

Reframing Reform

Previous efforts have not made significant, lasting improvements. More promising approaches, reflecting the symbolic side of schools, may be found by reviving the wisdom of the past or, a more formidable task, by transforming the basic character of schools.

We have tried almost everything conceivable to improve our public schools. We have invested millions of dollars in staff development—only to watch new skills disappear amidst old routines. We have changed roles, decision making, evaluation, and other structural configurations—and watched traditional arrangements quickly reappear. We have tried to empower teachers and parents, hoping to give them a stronger voice in determining the course of instruction. Yet power and coalitions among the disenfranchised do not seem to make much of a difference either. When one strategy fails, quickly we try another—usually selected from one of the categories above.

After a while, new reforms look suspiciously familiar—at least to seasoned teachers and administrators. Merit pay plans of the 1960s reappear in career ladder programs of the 1980s. Decentralization recycles as "school site management." Voucher plans tried in the '60s are being reintroduced as schools of choice today. Why does the carousel of reform continue? If we view change as an expressive event rather than an outcome-driven activity, it makes more sense. As modern ceremony, reform efforts may

create hope and confidence among external constituencies (Deal 1985, Meyer and Rowan 1977, Popkewitz et al. 1982). But it is hard to justify the cost of reform on instrumental grounds. A very large investment has not yielded a sizable return. For the most part, wave after wave of reform has left the deeper characteristics of schools and classrooms unchanged

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(Cuban 1984). Even worse, there is evidence to suggest that some attempts to improve schools have the opposite effect. Chubb (1988), for example, concludes that many recent reforms have suppressed rather than increased high school achievement scores. In Tennessee, the Career Ladder has created divisions within schools and fallen short of its promise to raise teacher commitment and morale (Kresavage 1988, Nixon 1989). Even more disturbing is the impact of constant change on the culture of schools and the spirit of educators. The telltale phrase "I'm just a teacher" reflects an erosion of meaning that has left many schools empty and joyless places to work.

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Now the national rage is the restructuring movement—another large-scale initiative launched before we have a sense of the real problem. In medicine, the Hippocratic Oath discourages doctors from treating symptoms with the admonition, "Above all else, do no harm." A similar caution might be in order for governors, legislators, and other agents of change caught in a "strange loop" (Hofstadter 1979), where past mistakes seem to be

rewarmed, relabeled, and reapplied without considering other alternatives. Now may be the time to step outside the cycle and see whether a look through other conceptual lenses will yield some fresh approaches.

Breaking out of our circular loop of reform strategies will require a novel look at the situation:

A commander received an order to clear a city square by firing at rioting rebels. He commanded his soldiers to take up firing positions, their rifles leveled at the crowd, and as a ghostly silence descended, he drew his sword and shouted: "Mesdames, M'sieurs, I have orders to fire at the carnaille (rebels). But I see a great number of honest respectable citizens before me; I request that they leave so that I can safely shoot the carnaille." The square was empty in a few minutes (Levy and Merry 1986, p. 101).

By reframing, the commander accomplished the goal of clearing the square without creating an even more difficult problem. We need to find similarly creative solutions for making schools better places for teachers, students, and administrators. Reframing reform may provide an opportunity to make needed improvements without creating more resentment or causing additional harm.

At the very least, we need to treat educational organizations as complex social organisms held together by a symbolic webbing rather than as formal systems driven by goals, official roles, commands, and rules. The current restructuring movement among academics and policymakers, for example, ignores the political, cultural, and human resource realities of schools (Bolman and Deal 1984). If anything, they see these other important dimensions as barriers for restructuring to overcome. History tells us that tinkering with formal roles and relationships will not make a significant difference in the lives of teachers or students. In fact, we will probably end up working very hard and spending a lot of money to do more damage.

What are the alternatives? There are at least two possibilities. One requires a backward look; the other suggests a metamorphosis. Some examples from both business and edu-



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cation will illustrate the potential of strategies that emphasize the symbolic side of organizations.

Renewal: Back to the Future

Restructuring or reforming schools assumes that old patterns need to be changed. But renewal assumes that the gateway to a better future requires a backward look. Rather than embracing the latest innovations, it may be wise to reconsider time-tested traditions. Many military and business organizations have reconnected themselves with history and old-fashioned values. The U.S. Air Force, for example, has reaffirmed an important value: "Cohesion is a principle of war"; has developed Project Warrior to call attention to its heroes and heroines; and has given new emphasis to its "rebluing" ceremony, where people renew their commitment to the values of the service.

