

Creating the Capacity to Support Innovations

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Phillip C. Schlechty
Founder and CEO
Schlechty Center for
Leadership in School Reform



**Schlechty
Center**

for leadership in school reform

950 Breckenridge Lane,
Suite 200
Louisville, KY 40207
502.895.1942 Phone
502.895.7901 Fax
www.schlechtycenter.org

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Creating the Capacity to Support Innovations

Though it is not always clear what people mean when they use the word *capacity*, nowadays everyone seems to want to build it. And, as more and more people become involved in capacity building, the meaning of the word becomes increasingly unclear. At the outset, therefore, I want to be very clear about what I mean when I use this term.

A Preliminary View

In the most generic sense, the word *capacity* has to do with potentials and limitations. Capacity has to do with what a person, group, or organization is capable of doing if called upon to act. It also has to do with the limits beyond which performance should not be expected. To say that a jar has a one-quart capacity is to say that the jar can hold up to one quart of a liquid, but that it cannot hold more than that. A two-quart jar can also hold one quart, but it has the capacity to hold two quarts—though not three.

Capacity for What?

The word *capacity* is meaningless without some referent. The question that one should always ask about capacity is, “the capacity to do what?” In the pages that follow, I will be discussing what I have learned about creating schools that have the capacity to install innovations that require systemic change. The reason I am concerned about developing this capacity is that it has been my observation that school leaders seldom take capacity issues into account when they are installing innovations. Because of this leadership shortcoming, innovations that might have dramatically improved school performance often end up being labeled as failures.

Innovations and Technology

It is becoming increasingly commonplace in education circles to use the word *technology* as a synonym for information processing, storing, retrieving, and transmitting technologies based on electronics, as well as such derivatives of these technologies as the Internet. This is a mistake. Technology has to do with “the means of doing the job, whatever the means and the job may be.”¹ Textbooks are a form of technology as much as is a computer.

When one goes about improving the performance of an organization like a school, the primary concern is with improving the way the job is done. Thus, improvement in the performance of schools, as in most organizations, almost always has to do with technology.

Sometimes improvement comes about by increasing the skill with which present technologies are employed. Such improvement efforts dominate the attention of most staff development programs.

Sometimes, however, improvement results from the introduction of new technologies. This is properly understood as innovation. In this article, I will be concerned with improvements that result from innovations as opposed to those that might result from the enhancement of the skills of individuals to do the job as it is currently defined.

¹ Robert S. Dreeben *The Nature of Teaching and Schools: Schools and the Work of Teachers* (Glenview Ill.; Scott Foreman and Co., 1970), p.83.

Two Types of Innovation

In his book *The Innovator's Dilemma*,² Clayton Christensen distinguishes between two types of innovations: those that are *sustaining* and those that are *disruptive*. Sustaining innovations are intended to improve effectiveness and efficiency and to make it possible for the present system to perform *up to capacity*. Disruptive innovations call upon the system and those who work in it to do things they have never done.

Sustaining innovations are sufficiently congruent with existing systems that they have little impact on either the structure or the culture of the system. Disruptive innovations, if they are to be employed effectively, require dramatic alteration in both the structure and the culture of the organization.

Sustaining innovations are neither more nor less than extensions of the present systems. For example, PowerPoint is an electronic elaboration of the slate board and the overhead projector. The use of PowerPoint does not require an alteration in the role of the teacher or any other structural aspect of the school. It simply makes it easier for teachers to do what they have always done, albeit perhaps somewhat more effectively and efficiently.

Disruptive innovations, on the other hand, require changes in the way vital functions are carried out in the organization, for example, the way people and programs are evaluated, the way new members are recruited and inducted, and so on.³ Changes such as these are systemic changes. They involve the alteration of rules, roles, and

² Christensen, Clayton M. *The Innovator's Dilemma* (Boston: The Harvard Business Press, 1997).

³ In a forthcoming book I discuss six vital functions around which systems develop in schools as well as in other organizations. These are the induction system, the knowledge transmission system, the evaluation system, the power and authority system, the directional system and the boundary system. I will not discuss these here, but the reader should know that I consider changes in the way these functions are carried out to be at the heart of systemic change and therefore, at the heart of capacity building.

relationships and of the culture in which these are embedded, so that critical functions of the organization (like evaluation or recruitment) can be carried out in dramatically different ways. For example, if teachers are expected to work in teams or to make decisions collectively, then the way the role of teachers is defined in the school will likely need to be changed and the authority ascribed to that role will need to be modified.

