

Best Practices/Tom W. Many, Ed.D.

The Stars Are in Alignment

The Importance of Aligning Tactics, Strategies and Goals



A school faculty targeted high levels of learning for all students as their goal. To achieve this goal, the principal established a specific theory of action that stated, “If teachers successfully implement the basic tenets of Professional Learning Communities, then students will learn to high levels.”

Most successful principals understand there are no silver bullets in school improvement. They also understand that if tactics and strategies are not linked to school goals, the outcome will be wasted time, money and energy as results fall short of expectations. Aligning a school’s tactics, strategies, and goals is the key.

Sounds simple enough but today’s principals are bombarded by the “latest and greatest” school improvement idea on a daily basis. Add to that the demand for almost immediate results and most principals are constantly on the lookout for the next “can’t miss” idea. It is a challenge to sort out all of the hype and hyperbole and keep focused on the few initiatives that matter most, but successful principals understand the difference between tactics and strategies, and relentlessly align both with their school goals.

An Example Where the Lack of Alignment Backfired

A principal correctly identified the creation of a guaranteed and viable curriculum as a key leverage point in his faculty’s effort to implement professional learning communities, however, what actually took place during the year derailed his school improvement efforts. Almost no training was provided to teachers on powering and unwrapping standards. Instead, tens of thousands of dollars was spent on the installation of interactive white boards and thousands more on stipends so teachers would attend Saturday training sessions on how to use the new technology.

The reason why the focus of staff development changed was never discussed but something shifted the faculty’s attention to a training initiative unrelated to the principal’s initial theory of action. Maybe it was a grant the school re-

ceived, an influential and enthusiastic faculty member who embraced technology, or pressure from parents to focus on 21st century skills, but whatever the cause, the result was a tactical shift from training designed to promote development of a guaranteed and viable curriculum to training designed to promote the use of a new technology.

The principal pointed to the new white boards with great pride until it became obvious during a routine walkthrough that the content being taught during mathematics instruction varied wildly from classroom to classroom in the same grade level. It did not matter that all the teachers were using white boards because all the teachers were teaching different material! The only “guarantee” in the curriculum being delivered at this school was that whatever lesson students did encounter, one could guarantee it would involve the use of the new technology!

The tactical shift to training focused on interactive white boards had backfired. The Saturday training sessions had taken the focus away from a guaranteed and viable curriculum and left no time for training on powering and unwrapping standards. It was clear the white board training had been detrimental to the principal’s efforts to promote one of the key leverage points—creating a guaranteed and viable curriculum—in his strategy to implement professional learning communities.

In this example, the plan started well enough when the principal identified a guaranteed and viable curriculum as a powerful leverage point (tactic) that would support becoming a professional learning community (strategy) that would ultimately lead to high levels of learning (goal). The problem arose when the training on interactive white boards did not align with implementation of professional learning communities.

The Trouble with Tactics

Strategies and tactics are different. One is not better or more important than the other. It is the order in which they are employed by principals that matters and strategies *always* come first. Strategy is the overall plan that principals rely on to enhance the long-term effectiveness of their school improvement efforts. Tactics are the short-term training programs, curriculum materials, or technologies that teachers use in the classroom.

What makes tactics so seductive is that they are easy to copy. When principals hear that another principal had success with a particular program, type of training or piece of technology there is an effort to replicate that success using the same tactic. Perhaps because of the rapid pace of change, the easy accessibility of information or the high demand for accountability many principals are becoming *too* focused on tactics. Worse yet, in too many schools tactics become the ‘end’ rather than a ‘means to an end!’ Tactics are simply the

way schools execute strategies and sadly, a school without a clearly articulated strategy is willing to try almost anything!

The trouble with relying on tactics for improving schools is they fail to deliver sustained success over a longer period of time. According to James R. McCarthy, being tactically focused results in lots of activity but little success. He argues that when leaders (principals) embrace tactics as their primary method of improvement you see “a lot of ups and downs and very likely a long, slow decline in the success” of the school. The key is to look at each tactic from the standpoint of alignment. Said another way, principals should ask how a particular tactic will or will not promote successful implementation of the overall strategy.

To paraphrase Michael Porter, “Strategy 101 is about choices: You can’t be all things to all people” and effective principals understand that the essence of an effective strategy is often choosing what *not* to do. In this case, the tactical choice to offer the white board training did not align with the strategic decision of implementing professional learning communities and while learning how to unwrap and power standards may not have been as flashy as interactive white board training, it would have done far more to promote the development of a professional learning community.

How Principals Align their Tactics, Strategies, and Goals

Aligning tactics, strategies, and goals can be challenging but principals can find success using a theory of action approach. The theory of action begins with an if/then statement to clarify the relationship between tactics, strategies and goals. Before the faculty embarks on implementation of any new tactic, training or technology, principals should use this simple process to check the alignment of their tactics, strategies and goals.

In this case, the principal believed that *if* every teacher successfully implemented the tenets of professional learning communities *then* students would learn to high levels. The high leverage strategy—becoming a professional learning community—was aligned to the goal of high levels of learning for all. If the principal had asked, “How is training on white boards related to the implementation of professional learning communities?” the lack of alignment would have become obvious. ■

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References

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