

Peer Coaching for Strategic Planning

Another set of eyes—in the form of peer coaching for the superintendent—has enabled a Pennsylvania district to begin planning effectively for the future.

Bill Cook, where are you when I need you? My mind was screaming for help while my face was smiling a greeting to the districtwide coordinating committee for strategic planning. I must be having one of those "out of body" experiences, I thought, as people stood around chatting, waiting for 8:30 a.m. to arrive.

As superintendent of the General McLane School District in Edinboro, Pennsylvania, I was beginning a process fraught with the possibility of my demise. How did this happen? The requirement of long-range planning has an extended history in our state. The need to plan for buildings was the initial impetus behind the requirement, which later was expanded to include program, staff training, and other elements. Like all districts in Pennsylvania, our district had met the long-range planning requirements and submitted our last plan in September 1986. We were faithful to the goals of the plan and had made significant progress in achieving them.

During the life of the 1986 plan, however, some board members began a discussion about the five-year requirement designated by the regulations. They felt that the district would be better served if the five-year plan were ongoing, that is, if our plan were

kept current through an annual updating process. Discussions led to more discussions and finally the agreement that I would attend Bill Cook's training for strategic planning.¹ Six days of "Cook and Company" convinced me the board was right—this was exactly what we needed. I was immersed in the philosophy and the discipline. I was in a hurry to get back and get started. Then came the session on how to identify the facilitator.

The strength of our plan rests directly on the work of our people, who gave their best to a facilitator relying on two coaches giving their best.

Plan Facilitators

The plan facilitator, we heard, is critical to the success of the process, and the superintendent must give much thought to the selection of that person. Until that moment in the training process, I was merrily thinking I was the plan facilitator. Now I had one small problem: I was also the superintendent.

Back home with my facilitator's guide under my arm, I discussed the situation with the board, our administrative council, and our staff. They all said I could act as plan facilitator. Some even said it wouldn't be the first time I had shot myself in the foot (the same people assured me that in the event that this did happen, I would heal).

Eight years of progress, of working together, of commitment, began to pass before my eyes. If *they* thought I could do it, why didn't I think so? I placed a hurried call to a superintendent in another district—rumor had it he had facilitated his district's plan. After confirming that the rumor was true, he added that when he had led his district plan, he was relatively new to the district. Now I had not only Bill Cook's words in my head but another voice saying: "It really depends on how much baggage you are carrying." With each conversation, eight years were getting heavier and more burdensome.

No Time to Change Direction

The calendar was set. We agreed to schedule our planning so that the 1991-92 budget would reflect directions set by the strategic plan. Introductory overviews were presented to everyone who would listen: staff, community groups, parent groups, newspapers. The process was moving: the coordinating committee was coming together, the dates were set, the data book was coming together, a questionnaire on the state of the district was publicly printed and mailed—and I had one of the best 4:00 a.m. solutions to the world's problems that I've ever had.

The Solution

Four people from this area had attended the training. Two were colleagues in another school district in our Intermediate Unit (a superintendent and a director of secondary education). Remembering that they had

said they would do anything they could to help, I took them up on their offer. A phone call later, they had agreed to attend the entire three-day session and to serve as peer coaches for me as I facilitated the district plan.

The three days went by in a blur. I learned to read body language at the level of a science. When the group was not understanding my explanation, I turned to one of my coaches, who was able to follow notes and the facilitator's manual while I was on my feet cheerleading the group. The coaches gave me their observations before and after sessions. They told me what to shore up and where I was not being clear or strong enough. In short, they kept me true to the process—another Cook principle.

Now that our plan is moving into the Action Planning phase, I know that its strength rests directly on the work of our people, who gave their best to a

facilitator relying on two coaches giving their best. Only with the insights of the coaches was I able in a consistent fashion to detach myself from the role of superintendent.

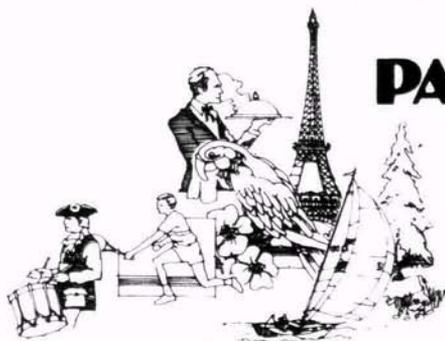
I have tried here to share what we learned. In a nutshell, we realized what we tell teachers all the time: you need another set of eyes to ensure peak performance and to see all the things going on in a group at any given time. Peer coaching works—even for strategic planning. □

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