Innovation and Systemic Change

The art and science of installing *sustaining* innovations is generally well understood among educators. These processes are, in fact, so well understood that they can be codified into programs and projects. These programs and projects can, if properly designed, give clear focus and direction to implementation efforts. Most of the literature dealing with staff development has to do with the design of programs that support the introduction of sustaining innovations or programs intended to improve skills in employing technologies that are currently in use.

There is, however, very little literature on the introduction of disruptive innovations. The reason for this is that, for the most part, educators proceed from the assumption that if people are changed then the systems in which they operate will change to accommodate them.⁴ Another reason is that knowledge about leading systemic change is so tied up in more general understandings of leadership and leadership development that it is difficult to disentangle concepts related to installing disruptive innovations from discussions of leaders and leadership. The result is that there is not a distinctive literature about installing disruptive innovations. Rather, there is a distinctive literature on

⁴ When pushed, most educators do recognize that systems have effects but far too many efforts to bring about change seem oblivious to the way systems shape the effects and effectiveness of innovations.

leadership from which one can gain some insights into what is required to introduce disruptive innovations.

Capacity Building: A Point of View

Over the past 20 years I have spent considerable time identifying and describing the characteristics of schools and school systems that are successful in installing what Christensen has taught me to call “disruptive change.” Though I have changed my mind about some of the details presented in my earlier writing on the subject, I continue to believe that there are three general capacities that schools and school systems must have in place if they are to be successful at supporting and sustaining systemic changes and introducing disruptive innovations.⁵ These are:

- The capacity to establish and maintain focus on the future;
- The capacity to maintain direction once a clear focus has been established;
- The capacity to act strategically, meaning the capacity to reallocate existing resources, to seize opportunities, and to create a new future rather than being dominated by the need to solve problems that have their origins in the past.

Focus On the Future

Leading Through Vision: To focus on the future, leaders must be able to articulate a vision of the future. To do this they must be able to answer two questions. These are:

⁵ For the reader interested in a more detailed discussion of my views on these matters it might be worthwhile to read Phillip C. Schlechty *Inventing Better Schools* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997) and Phillip C. Schlechty *Shaking Up the Schoolhouse* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001).

- What business are we currently in, and how much do our present customers and clients value what we do?
- If, in the future, if we want to be highly valued by our customers and clients, what business do we need to be in?

The key to school improvement lies in understanding that the present system was designed to produce attendance and compliance and to “harvest” engagement. If public education is to survive and thrive into the 21st century it will be necessary to focus on nurturing student engagement.⁶ Schools and school systems must be positioned to be in the *student engagement business* rather than *the compliance business*. Rather than demanding and commanding compliance without commitment, they must attend to creating work that commands attention as well commitment—at least this is my view of the matter.

If this view is accepted, it is clear that schools of the future must be organized in ways that are at substantial variance from the way schools are presently organized, and teachers will need to learn to do things few teachers have ever done as opposed to simply learning to do what good teachers have always done. For example, most teachers, even good teachers, place heavy reliance on the fact that their role as adults and professionals entitles them to expect compliance from their students. If most children are to learn at high levels, teachers must learn to rely less on tradition-based authority and status claims associated with being “knowledgeable professionals,” and rely more on the expert authority that derives from a deep understanding of student motives and the way schools

⁶ Much that I am suggesting here is discussed in more detail in a book I wrote entitled *Working on the Work* (San Francisco: Josse-Bass, 2002).

can be organized to support teachers in designing schoolwork that appeals to these motives.

At the very least, teachers, principals, and all who work in and around schools will need to shift their attention from developing strategies to get students to do whatever schoolwork the teacher assigns. Instead, they must focus on creating work that gains the attention and commitment of students. They must ensure as well that the work students do calls on them to learn things that the adult community values and sees as important for them to learn. No longer can the core business simply be producing compliance and attendance.

Understanding the Need for Change: In addition to being capable of leading by vision, leaders must be able to determine whether the innovations required to move the vision into reality simply requires the introduction of one or more sustaining innovations or whether the level of improvement required necessitates the introduction of innovations that go beyond the capacity of the present system. Put differently, leaders must determine whether or not the innovations they are trying to install call for changes that are systemic in nature.

