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## Challenges and Processes in School Turnaround A Singapore Secondary School Principal's Perspective

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### Abstract

Singapore schools have a reputation of high achieving in the various international surveys, such as the TIMSS, PIRLS and PISA, in the past ten years. The latest PISA 2012 results ranked Singapore 2nd in Maths, 3rd in Reading and 3rd in Science. However, in the midst of such high achieving schools are schools which have been saddled with poor discipline, low morale among staff and students and under-performance in academic standards. A few of these schools have achieved remarkable turnaround. How do such schools managed to turnaround? Purpose: This paper presents the context, challenges and processes involved in turning around an under-performing school in Singapore through the experiences of a 'turnaround' principal. Considerations of important factors such as context, personality, leadership and five essential questions for the turnaround leader are discussed with references to effective schools, school improvement as well as corporate turnaround literature. Conclusion: The process of turning around schools is never an easy one. The principal as the chief driver of the turnaround needs the moral courage, the belief and competencies to do the job of turnaround. In the end he must make the seemingly impossible task possible through working with all stakeholders in the school.

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### 1. Introduction

*1.1 What can we learn from turnaround organisations? Evidence from educational institutions and corporations.*

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School turnaround refers to the process of turning around a failing school into an effective school. Fundamentally, it involves school improvement especially in terms of academic achievements of its students. When does an institution require a turnaround? The answer is when it is failing, underachieving or underperforming. Such institutions are characterised usually by low morale among staff and students, low support from parents and other stakeholders and low academic achievements. Change in such institutions are seldom brought about without changes to people, policies, and structures. Turnaround schools require turnaround leaders who are brought in to the institution to effect change. For change to be sustainable it requires more than just changes to structure and people or policies, it requires changing mindsets, beliefs, perseverance and a buy-in from all concerned. According to Murphy (2008), the turnaround narrative follows four periods: period one represents a state of stability; period two encompasses the time when factors that push an organisation into a turnaround situation begin to occupy centre stage. This is the disintegration phase; period three includes the time when actions in response to decline, failing status, and crisis that are designed to stabilise the organisation are brought into play and represents an attempt to reintegrate/regenerate the turnaround process; period four is the end game in the turnaround narrative, either recovery or death (Armenakis & Fredenberger, 1998; Ford, 1983; Murphy & Meyers, 2008; Pearce & Robins, 1993). Leithwood et al (2010) developed the three stage concept of school turnaround processes: Stage 1: Stopping the decline and creating conditions for early improvement; Stage 2: Ensuring survival and realizing early performance improvement; and Stage 3: Achieving satisfactory performance and aspiring to much more.

## 2. Three Essential Considerations

Three essentials that one should bear in mind in school turnaround: i) context, ii) personality of the turnaround leader, and iii) leadership.

(I) Context - Context determines what can be done. Contexts include national contexts such as educational system and cultural values, the local neighbourhood, the context of the individual school itself with its particular practices and values.

(II) Personality of the turnaround leader - Leaders come with different personality types. There is no one personality that works best in turning around a failing institution. A choleric can succeed as much as a melancholic and a phlegmatic can succeed as much as a sanguine. Turnaround leaders have been known to possess very contrasting personalities. Their personality traits include being entrepreneurial, risk-taking, opportunity-oriented, proactive, optimistic, committed, positive, hopeful, enthusiastic, confident, achievement-oriented, action-oriented, relish hard work, intense, no-nonsense, high endurance, hands-on, tough and competitive, lead by example and many more.

(III) Leadership - The strong leader can create order out of chaos and cultivate excellence out of mediocrity. The effective leader provides vision and direction and enhances the climate for success (Grinyer et al, 1988; Kanter, 2003; O'Shaughnessy, 1995; Yukl, 2002; Duke, 2007;) giving meaning to the organisation and its people. In turnaround schools, leadership is critical to recovery and to organisational reintegration (Murphy, 2008). Leadership is always about the heart - what one believes, the personal values and conviction. It is also about the head - possessing the required knowledge and views. Successful turnaround leaders are knowledgeable and hold on to very firm but open views. They have an uncanny ability to suss out the important from the showy. Finally leadership is about the hand - understanding the 'big' and 'small' picture, managing by walking around (MBWA) and getting your hands 'dirty' (Sergiovanni, 2009).

