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Cultural Change Paradigms and Administrator Communication

By T. J. Kowalski

Public school reform has taken three distinct turns over the past two decades. In the early 1980s, most policymakers blamed a lack of educational productivity on lazy students. Influenced by this argument, virtually every state legislature enacted laws lengthening the school year, lengthening the school day, and increasing high school graduation requirements. Within a relatively short period of time, however, the would-be reformers concluded that intensification of student experiences was insufficient to produce significant improvements. While not abandoning their original conviction, they shifted their attention to a second target—educators. The result was a flurry of proposals to revise or eliminate teacher education curricula and licensing standards. But these actions also proved to be incomplete, and by the early 1990s, the reformers identified a third target—the organizational configuration of schools (Bauman, 1996).

Now that reform is focusing largely on school restructuring, cultural change has become a popular topic in school administration. This article explores the meaning of school restructuring and culture change paradigms. A nexus between institutional cultural and communication is proposed, and an argument is made that cultural change will not occur unless those leading the process possess necessary communication knowledge and skills.

Restructuring and School Culture

Prior to the 1990s, either rational or political strategies were used to pursue school. The former assumes schools change will occur as a result of exposing educators to new programs or new teaching methods; workshops and conferences exemplify this approach. The latter assumes teachers and administrators are either incapable of initiating change or unwilling to do so. Essentially power elites (e.g., governors and legislatures) try to coerce educators to change. Both strategies have produced only marginal gains. Consider the following conditions that attenuate their effectiveness:

- Exposure to new teaching methods or programs rarely requires educators to interface new ideas with fundamental values and beliefs. Consequently, proposed changes are usually rejected when they conflict with the traditional role expectations of educators (Razik & Swanson, 1995; Sarason, 1996).
- When initially coerced, administrators and teachers almost always revert to past practices once the pressures to change lessen (Fullan & Miles, 1992). This pattern of reversion largely explains why the basic structure of public schools has remained intact after multiple reform movements.
- Those proposing focused change often do not understand how educators are able to exercise considerable power to resist change, especially when they act in unison (Sarason, 1996).

Perhaps the weaknesses of both rational and political strategies have not been more apparent, because they are almost always used to alter selected portions of the educational system rather than the entire system.

Current calls for school restructuring are predicated on the judgments that schools are complex social institutions and that school restructuring requires a social systems perspective (Chance, 2000; Murphy, 1991; Schein, 1996). That is, if schools and districts are to be sufficiently improved, they must be treated as complex entities composed of interrelated and interacting parts. This perspective reveals the fallacy of blaming education's deficiency on a single factor. More important, it discloses the futility of trying to reform education by merely manipulating one or two of the system's elements. "Systemic thinking requires us to accept that the way social systems are put together has independent effects on the way people behave, what they learn, and how they learn what they learn" (Schlechty, 1997, p. 134). Schools are shaped by both internal and external political transactions;

thus, values and beliefs about education are central to determining the nature of schools. Largely for this reason, proposals for structural change that are not supported by changes in values and beliefs get overwhelmed by the prevailing culture (Schlechty, 1997).

Organizational structure refers to the formal ordering of roles in terms of authority, job descriptions, and work assignments; also included are the arrangements of networks that affect formal and informal interactions (Toth & Trujillo, 1987). Restructuring thus implies reshaping these core organizational elements. Compared to non-systemic reform initiatives, the goal of redesigning schools is more manifold and challenging for at least three reasons:

- Restructuring can mean different things to different people. It often involves open discussions of what seem to be intractable and deeply troubling problems such as governance, the distribution of power, and organizational design (Carlson, 1996). The potential for conflict is substantial.
- Both state deregulation and district decentralization are promoted as mechanisms for restructuring. Unlike mandates, they require that core policy decisions be made at the district and school levels (Kowalski, 1999). This condition revises ideal administrative roles and necessitates additional leadership competencies.
- A century of failed reforms incrementally reinforced a shared belief among educators that substantial change is neither necessary nor politically advantageous (Sarason, 1996). Essentially, educators have been socialized to accept things as they are (Streitmatter, 1994). Most see no reason to reshape schools, nor do most envision a reward for doing so.

There are conflicting opinions as to whether all public schools share a common culture, a condition that is quite important to considering how change should be pursued. After studying American public education for more than 20 years, Seymour Sarason (1996) argued that core elements of institutional culture—components that define roles, responsibilities, and the distribution of power—explained the behavioral uniformities he observed when visiting public schools across the 50 states. Studies

conducted on effective schools, however, suggest something different. Research by Purkey and Smith (1985) found that values, norms, and assumptions not readily observed in other schools guided educators in highly productive institutions. Writing about cultural variability, E. Mark Hanson (1996) concluded, "Various idiosyncratic elements help shape a school's culture, such as early history, community expectations, leadership, traditions involving standards of excellence, and rates of teacher turnover" (p. 316). In all probability, Sarason's observation of uniformity was based on tacit values and beliefs; that is, classroom environments and teacher behavior appeared to be very uniform. However, explorations into the deepest levels of culture often expose differences among schools with respect to underlying values and beliefs. Thus some aspects of culture, generally those that readily observed, are common to all schools while others, generally those most difficult to discern, often are not.

