Leadership for Learning

An Action Theory of School Change

© Tony Wagner, 2001 (first published in the *Phi Delta Kappan*, January 2001)

I have worked in education for 30 years—as a teacher, principal, teacher educator, and consultant and as head of several nonprofit organizations working with schools. For the past 12 years, I have both studied and facilitated the change process in numerous schools and districts in the U.S. and abroad. I spend most of my weeks working in schools and with various groups concerned about education.

This article is an attempt to distill what I have learned about how successful leaders create change in schools—change aimed at improving learning for all students. I call this an "action theory" of change because it is a synthesis of ideas informed by theory but developed primarily from practice—trial and error and disciplined reflection. The theory describes how to create the conditions and capacities for sustaining change, which must be developed before more specific action plans can be considered.

The first question that any theory of change should address is: What motivates adults to want to do new and sometimes very difficult things? This question is especially critical in education, as I believe that the temperament, training, and working conditions of most teachers predispose them not to want to change. On the other hand, leaders are often individuals who like change and so see teachers' reluctance to change as sheer stubbornness or indifference. In my experience, most teachers are neither stubborn nor indifferent, but they do resist change for reasons that leaders must understand. Three of the most common factors contributing to teachers' resistance are risk aversion, "craft" expertise, and autonomy and isolation.

Risk Aversion

Historically, most people have entered the teaching profession because it promises a high degree of order, security, and stability. In my experience, most educators are risk-averse by temperament, while many who thrive in the business world are risk-seekers. (I believe this fundamental difference in temperament is one reason why the two groups generally do not understand or even like each other, and this lack of understanding and communication contributes greatly to the absence of a more thoughtful, balanced dialogue about educational improvement.)

The training and working conditions of most teachers have only reinforced this risk aversion. Schools of education foster docility with too many lecture courses and too few opportunities for problem solving and original thinking, and school district leadership rewards compliance rather than creativity and initiative. The educational "fads of the month" that have swept through schools for the past 30 years have served to reinforce the belief of many teachers that innovations are the fleeting fancy of leaders who are here today and gone tomorrow—and so are not to be believed.

'Craft' Expertise

In traditional cultures, many individuals worked alone as farmers and craftsmen. Historically,

education has also been a "craftsman's" trade—attracting people who enjoy working alone and take great pride in developing a degree of expertise and in perfecting "handcrafted products." For many teachers, their special units or courses—on Native Americans, Shakespeare, Advanced Placement (AP) biology—represent expertise they have developed over years and are sources of enormous pride. Teachers' greatest sense of job satisfaction often derives from introducing just a few students to their "craft." Teachers have told me that asking them to give up teaching such units would be like telling them to cut out a part of what makes them unique as human beings. And many perceive the call to create uniform standards as a demand that everyone teach the same thing in the same way. Their sense of craft pride is offended and their identity threatened.

Autonomy and Isolation

Risk aversion and craft pride contribute to educators' reluctance to change, but the factors limiting their capacity to change are their autonomy and isolation. Craftspeople often have a temperamental predisposition for autonomy, but they are not necessarily isolated in the way that many teachers are. Educators are, first, isolated from the fast-changing world of globalization and business innovation. Most do not understand the fundamental changes that have taken place in the world of work—changes that require that, to be successful, students will have to have very different skills from those needed a quarter century ago. Lacking daily exposure in their own workplace to these fundamental economic changes, most educators do not understand the urgency of many business and political leaders.

Educators—who spend most of their workday with children—are also largely isolated from contact with other adults. The "egg crate" organization of work in most schools reinforces autonomy rather than collaboration. With few opportunities to work with other adults during their workday, many educators have not developed the skills of teamwork.

Fifty years ago, the opportunity to work alone for most of the day was considered a plus for many adults in our society. Autonomy equaled independence. Not so today. The problems and challenges in the workplaces of the 21st century are impossible to solve alone. That's one reason why teamwork is now the dominant mode of work nearly everywhere—except in education. But teachers working alone cannot possibly solve the systemic problem of how to get more students to achieve higher standards. Add to this the tendency of leaders to blame educators for what they describe as the "failure" of American education, and I find that most teachers feel both powerless and victimized in their isolation.

