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Leading Change for School Improvement

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Introduction:

This case study is relevant to practicing, prospective principals and administrators because it raises issues related to adaptive leadership, change, and school improvement. Administrators frequently face adaptive challenges and their response to those challenges impact student learning. In this case study, I provide leadership models with the aim that leaders will use them to guide their work to lead change and transform their schools.

Bush and Glover (2016) describe leadership as the second most important factor influencing school and student outcomes after having quality teachers in place. According to these authors, leadership accounts for 27% of variation in student learning outcomes. With the changing educational landscape, it is crucial that school administrators become adept at leading change in order to positively affect student academic achievement and well-being. Leading change can be messy because it often means resolving adaptive challenges for which there is no easy solutions (Heifetz, 1994). Leading change also involves identifying the root cause of problems, taking risks, accepting casualties, being resilient, goal oriented, and disciplined (Fullan, 2007; Heifetz, 1994; Hess, 2013; Kotter, 2012). Leading change also necessitates making unpopular decisions.

School leaders make decisions all day long. Sergiovanni (1992) believes that there are three dimensions to leadership behavior. According to the author, these dimensions are related to the heart, the head, and the hand. The heart involves personal beliefs, values, and dreams. The head pertains to professional knowledge while the hand deals with actions and leadership styles. The challenge for school leaders comes when these three dimensions are not in harmony, forcing practitioners to make decisions that they do not support. For example, political or legal factors

may force leaders to make hiring or re-hiring decisions with which they do not agree because the decisions go against their beliefs and values.

Background Information

All the names used in this case study are fictitious.

Madison

Madison is a medium size city in the south west of the United States. The city was for a long time considered one of the best places to live because of its beauty, numerous trails, and its large lake. The city is home to 140,000 people but its affordability, its climate, and stunning surroundings continue to attract more inhabitants each year, mainly the elderly. Because of the growing population, Madison has excellent health care facilities with new hospitals equipped with modern equipment. In the last census, the population was 73% White, 17% African American, and the rest were mixed race. Economically, Madison relies on the health care industry, tourism, and to a lesser extent agriculture. Despite the fact that the west part of the city is economically vibrant with businesses and various services for the elderly population, the city deals with a high unemployment rate (10%) because the technology companies that had satellite offices in the city left the region to settle in larger cities in the coastal states.

The high unemployment rate has led to more poverty, violence, drugs, and gang activities in the east part of the town. Because Madison is surrounded by highways, drug dealers have easy access to their customers and can drive in and out of the city easily on their way to transporting drugs across the country. Despite the Mayor's efforts to revitalize the city, the opioid crisis remains the city's chief challenge. The high unemployment rate in the east part of the city has also affected the overall real estate market. With the drop of real estate values, the school district suffers from a lack of funding and resources. To add to the already challenging

situation, Madison school district had to redraw its boundaries and added three schools to the district because the neighboring town was slowly disappearing due to the aging population, the drugs issues, and the closure of all its businesses. Madison added a high school, a middle school, and an elementary school.

Madison School District

The Madison School District (MSD) used to be smaller prior to the re-mapping of its boundaries. The district now serves 8,000 students from Kindergarten to High School. Overall, the district gained a F on its most recent report card. MSD has three high schools, five elementary schools, and 3 middle schools. In a recent school board meeting, the superintendent reassured the stakeholders by saying: “We have excellent school leaders in each of the buildings and they have developed robust school improvement plans. I am confident that these plans will yield results this year.” The principals are all experienced school principals.

Madison High School

MHS is located on the most eastern side of the city. MHS was added to the district two years ago. The school hosts an early college high school: the result of a collaboration with the local community college. This partnership enables high schoolers to obtain college credit for free, making community college or a four-year college more affordable and attractive. The partnership also seeks to promote college attendance and prepare the young generations to earn livable wages, should they not continue with their studies. Another strength of the school is its athletic teams. Men’s basketball and football often wins the state championship and the women basketball has historically been the first in the region. The school facilities are clean though the building is from the 70’s.

MHS serves about 600 students grades 9-12. 40% of the students are male and 60% female. 38 % are African American, 15% are Asian, and 47% are White. There are 25 teachers; 70% of them are White and 60% are female. The school also employs 2 vice principals, one counselor, 2 special education specialists, 2 secretaries, 2 police officers, and 2 janitors. Among the teachers, 80% of them have been teaching for over 15 years. While novice teachers are always eager to join and make a difference at the school, they often leave after one academic year. Perceived reasons for the millennials' departure include the fact that they want to experience others states or that they are not trained to teach in an urban environment.

