

"Management Doesn't Change Culture." So how does culture change?



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Tonight, I'm on another airplane, and I'm thinking again about how leaders influence change in education.

Today I participated in an exciting work session in Reno among Nevada's CTE (career and technical education) administrators. I've conducted similar sessions in two other states recently and will do so again next week in Louisiana. In Reno, we talked about major challenges facing the field of career and technical education. We worked on how to integrate academic content into CTE so it is more tangible and transferable for the students (a la Jim Stone's math-in-CTE research), connecting secondary and postsecondary programs through programs of study, and creating an assessment system for technical skill attainment that is useful to teachers for improving teaching and improving accountability. We also discussed how to better align CTE programs with the current demands of the world of work, and how to redesign professional development based around the knowledge and skills that teachers need to be successful.

All of these issues have a "technical" component to them - technical in that they involve policies, incentives, programs, and strategies. But more importantly, they are issues which will require a deep level of cultural change among teachers and other education professionals. Dr. Ronald A. Heifetz of the Harvard Kennedy School of Government talks about two types of change - "technical" and "adaptive." Adaptive change focuses on changing deeply-held attitudes and beliefs. Adaptive change is much harder to accomplish than technical change.

In the adaptive change work in education, teachers will have to learn new habits of collaboration - horizontally with each other in their institution, and vertically, among postsecondary and high school faculty. Teachers, counselors and administrators will have to change some deeply-held (almost subconscious) beliefs about which kids are "college material" and which ones aren't. Professionals who have operated within the traditional organization of CTE and drawn their sense of identity from this organizational approach are being asked to adapt to a new "career clusters" model. For some teachers, this is not just a re-organization, it is a redefinition of themselves professionally. Some teachers will need to let go of comfortable (but less than effective) teaching techniques and adopt a project-based, inquiry-based approach to their work. They might have to move from a command and control model of teaching to a facilitation/coaching model. All of this is hard, adaptive-oriented work.

Which brings us back to how to lead change in education. First, let's recognize how difficult this really is. Public education in the U.S. is a very complex organism, consisting of 54 million students and 4 million adult professionals working in about

80,000 schools in 16,000+ local school districts with their own governance boards. These districts are housed within 50+ states and territories - each with their own governance, funding, rules and regulations - spending over \$500 billion. Now let's overlay this with national rules and processes that are leveraged by federal dollars (equaling about 9 percent of total funds) coming through your friendly "partners" at the U.S. Department of Education, carrying out program mandates laid out by the U.S. Congress. And all this activity is supported and facilitated by an army of publishers, test developers, consultants (like me), professional development providers, foundations, universities, research organizations, and technical assistance providers.

So, how does one lead change on behalf of our children and youths in this environment? As a young staffer on Capitol Hill, I learned some hard lessons about collaboration (or the lack thereof) and the need to build critical mass around policy. So as a federal official, I knew how important it would be to do my work in an open and engaging process, with a high degree of interaction with states and local stakeholders, as we tried to frame federal policy and guidance. Much of my four years as Deputy Assistant Secretary was spent trying to interact with state and local stakeholders in a positive manner, expressing confidence in them and respecting their roles, all the while trying to turn up the temperature a bit so we could raise expectations for students and our programs appropriately. But the decision-making process in Washington is like a black hole that inexorably draws creativity and energy back into itself. With all the layers of decision-makers in Washington, the institutional distrust between political appointees and career staff, and a bureaucratic culture of risk-aversion, leading through an open, engaging dialogue was very difficult to pull off. We failed too often, but in many ways, we succeeded.

I remain committed to this approach. But I am concerned that too many leaders in education are not exercising the kind of hands-on, people-oriented leadership that deep change -- adaptive change -- requires. I have seen some leaders who are brilliant intellectuals, but tend toward trying to solve everything as it were a technical issue - by relying only on policy and program solutions. They quietly, and sometimes secretly, work to create policy and funding solutions. Then they release memos, reports and written guidance in near-final form, and expect people to implement them and make change happen. Sometimes, there will be the obligatory stakeholder meetings to roll out the new policy or guidance. But everyone at these meetings knows that the policy is already set in stone. Real dialogue doesn't exist.