Faced with these serious obstacles to change, some leaders and state legislatures attempt to apply the most primitive "theory" of human motivation to the problem: an appeal to teachers' fear and greed. They try various forms of intimidation and threaten teachers with the takeover of underperforming schools, or they attempt to bribe them with the promise of bonuses for improved test scores. But most teachers are not moved by some combination of threats and bribes to do the difficult things required for school change. They have tenure and so are not easily intimidated, and they are less motivated by the desire for more money than many in other professions.

So if the "carrot and stick" theory of human motivation doesn't work, what does? What motivates teachers? What do leaders need to do to create the will to learn how to improve student achievement?

First, we must acknowledge that most teachers care about students, and they want to make a difference. That's one important reason why many chose the profession initially. Thus the challenge in motivating teachers is to help them understand what today's students need to know and be able to do for work and for effective citizenship and to help them learn better strategies for teaching all students.

'Buy-in' Versus Ownership

Many school leaders say they talk to teachers about how the world is different, and they provide them with workshops on new teaching strategies. But what are the real messages? "Get kids to pass the tests, or we're in trouble . . . and here's a workshop on the new state standards to help you." Not exactly inspirational. Yet leaders expect "buy-in" from teachers for goals and strategies that teachers have never even discussed. Indeed, the biggest problem I hear educational leaders worry about these days is how to get "buy-in."

It's the wrong question and the wrong answer. The question is how to create "ownership," not buy-in. And the answer is that, just as good teachers create classrooms in which students construct new knowledge, leaders must provide learning opportunities that enable teachers to "construct" a new understanding of the world, their students, and their craft—and so enable them to "own" both the problem and the solution rather than being coerced into "buying" someone else's. With this new understanding, leaders can then work with teachers to design the new school structures and conditions that will allow them to be more successful.

What is needed, in a word, is leadership that creates "constructivist" adult learning—dialogue and critical inquiry. What I am describing should not be confused with a simple increased emphasis on professional development—the current fad in schools these days. Leadership for change means creating and sustaining the conditions for continuous adult learning for both teachers and members of the community—many of whom are as confused and resistant to change as teachers. It means analyzing everything a leader of a school or district does from the point of view of whether or not it is promoting focused, collaborative learning.

In my experience, there are four essential conditions for adult learning in schools and communities—and therefore for educational change. At the risk of sounding too formulaic, I call this the S-U-R-E approach to the improvement process in schools:

- Shared vision of the goals of learning, good teaching, and assessment;
- Understanding of the urgent need for change;
- Relationships based on mutual respect and trust; and
- Engagement strategies that create commitment rather than mere compliance.

Let me explain what I mean by each element of this framework for adult learning and what leaders must do to develop it. I will begin with understanding the urgent need for change, as I think too many leaders skip over or rush the process of helping teachers and the community really understand the educational "problem." But without a clear understanding of the challenges we face, we have no criteria for determining success or evaluating alternative strategies. Even more significant, popular misconceptions of our educational problem contribute greatly to teachers' sense of victimization and resistance to change and so must be actively countered by leaders. As Einstein said, "The formulation of the problem is often more essential than its solution."

Understanding the Urgent Need for Change

Why do we need change in schools? When I have asked education leaders—policy makers, superintendents, principals, and school board members—this question, I have often been surprised at how thin and inarticulate their responses are. How can teachers be motivated to change if leaders cannot clearly explain why it is important?

The descriptions of the nation's educational problem that are offered by politicians and the media often hinder, rather than help, the change process. "Schools are failing," and the solution is education "reform," everyone tells educators. Teachers hear or read these words nearly every day. But both the diagnosis of the problem and the proposed solution reflect profound distortions of the truth—and they anger many teachers.

Most educators know that schools are doing an incrementally better job than they were a quarter century ago: more students than ever before are graduating from high school, taking advanced courses, and going on to college. Teachers are generally doing a better job with a student body that is more diverse and less well prepared for school than in the past.

So where's the problem? The problem is that fundamental changes during the last quarter century in the nature of work, in expectations for citizenship, in our understanding of what must be taught and how, and in students' motivations for learning—taken all together—have rendered our system of education totally obsolete. I have described the nature of these categories of change in my book How Schools Change: Lessons from Three Communities and in a number of articles. So let me try to summarize succinctly the problem of obsolescence.