I would like to propose five essential questions that any turnaround leader should ask before embarking on the task:

### 2.1 Five Essential Questions

1. What is/are the problems? - A school never starts out to be a failing school. Most school leaders when assuming the responsibility of leading a school will have great plans in mind for both the students and the school. So when a school fails there are a number of causes. The school leader brought in to turn around the school must seek to find out and identify the causes of school failure. Possible causes of school failure could be many and varied, for example, school discipline becoming too lax, lack of academic rigour, teachers who are not committed, low morale of school staff, focusing too much on areas not related to academic learning, lack of systems in place for assisting

academically weak students, administrative system gone awry, and many others. Thus it is of utmost importance for the new school leader to identify the causes of the problem(s).

2. Why do I want to change? - For any leader coming into the organisation with an assigned task to turnaround the school, the task demands full passion and commitment. It involves the value system of the leader and not just the skilfulness and personality traits. Unless the leader is convicted that the task at hand is more than just a "task" to be fulfilled, either the leader will not see it through or the change will not be sustainable. Whether the leader sees it as a job or as a mission makes a world of difference. Beliefs about one's calling, children, school, responsibility, trust and opportunity to exercise one's skills are key for the leader who has been tasked to do the job.

3. Do the people and stakeholders want to change or are they just satisfied with the status quo? The people within the organisation may not share the same concerns as the turnaround leader or school authorities. They may just be "happy" at not doing much for the students or school and neither do the students want to achieve.

4. What do we want to change to? Does the leader have a vivid mental picture and vision of what the school would look like? How does he share and pass this to all stakeholders of the school.

5. Can recipes for success be transferred? - The literature on organizational management points to the conclusion that corporate organizations are so radically different in their culture, politics and strategic position that recipes for success cannot simply be transferred from one organization to another. In the school improvement literature, Mortimer et al (2000, p. 143) identified four important lessons for consideration for school improvement in any culture and context: (i) there is no one way of achieving improvement, no single recipe for turning round a school, (ii) borrowing from other cultures may not achieve the desired results, (iii) resources do not, in themselves, guarantee improvement, and (iv) change has to be carried out by the school itself.

## *2.2 Steps for turning around school - my experience*

1. Identify the school culture - It is essential for any new leader to understand the type of organisational culture he is going into. Without first understanding this the leader who tries to do anything will meet with failure no matter how good his plans are. Stoll and Fink (1996) classified school culture into five types: moving, cruising, strolling, struggling and sinking. Understanding this means that the leader can seek to identify if cultural norms such as shared goals and responsibility for success are present. Culture can also be categorise as positive or negative.
2. Identify key positive people - In any school there will always be faculty and students who are concerned with the current state of the school and desiring improvements. These are the 'positive' people as opposed to the "negative" people who do not want to change for the better and prefer the status quo. Then there are the "neutral" and to them it does not matter whether the school improves or deteriorates as they are just here for the job. The key positive people are those whom the turnaround leader needs to work with and to work through as he will not be able to turnaround the school all by himself.
3. Students want to learn - Even in a failing school where the school culture and school climate is not conducive to learning there will be students who desire to learn and teachers who want to help students succeed. These students have personal aspirations, dreams and goals and want to succeed in school. The turnaround leader must never assume that the whole school has lost hope and is beyond resuscitation. It is thus essential for the turnaround leader to constantly bring to the attention of the school that there are those who want to learn and these must not be deprived of the opportunities.
4. Get feedback - The importance of feedback cannot be underestimated. Without good and accurate feedback from stakeholders regarding faculty, students, school environment, practices, programmes and a host of many other essential aspects of the school the leader will not be able to strategise and plan his turnaround actions. The leader needs to have a system to gather such feedback in such a way that people will come forth willingly. Examples can include setting up a suggestion box for both students and faculty, conducting feedback sessions with both faculty, students and also parents. The leader would then have to discern, evaluate, prioritise the concerns or issues brought up and then plan strategies to address them. The turnaround leader must provide the assurance and show that he actually values and follows up on the feedback provided so that people can trust that the leader really means what he says.

