Creating Instructional Cultures of Achievement that Lead to Strong Internal Accountability and Close the Achievement Gap: What to Do When the Challenges Seem to Outweigh the Benefits?

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Background

A Quiet Storm. It began simply enough. It was the late 1990's, and I was employed as an educator in the Chicago Public Schools during its tumultuous years of school reform. I was employed as the Assistant to the Principal at a large high school that was on academic probation because fewer than 50% of our students were reading at or above grade level. At the time, I was enrolled in a reading endorsement program at a local university and one of our assignments was to complete an action research project. Because I had recently left the classroom as an English teacher and was intimately familiar with the challenges that my colleagues encountered in teaching reading strategies, I decided to research and design a secondary literacy program to overcome these difficulties, improve student achievement, and close the achievement gap.

Throughout the previous year, district-based professional developers attempted to train us in how to teach reading strategies. However, the teachers struggled with how to integrate the strategies into their content areas. They were not trained as Reading teachers and stated that they could not teach both their content area and the reading strategies within the 50-minute periods. These were legitimate concerns and challenges. As a former elementary school teacher who had completed reading courses at both the elementary and secondary levels, I did not face these same obstacles. I knew how to effectively integrate reading strategies into my English curriculum. I shared my action research plan with the Principal, and he requested that I implement it school-wide the next year.

Input is Critical to Success. Having a degree in curriculum development, I did not find it difficult to design the secondary literacy program; and, I was excited about the possibility of implementing a school-wide plan that would meet the specific needs of both students and faculty. However, I wanted to ensure that the plan I designed would actually meet their particular needs, improve academic achievement, and close the achievement gap. I began by designing and administering a teacher survey that asked about their specific concerns regarding teaching reading strategies and how the administrators could support them in their efforts. The responses came back overwhelmingly that they needed the following: (1) Reading strategies integrated into the content areas, and (2) Continual, differentiated, instructional support to help ensure their success. I designed the program to meet these specific needs.

Hindsight is 20/20. While the program met the specific needs of students and teachers, I was not prepared for the teachers' responses in having another

adult in their classroom observing instruction and giving feedback. I naively thought that because the teachers said that they required continual instructional support to be successful that the implementation process would not be met with considerable resistance. I did not know that I would clash precipitately into a centuries old public school instructional culture where teachers work within their individual egg crate compartments, have virtually unlimited autonomy in how to teach, and have only the minimal one or two administrative evaluation visits per year. In addition, these were high school teachers who did not have a background in teaching reading. In other words, while they were content specialists, this was unchartered territory for them which could lead to feelings of inadequacy and insecurity which then translates into resistance, non-compliance, sabotage, etc. In desperate need to understand the teachers' responses, I devoured Susan Rosenholtz's, *Teachers' Workplace: The Social Organization of Schools* (1991) wherein she describes this phenomenon as "threatened self esteem". This book has become my seminal source for responding to change in instructional cultures.

Translating Research to Results

While I learned many valuable lessons in organizational leadership from my experiences in implementing my first school-wide program that I would apply to future experiences as a district-wide administrator to successfully manage the change process, I describe the major lesson learned below:

Redefining Us VersusThem. The first valuable lesson that I learned was how to effectively translate research to results to successfully manage the challenges associated with creating an instructional culture of achievement that improves academic achievement and closes the achievement gap. This afforded me the requisite insight that I needed to step back from the painful situations and view them through a theoretical lens that put the difficult encounters (i.e., lack of collaboration, massive resistance, threats of teacher union grievances, etc.) into their proper perspective. I refused to engage in the futile and destructive us (i.e., administrators) versus them (i.e., teachers) tug of war. After reading Rosenholtz' (1991) text, I realized that the responses of the teachers were based upon threatened self esteem. This concept is described as follows:

> Most formulations of the "threatened self-esteem" model begin with the assumption that most of us like to think well of ourselves. Indeed, we maximize our opportunities to do so. We therefore avoid situations where our performance adequacy, and thus our sense of self-esteem, may conceivably be called in question (Fisher, DePaulo & Nadler 1981). The task at hand is not merely to prevent damage to our sense of self-worth; it also involves our need to maintain control. For not only are we motivated to cast

> ourselves in the best possible light; we are also motivated to experience ourselves as causal agents in our performance—to feel that we can make things happen with our own deliberate striving (Gecas & Schwalbe 1983).
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> We are unable to control situations, to make things happen, where our abilities are found wanting. We thus devise self-protective strategies to avoid such occasions. We may refuse to participate, for example, or simply not try. And since any lack of effort or engagement is under *our* control, we are not obliged to accept any self-limiting implications about our abilities (Snyder & Wicklund 1981) (p. 5).