Since the re-mapping of the district's boundaries, MHS has been the community's favorite school despite its recent academic and athletic struggles. Academically, MHS is struggling with an F on the report card. The state has given the principal three years to turnaround the school and move the school from an F to a C. Athletically, a recent incident has produced bad press for MHS football team. During their last game, a player assaulted the referee, causing the team to forfeit not only from the game but also from the regional championship. This incident added to existing low morale observed in the teachers, students, and community members. In the last two years, the community surrounding the school has suffered the effects of drug dealing. Houses and stores have been robbed and the community continues to mourn the deaths of several students due to drug overdose. As a result, police presence is required at the school all day.

The Principal

Mr. Sam Mashall is a 60 years old White-man. He has been the principal at MHS for 10 years. He was the principal of the school before the re-mapping. At the time, the school was part of a three-school district. Mr. Marshall used to be a mathematics teacher in the middle school

before moving into administration. Mr. Marshall has a joyful personality and he loves his school. He is proud of his sports team and makes sure he attends every game. He is energetic and spends his day “putting out fires” but comes back day after day, year after year, with an optimistic outlook on the future. He always arrives at school before everyone and leaves well after 6pm every night. He states: “I put long hours because I care but the job is draining, particularly in the recent years. We have more discipline issues, more novice teachers quitting, and less results.” The principal works well with his team and trust the teachers to do their jobs. When Mr. Marshall started his principalship, before the re-mapping of the district boundaries, the school was thriving academically and athletically. At the time, the small neighboring town’s economy was thriving, and the school district was well-resourced and well-respected. He remembers: “Back then, my job was easy. I was in my office rarely disturbed and could complete my paperwork in a timely fashion. My school improvement plan back then was easy to implement.

The Case

Mr. Marshall is a busy man. He is often in his office, in classrooms, or at the district office in meetings. The principal spends hours working on his 15-page long school improvement plan (SIP). He always shares his SIP during his monthly teachers’ meeting. Mr. Marshall also spends a large amount of his time in teacher classrooms that he has labelled “problematic.” These teachers are problematic because they refer students to the office for what they perceive to be infractions to the code of conduct. As a result of this influx of detentions and discipline issues, Mr. Marshall and his vice principals spend their days putting out fires, talking to teachers, disciplining students, and talking to families.

Mr. Marshall has noticed that he spends more and more time with veteran teachers. One day, he gathered his leadership team and asked his two vice principals to collect teachers’ data.

The data included discipline, academic, and level of engagement. The goal of the exercise was to determine who, among the teachers, was taking his time and who did not get any of his attention.

Within a month, the team gathered and analyzed the data. The reality was that 20% of the teachers were doing 80% of the work. The rest of the teachers, the majority being veteran and tenured teachers, both male and female, were the ones sending students to the office. Shocked by these numbers, the leadership team decided to survey students and parents and ask them their perceptions of the school, teachers, and leaders. Mr. Marshall was uncomfortable to include himself in the exercise, but he had no choice because his vice principals insisted that he modeled humility and openness to feedback. The results were shocking for Mr. Marshall. Students and parents had major complaints about the veteran teachers and the direction in which the school was going. Both parents and students demanded change.

Survey results indicated that the students were not motivated to come to school. They felt uncomfortable with a few of the veteran teachers because “they are disconnected from our realities and they are bitter.” Students were disappointed in their “leadership too because nothing seemed to change.” During a focus groups led by the vice principals, a student added:

You want us to do better but every time we speak we are sent to the office, even if we talk about the work or assignment. Also, you want us to perform but how can we if we spend our time in the office! We want to learn believe me, we want to get jobs and rebuild our community, but we need the principal and other leaders’ help!

Another student added: “Not everyone believes in us here, and we feel and know it.”

As a result of this survey, the principal and his team offered professional development (PD) to the teachers. PD efforts focused on classroom management, building relationships with students, restorative practices, and included team building exercises among teachers.

Unfortunately, the teachers who needed the PD complained about it and had a bad attitude towards it, consequently they never implemented any of it in their classes. On the other end, the teachers who did not necessarily need the PD embraced it and were grateful for it.

Not understanding the dynamic, Mr. Marshall called one of his former teachers and asked him two simple questions: “Why did you leave MHS after one year, and what could we have done differently?” The responses were short and concise. “I left because the veteran teachers made it impossible for the school to perform and move forward because you spent all your time with them without yielding any change in them or the school.” The principal had noticed that he was spinning his wheels for nothing, working countless hours, and yet the results or the atmosphere were not improving. He also had noticed that teacher morale was low, students and parents were unhappy, and even athletic results were plummeting. The former teacher added:

The school is great, and our students deserve dynamic teachers of all ages, walks of life and experiences. There is no time to cater to the ineffective, toxic teachers, and I know you at least have two of those. They make life at school miserable for others.