This means leaders need to be able to assess whether or not the present system has the capacity to support the proposed innovation. If it does have the needed capacity, what leaders provide are motive force, access to technical support, and the needed resources. If, on the other hand, the needed capacity is lacking, then leaders must involve themselves in the much more difficult and less well-understood process of capacity building.

Building the Capacity to Focus on the Future

Assuming that key leaders—namely the superintendent, key central office personnel, and the majority of principals and teacher leaders— share a common understanding of the need to install disruptive innovations, they will also need to envision the kind of changes that will be necessary to support the intended innovations. This means that the school system and its leaders must have the capacity to:

- Communicate the beliefs that will guide the new system in a way that is compelling to those people whose support is needed to bring about the changes required to act on these beliefs.
- Develop among key leaders and relevant constituencies a shared vision of what schools and the school system would look like if these beliefs were acted on, and develop a bias toward action relevant to these beliefs.
- Assess the current status of operations at the classroom, building and district level and, based on these assessments, develop plans for moving each of these units toward a condition in which the guiding beliefs are more and more fully realized in the district.⁷
- Create consensus around the plans that are developed as well as a shared commitment to act on these plans, including a commitment to provide or locate the resources (time, people, space, information and technologies) needed to support these actions.

This means that it is essential for leaders to be brought to consider what they believe about the business of schools and how schools go about doing that business.

⁷ The Schlechty Center for Leadership in School Reform (SCLSR) has developed a variety of tools to support such assessments. The interested reader can get more information about these tools through the SCLSR website.

It also requires that leaders make clear decisions regarding their willingness to commit to and support what they say they believe, even when the going gets tough. Without such clear commitments, the likelihood of successfully installing a disruptive innovation is quite small.

Similarly, with regard to the second statement, it requires considerable skill to move from beliefs to vision. And it is essential that this vision, which is necessarily a district-wide vision, be translated into local versions that can drive action at the schoolhouse and classroom level. It is, for example, certainly the case that a compelling vision of a large urban high school would be very different from the vision that might guide a small elementary school in the same district. If, however, the system envisioned is to be a school system rather than a system of schools, both should be guided by the same belief about the nature of the core business of schools, the role of teachers, and so on.⁸

Maintaining Direction

Two general conditions must be assured if direction is to be maintained.

- First, leaders must have a clear image of where they are going
- Second, leaders must have a clear understanding of where they are now and some appreciation of what it is going to take to get from where they are to where they want to go.

⁸ It is my view that much harm has been done to public education and to the ideas of excellence and equity by confusing decentralization of decision-making authority with the decentralization of values, commitments, and beliefs. Devolving decision-making authority to the level of the schoolhouse and the classroom is, in my view, essential to meaningful reform in schools. However, if this occurs without serious attention to the central values and beliefs that will guide decisions, the likely result will be mediocrity for the masses and excellence for the few rather than excellence for all students.

In part, the development of a clear image of where leaders intend for the system to go is addressed in the visioning process. However, it is essential that this visioning process be informed by a clear understanding of the nature of the core business of schools as well as an understanding of the available means of conducting that business. If leaders accept the premise that the core business of schools *should be* designing educational activities for students that command attention *and* commitment as well as leading and supporting students in the pursuit of this work, then it should be clear that the focus of schools should be on students and their motives. In other words, it should be clear that the business of schools is designing engaging work for students. It should also be clear that engaging work is the primary product of schools, and that students are the first line customers of schools.

Given clarity on these matters it is essential that leaders work to establish a culture where results are carefully assessed and actions are taken based on these assessments. Furthermore, one of the first results that should be assessed is the ability of school leaders and those who teach to purposefully focus attention on the creation of engaging work for students.⁹

Indeed, absent a clear focus on providing engaging work for students, improvements in test scores will more likely be the result of getting non-compliant students to be more compliant than it will be to getting these students and their already compliant peers to be engaged. Increasing the ability of schools to produce compliance may be a formula for ensuring that bad schools look better, but it is not a formula for

⁹ I provide a framework for such an assessment in *Working on the Work* (See Phillip C. Schlechty *Working on the Work* [San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002].

excellence in America's schools. It is certainly not a strategy for making good schools great.