As decades of reform have flowed in and out of schools, what of importance has been left behind? What traditional educational values and practices can be dusted off and dressed in contemporary raiments? How can we renew our commitment to customs and traditions that lie at the heart of our sacred calling or profession?

Similar questions prompted the Fairfax County Public Schools to cre-

ate a video history of the district. Through stories, photos, and testimony, the history traces the system's development from its early origins to the present. After watching children walking through mud to attend a one-room school and hearing an older teacher describe how she often got down on her hands and knees to wash and oil the classroom floor, one administrator remarked: "So much technical flab and rational fat has built up around the act of teaching that we sometimes lose sight of the real business we are in." Fairfax County, an exemplary school district, has realized the importance of reviewing historical roots as a way to renew existing practice.

As a related example, Anita McCarthy, principal of Todd Elementary School in Briar Cliff, New York, convenes a "boot camp" each year before the opening of school. In this Mentor Program, seasoned veterans spend half a day with novice teachers to retell stories of the past. During the school year, the group convenes monthly to swap experiences and lore. These events bond newcomers to traditions of the school. Even more important, older teachers are given an opportunity to renew their own commitment. As the principal observed: "The only thing worse than not hearing any stories is having stories to tell and no one to hear them."

In Edina, Minnesota, the suicide of a superintendent prompted Ray Smyth, her successor, to challenge the district to "figure out what we stand for." He convened committees of parents, students, custodians, teachers, food service workers, bus drivers, administrators—anyone in the community with a vested interest in education. Later, a smaller committee condensed input from the diverse groups and distributed a short list to each school. The schools sent the list home to parents for their reactions. Eventually, the Edina system fashioned a credo from their past to guide the present and shape the future: "We care. We share. We dare." The process renewed commitment to important educational values.

Sally Blewett, the principal of Caldwell Elementary School (Beaumont,

Texas), has reached back in time to revive a forgotten symbolic activity (Waller 1939). She begins each new day with a schoolwide meeting in the auditorium, including a singing of the school song. This daily ritual, she believes, reminds everyone of why the school exists and how the day's instruction will help them realize their collective dream of being "the best at reading and writing and all the rest." While by modern standards this practice may seem old-fashioned and out of place, the Texas principal feels that it has played a pivotal role in a dramatic improvement in the school's performance.

Reviewing and reviving the past presents a novel avenue for renewing the spirit of a school or school system. But historical educational practices are not always equal to the demands of a modern society. What if significant changes are needed? Technology, demographic shifts, new economic challenges, and other forces call to question many traditional educative forms and practices. Where necessary, how can we reshape our schools to prepare young people for a different—and rapidly changing world?

Transformation: Revising the Basic Character of Schools

Reform, according to Webster's, means correcting weaknesses or deficiencies in existing patterns or practices. For the most part, efforts to improve public schools have concentrated on correcting visible structural flaws such as teacher evaluation and reward systems, unclear goals, or decision-making authority, especially around instructional issues. Such "first-order" changes overlook more durable and stable cultural values and mind-sets behind and beneath everyday behavior. These deeper patterns provide meaning and continuity. They are also the source of many frustrations and problems. Modifying them involves "second-order" changes, a level that most reform efforts have missed (Cuban 1984).

However, deep structures and practices cannot be reformed; they have to be transformed. To *transform* an organization is to alter its fundamental char-

acter or identity. Examples of such revolutionary changes are rare. Iaccoca was able to bring about a metamorphosis at Chrysler largely because of the acute crisis the company faced in the early 1980s. AT&T is still struggling to transform a once successful telephone system into a corporation that can compete in a deregulated communications environment.

Transforming the basic character or identity of public education presents an even more formidable challenge because schools are highly symbolic organizations. Schools occupy a special place in a community. They are storehouses of our memories. As Waller (1939) observed, they are museums of virtue. Transforming schools entails a fundamental renegotiation of cherished myths and sacred rituals by multiple constituencies: parents, local politicians, or residents, as well as administrators, teachers, staff, and students. The entire community must reweave or reshape the symbolic tapestry that gives meaning to the educational process, and this takes time.

