

Mustering the Will and Skill for Change

The findings from a four-year study of high schools that are experiencing real improvement offer insights into successful change.

It's like a different school now. It's entirely different in terms of attitude and commitment that weren't here when I first came.

99 and 44/100 percent of efforts to change things here have conked out.

These comments came from two schools in our four-year study of high school renewal.¹ We focused on what lay behind such different degrees of success in improving schools. Others have done good studies of "excellent," "recognized" schools (Corcoran and Wilson 1988). But the missing piece for most school people is *how to get there*: how to lead and manage the process of school reform.

We chose to look at urban high schools—really difficult settings for improvement. Buildings are decaying, teachers are frustrated with an out-moded curriculum and school structure, administrators are harried, parents are desperate, and students—poor, minority, and immigrant—are often shortchanged. We believed that if we could understand how real improvement takes place in such settings, the lessons would be generic, useful in less difficult schools.

During 1985–86 we did five in-depth case studies of high schools in Boston, New York, New Jersey, Cleveland, and Los Angeles—high schools

that were improving; we returned to them briefly in 1988. We also did a national survey of 178 big-city high school principals whose schools had been carrying out serious improvement efforts for one to four years. We were able to draw clear, compelling lessons about what makes for successful change efforts.² We saw repeatedly that the leadership and management of change was a matter of dealing with uncertainty, complexity, turbulence, and the cussedness of many different people. Narrow blueprints or "rules

ASCD photograph



One of the factors involved in improving our high schools is empowering the people engaged in the day-to-day life of the school and supporting their change efforts.

for change" did not work. As Fullan (1982) points out, the issue is developing "a feel for the process" and "learning to get better at change."

In this article, we summarize a few of our key conclusions about successful change and outline what may be involved in using them effectively.

From Knowledge to Action

We believe that at least five issues are involved in getting from knowledge to action (Miles 1987, Louis and Miles 1990a):

● **Clarity.** The knowledge must be understood clearly—not be fuzzy, vague, or confusing.

● **Relevance.** The knowledge must be seen as meaningful, as connected to one's normal life and concerns—not irrelevant, inapplicable, impractical.

● **Action images.** The knowledge must be exemplified in specific actions, clearly visualized. People must have an image of "what to do to get there."

● **Will.** There must be motivation, interest, action orientation, a will to *do* something with the knowledge.

● **Skill.** There must be actual behavioral ability to *do* the action envisioned.

But even clear, relevant, action-focused findings (like those we describe below) often go unused. So we'd like to share ideas about mustering will and skill for real school improvement. Many research-to-practice efforts founder on the issues of will and skill.

First, *will*. Do you really want to do it? This is such a primitive, old-fashioned, even trite question that we often don't even ask it. People in schools often complain that nothing can be done, that all power resides elsewhere (in the union, in the central office, in the principal, in the department heads . . .). Yet in our study, we often saw action taken on near-intractable problems when someone simply decided to act.

Where does will come from? It comes in part from success experiences and in part from environmental encouragement of change efforts, both of which lead people to believe that their actions can make a difference. There is also a personal factor composed of sheer courage and assertion.

Questions of *skill* are also often ignored. Knowing *that* X is a workable action you want to take does not mean knowing *how* to deliver X. The paths to educational improvement are strewn with examples of behavior that no one knew how to deliver: the team teaching project where no one knew how to make good group decisions; the clinical supervision program where principals had no practice in giving effective feedback; the science inquiry project where teachers kept on using closed-end questions.



Will comes in part from success experiences and in part from environmental encouragement of change efforts, both of which lead people to believe that their actions can make a difference.

Furthermore, skill can't be developed through reading, explanations, or videotapes. Improving skill requires *doing*: practice, getting feedback, and reshaping the doing until the action makes sense, is smooth, and gets you where you want to go. Most people know this about skiing or tennis, but don't consider it in relation to the behaviors involved in educational change. Good skill-development models (for example, Joyce and Showers 1983) often go unused in day-to-day school improvement work.

Our Findings and How to Use Them

We'll talk about four topics from our study (the context, vision building, resources, and problem coping), discuss some of the will and skill issues involved, and suggest some advice.³

The Context

Our basic findings here were that turbulence in the external context is the norm (five new chancellors in New York since 1980, for example) and that school improvement is most successful when schools and their districts are actively engaged with each other—but with few strict rules and much auton-

omy for the school in choosing change goals and strategies. Our least successful site, for example, was "micro-managed" by the district office down to the level of who should do cafeteria duty.

It's clear that district offices will have to learn to rely more on their working relationships with schools, and less on rules and mandates, to steer a course through the turbulent waters. Schools have to have room, a good deal of local decision-making power, and help with the problems they face. That means a well-coupled relationship, not a distant one. And when there is pressure to carry out a particular improvement program, it must be accompanied by plenty of support (Huberman and Miles 1984) if it is to succeed.⁴

Schools also have an *internal* context, which may include weak cohesiveness, staff cynicism about past innovation failures, or disgruntlement about the present, in contrast to a prior "golden age" ("good kids were here in the '50s and '60s . . . not a mark on the walls . . . they could get into any college they wanted. Now it's a zoo."). These issues need to be addressed early in the improvement process.