Depressed by the conversation, the principal retreated in his office for the rest of the day while the vice principals surveyed the novice teachers in the hope to hear different from them. But the vice principals heard the same kind of arguments. New teachers were trained for urban settings, they wanted to be at the school, but did not understand the:

Long school improvement plan that does nothing for us, the students, or the school.

Teachers need to change, leaders need to lead or else we will leave too because we want to be part of real school improvement and turnaround schools, that is why we were excited to come work here.

To debrief the results of the focus groups, the leadership team had yet another meeting. Mr. Marshall said:

I understand that a couple of teachers make the school miserable for others and for our students. But I cannot fire or remove these tenured teachers. The union will be all over me. I just cannot do it. As it is, we are putting off fires all day. Imagine if we have to deal with a law-suit. I thought about replacing these teachers, but we just cannot do it with all the paperwork and union issues.

The vice principals listened and felt compelled to agree. However, one of them said: “MHS is not what it used to be. Since the re-mapping of the boundaries and the drug issues, our school has different issues, needs, goals, and obligations. I think it is our duty as educators to do better and to do what is right for the sake of the students.

Teaching Notes

In this case study, the school principal faced numerous challenges including leading a “failing” school, an increase of student referrals, a few unwilling teachers, and the leader’s inability to lead change. The following Teaching Notes outline key concepts on adaptive leadership and how to lead change.

Educational Leaders as Change Agents

“Education is an important tool for the development of an individual, society, and the nation at large” (Edet and Ekerege, 2005, p 1). Seminal scholars argue that principals play a crucial role in the education of children because they influence teacher morale, retention, and student learning (Grissom & Harrington, 2010; Ingersoll, 2001; Marzano, Waters & McNulty., 2005; Rosenholtz & Simpson, 1990). Leithwood and Jantzi (2008) suggest that educational leaders empower the more effective teachers and that it is through them that they improve

student learning. Additional scholars maintain that leaders create cultures of learning and those cultures positively affect student learning (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1991). One of the challenging tasks of 21st century leaders pertains to finding solutions to complex problems, what Heifetz (1994) calls adaptive problems.

Heifetz Adaptive Leadership

Heifetz (1994) defines leadership as the ability to mobilize people to tackle challenging problems, which the author calls adaptive challenges. The author posits that there are two types of challenges: technical and adaptive. Technical challenges offer a clear definition of the problem. As a result, a leader or expert can provide a solution that is likely to solve the issue. For example, if the roof of a school is leaking, the principal would hear about the issue, call a roofer, and with time and resources, the roof would be fixed. This example shows that technical challenges do not require new learning, adaptation to change, or the mobilizing of a team in order to solve the issue at hand.

On the other hand, adaptive challenges are ill-defined problems, for which the definition, solution, and implementation require new learning. Adaptive problems are difficult to resolve. Tackling adaptive challenges requires that leaders adapt to change and learn new skills and competencies to solve the issue. Additionally, adaptive challenges necessitate that leaders mobilize and inspire others to learn new skills. For instance, if a school leader realizes that there is a need to change the hiring process of the organization, the principal might write new policies, write a handbook, and create a hiring committee. The principal would then have to educate and train all stakeholders on these changes. Because changing an existing hiring process requires a change in mindsets, habits, values, and behaviors, this would be considered an adaptive problem.

It is easier to repair a roof than to change people's mindsets and beliefs. Solving adaptive challenges require that leaders become change agents and lead change.

Leading Change: Model of Leadership

It is imperative that leaders understand how to lead organizations during changes. Being a facilitator of change is one of the most important aspects of leadership. Leaders need to understand that resistance to change is inevitable but not necessarily a negative. Leaders should rather view change as opportunities for growth. Leading change is demanding. Leading change often entails that leaders alter their actions and reactions. For example, during periods of change employees deserve good planning, involvement, decision making, and timely communication. Having trusting relationships with all stakeholders is also critical to the success of major organizational change. Kotter (2002) offers a model of change that leaders can use to frame their work when their organization face change and adaptive challenges.

Kotter's Model of Change

Kotter (2002) posits that leading change involves the following elements:

- Establishing a sense of urgency.
- Creating a guiding coalition (and allies) and encouraging participation.
- Developing a vision and clear goals as to align programs to those goals.
- Communicating regularly to develop buy-in.
- Empowering action in others and removing barriers.
- Generating short-term wins.
- Consolidating gains and keeping the momentum going.
- Incorporating changes into the culture and, if necessary, writing new norms.

Kotter (2002) adds that communication is critical—before, during, and after the change takes place. He reminds us to involve people and that survey data is helpful to do so. He warns us to be wary of the early excitement and urges us to take risks while also being thoughtful and careful. The author also asks leaders to be open-minded, listen to feedback, and understand that there will be problems in leading change. Hess (2013) lists additional dispositions that change leaders need to have in order to lead change and solve adaptive problems.