Our system of education was designed to serve as a sorting machine. Historically, we sorted out the 20% or so of students who were going on to college and to professional and managerial careers and gave them the skills they needed. The rest of the students received the functional equivalent of an eighth-grade education—the minimum needed for work and citizenship for most of the 20th century.

Now all students need different and more sophisticated skills, such as the ability to solve problems, work in teams, and learn independently. Those students today who leave high school with a diploma and no skills or plans for further learning are, in effect, being sentenced to a lifetime of subsistence wages and marginal employment. In most districts, at least 50% of the student population is leaving school completely unprepared for either skill-based work or responsible citizenship.

And so the first problem we face is how to educate all—not just some—students to higher standards and how to prepare them for continuous learning. We don't know how to do this; we've never done it before. That's why the educational problem is obsolescence, not failure.

This challenge of trying to determine how to educate all students to new high standards is the "rock" that is crushing many educators. But it is only half of the problem. Educators are caught between this rock and the "hard place" of a student population that has changed profoundly in 25 or so years.

The demographic changes—an increasing percentage of minority students and students for whom

English is a second language—have been extensively covered in the media. But the other changes—changes in all students' life circumstances and motivations for learning—represent perhaps the greatest dilemma for many teachers and are much less well understood. The traditional motivations for learning, the "sticks and carrots" teachers have relied on to get generations of students through school—fear and respect for authority and the belief that sustained hard work equals success and happiness—don't have much traction for many young people today, regardless of their social class, skin color, or proficiency in English.

Adult authority has much less influence on young people today, for several reasons. First, as a culture, we have grown increasingly skeptical of all forms of authority. Respect for authority is no longer automatic; it must be earned. But far more serious for students is the absence of adults from their lives. Single-parent families, longer work hours, and large, anonymous schools in which very few adults interact with students outside of class all contribute to students' sense of isolation and lack of respect for adult authority. Most young people spend too much time alone and are essentially being reared by their peers. Many feel ignored or neglected and harbor resentment toward adults.

This leaves just the work ethic as the remaining dull tool in too many teachers' small bag of tricks for motivating students. But "downsizing" and our "shopping mall" society have conspired to render this appeal ineffectual for most students as well. They've seen too many people work hard and get laid off, and they've seen too many ads that tell them to have it all, have it now, and get it without effort. Students today have been acculturated to believe that the aim of life is to consume, not to create. Unless there is an immediate payoff, most simply don't see much point in working hard, especially in schools where the tasks are often boring and unrelated to their needs or interests.

Needless to say, mere education "reform" is not going to get teachers out from between the rock and the hard place I have described. The very word is insulting. First, it implies that schools were once "formed" properly—presumably in the 1950s—and just need some tinkering to be "reformed." Second, the term has a punitive overtone—as if the goal of improvement were to send teachers and students to "reform(ed)" schools! But far worse, the term "education reform" trivializes the problem. We don't need to reform our schools; we must "reinvent" the entire system, and that is a very different problem and one that educators cannot solve by themselves.

What are the implications of this analysis for leadership? First, leaders must themselves clearly understand the need for change and then create a framework and forums for discussion. Everyone in the community—not just the educators—needs to understand the ways in which our society has changed and the implications for education and for parenting.

Second, leaders must make the problem "blame-free" and the solution a shared responsibility. They must make clear that the serious issues we face in schools are not the fault of teachers. Nor are parents and students to blame. In the Harvard Institute for School Leadership, where I have taught for the past five summers, our credo has become "No shame, no blame, no excuses!"

Finally, leaders need to create time for educators to understand and discuss different kinds of data. Disaggregated student achievement data are obviously a starting point, as are dropout and ninth-grade failure rates, and so on. But these alone don't often persuade educators that there's a serious problem. The numbers are, after all, nothing new.

Teachers can gather and understand qualitative data, as well. They need to hear the voices of employers talking about the skills needed in the workplace today. They need to hear recent graduates talk about how unprepared they were for work and further learning. And they need to hear current students talk about the problem of lack of teacher respect for students and how cold and uncaring most schools seem. Though more time-consuming to collect, such data—presented through panel discussions, videos of focus groups, and so on—often create the sense of urgency many teachers need in order to begin to take risks and try new things in their classrooms.