Since education is such a complex interaction of players, top-down decision-making simply doesn't work. States, districts, and teachers can, and do, resist edicts from on-high. They may do the minimum necessary to be "in compliance," but compliance does not lead to deep change.

Adaptive change takes time. It is not clean and efficient. It has a very human element. And if we don't work with that human element, our hoped-for changes will not work. So let's face the problem head on. Education leaders at every level must ask themselves - am I leading from a people-oriented perspective, or am I just leading from policy and

programs perspective? Every leader needs to look in the mirror AND take a hard look at his or her leadership team. If adaptive leadership can be learned (and even for natural introverts, I think it can be learned), then leaders must embrace it, develop it and implement it as quickly as possible. But if a leader refuses to embrace an adaptive leadership style, or because of his or her personal issues can't seem to get the hang of it, they should be removed and replaced with the right kind of leader.

During the last couple weeks, I've been re-reading Louis Gerstner's memoirs about the turn-around of IBM he orchestrated in the 1990's. He has something important to say to us. Through the 1960s through the 1980s, IBM had enjoyed unbelievable success and dominance of the computing industry. During these decades, IBM became a heavy-laden, tradition-bound bureaucracy that would do the federal agencies in Washington, DC proud. There was incessant fighting and turf-wars among divisions within the company. In fact, Gerstner found there was more passion among IBM'ers in fighting each other than against the external competition. IBM's people were very smart, and were obsessed with perfection in products and processes. But the culture was so dysfunctional that the company forgot how to work as a whole, how to focus on the customer's needs, and how compete effectively when the revolution in micro-computing happened in the late 1980's. Gerstner was brought on to save the company from its self-initiated implosion.

I want to share some of the most compelling excerpts from the book about how Gerstner worked to influence and lead the culture change in IBM. As you're reading, remove the word "IBM" and insert the name of your agency, state, district or college. I think you'll discover some very applicable insights for how you can exert leadership. We need a cultural re-awakening among leaders and professionals in our state agencies, schools and colleges. There's only one way to do it - through your personal action and interaction with those whom you serve. Good luck and God bless! - Hans Meeder

"One of the most surprising and depressing things I have learned about large organizations is the extent to which individual parts of the enterprise behave in an unsupportive and competitive way towards other parts of the organization."

"In comparison (to creating a new strategic direction for IBM), changing the attitude and behavior of hundreds of thousands of people is very, very hard. Business schools don't teach you how to do it. You can't lead the revolution from the splendid isolation of corporate headquarters. You can't simply give a couple of speeches or write a new credo for the company, and declare that the new culture has taken hold. You can't mandate it -- can't engineer it."

*"What you CAN DO is create the conditions. You can provide incentives. You can define the marketplace realities and goals. But then, you have to trust. In fact in the end, management doesn't change culture. **Management invites the workforce itself to change the culture.**"*

"In the end, my biggest culture change goal was to induce IBM'ers to believe in themselves again, to believe that they had the ability to determine their own fate, and that

*they already knew what they needed to know. It was to shake them out of their depressed stupor, remind them of who they were -- "you're IBM, dammit" -- and **get them thinking and acting collaboratively as hungry, curious, self-starters.**"*

*"**I knew the leader of the revolution would have to be me.** I had to commit to thousands of hours of personal activity to pull it off. I would have to be upfront and outspoken about what I was doing. We all had to talk directly about culture, behavior and beliefs. We could not be subtle."*

*"**Measure and reward the future, not the past...** Leaders who are thinking about creating true integration in their institution **must change the measurement and reward systems to reinforce this new direction.**" (all bold emphasis added) - Louis V. Gerstner, "Who Says Elephants Can't Dance?", Harper Audio.*

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