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Growth Infusion:  
Embedding Staff Development in a  
Culture of Learning  
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### Abstract

To address increasing accountability demands, instructional leaders must find ways to expand the current reality of faculty development to create a culture where continuous growth and learning are the standard for professional behavior. Growth Infusion is a framework for creating such a culture. The framework is a result of an extensive search for both empirical and theoretically based data and is a response to the new Florida Professional Development Evaluation Protocol. Seven elements are identified and this framework shapes the best practices in these areas into a systemic plan.

Growth Infusion:  
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*“To live is to grow. The life of the organization is embodied in its ability to enable its people to grow”* (Joyce & Showers, 1995 p. 173).

Improvements or reforms that focus only on changing the structural aspects of schooling do not succeed in making lasting changes that benefit students. In their continuing research on school reform, Deal and Peterson (1999) found that “reforms that bring new technologies or higher standards won’t succeed without being embedded in supportive, spirit-filled culture” (p. 137). Peter Senge (1990) characterized such an environment as a learning culture, which he defined as “a place where individuals are continually discovering how they create their reality, and how they can change it” (p. 7). Teachers need opportunities for continuing learning to keep up with trends in society and to provide for any meaningful change (Harris & Anthony, 2001).

The process of “Growth Infusion” provides a framework for expanding the current reality of faculty development to create a culture where continuous growth and learning are the unquestioned and enthusiastically supported standards for professional and personal behavior. To create this new culture there must be change of great magnitude. Sergiovanni (2000) called this “deep change” (p. 145), which involves changes in fundamental relationships, in understandings of subject matter, pedagogy, how students learn, and in teachers’ skills and behavior.

To be a lasting change, the initiative must focus on the system as a whole. The energy produced by the interaction among the parts is greater than that of any of the parts used alone. The effects of these interactions, called synergism, create the intense energy needed to fuel and sustain deep change. According to Green (2003), through its capacity to facilitate energy flow this “living synergistic system has the ability to create the conditions for its own existence” (p. ix). A system that is self-supporting is better prepared to withstand the pressures that could cause a regression to past conditions.

Many definitions for organizational culture can be found in the literature. Webb and Norton (1999) defined culture as a school’s personality. Barth (1990) suggested that the culture is an atmosphere characterized by social and professional interactions of the people. These interactions, while helping to generate energy to sustain the culture itself, are also closely related to the professional growth of teachers. Barth referred to this culture of learning as a “community of learners”, where “learning is endemic” (p. 43).

According to Schein (1985), an organization’s culture is most obvious in observation of things one sees and hears, such as buildings, technology used, and speech and behavior patterns. These observable distinctions represent mere symbols of a culture that is not seen. The next level of understanding lies in documents, such as vision or mission statements that may help to further identify the culture of an organization. The third and final level of organizational culture is termed by Schein as assumptions. Assumptions are the unseen, unwritten laws. They are beliefs as to the “way things are done around here” (Owens, 1998, p. 166) and accepted as truth and reality. The organization’s members generally share these beliefs unquestioningly. Through

rethinking and challenging these beliefs, change can be initiated by means of the very basic tenets of the organization.

Upon review of the related literature, seven essential elements were identified within a school environment as having the most influence on facilitating the growth of a culture of learning. The Growth Infusion framework shapes the best practices in these areas into a systemic plan. The elements are: a) purpose and philosophy, b) concern for stakeholders, c) adult learning environment, d) leadership, e) design, f) praxis, and g) evaluation. In any effective system, the greatest value comes not from the efficiency of the individual elements, but from their collective worth as they function as a whole. Therefore, the success of the Growth Infusion framework in facilitating a culture of learning lies in the interactions among all of the seven elements.

#### *Purpose and Philosophy*

For the past decade, studies have confirmed what the wisdom of the ages has told us: Envisioning a future outcome has a significant effect on its achievement. While plans, objectives, strategies and timelines are important tools to achieving a goal, they are useless without a clear vision of and purpose for that goal. For the Growth Infusion process to be an effective learning framework, we must establish our philosophy, purpose and vision to ensure that as leaders, we have a clear picture of what we want to achieve, and the direction in which we want to move.

The development of a genuine purpose and vision incites people to excel and learn, not because they are ordered to do so, but because they want to for themselves (Senge, Cambron-McCabe, Lucas, Smith, Dutton, & Kleiner, 2000). Leaders have a responsibility to work with the members in the organization to develop a collective

purpose and vision for the learning culture (Senge et al., 2000). While a purpose and vision can set us apart and make us feel special, there has to be a shared vision based on common values and beliefs. “A group vision can come from one person or many people, but leaders constantly explain and elucidate it” (De Pree, 1997, p. 117). For a vision to be attractive, it must appeal to all of those who have a stake in that learning environment.