Shared Vision

For many leaders, a shared vision begins and ends with a school or district mission statement pinned to a bulletin board somewhere. These statements have become "de rigueur" in most businesses, so educators feel they must have them, too. However, as a tool in the change process, such statements are virtually useless.

I believe a much more specific kind of vision is required to motivate teachers and to rally the community. First, we need clarity about what are the few most important things students should know and be able to do—a short list of expectations for all students, which grows out of a new awareness of how the world has changed and of the essential skills needed for work and citizenship today. And then we need a deeper, shared understanding of the good teaching practices that can achieve those goals and of the performance-based assessments that best measure student progress. Developing this more explicit vision of academic goals, teaching methods, and assessments requires a very different kind of process from just putting together another blue-ribbon committee to write a district mission statement.

For the past 15 years, the dominant approach to school improvement has been "add-on." Various state mandates and local school boards keep adding to the list of what teachers are supposed to cover. And they never take anything off the list. This, in my opinion, is the tragic—perhaps even fatal—flaw in the standards movement as well.

Such an approach leaves most teachers feeling overwhelmed and creates completely unrealistic community expectations for what is possible. Education leaders must make clear that we can't do it all: we can't have 25 educational priorities—or even 10—and expect success. Leaders can help establish more reasonable expectations by creating community discussions that seek consensus on a small number of key learning priorities.

Such discussions should include the voices of leaders from higher education and business. Too many parents and teachers still believe that higher learning standards must mean covering more material. But many college-level teachers and employers will tell you that the issue is not coverage—it's competencies. Students can always look up the definition of a part of speech if they have to, but they must know how to write clearly. College teachers and businesspeople agree that lack of writing skills, not lack of subject content, is the number-one failing of high school graduates.

In many places, leaders must also convince the community to give its permission for educators not to try to teach to all the new state learning standards and tests at once. There are too many, and telling educators that they have to succeed with all of them at once is a guaranteed recipe for failure. The work of Anthony Alvarado, former superintendent of District 2 in New York City,

teaches us that raising the levels of literacy is the key to learning for all students. Literacy was his sole focus for seven years in District 2, and success with this effort created the student and teacher skill base needed for subsequent progress in the other subjects.

With a much sharper vision of what is most important for students to learn, educators are in a stronger position to explore "best practices" in teaching. But here again, the task of a leader is not to tell teachers what these are but to create opportunities for educators to discover them for themselves. A short lecture on group work or a motivational speaker proclaiming that all students can learn does not persuade veterans who have spent years honing their craft expertise to try something new.

Effective leaders give teams of experienced teachers—the building leaders—time to visit successful schools and to discuss what they've learned with colleagues. Teachers need to see models of much more successful classrooms in order to believe that all students can succeed. Over time and with a well-planned and well-funded program of peer supervision, this general understanding of best practice evolves into a more specific set of skills that the teachers in every building can master and then pass on to others as the new craft expertise.

Relationships Based on Mutual Respect and Trust

Bad relationships are the first problem to tackle, and different kinds of collaborative relationships among adults are the ultimate solution to the dilemma of school reinvention.

The problem of lack of respect in most schools—especially middle and high schools—is profound. As I suggested earlier, in countless focus groups I have conducted with high school students all over the country, the number-one criticism of schools is lack of respect. Students feel that many of their teachers do not respect them and often do not even respect one another. Most of our schools for older students are cold bureaucracies, not caring communities.

The importance of respect in the classroom is probably obvious to most educators—at least in theory. Most students will not work hard for teachers who they feel do not respect them. And they will not try new things or take risks in classrooms where sarcastic comments are tolerated—or worse, modeled—by teachers.

Adult learning and dialogue are similarly inhibited by lack of respect. Younger teachers are often cowed into silence by the snide comments of their older peers in faculty meetings and lunchrooms. Just one or two cynical teachers can psychologically dominate an entire building and so cut off all meaningful conversation about school improvement. (One of the challenges for leaders is to distinguish between the skeptics and the cynics. They may often sound alike but in fact have very differ-ent motives. The skeptics are usually experienced and committed educators whose concerns must be understood and addressed, while the cynics are the teachers who have given up and should be removed from the building as quickly as possible!)