Certainly, the goal of schools, regardless of the vision that guides them, should be to ensure that all students are learning at high levels. Test scores can help one to assess whether this is so. However, there are many other factors to consider as well, and among the items that need to be assessed is the capacity of the present system to support the introduction of disruptive innovations.¹⁰

¹⁰ (Embedded in the present discussion, as well as the discussion that follows, are ten qualities or attributes that I believe describe the capacity of schools to focus on the future, maintain direction, and act strategically. These attributes are presented graphically in figure 1. This framework also provides the basis for an assessment process employed by staff from the Schlechty Center for Leadership in School Reform when they work with client school districts.)

Developing District-Level Capacity

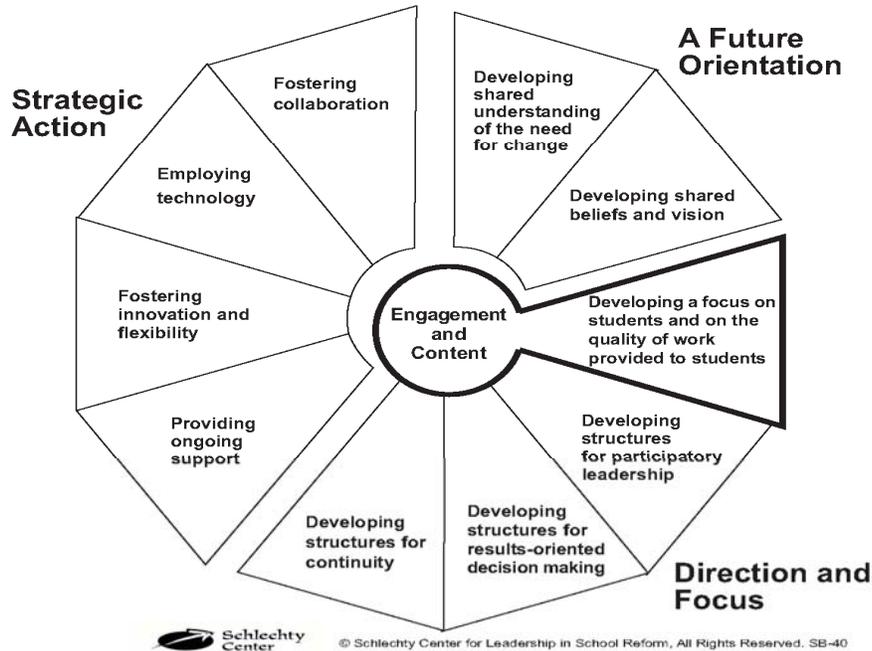


Figure 1: Developing District-Level Capacity

Another critical component of the capacity to maintain direction has to do with participatory leadership. Disruptive innovations interrupt habits and often create fear and uncertainty. While participatory leadership may not reduce uncertainty, it can help to transform fear into heroic collective action—this is, the power of what anthropologists refer to as *the shared ordeal*.

Knowing that others are as frightened as you are often generates courage. After all, courage is nothing more than behaving as you need to behave even when you are scared to death. It is only through participatory leadership that one is likely to create the

level and type of commitments necessary to sustain disruptive innovations, especially during those middle stages when, as Rosabeth Moss Kanter observes, “nearly all change feels like a failure.”¹¹

People who have bought into a common vision based on shared beliefs are more likely to persist with their efforts when they confront difficulties than are those whose only reason for participation is compliance with a directive from above. Enhancing the capacity of leaders to lead in a participatory way and developing policies and procedures that encourage participatory leadership are essential capacity-building activities, for without this capacity, few will be willing to take the risks that must be taken to invent new systems.

Another issue that must be addressed if disruptive innovations are to be sustained is the issue of continuity. Continuity is dependent on two features of organizational life; induction and executive succession. For induction programs to be effective they must attend to inculcating in new members the beliefs that guide action as well as ensuring that individuals possess the technical skills needed to act in the way the culture requires that they act. Too few induction programs in education attend to such issues.

