

Instructional Leadership and Organizational Change:  
Learning to Expect and Manage the Unexpected  
Sheila Polk, Ed.D.

Background

As a long-term systemic planner who specializes in leading organizational change, I must admit that I am fascinated by the change process, specifically, as it relates to the juxtaposition of the stability of long-term plans for strategic success and the volatility of the implementation process. As a school and district leader, I learned through experience that it was vitally important that I spend an inordinate amount of time researching, designing, and writing long-term strategic plans for each instructional program that I supervised not only for myself and my team but also to help ensure continuity in planning for my succession. However, these detail specific plans with timelines and budgets within themselves did not guarantee success. Any school leader who has designed long-term systemic plans understands that along with the program designs, we envision how each program will be implemented to accomplish the goals that we have set.

In this current era of increased accountability, school leaders understand the importance of meeting academic goals. I learned early on in my administrative career the significance of having well-designed, long-term systemic plans as they make it easier to lead the change process, specifically, as it relates to staff, students, and parents because they assist me in staying focused on the systemic plan while managing the challenges that inevitably arise. However, I am continuing to learn the value of expecting the unexpected. What is intriguing about the organizational change process is that it does not matter how many times I have undergone this procedure and learned what to expect and then plan accordingly, there are ALWAYS unexpected challenges that are part of leading change and developing and managing professional relationships (i.e., administrators/trustees, administrators/administrators, administrators/teachers, administrators/parents, administrators/students, teachers/administrators, teachers/teachers, teachers/students, teachers/parents, etc.).

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While an impressive body of literature exists on the principalship (Barth, 1990; Drago-Severson, 2004; Fullan, 1997; Sergiovanni, 1995, 1996) that defines and discusses the role of the principal, for the purposes of this article, I am relying upon Sergiovanni's (1996) description. The author argues that the principalship is at the root of the principal's role responsibilities:

[A] commitment to administer to the needs of the school as an institution by serving its purposes, by serving those who struggle to embody these purposes, and by acting as a

guardian to protect the institutional integrity of the school (p. 88).

In traditional public schools, the multiple responsibilities of principals are monumental. According to Chirichello (2003), these roles and responsibilities have become even more complex. Principals are expected to supervise staff, discipline students, meet with parents, manage facilities, lead the instructional program, work on special projects, ensure the safety of staff and students, manage budgets, take part in school-wide reform, build partnerships with social agencies, and understand the legal implications that impact their decisions. Fullan (2001) further maintains principals are experiencing the “worst of both worlds” (p. 139). He explains:

With the move toward the self-management of schools, the principal appears to have the worst of both worlds. The old world is still around with expectations to run a smooth school, and to be responsive to all; simultaneously the new world rains down on schools with disconnected demands, expecting that at the end of the day the school should be constantly showing better test results, and ideally, becoming a learning organization (p. 193).

I believe that these multiple responsibilities and expectations for performance are compounded for charter school leaders who do not have the traditional support system of a school district (i.e., instructional programmatic planning and support, facilities, finance, transportation, personnel, employee benefits, etc.). In addition, charter schools are technically start-up organizations and are subject to the same misfortunes as other new businesses. Finno, Jr., Manno, and Vanourek (2000) explain:

In other entrepreneurial ventures, we expect start-up calamities and high failure rates. But we seldom view schools that way. Yet charter schools resemble small businesses as well as educational institutions (p. 101).

The authors further maintain that in addition to the prerequisite skills needed for traditional public school leaders to succeed, charter school leaders also need the following skills to succeed:

[F]inancial acumen, political shrewdness, Herculean stamina, and tolerance for trial and error, as well as educational vision (Finno, Manno & Vanourek, 2000, p. 101).

With the exhaustive responsibilities of instructional leadership and the expectation of successfully leading organizational change to improve student achievement, school leaders are oftentimes faced with expectations from key

stakeholders to be Superman figures. However, I would argue that these expectations are unrealistic and short-sighted. In order to effectively lead organizational change that is sustainable, school leaders must embrace and implement strategies that will result in long-term success as opposed to short-term, non-sustainable gains.

## Conclusion

Following are three lessons I have learned over the past 20 years that school leaders might find helpful in successfully leading sustainable organizational change within your school. They are: (1) Expect the Expected; (2) Expect the Unexpected; and (3) Breathe and Relax:

1. Expect the Expected. In other words, plan for what you expect/know will occur during implementation. Having a plan, system, processes, and procedures in place will help to ensure that you and your staff are able to effectively and efficiently manage issues that arise. This saves time and reduces angst among your staff.
2. Expect the Unexpected. When you know that there will be challenges that will arise that you have not anticipated will help to alleviate the anguish that occurs when the unexpected happens and will help you to stay focused on your systemic plan. In this regard, I am not speaking about an issue such as one of your key staff has to take an unplanned sick leave. While this is inconvenient for you and other members of your team, having a detailed, long-term systemic plan and a well-informed, collaborative team will help to assuage frustration that is oftentimes associated with this type of dilemma. More to the point, I am referring to the types of challenges that should never have occurred; those events that could never have been envisioned by anyone. These types of issues hit hard and fast, without warning, and without a detailed long-term systemic plan in place, they could quickly derail your efforts.
3. Breathe and Relax. It is vitally important that you learn to manage the stress that goes along with leading organizational change. It is not easy to lead change because people intrinsically resist change whether it is necessary or not. It is even more stressful when you are leading change in a school that is in need of academic improvement and are striving to stay ahead of external accountability measures. I am continuing to learn that taking care of my emotional and physical health is NOT an option. However, as school leaders, it is extremely important to commandeer the time to eat healthy, exercise, and enjoy passions outside of school because these are generally the first things that we abort in order to find the time to successfully complete our work. We are always on call and always on "duty". Even when we are not at school, we are oftentimes thinking about our work. This is natural because for many of us our career is

also our passion and what energizes us. However, the reality is that this leads to an unbalanced lifestyle; and, while this type of living might yield desirable results in the short-term, it is not conducive to the long-term positive results that we desire.

Remember that if you learn to expect the expected, expect the unexpected, and breathe and relax, you should be able to successfully lead the change process. Equally important, you might also learn to enjoy it.

### References

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