Culture not only is a central element of restructuring, it determines how individuals and groups promote and accept change (Leithwood, Jantzi, & Fernandez, 1994). In recent years, various aspects of the change process that relate to school culture have been discussed in the literature. Examples include the effects of transformational leadership (e.g., Leithwood, 1992), the need for collaboration (e.g., Leithwood, Begley, & Cousins, 1992), barriers to true professionalism (Kowalski, 1995; Shedd & Bacharach, 1991), and consequences of not conceptualizing schools as communities (Sergiovanni, 1994). Collectively, this knowledge base suggests that restructuring must occur from the center of a school and be culturally based (Trimble, 1996).

Culture and Communication

Does culture create communication or does communication build culture? A macroanalysis of communication research produced two cogent findings: (a) most studies used modernistic approaches rather than naturalistic or critical inquiry; (b) most researchers categorized culture as a causal variable and communication as an intervening variable (Wert-Gray, Center, Brashers, & Meyers, 1991). More recently, however, the existence of a cause and effect relationship has been questioned. Charles Conrad (1994) wrote:

Cultures are communicative creations. They emerge and are sustained by the communicative acts of all employees, not just the conscious persuasive strategies of upper management. Cultures do not exist separately from people communicating with one another. (p. 27)

Today, communication scholars are more prone to describe the relationship between the culture and communication as reciprocal. Stephen Axley (1996) characterized the bond thusly, "Communication gives rise to culture, which gives rise to communication, which perpetuates culture" (p. 153). In this vein, communication is a process through which organizational members express their collective inclination to coordinate beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes. In schools, communication gives meaning to work and forges perceptions of reality. As such, culture affects communication, but communication also is central to building, maintaining, and changing culture.

Given the intricate nature of cultural change, many scholars (e.g., Greenfield, 1991) conclude that administrators should have an understanding of how culture is formed, how it influences thinking and behavior, and how it can be transformed. Indeed, students preparing to be principals and superintendents commonly study organizational theories, including those relating to culture. But far less recognized is the need for them to study communication. For instance, it is important to know how one-way channels of communication became the norm in public schools during the early part of the 20th century. This knowledge creates an understanding of why many administrators continue to believe that the sole purposes of communication are to "tell" and to "control." It is equally important for contemporary practitioners to understand why they should take into account the critical importance of feedback and focus on reciprocal information exchanges when pursuing school restructuring (Harris, 1993).

Cultural change begins with an accurate depiction of the past and present. To do this, Edgar Schein (1992) suggested that leaders engage others in open discussions that center on five themes:

- Relationship with the environment (Who is served by the school? What is the school's relationship with the community?)

- Reality, truth, and the basics for decisions (How are validity and truth established? What assumptions define reality?)
- Nature of human beings (Are students inclined to be productive? Are parents inclined to be cooperative?)
- Nature of human activity (How are problems solved? How are decisions made?)
- Nature of human relationships (How are power and authority distributed? What relationships are acceptable and unacceptable?)

A true cognizance of how we communicate with each other is predicated on our awareness of:

- (1) the process of sending and receiving messages through specific channels;
- (2) the formal and informal impediments and facilitators of the process; and
- (3) the multivariate social, political, cultural, and economic environments that surround and permeate every aspect of the communication process (Hanson, 1996, p. 224).

Additional expectations include:

- facilitating the process of bringing people together to discuss their values and beliefs so that they can collectively establish goals for renewal (Kowalski, 2000)
- galvanizing support among policymakers and other citizens and persuading them to endorse and enthusiastically support the school's initiatives (Howlett, 1993)
- facilitating the work of other educators to reach diverse groups of students and their parents (Spaulding & O'Hair, 2000).

The need for open communication is also evident in more specific responsibilities, such as selecting staff whose values are congruous with the school's vision, reinforcing dominant values, and sharing power and responsibility (Leithwood et al., 1994). Schein (1992) observed, "The learning culture must be built on the assumption that communication and information are central to organizational well-being and must therefore create a multichannel communication system that allows everyone to connect to everyone else," (p. 370). Leaders who want open, learning organizations create conditions permitting them to "listen fully and accurately to all voices, both negative and positive" (Sharpe, 1996, p. 61).

Communication and Administrator Preparation

Experiences with previous reform efforts and the professional knowledge base suggest that the following conclusions are valid:

- Change is more likely if it is initiated and carried out by those who are most affected.
- Restructuring can not occur unless organizational culture is revamped.
- Culture and communication maintain a reciprocal relationship; hence, any effort to change culture involves communication.
- Culture change requires dynamic leadership; those who lead the process must possess knowledge and skills in communication not previously deemed necessary for school administrators.