Hess Cage Busting Leadership

According to Hess (2013), cage busting leadership occurs when leaders are able to remove real and imaginary barriers in order to move their organizations forward. The author states that often times leaders use policies, red tape, and legislation as excuses to remain in the status quo and avoid leading change. Hess asserts that there are different types of policies. The *Policies* (with a capital p) that are federally mandated and challenging to avoid and the *policies* that are state or district led. Loopholes can often be found in state and district policies, and hence can be challenged. The leaders who are willing to challenge these policies for the sake of students' academic achievement and well-being are what he calls cage busting leaders because they find ways to remove the barriers that would otherwise keep them in the cage. The cage represents all the policies. According to the author, change agents are creative, they are curious, critical, and constantly ask questions. One strategy cage busting leaders use is the 5 Whys strategy. The 5 Whys is an iterative interrogative technique used to explore the root cause of a problem by repeating the question why.

The author takes the example of Chancellor Rhee, who wanted to change the municipal regulations around reductions in force (RIF) in Washington DC. The regulations said that city

agencies had to take into consideration four elements before removing teachers. These elements were professional credentials, agency needs, unique skills, and seniority. By thinking critically and asking questions, Rhee discovered that the four elements could be weighted differently. As a result, she decided to put more weight for the unique skills and agency elements rather than for seniority and hence was able to retain junior excellent teachers and lay off senior teachers without breaking the law. Despite difficulties and criticisms, Rhee took risks and led change for the benefits of the students she served. According to Schmoker (2016), change agents focus their energy and resources on the adaptive challenge(s) they are trying to solve.

Schmoker Focused Leadership

Schmoker (2016) affirms that leaders who are leading change efforts need to be focused and that distraction is their enemy. As such focused leaders protect their teachers from unnecessary meetings or PD but hold high professional standards of teaching and provide regular and honest feedback. Additionally, efficient change leaders focus their school improvement plan on only one or two core achievable goals.

Educational leaders play a critical role in the lives of students, teachers, and stakeholders. Understanding what adaptive challenges are and how to lead change is necessary to meet the needs of 21st century students. School leaders must have a “can do” attitude, think creatively, be ready to take calculated risks, be courageous, and have evidence-based models and frameworks to help them lead change.

Conclusion

The situation at MHS is far from being resolved. Mr. Marshall’s school still faces the possibility of being taken over by the state. The principal still has the same team of teachers and human resources issues. This case study is relevant because students in educational leadership

programs do not always learn how to lead change and when they do, they do not always know how to practically apply the theory they learned in class to their schools. This case study provides an opportunity to current and prospective leaders to brainstorm solutions to adaptive challenges by applying a model of change. MHS highlights how difficult yet crucial it is for leaders to lead change in order to improve schools.

The Challenge

The questions and activities below provide administrators with the opportunity to reflect on the case study and apply concepts from Heifetz' (1994) adaptive leadership, Kotter (2002), Hess (2013), and Schmoker's (2016) models of change.

Questions to Consider

- 1- In pairs, discuss why the situation at MHS deteriorated and define what is Mr. Marshall's adaptive challenge. What could have been done to prevent the situation?
- 2- What contextual variables contribute to the difficulties experienced by Mr. Marshall?
- 3- To what extent do you think the principal created an open climate in the school?
- 4- Assess Mr. Marshall's leadership. What are his strengths and what are his weaknesses? Do you think he was well prepared to be principal of a large urban high school?
- 5- In this case study, the principal spends a large amount of time trying to assist teachers experiencing problems. Do you think the principal's behavior is appropriate?
- 6- In your opinion, do most principals integrate research and theory into their practice? Please share examples.

Activities

1- Next, using the eight elements of Kotter's model of change, create a matrix of ideas for each of the elements. Put yourself in Mr. Marshall shoes: What would you do to establish a sense of

urgency? What would you do to create a guiding coalition (and allies) and encourage participation? What would you do to develop a vision and clear goals as to align programs to those goals? What would you do to communicate regularly and develop buy-in? What would you do to empower action in others and remove barriers? What would you do to generate short-term wins? What would you do to consolidate gains and keep the momentum going? And what would you do to incorporate changes into the culture? Be ready to share your ideas.

2- Using the template below and the information from your previous discussions and from the Teaching Notes, develop a School Improvement Plan (SIP) for MHS that responds to the following prompt: What should Mr. Marshall’s SIP focus on given the situation of the school? (write two core goals). Share your SIP with your partner and seek feedback.

SIP

Goals	Action Items	Person(s) Responsible	Resources Needed	By When?

3-Reflect on your own school, based on what you have learned in this case study. What adaptive challenge does your school face? How would you go about finding solutions? What could be some solutions?

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