



## **A New Paradigm for Organizational Change: Involving Customers and Stakeholders in the Improvement Process**

**J. Jay Marino**

Education leaders around the country are focusing their schools on achieving results. Under the strict accountability and sanctions of the No Child Left Behind Act, educators are working diligently to find the right recipe of research-based instructional practices, effective professional development programs, and successful school improvement processes in hopes of increasing test scores. The battle and complexity of closing achievement gaps and increasing student learning is evident and so is the need for a paradigm shift in how leaders approach organizational change.

In a new paradigm of systems improvement, successful organizations are involving employees, stakeholders, and even the customers (the students) in the process of improving their schools through a continuous quality improvement approach to organizational change. In hopes of harnessing the efforts of everything and everyone in the system, educational leaders are encountering promising results through the implementation of powerful approaches to systemic leadership including:

- Shared leadership.
- Clear vision and precise direction.
- Alignment of the system and its parts.
- Measurement of results.
- Broad-based participation in the improvement process.

### **Share the Privilege and Responsibility of Leadership**

The old paradigm of school leadership called for the principal or superintendent as “the boss” or primary decision maker. Decisions were often made in isolation according to the whim of the highest ranking administrator. Today, at the heart of successful school leadership is a representative group of dedicated, front-line employees who are personally committed and involved in the improvement of the system in which they work.

By establishing a community of leaders, administrators can collectively harness the talent of a diverse group of individuals and benefit from their multiple perspectives. Effective leadership teams participate in

the establishment of group norms and collaboratively establish a clear mission, vision, goals, and core values, which direct improvement efforts in their system. This new paradigm of school leadership calls for collaboration, teamwork, consensus building, and a trusting environment that involves others in the leadership responsibilities of shared decision making.

### **Establish Clear Vision and Precise Direction to Guide Improvements**

Many school systems create popular guiding documents (often referred to as strategic plans or improvement plans) that include components such as: vision, mission, core values, goals, and guiding philosophies. In the old paradigm, these components were nothing more than words on a piece of paper that made the people who created them feel like they were doing “something” about the problems they were trying to solve. Think about your system for a minute...can you recall the mission statement? Does it have meaning to you? Does it provide guidance and focus to your daily work? Are you passionate about it?

Effective leadership teams in today’s new paradigm create a shared vision, mission, core values, and goals to serve as the compass that guides the improvement journey. To ensure consensus and buy-in from users, leadership teams are implementing methods that include stakeholders’ input in identifying a clear direction and focus. Obtaining input from various groups and individuals can be a daunting task, which is why it is often excluded from the process. However, feedback can be collected through a variety of quality tools that are designed to ensure equal voice and effective participation in the process. For example, the brainstorming tool can be used to gather broad input on key mission and goals. Ideas can be generated for future use in planning by allowing individuals the opportunity to share their thoughts or ideas. The affinity diagram can help put like-ideas together and establish common themes from the feedback. The nominal group technique can narrow the focus to the “critical few” concepts that the leadership team incorporates into its improvement planning process.

Once direction is set and is based on input from stakeholders and customers, it's the responsibility of the leadership team to ensure that everyone clearly understands the improvement effort and how each person's work contributes to its accomplishment. Effective leadership teams know that in the absence of clear focus and direction, people will determine for themselves what is most important. When ambiguous and diversified direction exists in the system, success happens only by chance in what's referred to as *random acts of excellence*. The new paradigm of organizational change demands clear vision and well articulated goals that guide continuous improvement efforts through *intentional acts of excellence*.

### **Align the System and Its Parts**

How do successful organizations maximize results? They align their resources, budgets, and people to their vision, mission, goals, and core values. Effective teams operating in the new paradigm of educational change incorporate a systems-thinking approach to ensure that improvement efforts are aligned horizontally (in the system itself) and vertically (in the various parts of the system in which it interacts). Without an approach that incorporates systems alignment, the efforts of individuals may have little impact on the bottom line. There is nothing less motivating than people working hard yet not producing results.