Executive succession planning, which is virtually absent in most school districts, is also essential to the maintenance of direction. Indeed, it is the absence of such planning that leads teachers to the view that “this too shall pass,” a view that not only decreases commitment but engenders cynicism as well. Therefore, leaders who are committed to building capacity must attend to executive succession planning almost before anything else. In situations where change is real it is “real hard” as well. People who are asked to

¹¹ Rosabeth Moss Kanter *On the Frontiers of Management* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1977), p. 11.

make the sacrifices that really hard change requires need to be assured that there is a leadership structure in place that will sustain them.

Strategic Action

Strategic action is action that focuses on the future. The intent of strategic action is to bring into existence some desired end state that has yet to be realized. It is not the intent of strategic action to solve immediate problems. Rather, the intent of strategic action is to seize opportunities and invent new futures for the organization.

There are a number of large barriers to strategic action in schools. Chief among these are:

- The way schools are governed; especially the tendency of boards of education to anchor decisions in short term constituent interests as opposed to strategic goals.
- The tendency to allow efforts to keep things from getting worse (maintenance interests) to overwhelm efforts to make things better (developmental interests).
- The lack of an understanding of and support for the experimentalism that is inherently involved in innovative efforts; especially innovations that require the disruption of present systems.
- The tendency to try to domesticate emerging technologies rather than incorporate these technologies in ways that exploit the full power that they might otherwise bring to the task.¹²
- The limited capacity of most schools and school districts to develop and sustain actions that call for collaboration within the system, for example, among departments, grade levels or schools, as well as between the system and other

¹² Domestication involves altering the way a new technology is used so that it fits the present system as contrasted with changing the present system to capitalize on the technology.

organizations that have a stake in the way the schools operate, for example, teacher unions, advocacy groups, and so on.

If schools and school systems are to develop the capacity to act strategically, leaders must be prepared to address these issues. To address these issues leaders must:

- Ensure that appropriate support systems are in place— especially political and financial support systems, and human resource development systems.
- Create a culture that drives out fear, encourages responsible risk taking and separates unsuccessful tries from punishment.
- Assess the system requirements presented by innovations and ensure that these requirements are responded to at the same time that the other requirements of the innovation are being addressed.
- Support and encourage the development of relationships within schools, among schools, and between the school district and the larger community to create conditions of trust and perceptions of competence and community.

Providing support is essential whether the innovation to be installed is a sustaining innovation or a disruptive one. However, the kind of support needed when an innovation is disruptive is likely to be quite different from the support needed when the innovation is a sustaining one. There are several reasons this is so.

- Sustaining innovations build on pre-existing competence. Disruptive innovations often require persons to do things they have never done, which force them to act in areas where they have no competence. This means that leaders, especially top-level leaders, must work hard to provide assurances that initial failures will not be

punished and that honest efforts—even when immediate results are not evident—will be rewarded.

- The type of training that can be provided to support disruptive innovations is often quite different from the kind of training required when the innovation is sustaining in nature. In the case of sustaining innovations, it is likely that the demands of the innovation are well known, codified, and subject to demonstration and modeling. Disruptive innovations, on the other hand, are usually more uncertain in their demands, less clear in their requirements, and less easily demonstrated and modeled. This requires a much more collegial approach to implementation where all who participate do so as learners and where there are no clear models to master. Rather than mandates for implementation, disruptive innovations involve invitations to invention.
- Because disruptive innovations introduce so much uncertainty and “static” into existing systems, the intentions, motives and commitments of leaders—especially top-level leaders such as superintendents and boards of education—become critical to successful implementation. When innovations are disruptive, the integrity of leaders and the perception that present leadership commitments can and will be sustained over time are critical determinants of success. Furthermore, in the case of disruptive innovations, the time line in which success can be measured is likely to be much longer than would be the time line appropriate to measuring the success of a sustaining innovation.

To provide support to disruptive innovations, leaders must have or must develop the capabilities these issues suggest. Among other things they must:

- Develop strong and personal bonds of trust and feelings of common destiny with those whose support they want and need in order to make the innovation work as it is intended to work.
- Be prepared to make themselves vulnerable and proceed as a learning leader rather than an expert leader. They, like those they are leading, will often be on “the cutting edge of ignorance” rather than on the cutting edge of knowledge. Leaders of disruptive change need to learn to be comfortable with this condition.
- Like Caesar’s wife, not only be virtuous, but appear to be virtuous. The slightest dissembling can destroy credibility. Unlike bureaucratic leaders who sometimes absorb success and give away failure, leaders who are committed to the installation of disruptive innovations must absorb failure and give away success. Fixing the system is very different from fixing the blame or solving the problems the present system creates.