In developing our purpose and philosophy, we recognize that each person’s view is valid and honors the life experiences that helped shape it. The Growth Infusion framework operates on the basis of openness and trust, nurturing an environment where truths can “unfold” and be heard. No human being is more important than another, but each is important to the organization in a unique way. Last, but not least, people are valued for who they are and not just for what or whom they know.

#### *Concern for Stakeholders*

When designing an effective learning culture, it is important to consider all of the stakeholders, such as students, teachers, staff, parents, community members, and district personnel. This importance is clearly seen if you consider that the stakeholders will interact, whether in a positive or negative mode. Senge et al. (2002) recommends involving everyone in the system through encouraging them to examine their goals and develop skills to accomplish these goals together. This communication can reduce the false interpretation of others’ agendas that can lead to negative interactions. The creation of a mood of collaboration toward a common mission is the desired outcome (Senge, et al., 2002). Collaboration can also help to limit the isolation of teachers and stimulate sharing of skills, knowledge and commitment (Harris & Anthony, 2001).

A thorough investigation into the learning needs of the organization and individual stakeholders is vital in creating an effective learning culture. What benefit is there in learning and growth activities when there is no apparent need for such training? The training provided should be designed to meet the needs of individuals and also be directly related to achieving the vision and goals of the organization as a whole.

Finally, it is essential that efforts and risks taken by the stakeholders in participating in this learning culture be celebrated. This would be a celebration of learning and a way of honoring the stated values (De Pree, 1997). These commemoration activities could be in the form of personal recognition or professional acknowledgment from colleagues or students. The main idea is for learning to be recognized within the school and at the district level.

#### *Adult Learning Environment*

A noteworthy aspect of creating an effective learning culture is that some special considerations must be made when providing learning activities for adult stakeholders. Robbins and Alvy (1995) found that adults tend to be more motivated when there is relevance between in-service and their job responsibilities. Adults come to the learning opportunities with rich experiences that are ready for use. Tapping into the experiences and insights of seasoned educators as well as new and innovative practices by novice teachers, can provide valuable and cost effective learning opportunities.

One difference between the education of a child and the education of an adult is that an adult can usually select the activity in which to participate (Gardner, 1981). An environment that supports choice will minimize the obstacles for attending an in-service and facilitate trust amongst members of the organization. School leaders cannot inflict

punitive measures upon those who are not interested in the topic. Instead, they must find ways to “uncouple learning and punishment” (Barth, 2002, p. 10). The leader’s role is to kindle the desire of the staff member to gain new experiences through an open forum of sharing (Brookfield, 1989).

The adult learning environment encompasses many aspects of internal and external satisfaction due to the renewed educational experience. The learning environment can be the immediate learning area surrounding the participant attending the in-service or discussion group. The learning environment also encompasses the facilitation of a positive experience provided by the facilitator or the attendees. The participant’s emotional growth is dependent upon a learning environment that consists of a comfortable area and a comfortable learning experience that is free of the fear of failure (Gardner, 1981). Emotional safety during in-service and professional growth stemming from the experience is necessary for the program to be successful.

### *Leadership*

Standard 2 of the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standards defines a school leader as one who “is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth” (Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium, 1996, p.14). Providing a culture hospitable to human learning can increase the likelihood that students and educators will become and remain lifelong learners (Barth, 2002). Such a culture is vital because organizations that will truly excel in the future will be the organizations that discover

how to tap people's commitment and capacity to learn at all levels in an organization (Senge, 1990).

To have this multi-level learning, the entire culture must involve agreement about the importance of continuous learning. The leader must not only build a shared vision of what this learning culture will look like and what goals it will pursue, but also communicate the implications and responsibilities that the vision entails. "A clear articulation of a new vision of the organization marks the beginning of the journey. Making that vision a reality requires a core community of people who are committed to helping transform themselves and their organization" (Wheatley & Senge, 1993, p.11).

A leader must be transformational; dedicated to a reciprocal relationship of growth between himself/herself and the "followers". Within this transformation, it is helpful for the leader to show that he/she values learning and is involved in it him/herself. Barth (1990) stated that the most important enterprise of the school and most crucial role for a leader is that of "head learner". A leader as head learner is described as someone who "experiences, displays, models and celebrates what it is hoped and expected that teachers and pupils will do" (p.46). This could be described as Growth Infusion through example.

