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Best Practices/Tom W. Many, Ed.D. and Tim Miller

Engagement Precedes Alignment

“A cardinal principle of success escapes too many systems thinkers: you cannot continuously improve interdependent systems and processes until you progressively perfect interdependent, interpersonal relationships.” -Stephen Covey

Every principal has a long list of initiatives they are responsible for implementing. Efforts to institutionalize new teacher evaluation procedures, expanded high-stakes testing requirements, ever-changing eligibility criteria, and more rigorous standards for student learning are sweeping the nation.

Most of these initiatives will be implemented using a mechanical approach whereby too many principals will labor under the misconception that the systematic alignment of resources is all that matters. This ‘wrong-headed’ thinking suggests that if principals can somehow synchronize all the various initiatives, efforts to improve their school will be successful.

In these schools, principals will be encouraged to create detailed action plans, prescriptive training schedules, multitudes of milestone charts or complex dashboards and scorecards to track progress. The most likely outcome of these heroic efforts will be the creation of more complex and complicated structures in an attempt to align the system.

Unfortunately, aligning to new structures and systems won’t change teacher’s behaviors or give them new skills. As Torben Rick argues, “New structures and systems can help create a new context or orientation and they have the superficial appeal of being visible and fast, but people do

not become different just because you put them in a new context.” (T. Rick, 2012) Michael Fullan extends that idea saying, “The solution is not a program; it is a small set of principles and practices relentlessly pursued.”

Leaders must stop thinking of schools as collections of inanimate objects. We align things (desks, chairs, books) but we engage people (behaviors, beliefs, attitudes). School improvement initiatives struggle when they fail to engage the hearts and minds of the very teachers who are responsible for making the change a lasting part of their school. What these authors advocate is that leaders **engage people** in the relentless pursuit of the right work.

“It is not alignment that makes all systems go but rather engagement and the power of alliances [relationships] put to a higher purpose.” -Michael Fullan

The rationale for engaging staff in the school improvement process is simple; the more the faculty is involved, the more positively they will respond, but involvement can be a time-consuming task and the sense of urgency for principals to rapidly move schools in a positive direction has never been more palpable.



According to Rick, “The pressure to act undermines engagement as leaders take drastic steps quickly with no time to explore alternatives. Deeply held values about participation, involvement or concern for people disappear under the pressure for immediate results.” To help principals, we have outlined a series of steps that will promote higher levels of engagement throughout the year.

Spring: Respond to the school’s current reality

The first step to promoting high levels of engagement is to involve the faculty in defining the school’s current reality. Teachers need to have a stake in the analysis of data and when given an opportunity, will find the greatest area of need. Having first hand knowledge of formative and summative assessment results allows teachers to identify the highest priority needs and establish SMART goals that align with schoolwide goals.

Spring is a good time for principals to reconfigure, reaffirm or reappoint teachers to the school’s guiding coalition and charge them with the task of clarifying the school’s problem of practice and creation of a plan to address the identified need (See *TEPSA News*, September/October 2012, for more on developing Hundred Day plans). Once drafted, the plan should be shared with the faculty as a whole to ensure everyone is familiar with the goals and objectives for the upcoming school year. Achieving consensus at this stage is important!

Summer: Collective inquiry builds commitment and capacity

In the summer, the focus shifts to building shared knowledge, collective capacity, and a lasting commitment to the school improvement initiative. Teachers are motivated to think about how they might complete their improvement plans, accomplish their SMART goals, and what resources will be needed to ensure their best chance for success!

Summer is also an ideal time to share books and articles, and provide additional training. A productive activity is to facilitate opportunities for teams to meet and plan. For some, time away from the daily grind of the school year can be the optimal time to create rigorous units of instruction, relevant assessments and meaningful intervention strategies. Make the most of it!

Fall: Focus on inspiring a lasting commitment to learning

With plans already in place, principals begin the new year by reviewing *why* the school improvement initiative matters. The objective is to energize and mobilize the faculty with a call to action—an appeal to their hearts and minds—which generates commitment to the goal. If teachers do not understand the reasons behind the proposed changes, and consequently what specific behaviors will be expected of them, they cannot be expected to respond in a logical, rational and reflective manner. The goal is for teams to build a sense of interdependency and commitment towards the goal and to each other.

During early fall, teachers work to clarify *how* the goal will be accomplished and *what* it will look like in practice. The focus is on understanding the impact the proposed change will have on their daily routines and agreeing on ways progress will be evaluated, measured and monitored.

Winter: Monitoring progress towards the goal(s)

In this stage, it is important that principals conduct frequent progress checks to gather tangible evidence of progress. A good way to accomplish this is to craft an informal ‘walk through’ protocol to gather data, collect samples of student work, or review products generated by the teams. The results of these frequent progress checks can be shared and celebrated with the faculty.

Principals create a higher level of accountability by routinely meeting with each team to discuss progress towards their goal. These meetings also provide principals with opportunities to offer extra support to teams that may be struggling—for whatever reason—to meet their goals.

Spring: Celebrating and building a sense of efficacy for all

The culminating activity of the cycle is a learning fair with the entire staff. Each team shares their goal, work and results. Their testimony serves as a celebration and allows everyone to reflect on the “lessons learned” that will inform future work, create a greater sense of efficacy, and fuel the desire to try new things! Another by-product of this is the creation of positive peer pressure: one of the most authentic forms of accountability! Knowing each team will be asked to publically share their progress in the spring creates a sense of urgency that will influence a team’s work throughout the year!

The most effective principals know engagement precedes alignment. They understand that attempts to align a system without engaging those within the system is a bit like rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic; it is a pointless exercise with no lasting impact. ■

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Resources

- Fullan, M. (2010). *All Systems Go: The Change Imperative for Whole System Reform*. Corwin Press.
- Rick, T. (2012). *Change Management, Top 20 Mistakes to Avoid*. <http://www.torbenrick.eu/blog/change-management/top-20-change-management-mistakes-to-avoid/>.