Encouraging innovations is essential to strategic action. It is unfortunately the case, however, that schools are peculiarly ill-equipped to maintain innovations, especially disruptive innovations. Although schools continuously install innovations, they seldom stick with the innovations long enough to ensure that their intended effects will be realized. The result is that many see schools as fickle and given to fads, when the fact is that schools too often simply do not have the system capacity to support innovations through the difficult stages of implementation.

The Capabilities of Leaders

What, then, do leaders committed to the creation of change-adept organizations, which is to say organizations that have the capacity to support disruptive innovations do, and how does what such leaders do differ from the actions of those who lead change-inept organizations? The following is my current thinking on this matter:

In *change-adept* organizations, leaders:

- Are clear about their core business and can communicate this understanding to others in ways that are both clear and persuasive.
- Treat change as an ongoing, expected, and normal process.
- View new technologies and shifts in the external environment as opportunities for growth, improvement, and continuing development.
- Ensure that systems are in place that support changes once they have been initiated.
- Invest in the creation and maintenance of support systems in the same way as they invest in programs and projects intended to produce substantive improvements in performance.
- Deal with uncertainty with ease and thrive on chaos.
- Introduce innovations as a means of improving performance or expanding service rather than using innovations as a tool to appease critics.
- Incorporate multiple changes simultaneously and sometimes introduce changes that create competing demands on the system.

- Place high value on innovation and novelty.

In *change-inept* organizations, leaders:

- Have only a vague understanding of their core business, or hold competing views of that business and therefore send unclear messages to others regarding what they should be about and what matters should be given priority.
- Treat each change as an independent event.
- View new technologies and shifts in the external environment as threats to internal stability and as problems to be managed and dealt with.
- Fail to attend to the support systems needed to sustain changes that have been initiated.
- Invest in programs and projects intended to improve performance but fail to invest in the support systems needed to sustain these programs and projects.
- Are overwhelmed by uncertainty and seek to impose a traditional order on situations that are not fully understood or that are particularly threatening.
- Introduce innovations primarily as a means of accommodating outside threats and protecting the control exercised over the core operations of the enterprise.
- Create boundary systems that protect internal operations from external influences and seek to limit the impact of the environment on day-to-day operations.

- Seek to limit the number and type of changes introduced.
- Place high value on stability and predictability.

Introducing and effectively using new and emerging technologies requires that systems have the capacity to evaluate these technologies and to assess the demands they will place on existing systems. It also means that leaders will be prepared to reallocate resources (time, people, knowledge and space) to support the technologies being installed as well as to support the system changes required to support these technologies.¹³

In my view, the greatest threat to the survival of public education is the inability of the schools to use new and emerging technologies in the way they were designed to be used. Rather than using new technologies to provide students with new forms of schoolwork, for example, too many educators use these new technologies to do old forms of school work in new ways. Thus, the computer often becomes an electronic slate board and distance learning becomes a means of providing a boring lecturer with the opportunity to bore a larger audience.

The Non-School Option

Educators sometimes overlook the fact that non-school-based education, as contrasted with school-based education, has always been available to the educated and the affluent. John Adams spent many hours educating John Quincy Adams and only turned to school to supplement the education he provided his son. Many others who were

¹³ The reader should recall that I define technology as “the means of doing the job, whatever the means and the job may be.” (See footnote 1. above.)

similarly situated did the same. Public schools were designed, *in part*, to provide the benefits of academic education to children whose parents did not have the talent, money, or inclination to personally provide education for their offspring.

One of the most fundamental facts confronting those who value public education and want to preserve public schools is the fact that the introduction of electronic means of communicating information, storing information, processing information, and analyzing information has created the possibility of educating people without “schooling them.” This means that if parents become sufficiently dissatisfied with the way the schools are fulfilling their legitimate functions, they can remove their children from school without fear of compromising the child’s academic education. As William Bennett and his colleagues at K12 are even now trying to demonstrate, it is now possible for all students, including the children of the poorly educated, to attain access to a high-quality academic education without attending school. (K12 is a for-profit corporation that is marketing a comprehensive K12 curriculum to home school parents, one that depends primarily on the Internet as a means of delivery.)