Although school restructuring has become a widely accepted goal as evidenced by growing state deregulation and district decentralization, there is little evidence that the study of communication is receiving adequate attention in professional preparation programs.

In rational and political paradigms, decisions about change objectives are typically determined by a select number of individuals. In cultural change models, they are shaped by the ideas, feelings, and opinions of those who are the primary targets of change—students and teachers (Marshak, 1996). Rather than directing others, administrators listen, synthesize, and share vital information. The intent is to build common understandings, beliefs, and values that determine what is done and how it is done (Prestine & Bowen, 1993). This intricate and difficult process requires leadership from a person who can earn trust and build collegial relationships.

When an administrator appropriately recognizes that organization does not precede communication and becomes subsequently supported by it, he or she is more inclined to view organization as an effect of communication (Taylor, 1993). Accordingly, the practitioner needs to understand how and why the existing culture was established and sustained. He or she also needs to comprehend how personal actions symbolically reinforce or contradict existing culture (Deal & Peterson, 1990). Language in a school or district is the primary

vehicle through which audiences develop a sense of order—it reveals how various publics collectively define and participate in organizational reality (Toth & Trujillo, 1987).

In summary, there are two primary reasons why school administrators (and arguably all educators) need to study communication science. One is to ensure that they can engage in rebuilding their own cultures to accommodate restructuring; the other is to ensure that they can make necessary adaptations to sustain those cultures. Although there are many areas of communication that could be studied, the following are considered the most essential for present-day administrators:

- *Developing comprehensive listening skills.* Communication studies in organizations report that individuals are usually cognizant of listening-related behaviors such as attentiveness, nonverbal behavior, attitudes, memory, and overt responses (Lewis & Reinsch, 1988); however, less noted is the fact that a person who routinely exhibits good listening skills is perceived as respectful, interested, and concerned (Burbules, 1993).
- *Establishing credibility.* Leaders earn credibility when they do what they say they will do. People listen to an administrator's words and look at his or her deeds. "A judgment of credible is handed down when the two are consonant" (Kouzes & Posner, 1993, p. 47)
- *Understanding nonverbal communication.* Nonverbal communication is often symbolic and occurs at the unconscious level. It is a way of expressing emotions, e.g., excitement, disappointment; an avenue for conveying interpersonal attitudes, e.g., sincerity, openness; an avenue for presenting one's personality to others, e.g., aggressive, introverted; and an extension of verbal communication, e.g., reinforcing words, substituting gestures for words (Argyle, 1988).
- *Communicating in context.* Contextual variables may interfere with communication and contribute to misinterpretations, even to the extent that a message is completely distorted (Hoy & Miskel, 1996). Thus, administrators should understand how factors such as prejudice, ethnic diversity, gender differences, and organizational structure can influence communication.

- *Resolving conflict through communication.* Conflict is inevitable in all types of organizations. While communication may occur without conflict, “conflict cannot occur without some type of communication” (Harris, 1993, p. 396). In many school districts, administrators spend a significant portion of their time dealing with tensions that form and grow as a result of social interactions. Consequently, conflict and communication in school systems are inextricably linked, because communication behaviors both contribute to conflict and become a vehicle for resolving it (e.g., building cooperation). Effective conflict management is unlikely if an administrator does not comprehend the dynamics of conflict and possess the ability to use cooperative communication strategies (Spaulding & O’Hair, 2000).

- *Relating culture and communication to organizational behavior.* Behavior in schools is frequently unpredictable and bewildering. Since communication is observable, it provides a window for understanding the deeper levels of institutional culture and for determining how basic assumptions and beliefs shape behavior. To gain these insights, administrators need to integrate communication theory into the study of organizational theory (Kowalski, 1999).

Concluding Thoughts

An argument for requiring prospective administrators to study communication could be made even in the absence of the current need for school restructuring. A recent study, for example, found that 50% of principals had underestimated the extent to which communication would be pervasive in their work. This same study showed that the academic preparation of principals in communication varied considerably across courses in communication, content in educational administration courses, and content of staff development programs (Kowalski, 1998). And these conditions persist despite repeated efforts to make communication a core skill for school administrators (e.g., Hoyle, English, & Steffy, 1985). Perhaps past tolerance of this disjunction between ideal and real practice is explained by expectations that administrators func-

tion as managers—an expectation that merely essentially requires them to communicate by dictating memoranda and giving verbal commands.

Clearly, the pursuit of school restructuring has not created a need for administrators to study communication science; rather it has magnified the need significantly. Action to remedy this deficiency should be addressed on three fronts. First, state licensing officials or professional standards boards need to emphasize the value of communication and interpersonal skills. These agencies typically have the power to modify curricula for professional preparation. Second, professional organizations, state departments of education, universities, and school districts need to provide communication learning opportunities for those already in practice. Finally, school officials need to value communication and human relations as essential skills. This can be expressed directly in employment decisions and symbolically in efforts to assist and reward employee growth.

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