And yet we know very little about the process of transforming organizations on any widespread scale. The



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higher education literature suggests that new myths or sagas arise only in new institutions, organizations with a culture oriented to evolutionary change, or institutions in crisis (Clark 1972). The alternative school movement of the early 1970s demonstrated the difficulties of transforming elementary and secondary education under the best of circumstances (Deal 1983). Even these new institutions found it hard to break away from deep-seated myths and traditions.

Unlike reform or renewal, transformation involves reshuffling the basic rules of the game, and few educational organizations have moved through a successful metamorphosis. Clark (1972) offers vivid examples of transformed colleges. But schools will become fundamentally different only when we quit correcting surface deficiencies and recognize that transformation involves a collective renegotiation of historically anchored myths, metaphors, and meaning. Such radical changes typically pass through several distinct phases:

1. What's off?—a period of decline in which first-order changes are attempted without significant results.
2. What's possible?—an awakening stage in which both crises and new possibilities of metaphor become part of the collective awareness.
3. The trapeze-like process of letting go and grabbing on. In this reordering stage, people let go of old values, beliefs, and practices and begin to experiment with new forms. In doing so, people must successfully negotiate the space between clinging to tradition and embracing a new worldview. This requires grief work, a historical connection between past, present, and future—and celebration. (Owen 1987, Buckley and Perkins 1986).

Owen (1987) provides an example of spiritual transformation in Delta Corporation (a pseudonym), a struggling engineering company of nearly 5,000 people. The corporation was created by an entrepreneur named Harry, who invented a highly successful mechanical device. Before long, the company grew and went public. Although the first public stock offering



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was very successful, the distant horizon portrayed a grim future. The company's performance began to flatten and decline. Faced with stockholder dissatisfaction and charges of mismanagement, Harry reluctantly passed the torch to a new leader.

Harry's replacement was very clear about her vision for Delta. She wanted engineers "who could fly." But her vision was juxtaposed against a recent history of "going downhill." Elsewhere in the company, as in most organizations, various groups were governed by an even more complicated array of stories. Each of these stories represents a different sub-cultural thread within the corporation. The challenge for the new CEO was to transform the company from a downhill slide to an uphill glide. Yet stories embedded in various sections of the organization could either enhance or inhibit the transition. Stories within the finance division exemplified the "new breed" analytic types brought in after Harry's demise and departure. "The Killing of '82" told about a new financial vice-president who sold so many tax losses incurred under Harry's management that he managed to make a profit. The "Cash Flow Kid" was a new arrival in middle management whose expertise in managing cash flow garnered a solid return on short-term deposits. "In praise of Wilbur," a story

about an in-house computer told at the operating level of the finance group, "was rather strange in that no one spoke of what Wilbur did for the corporation, only how elegant he was in his performance" (Owen, p. 153).

As one might expect, the stories in the Research and Development division were notably different. At the executive level, "Old Harry" stories extolled the creative accomplishments of the old CEO. Middle management stories focused on the "Golden Fleece" award given monthly behind the scenes to the researcher who had developed the idea with the least bottom-line potential. Two stories were commonly shared among those "on the benches." The exploits of "Serenity Sam," a researcher who had accumulated the most "Golden Fleece" awards, continued the legend of excitement and innovation from Harry's regime. The "Leper Colony" was the nest of Harry's contemporaries who had chosen, or been pushed into, a semi-retirement colony.

The production side of Delta also had its stories. "Making the Quota" exemplified an executive value of putting numbers over quality. "Reuben" was a tale of a politically sensitive supervisor whose ability to cover himself and impress his superiors led to a series of promotions. On the shop floor, most of the lore focused on "The Zebra," a local bar where people gathered after hours. Those who attended formed a tight cabal in opposition to their superiors.

