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Faith, Hope and Charity: setting out to create a new culture in merging schools

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Introduction

This report is the summary of a detailed story of the journey of two schools as they set out to come together and recapture or re-create shared morale. The names of the schools and the teachers have been changed and the local authority and other eyewitnesses are not mentioned by name.

Telling the story through the eyes of two teachers, the study looks at the possibility of effecting huge culture change in a relatively short time period in circumstances of enormous turbulence and uncertainty.

That culture change of such size and such speed is possible is confirmed in the story, and the key ingredients identified. Whether the change in culture is sufficient is for another part of the story to tell.

The context

A large urban local authority was under pressure to decide what was to be done about the secondary provision for over 2,000 secondary-age children living on an impoverished, large, outer ring estate. The estate was served by two medium-sized mixed 11–18 schools. They shared the same site (divided by a fence), served the same communities and faced the same difficulties. Throughout the 1990s the fortunes of the two schools had declined.

The decision was taken to put the two schools together, and to do it fast. In less than four months a new, combined Year 7 was to be sited in a separate annexe. Significant capital funds were to be acquired to refurbish and improve the physical environment, new and committed staff (ie all adults paid by the school) were to be drawn from across the authority to lead new approaches in learning, and all the pedagogic experience of the advisory service was to be brought to bear on creating a new curriculum.

All was set to grow the new school, a project which was driven by the energy and commitment of the authority's leaders.

The challenge

In an American text examining how companies can recover after mergers, takeovers or cutbacks, the author lists the issues facing people and their leaders.

A dozen realities about workplace recovery

1. *Transitions are difficult events to manage.*

2. *Transitions are difficult events for people to cope with.*

3. *Mismanaged transitions have a negative impact on people and organisations.*

4. *The way transitions are mismanaged weakens motivation.*

5. *People regress to primitive forms of behaviour.*

6. *Executives – that is the people responsible for leading the new organisation, a senior team in a school – adopt crisis management.*

7. *Transitions have the potential to unfreeze people and organisations.*

8. *People need to let go of the old before they can accept the new.*

9. *Executives typically ignore or deny the need to let go of the old before accepting the new.*

10. *The more consistent the forces for the new organizational order, the more readily people will accept it.*

11. *People want to identify with their workplace and want a fair chance at succeeding in the new organisational order.*

12. *A post-transition culture will emerge.*

(after Marks (2003) pp109–111)

In the 12 months from the announcement of the new arrangements for the two schools to the first cross-project development conference, the truth of the first six assertions was clearly evidenced in the stories and experiences of those who lived through the change.

The size and nature of the task facing the new leadership team was significant. There was no going back, no way the grievances associated with the process so far could be undone. Forward was the only way, so the priority was given to building a shared vision of what this new school could be and giving people the opportunity to share in that process. The aim was to make sure that the values and the behaviours that emerged would be seen to be uncompromising and consistently applied. During this process it would be essential to celebrate the positive histories of the two schools, and give people a real chance to identify with the new school and sign up to its success.

Points 7–12 were being worked on, and the possibility of success began to emerge.

The findings

Even in the extreme circumstances of the case-study, the research conclusions of reflective and longitudinal studies, such as Leithwood and Jantzi's (1990), stand up well.

Culture can be built explicitly, as the high scores in the School Learning Organisation Survey conducted in this school showed. Where embracing change is not an option, it may well be that a frontal assault on culture is not only effective but desirable.

Professional communities serving high-poverty communities have a particular, and strongly developed, values set. Re-connecting colleagues with these can legitimise the growth of new cultures and create strong communities, though there is a tension here with the demands for quick fixes. The new school set out to follow a principle (not a principal).

Models of change need to be openly taught and the emotional experience of change needs to be explicitly acknowledged. As Professor Hargreaves argues, too often change is presented as cerebral and the task of leaders simply to manage mood and motivation.

Transforming culture may be necessary for successful educational change, but it is not sufficient.

NB. The full report of this study is available at **www.ncsl.org.uk/researchpublications**

References

Marks, M L (2003), *Charging Back Up The Hill*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass

Leithwood, K and Jantzi, D (1990), *Transformational leadership: how principals can help reform school cultures,* School Effectiveness and School Improvement 1(4): 249–80

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