Issues of will. Central office people often worry that empowering schools will just lead to chaos (read "central office powerlessness"). There is often a zero-sum view (more for them means less for us), but real empowerment usually expands the pie, with more coherent control on everyone's part. Also, when school-based management is launched, district staff may not be tenacious enough to make it work—or may just abandon schools, leaving them to their own devices.

People in schools sometimes feel unwilling to stick their necks out, ask for the autonomy they need, bid for the type of working relationship that will get things done. It's safer to blame "downtown" than to take responsibility for working things through with the central office. And it's also easy to avoid taking a square look at the school's own internal context and doing direct work on less-than-optimal conditions. *Advice: Getting focused help through organization development, school-based review, or effective schools programs is useful.*

Key skills. The skills of empowerment are not easy ones. One needs to learn how to take active initiative without shutting others out—and to support others' initiative without becoming paternal. It can help central office people to realize that they are not necessarily sharing or delegating decision-making power over every aspect of school life.

Another key skill is clear decision *allocation* (this one is non-negotiable; I will decide this one but need your advice; that one belongs to the school; this one we should discuss and decide jointly in a principals' meeting; that one is properly a board decision). *Advice: Coaching on decision allocation helps—even for central office people.*

The skills of relationship-building between previously unequal partners are not minor. How does one build trust and supply/receive help if the history is one of rules and control/compliance/avoidance? On the school side of the relationship, key skills include assertiveness (how to ask for what's wanted directly without aggression, game-playing, or blaming) and how to negotiate effectively when resources are scarce or there are competing claims. *Advice: Assertiveness training, as well as training in negotiation and conflict resolution for principals and department heads—since the same issues appear internally when school-based management is under way—is money well spent.*⁵

Vision Building

Our findings were that broad, ennobling, passionate, *shared* images of what the school should become do much to guide successful improvement. People in one of our successful schools said, "We are not only a school for kids, but a university for teachers"—a vision that led to a strong internal cadre's running an immense and rich range of staff development. Visions may either emerge from or lead to smaller "change themes," such as "get successful small projects going" or "model improved supervision and teaching." Gaining real ownership of visions by school staff is critical and requires serious time investment, patience, and empowerment for success.

Improving skill requires *doing*: practice, getting feedback, and reshaping the doing until the action makes sense, is smooth, and gets you where you want to go.

Visioning is a joint process; hope depends on successful and optimistic interaction among people.

Issues of will. Will looms very large in vision building. Many people experience fear and uncertainty about the future, since they feel it cannot be known. *Advice: Asking people to look back on the future, as if it had already happened, is very helpful.* An example: "It's October 6, 1992. The governor's office has just cited this school as one of 10 outstanding schools in the state. Write the citation." Furthermore, people often stop themselves from vision building by doubting themselves and their ability to be out front, leading, making a commitment. And they weaken the power of their visions by taking present structures and procedures as givens, not as things to be transcended.

Key skills. Here we can point to the skill of "going outside the frame," thinking laterally and creatively. An associated skill is the ability to *design*, invent new structures and procedures.⁶

The basic skills of collaboration are key. Visions can't be shared without direct, joint work on decisions that matter, nor without the ability to support and encourage others in dreaming. *Advice: Spend time on team build-*

ing and on training in group problem solving and decision making

Resources

Effective change takes money and time. We found that a floor of funds (from \$50–100,000 annually for several years) is needed for serious change efforts in big-city high schools. Such funds may be "add-ons," or reallocations within the budget, or in-kind donations of services. Most of these funds should go to internal coordination and shared planning (our average survey principal spent 70 days a year on improvement work; the average teacher spent 70 days over three to four years) and to intense, sustained, focused external assistance (more-successful schools used more than 50 days a year of external assistance for training, coaching, and capacity-building).⁷

Successful schools also scanned actively for a broad range of resources (time, the right people, services, educational programs and materials, support and influence) that furthered their vision. We also saw much assertive, imaginative negotiation to get what was needed. ("The central office wanted to fix the boiler, but I knew that paint and cleanup was much more critical for staff morale. I knew they'd fix the boiler anyway if it broke.") Building permanent internal resource structures (for example, cadres, coordinators, program managers, steering groups) was also important.

Although money is a master resource for buying other resources, assistance and internal coordination are really "multiplier" resources. Good assistance and coordination multiply resources through better decisions on other resources: staffing, time use, and educational practices and materials. They also build internal assistance capacity.