Rather than having a companywide story, Delta Corporation was a collection of independent cells, each with its own story. Across the levels and divisions, the stories cluster into two competing themes: the management orientation of the new arrivals and the innovative traditions of the company. Recognizing the importance of blending old and new into a company where "engineers could fly," the new CEO summoned 35 people from across the company to a management retreat. Her strategy surprised everyone:

She opened with some stories of the early days, describing the intensity of Old Harry and the Garage Gang (now known as the

Leper Colony). She even had one of the early models of Harry's machine out on a table. Most people had never seen one. It looked rather primitive, but during the coffee break, members of the Leper Colony surrounded the ancient artifact and began swapping tales of the blind alleys, the late nights, and the breakthroughs. That dusty old machine became a magnet. Young shop floor folks went up and touched it, sort of snickering as they compared this prototype with the sleek creations they were manufacturing now. But even as they snickered, they stopped to listen as the Leper Colony recounted tales of accomplishment. It may have been just a "prototype," but that's where it all began (Owen, p. 172).

After the coffee break, the CEO divided the group into several subgroups to share their hopes and dreams for the company. When they returned, the chairs had been rearranged into a circle with Old Harry's prototype in the center. With everyone now facing each other, the CEO led a discussion, linking the stories from the various subgroups. Serendipity Sam's report came in an exalted torrent of technical jargon. The members of the Leper Colony quickly jumped in to add details and elaborate the theme. Before long, they and Sam were engaged in animated conversation.



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The noise level was fierce, but the rest of the group was being left out. Taking Sam by the hand, the CEO led him to the center of the circle right next to the old prototype. There it was, the old and the new—the past, present, and potential. She whispered in Sam's ear that he ought to take a deep breath and start over in words of one syllable. He did so, and in ways less than elegant, the concept emerged. He guessed about applications, competitors, market shares, and before long the old VP for finance was drawn in. No longer was he thinking about selling losses, but rather thinking out loud about how he was going to develop the capital to support the new project. The group from the shop floor forgot about the Zebra and began to spin a likely tale as to how they might transform the assembly lines in order to make Sam's new machine. Even the Golden Fleece crowd became excited, telling each other how they always knew that Serendipity Sam could pull it off. They conveniently forgot that Sam had been the recipient of a record number of their awards, to say nothing of the fact that this new idea had emerged in spite of all their rules (Owen, pp. 173–174).

In one intense event, part of the past was buried as the spirit was resurrected and revised to fit the new set of circumstances. The disparaging themes and stories were merged into a company where "engineers could fly"—in a profitable way.

In order to transform schools successfully, educators need to navigate the difficult space between letting go of old patterns and grabbing on to new ones. Like the Delta Corporation, schools and districts are full of competing stories and themes. They must often move from "going downhill" to places where teachers and students "can learn how to fly." To do so, it will be necessary for someone to take the risks that the new CEO took in designing the event that brought Delta's past, present, and future together. In short, schools probably need more funerals and more celebrations to move them along.

A New Generation of Reform?

Policymakers and other change agents have been given ample time to improve educational organizations through training, restructuring, and empowering. We now need to reframe reform and consider some new alternatives. As Cohen (1989) puts it: it is now time to focus

attention on the assumptions and practices of reformers rather than those of practitioners. As we do, two other approaches emerge. The first is to reach back, in research rather than nostalgic quest, to our historical roots. There we must refine and rekindle basic values, stories, rituals, or other symbols that may have been lost, forgotten, or allowed to atrophy. In the wake of our attempts to rationalize the schools, there is a rich residue of practices and wisdom that may still be valid. The second is to refocus and renegotiate the myths and values about schooling.

Both the backward look and the prospective search need to happen in local districts and schools, the natural, organic places where revitalizing and revising always occur. State and federal policy can legitimate and encourage the forward and backward search. But to be effective, new approaches to school reform will need to be shaped more by practitioners and parents than by policymakers. They will need to be guided by craft wisdom, instead of directed by objective knowledge produced by academics. In large measure, the core problems of schools are more spiritual than technical. Cox (1969) nicely sums up the needed remedy in *Feast of Fools*:

We have pressed [modern people] so hard toward useful work and rational calculation [they] have all but forgotten the joy of ecstatic celebration, antic play, and free imagination. [Their] shrunken psyche[s] are as much a victim of industrialization as were the bent bodies of those luckless children who were once confined to English factories from dawn to dusk . . . [people] insofar as they are touched by the same debilitation, must learn again to dream and dance (p. 12).

In the same way, administrators and teachers need, above all else, to relearn the capacity to dream and dance and to impart their joy of learning to young people. Unless they do, our schools will never get better. □

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