A strong educational leader makes clear that the creation of a respectful environment for both students and adults is non-negotiable and is everyone's responsibility. Incivility is not tolerated from anyone. Conducting student focus groups and then holding small-group conversations about behaviors of concern and behaviors to be encouraged—both adult and student—is often an important starting point. New peer and school norms, or core values, result from such discussions.

Once a safer, more respectful environment has been established in a school, leaders can create teacher teams, suggest meaningful tasks or topics for them to pursue, and set up regular weekly times for discussions. Just as students learn social skills, or "emotional intelligence," through group work, so too do teachers learn how to work more collaboratively through regular problem-solving discussions in small groups.

Gradually, the sense of isolation and preference for autonomy give way to pride in the accomplishments of a team—in making more of a difference for students. Over time, teacher groups progress from discussions of curriculum and student work to visiting one another's classes and, finally, to offering critiques of teaching. Creating such a collaborative culture takes years, but ultimately, this kind of peer supervision—not evaluations by leaders—is the key to improving instruction and is at the heart of successful school improvement efforts that I have observed.

Leaders help to establish such a culture by modeling respectful behavior, seeking critical feedback on their performance from teachers (mutual evaluations or "360-degree reviews," as they are called in business, should be the norm in every school and district), and providing the resources needed—time to work together and released time for master teachers to coach colleagues.

Engagement Rooted in Commitment, Not Compliance

Throughout this article, I have tried to suggest what educational leaders must do to overcome the natural reluctance of teachers to try new things. Shared vision, understanding, and respectful relationships are all crucial elements of a culture that fosters adult learning, which, in turn, promotes thoughtful, responsible risk-taking (educational "R&D"), craft expertise focused on real competencies for all students, and collaboration.

But something more is needed to transform our schools—a different kind of engagement on the part of everyone (students, teachers, parents, and the community) and a new understanding of the leadership qualities that nurture such engagement.

I suggested above that, in my experience, most American public schools are bureaucracies, not communities. And bureaucracies are often managed by leaders who rely on compliance, not commitment. Subservience to authority is valued above all else. Such an atmosphere fosters the mentality among students and teachers alike that one need do only the minimum to get by. When parents are faced with inflexible, bureaucratic schools and compliance-minded managers, they are more likely to take an advocacy or adversarial stance.

By contrast, a shared sense of community nurtures active engagement in learning and collaborative problem-solving. Both students and teachers learn more and do more when they feel a part of something important that is larger than themselves and that they have helped to create. Some of the best independent, magnet, charter, and new small high schools have this characteristic. And they are places in which everyone does much more than the minimum. These schools are also much more effective at involving parents, community members, and business partners in helping out and working with students through mentoring programs and internships. This extended community—and the closer adult/student relationships it encourages—is crucial. By themselves, educators cannot possibly solve the problem of motivating all students to want to achieve at high levels.

And so the biggest challenge for educational leaders is to nurture engagement and commitment rooted in community. To create such learning communities requires both new structures and a very different spirit.

Structurally, school units have to be reduced in size. Large schools need to be broken down into much smaller units within the same building—autonomous schools-within-schools or academies in which a team of adults works with the same students (and their parents) over a longer period of time. These structures enable adults to work much more collaboratively. They also permit teachers to know students well and so better to tailor learning to individual student needs and interests. As Theodore Sizer has often said, "You can't motivate a student you don't know."

The spirit of a good learning community is one of shared responsibility and collaborative inquiry for both adults and students. Everyone's voice is valued. Developing such a culture requires a leader with qualities of heart and mind that are very different from those associated with the traditional role models. To get significantly better schools for all students, good management is not enough, and charisma gets in the way.

Today's successful educational leaders understand that they cannot make change alone or by edict. They motivate groups to learn and to solve problems together by asking tough questions and naming the big problems while refusing to offer easy answers. They are self-aware and reflective, they seek constructive criticism, and they freely admit their mistakes. They are leaders who, above all, model good teaching every single day.

But there are far too few of them. Can more of our educational leaders learn to say, "I don't know"? Can they learn to trust groups to find the best solutions to the pressing challenges of "reinventing education"? Are they willing to take risks themselves and to become learners and collaborators? The future of American public education may well depend on growing numbers of new leaders who answer these questions with a confident "yes!" and who have the courage to act on their convictions.

Articles