lot smoother.

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