It may well be that education by way of the Internet and television is not the same as education by way of school, but this argument is increasingly unpersuasive to parents who perceive the schools as failing to carry out their educative functions as they would have them carried out. If not now, then in the near future, public school educators will have to face the fact that it is, or will be, technologically possible for children to receive a pretty sound academic education without the benefit of school, even if their parents are themselves not very well educated.

This case seems to me to be so strong that I would suggest that leaders who comfort themselves with the argument that non-school-based education is inherently inferior education would have made good candidates for CEO at Ford when Lee Iacocca was comforting himself and Ford employees with the fact that Japanese cars were inferior and presented no real threat to the American automobile industry. If all one wants from schools is that they fulfill the instrumental functions involved in teaching children to read, write, and cipher, or even to produce a world-class workforce that is literate in the ways of science and competent in mathematics, it may be that the age of schooling is indeed past. As for me, I expect more from our schools, and among the “more” that I expect is that the schools will contribute to the building of communities to serve, as well as to serving the communities they build.

Collaboration and the ability to engage in collaborative action are becoming increasingly important to the survival of the public schools. Indeed, without the ability to collaborate with others the prospect of truly repositioning schools in the constellation of community forces is not likely. Unless schools can be repositioned it is unlikely that they will have the capacity to support the kind of disruptive innovations that will be needed to ensure a healthy future for public education in America. What, then, must schools and school leaders do to ensure that the organizations they lead will have the capacity to collaborate with others?

- First and foremost, leaders must ensure that there is sufficient cohesion within the school and the school district that cooperation with others does not needlessly threaten the internal integrity of the system. Sharing authority with others is essential to collaboration, but sharing authority is not the same thing as giving up

authority. Only organizations that have clear beliefs to which most members are committed can collaborate without fear of compromising their mission and their integrity.

- Second, the social boundaries of the system must be sufficiently permeable that interaction with others is encouraged and supported yet does not result in aimless wandering about, attempting to satisfy so many competing interests that nothing of substance results. This means that leaders must lead rather than simply manage and that they must provide direction as contrasted with seeking to control.
- Finally, the ability to collaborate is dependent on all those who are a party to the collaboration having a clear sense of the mission they are pursuing and the vision they want to realize. Failing this, the most politically powerful parties to the collaboration will almost certainly dominate the action and will co-opt the resources of other members of the collaborative effort to serve their own ends with little or no attention to the collective ends to which the collaborative effort should be addressed.

A Concluding Comment

One of the most fundamental problems confronting those who would transform schools from organizations that produce compliance to organizations that nurture and develop engagement is the problem of persistence of effort. As Rosabeth Moss Kanter has observed:

To convert imagination into useful ideas requires persistence, which is also helped or hindered by the organization. My favorite maxim of management, if not of life, is “Everything can look like a failure in the middle.”

Predictable problems arise in the middle of nearly every attempt to do something new. Almost inevitably, innovation projects encounter shortages of time or resources because forecasts were overly optimistic. Unexpected obstacles

have to be removed for the project to proceed. Momentum is lost because of staff turnover. Morale dips because of setbacks or sheer fatigue. Or critics attack because they start to notice the project when it looks like it might succeed. Before that, it was not enough of a threat to arouse antagonism.

Stop a project because of these problems, and, by definition, that project will be a failure. Persist—by solving the problems, pumping up the troops, or dealing with the critics—and, if the signals still indicate the idea is promising, a chance for success remains. Change-adept organizations support projects through their difficult middle periods.¹⁴

Persistence of effort is a capacity issue as well as a question of competence, courage, and will. Competent leaders who are people with courage and strength of will are essential to the transformation of schools. Even competent, courageous, and strong-willed leaders will fail, however, if the schools and school districts they are trying to transform do not have the systems in place that must be in place to support and sustain innovations over time. Thus leaders must work first on those things that enhance the capacity of the schools they are leading. It is only by enhancing the capacity of schools to support disruptive innovations that it will be possible to invent schools where nearly every child learns at high levels and no child will be left behind because every child will have a genuine opportunity to get ahead.

¹⁴ Rosabeth Moss Kanter *On the Frontiers of Management* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press 1977), p.11.

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