Rosenholtz (1991) further explains that where uncertainties threaten to expose teachers and principals' professional inadequacies, "they too engage in self-defensive tactics to protect their sense of control and their social and personal worth" (p. 5). Years later, in working with hundreds of teachers in 20 schools across various district-wide academic programs, I learned research-based, practitioner-proven strategies to successfully guard against threatened self-esteem and effectively implement systemic academic plans. It is imperative to have transparency, consistency, oversight, continual support, and accountability. I briefly describe these tactics below:

1. Transparency, Consistency, and Oversight. As the supervising district administrator, I realized that my primary job was to support teachers in their efforts to successfully meet and exceed the expectations that I set for them. I have become an ardent believer and practitioner of leadership for adult growth and development because it works, and it provides me the same satisfaction as I experienced when teaching students. In her book, *Helping Teachers Learn: Principal Leadership for Adult Growth and Development (2004)*, Dr. Ellie Drago-Severson describes this feeling of "satisfaction" as follows: "… [L]eadership is about heart—dedication and profound caring. There's a special kind of satisfaction and joy in supporting another person's growth. You *see* and *feel* that your efforts to support another human being have made some difference in his or her sense of self and ability to make a difference for a student or a fellow teacher (p. 1)."

   It was extremely important that I immediately set and commit to clear standards and expectations to help ensure that teachers understood the program and how it should improve academic achievement. This included my expectations regarding how they would utilize the training in their classrooms. Therefore, I had to clearly describe these expectations, implement effective, targeted professional development, and provide on-

going, diversified support to help teachers to meet the expectations in an effort to reduce the impact and consequences of threatened self-esteem.

2. Continual Support. Research has shown and those of us in education know that "one-shot" professional development does not work. Therefore, in addition to whole group instruction, I provided continual and differentiated support to teachers throughout the year (i.e., in-class support, small group support, one-on-one support, etc.) to help ensure that they were provided with the help they needed to be successful. While administrators can deliver this assistance, I have found this level of support to be more effective when other teachers provide it because it maximizes openness and comfortability and eliminates the conflict often associated with support versus accountability/evaluation. As a consequence, I identified at the outset of the implementation process, teachers who had mastered the strategies, recruited, and trained them to support me in my efforts to deliver whole group, school-based, and classroom-level support to other teachers.

3. Accountability, Accountability, Accountability. Lastly, it was equally important that I hold teachers accountable for the training that they received by observing and giving them both formal and informal classroom feedback on the implementation of the strategies. Most importantly, I was able to continue to work and support them in their efforts to teach all students to the highest standards by focusing on helping them to improve their performance in the classroom. Consequently, the focus of our professional relationship was one of collaboration rather than combativeness. However, the missing link was that the professional development was not included as a component of the teachers' year-end evaluation. Connecting the two would have addressed the continual, valid issue of loosely coupling teacher professional development and teacher evaluation processes, thus greatly increasing the teachers' motivation to learn and effectively implement the professional development.

Over the years, I have learned that when I design systemic academic plans, I have to do the above as it relates to successful implementation. While the implementation of the above steps has not completely eliminated all of the challenges associated with creating instructional cultures of achievement that lead to strong internal accountability and close the achievement gap, they have greatly reduce the angst and allows school leaders and teachers to focus on their shared goal of improving academic achievement for all students while supporting teachers in their efforts to do so.

Conclusion

I have learned that the implementation of systemic academic plans designed to create instructional cultures of achievement that lead to strong internal

accountability and close the achievement gap inherently produces teacher resistance. Because of the intense pain associated with creating instructional cultures of achievement, many school leaders relinquish their efforts because the challenges seem to outweigh the benefits. Consequently, school leaders inadvertently support and perpetuate instructional cultures of mediocrity that lead to weak internal accountability and widen the achievement gap. As a result, they struggle to stay ahead of external accountability measures and sanctions. Research has found that charter schools that do not create strong internal accountability within the first three years generally fail (Hill, Lake & Celio, 2002; Polk, 2004; 2006). Research has also shown that when charter schools do not create instructional cultures of achievement that lead to strong internal accountability are not closed within the first three years, they continue to struggle academically until their authorizers ultimately revoke their charters.

While managing the change process can be tremendously difficult and frustrating, especially in schools facing external accountability measures and sanctions, we must continue to persevere in spite of the resistance, lack of understanding, and the sense of isolation that school leaders often face. Furthermore, because creating instructional cultures of achievement that lead to strong internal accountability and close the achievement gap is such an enormous, complex undertaking requiring that all adult key stakeholders daily share responsibility for improving teaching and learning, we must work collaboratively, arming ourselves with the requisite resources to help ensure our success.

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