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   At the annual Superintendents Work Conference at Teachers College last summer, we heard Bill Baker, then president of WNET Channel 13 public television station in New York City, make the provocative claim he did not think organizational cultures could improve in nonprofits, including school systems. Large, established organizations, he insisted, are so "transfixed with their internal systems and bureaucracies they are unable to change."

   Leaders in these environments, Baker suggested, ought to adapt to prevailing organizational norms and expect their successes to occur "around the edges" by creating new organizational subcultures, for example.

   We found ourselves taking Baker's remarks to heart for two reasons. First, Baker has proven himself to be a successful public television executive, in part through his innovative use of smaller units within larger organizations. But more significantly, his remarks challenged a deeply held assumption. In our practice, we have believed that deep, transformative change in school organizations is possible and that it occurs precisely through the kind of culture change Baker sees as impossible.

Complex Questions

   There is an obvious urgency to answer the question of whether and under what conditions school and school district culture can really change. The question, of course, is deceptively simple to state but confoundingly complex to answer.

   The question itself raises more questions. What do we mean by culture change? How do we know change has occurred if it happens? What relationship exists between culture change and school improvement? Is there a cyclical relationship in which new actions by teachers bring some results and produce some culture change, which motivates more new actions as the cycle recurs?

   Does research help us in answering these questions? Considerable evidence of the intractability of school organizations exists. School reform efforts over the years have had little substantive and enduring impact on school culture. Some experts even have suggested that the clearest outcome of the endless implementation of reform ideas is the next cycle of work for reformers.

   Researchers also have suggested a powerful reason for this response. Change efforts often move too far and too fast and threaten to destroy the organization's sense of competence that has taken years to develop. If the organization loses its sense of self, it cannot become successful. Leaders should avoid revolutionary changes and attempts to import rather than develop culture. Instead, they should learn to live with the tension between maintaining and even protecting the old culture while pushing at the same time to change it.

Past Successes

   What about our experience? Together we have more than 30 years in the superintendency. We each consider ourselves to have been successful superintendents. But did we make lasting changes in school districts in which we worked? Did cultures change?

   To answer these questions, we first clarified what we mean by culture. Twenty years ago, Terry Deal suggested "culture is what keeps the herd roughly moving west." In Deal's terms, culture relates to the values and norms that underlie action. Characteristics of culture explain "the way we do things around here."

   If culture deals with how people perform their work, then changes in culture must involve new patterns of work. For culture to change in a school or school district, teachers, principals and other staff must relate to each other in different ways and actually do something differently.

   Moreover, they must continue to do work differently in the future. Teachers and principals will not substantially change how they do things on a temporary basis. Cultural change in work activities is deep and lasting. It requires time and team building, often through recruiting people who have a shared vision and dedication to implement it.

   To claim the culture has changed, new ways of doing things must be institutionalized. As superintendents looking back on districts that we led, we believe the litmus test is whether the changes survive us and continue.

Enduring Changes

   In applying this definition of culture change and this test of its occurrence, we discovered both bad and good news.

   Both of us invested time, energy and personal credibility in efforts to change culture. Such efforts are always fragile at first, subject to variables beyond our control. A group of tenured teachers in a high school academic department may be prima donnas who could substantially improve their practice by collaboration. But if they are successful in terms of the indicators they and their clients have established, such as Advanced Placement test scores and college admissions, and if they are recognized for that success, they may defeat every effort to foster more collaboration.

In another area, a data-based program assessment process may produce enthusiastic responses from the first groups of teachers involved. However, if the superintendent who helped to put it in place moves on before building a critical mass of teacher and administrative support, the program may founder during the leadership transition.

In contrast, we can confidently point to changes in how teachers work together that we initiated and that continue to this day. One of us, in collaboration with the teachers' union, initiated a sequence of formal courses that exposed teachers to the research base on teaching, provided them with hands-on opportunities to broaden their repertoires of teaching strategies and required them to engage in experiments together in their classroom to apply what they learned and to critique each other's success. For more than 10 years, these courses have continued to be offered by the district. The collaboration that the experiments spawned has continued, too. By our definition, the culture appears to have changed--more collaboration, less isolation.

Our experience suggests it often is easier to change the culture by opening up a school or school district to more shared decision making than it is to confront the challenges of creating a culture of shared accountability. One of us was successful at increasing shared ownership within a district by including faculty and site administrators in decision making, recruiting a stable administrative team with a shared vision of excellence and creating in-house teams for building skills and capacity to implement shared goals with faculty and parents.

On the other hand, we have observed the difficulties of some of our colleagues, especially those in urban districts, who have worked to build shared accountability for student achievement. It is not surprising that much of the support for state standards and accountability has come from urban administrators who have used these external pressures as leverage to confront the culture and lack of student achievement within their schools and district.

Too few urban educational leaders have been given sufficient time or appropriate support to build a team and develop trust. They have been expected to walk on water and turn around a school district within a few years. When this does not occur, a new administrator, hired with great fanfare, repeats the pattern and is often gone within a few years. No wonder many teachers respond cynically to calls for reform by repeating, "This too shall pass."

This kind of resistance to change from large secondary schools has caused several urban superintendents, now supported by foundation grants, to break up large schools in order to create schools within the school. Deborah Meier, Ted and Nancy Sizer and others who have started alternative or charter schools have achieved substantial success by creating new, small subcultures within or outside larger organizational structures, precisely the path to success that Bill Baker recommended at the superintendents conference. Indeed, we would question whether the new reorganizations being mandated in large city secondary schools will work unless the reformers and educational leaders of these new small schools understand how a common culture affects development of a community of learners.

Realistic Prospect

Can culture change? Our answer is a qualified yes. Our experience and that of many others provides clear evidence that aspects of culture change. But many variables affect whether changes endure. These include the ability of the educational leader to build trust and commitment in staff, the length of the superintendent's tenure and the willingness of the district to make a transition to a new leader with a similar set of values and beliefs.

Even with these issues adequately addressed, organizational culture may be intractable to certain changes, especially those conceived on a large scale that would attack the organization's collective identity. The lesson for district leaders is to reaffirm the importance of learning and to develop a healthy respect for those aspects of organizational culture that are deep in the fabric of the institution. We may still decide to confront and attempt to change them. But we will do so with more realistic expectations and a greater likelihood of long-term success than if we act in ignorance.

ADDED MATERIAL

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