Issues of will. One of the biggest issues is facing up to the fact that changes cost money and confronting a second fact: powerful others may lack that realization—and may have to be persuaded (for example, through reminders that \$50,000 a year is usually less than 1 percent of a school's budget), converted to supporters, or even bypassed. Finding and getting resources takes tenacity—hanging in there and persisting against obstacles.

A second big issue is false pride and mistaken self-sufficiency. The basic feeling that "we can do it ourselves" is sometimes reinforced by a mistaken belief that our school system is unique and ideas from elsewhere won't work. *Advice: Seeking assistance has to be reframed as a sign of intelligence and strength, not of weakness.*

Key skills. Negotiating skills, "getting to yes" in Fisher and Ury's (1981) terms, loom very large. A less focused but equally important skill is the "garage sale junkie" stance: the ability to scan regularly and automatically for whatever looks good and fits with the vision. Here too the skill of "going outside the frame" is crucial, not only in reworking existing resources in creative ways but in looking in odd places for what you need.

In the special case of assistance resources, key skills are those of how to broker the right assistance to needy parts of the improvement program; how to develop a clear contract with assistance providers, especially outsiders; and how to design and strengthen internal assistance capacity. *Advice: Put this motto on the wall: "No training without training trainers."*

Problem Coping

The problems arising during school improvement efforts are multiple, pervasive, and sometimes nearly intractable. In our schools, they ranged from "no place for seven new counselors to sit" to "delayed funding" to "staff skepticism," "the vice-principal's heart attack," and "conflicts in the cabinet." Good problem coping (dealing with problems promptly, actively, and with some depth) is the *single biggest determinant* of program success. *Depth* means thinking structurally, or in terms of capacity-building, rather than in a "business as usual" or "push a little harder" or "fire fighting" style. (For example, instead of exhorting overloaded teachers to be more dedicated and "professional," rearrange the schedule to permit shared planning periods and added technical assistance.)

It pays to become aware of one's own typical coping style—and the styles typical in the school. Reviewing recent problems, what was done about them, and whether they stayed solved

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can be illuminating. *Advice: Routinize problem scanning (for example, beginning meetings with a "worry list"), as well as solution generation (always getting a range of brainstormed alternatives before deciding on one) and follow-up (reviewing consequences of each past coping effort).*

Issues of will. Passivity and denial are the main enemies of good coping. Doing nothing, and its partner procrastination, rarely work unless done deliberately with good reasons. Pretending or believing that the problem doesn't really exist or will go away are also ways to fail.

Here, too, refusal to "go outside the frame" hinders success. A dogmatic preference for low-risk, incremental coping (sometimes expressed as fear of seeming too radical) means that the deep coping required for difficult, persistent problems won't happen.

Key skills. One essential skill is the ability to locate and state problems as natural, even helpful occurrences ("Problems are our friends") without blaming anyone, arousing defensiveness, or implying a predetermined solution.

As we've seen repeatedly, creativity, invention, and design skills are critical in generating coping alternatives that go deeper than "trying harder," go to the roots of the problem—and build others' capability for future problem-coping.

Getting There

This review of our findings and the associated issues of will and skill show the limits of what can be done with words on paper. But words and ideas shape beliefs about what is possible in school reform and lead toward the skilled actions that will bring it about. Mustering of will and skill, judging from the successful school improvement efforts we have studied, unlocks and focuses a great deal of energy—and it does not require heroic, super-human effort. Working smarter, not just harder, can get us there. □

¹The Project on Improving Urban High Schools staff included Matthew B. Miles, Karen Seashore Louis, Sheila Rosenblum, Tony Cipollone and the late Eleanor Farrar (1986). Early results were reported in Louis and Cipollone (1986), Miles et al. (1986), Miles (1987), and Farrar (1987, 1988). Final reports are Louis and Miles (1990a) and Louis and Miles (1990b).

²They are reported in *Improving the Urban High School: What Works and Why* (Louis and Miles 1990a). "Success" was defined in survey sites as improved student outcomes (achievement, behavior, dropout reduction, employment of graduates, etc.); improved organizational outcomes (problem solving, etc.); and improved teacher outcomes (new teaching methods, skills, commitment, etc.). Our cases used the same criteria, plus completeness of implementation and continuation of the change effort.

³These findings are drawn both from our intensive case studies and from the national survey data. The two sources had many areas of agreement and never produced contradictory conclusions.

⁴This discussion deals only with the main issues we found critical in district-school relationships. For a full and helpful discussion, see Patterson, Parker, and Purkey (1986).

⁵For further helpful material along these lines, see Block's directly written book *The Empowered Manager* (1987). Helpful work on conflict resolution appears in Cole (1983). Caldwell and Spinks (1988) have described some very useful methods for school-based management.

⁶A very useful sourcebook of ideas and techniques on both creativity and design skills is Koberg and Bagnall (1976).

⁷Our survey principals said their programs ran on an average of \$800 per year, but the time use figures show that a very large amount of coordination and assistance was involved from both school and

central office, as well as from external business and university partners.

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