5. Overcome resistance to change - In failing schools, there will be people who are dead against change, for the better, for various reasons. Some are just comfortable with the status quo and would rather not do anything because they do not want more work and then there are those with very low expectations of their students. Change to these people means more work. These people may also undermine and sabotage any initiatives that the leader may introduce and if handled incorrectly will become obstacles to improvement. One good strategy to naysayers would be to say, "Let's give it a try and if it does not work out we can always revert back to what we were doing".
6. Overcome unbelief and low expectations - In low-performing, failing schools, negative habits and beliefs have usually become ingrained in the people within the organisation. A lack of belief in the potential of their students coupled with low expectations is the norm. The turnaround leader has to have patience but simultaneously be persistent in pushing, albeit diplomatically, his agenda and strategies. He has to be steadfast and focused and not get distracted by opposition and negative reactions to his initiatives.
7. Share, remind, convince, motivate - The turnaround leader needs to constantly share his vision with both the faculty and students. He needs to remind them day-in and day-out with regards to the school values he wants to inculcate and explore innovative and creative ways to reinforce these values. His task is to convince the naysayers through actions that all things are possible and be a motivating force in the school. These actions are not a onetime affair but need to be carried out throughout the course of the year. It may be a long process especially if there is a sizeable proportion of negative elements within the school.
8. Tidy up discipline - One of the characteristics of an effective school is the presence of a safe and orderly environment (Steller, 1988). This necessitates the presence of good discipline with clear structures and guidelines governing student behaviour. The safe and orderly school environment allows students to trust the school and eradicate fear and safety issues. With the presence of good discipline students will be motivated to learn and the teacher can then focus on teaching. This promotes a positive and learning school culture and climate. With good discipline in place, students will feel a sense of pride and want to belong to such an environment.
9. Clean and brighten up the school - A school that is drab, dirty and run down repels away students because it gives a sense of disorderliness and failure. The turnaround leader needs to transform the school from one that is repulsive to one that is inviting. The leader can be creative and involve both students and faculty in brightening up the school. This can be done through re-painting, adding attractive colours to the school and enhancing the internal and external landscape. Innovative ways can be explored to ensure that the transformed environment is maintained and does not deteriorate through neglect.
10. Reinforce with positive results - When a school fails it is usually through a gradual slide through the years. As a consequence the sense of belief in success begins to erode away. To reverse this requires much effort and creative ways to slowly put back the spark of positive belief in both the faculty and students. The turnaround leader needs to capitalise on any achievements of both students, faculty and school and spare no effort in publicising these to the school and the wider community. The frequency and momentum of positive publicity will slowly but surely bring back a sense of confidence and belief. Visuals and constant announcements of successes and the challenge to better the performance of the previous cohorts of students can be marvellous motivations to excel.
11. Enhancing school-community relations - The school does not exist in isolation but is a part of a wider community. More often than not the school board has representatives from the leaders of the community. The turnaround leader needs to be adept at engaging and mobilising the resources and support of these leaders to assist him in lifting the school out of the doldrums. He needs to make himself known to the community and be involved in community events and get to know more of the community to effectively work with them.
12. Institutionalise best practices - In any school, there will be a number of very effective teachers who are able to help their students achieve. These teachers not only have very good rapport with the students they teach but also have very effective strategies in their teaching. The turnaround leader should identify such teachers, get them to share on what they have done with the rest of the faculty and most importantly to institutionalise their practices among the department and teachers.
13. Be involved - Turning around schools is a very draining and challenging task. It requires total commitment, belief in children and education, moral courage to do the right thing, knowing what to do and when to do them, motivating both faculty and students and most of all getting your hands "dirtied". The turnaround leader becomes

the role model for all he wants to inculcate in the faculty and students. He must become part of the team and not just the director.

### 3. Conclusion

What has been presented is my own personal journey in transforming not one but two schools. Effective schools research (Sammons, et al., 1995; Steller, 1988; Dunsworth & Billings, 2009; Serrgiovanni, 2009) as well as research on turnaround schools (Kowal, et al., 2009; Leithwood, et al., 2010; Maxwell, 2010; Murphy & Myers, 2009) have highlighted possible steps taken to bring about change. A turnaround school with a culture of success which reflects positive attitude, high expectations, responsibility, hard work, collaboration and respect can be achieved when there is vision, belief and commitment.

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