In the new paradigm, effective leadership teams ensure that every part of the system is directly connected to the identified improvement areas. One way teams promote alignment is through the establishment of SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time bound) goals of individual employees and support departments that directly align to the improvement goals of the system. When all employees and departments clearly understand the direction and focus identified in their SMART goal, alignment becomes a natural occurrence. Systemwide results are experienced

when all the efforts of the front line are aligned to clear and specific goals.

### **Measure What's Important**

The cliché “the proof is in the pudding” holds true for continuous improvement efforts today. In the old paradigm of improvement, leaders would rely on the lagging high-stakes, once-a-year indicators to determine progress and goals. Decisions were based on the results of these assessments and often resulted in organizations chasing a data point generated from work that occurred the previous year. This type of “autopsy” left education leaders scratching their heads as they tried to determine how to change the trajectory of the next data point.

Today's leadership teams are measuring and monitoring progress frequently to determine the impact and effectiveness of strategies deployed by front-line employees. A measurement concept referred to as a dashboard can help educators observe real-time results using leading indicators. These measures allow teams to make in-process adjustments in their

strategies and improvement efforts. Like the dashboard of a car, educators can monitor key indicators of achievement in their system and keep an eye on warning lights or areas in need of attention. Dashboard measures provide a process for early detection of progress (or lack of) through a public display of data in graphical formats for easy interpretation by stakeholders. The days of waiting until next year to determine current performance are remnants of a past paradigm. Implementing a streamlined, in-process mea-

surement system that connects everyone's work to expected targets and results is how organizational change occurs. Effective leadership teams know that what gets measured *frequently*—gets done!

### **Involve Everyone in Continuous Improvement Efforts**

The responsibility of involving everyone in organizational improvements is the duty of today's leadership team. Effective teams utilize the collective effort of

*Effective leadership teams in today's new paradigm create a shared vision, mission, core values, and goals to serve as the compass that guides the improvement journey. To ensure consensus and buy-in from users, leadership teams are implementing methods that include stakeholders' input in identifying a clear direction and focus.*

the system (and its parts) to achieve results. A question that leadership teams need to ask is, "Should anyone be excused from our improvement efforts?" Absolutely not!

Traditionally, most of the emphasis with improvement efforts was placed on certified teachers, administrators, and the work done in classrooms and schools. The new paradigm of continuous improvement encompasses all parts (and people) of the system. In today's new paradigm of inclusion and participation, educational support service departments such as: food and nutrition, technology, human resources, custodial/maintenance, transportation, and payroll all play important roles in contributing to the improvement of systemic results. The niche role played by these support systems impacts the learner and the learning environment, which can greatly contribute to the teaching and learning process. Effective organizations ensure that all employees, regardless of their position or rank, understand how their work directly contributes to the vision, mission, core values, and goals of the system.

In the new paradigm of organizational change, leadership teams strategically connect students to the improvement effort. When teachers assist students in setting individual goals, they begin to understand how their daily work connects to the goals of the classroom, which are aligned to school improvement efforts, which, in turn, are aligned to district strategic improvement efforts. Effective leadership teams know

***The power of organizational change is realized when every employee, stakeholder, and student understands how his or her work contributes to improving student learning.***

that the work of continuous improvement is too important to leave just to the adults in the system.

Successful organizations are aligned from the district office, to the school, the classroom, and all the way to the individual student. The power of organizational change is realized when every employee, stakeholder, and student understands how his or her work contributes to improving student learning. Continuous quality improvement can have a tremendous impact on student achievement results when leaders use a

systemic approach and implement key strategies such as: sharing the privilege and responsibility of leadership, establishing clear vision and precise direction to guide improvements, aligning the system and its parts, measuring what's important, and involving everyone in continuous improvement efforts. This new paradigm of organizational change can have a profound and lasting

effect on the results of the educational system. Is your system operating under this new paradigm?



*Jay Marino is associate superintendent for organizational effectiveness and accountability, Cedar Rapids Community School District in Iowa. He has delivered keynote presentations at local, state, and national conferences and has been involved actively in state quality award programs as an applicant and as an examiner. Marino co-authored Quality Across the Curriculum; Integrating Quality Tools and PDSA With Standards, and serves as the K-12 chair of ASQ's educational advisory committee. You can reach him at [jmarino@cr.k12.ia.us](mailto:jmarino@cr.k12.ia.us).*