A leader must be collaborative. He/she must be willing to include others in all aspects of attaining the goals of the organization including planning, in-service, selection of new programs, evaluation and all that is involved in creating a learning environment (Garmston, 2004). Along with this sharing of responsibilities with others in the organization, the leader should be willing to actually "let go" of the power that goes with controlling these responsibilities. All people in the organization should feel that they have

a certain amount of genuine power for this idea of collaboration to be effective. Through collaboration, everyone can feel that they are a part of the decision making process, and therefore more willing to buy into the goals evident in the organization.

### *Design*

Two perspectives of design are presented in this section. They are the design of the learning process, which is based on adult learning theory, and the design of the event in which learning occurs. The first perspective articulates the general structure, whereas the second perspective focuses on specific activities.

As stated by Clark (1993), the foundation for adult learning is based upon transformational learning theory, which states that adults create and are responsible for their learning. Adults develop understanding through personal meaning systems, which are based on past experiences. The meaning systems are the glue to which new knowledge adheres. Further, meaning systems create expectations that may distort understanding gained from new experiences.

Learning occurs when adult learners set learning objectives, methods and evaluative criteria. Clark (1993) stated that transformational learning occurs when adult learners explore alternatives to their values and beliefs. Real learning occurs when adults are willing to be disconfirmed in their beliefs.

The second perspective of design is centered upon three different types of staff development events that provide a variety of peer interaction and personal growth opportunities. One type involves district-sponsored activities and college courses. Generally, these events require a minimal level of peer interaction and participant activity. Another type of personal growth and development is found in peer-generated

activities such as professional discussions, mentoring relationships and group dialogue. The third type is self-directed personal growth and development based on personal interest, which may or may not benefit the organization directly (Joyce & Showers, 1995).

Events and activities that facilitate adult learning are attended voluntarily and are based on participants' personal interests and needs. A variety of methods and activities, including independent and self-directed learning, maintain participants' interest and are aimed at facilitating innovative ideas. The learning is relevant to the participant and/or the organization. Scheduling is flexible and participants are adequately compensated (Robbins & Alvy, 1995).

The participants in simulated scenarios practice theories and new knowledge presented in the activities. Peers and facilitators provide feedback. Also, time is given to participants to plan follow-up activities. In a 3-year action research study of the professional development of 145 primary teachers, O'Sullivan (2002) found that follow up was critical to effective professional development. Also significant was the use of a variety of follow up strategies such as workshop handouts, diaries, self-evaluation forms and peer coaching.

Another crucial aspect of professional development is support after the in-service activity. Participants are supported in their efforts to integrate acquired learning into real situations. Teachers need this support to help them implement the change. Many times, a teacher will become frustrated and give up when trying to implement new strategies unless they have someone to help them if they encounter a problem. A case in point is a practice used in a reform design, called America's Choice, that involves the integration of

standards based education. With this training, schools have one or two full time staff members with the sole responsibility of assisting in the implementation process and modeling the use of the new strategies (Corcoran, Hoppe, Luhm & Supovitz, 2000).

### *Praxis*

Praxis, a process that Paulo Friere (1995) referred to as a combination of action and reflection, has become a subject of interest in adult education. Reflection is an integral part of learning as it helps us to generate meaning from experience. In addition, reflection is a means of revealing underlying assumptions that vary from individual to individual, thus limiting people's ability to change. These differing assumptions result in conflicting perspectives of the same phenomenon. The problem lies in the fact that the majority of these assumptions are tacit and therefore often untested. Senge et al. (2000) refers to these assumptions as mental models. He suggests that they be brought to the surface and discussed to minimize misunderstandings. Once these perspectives are identified, new mental models can be created that better serve the goals of the organization. Green (2003) describes the establishment of more effective mental models as "the key to individual and organizational learning" (p. ix). Subsequently, participants should be encouraged to apply what they have learned and be given opportunities to do so.

Learners likely to embody the concept of praxis are those with a positive attitude and commitment to self-improvement. These learning participants realize the importance of continual growth and welcome the opportunity to focus their attention on their own development.

### *Evaluation*

Evaluation of the effectiveness of staff development encompasses three areas. The first involves evaluating what the learner has “learned”. In an andragogical learning environment, learner evaluation can be attained by learner collected evidence that is validated by peers, facilitators or experts. Secondly, and perhaps more important, is an evaluation of the learning activities that can have a great influence on learning and growth within the organization (Webb & Norton, 1999).

Some of the components recommended to be included in participant evaluations of learning activities include:

1. Effectiveness of the in-service: Did the activity meet the needs of the participants? Was the presenter effective?
2. Practical application of the information: Will participants be able to apply the in-service to their situation over time? Do participants have the means for application and simulation of the information presented?
3. Suggestions of topics for future in-service: Participants are given the opportunity to suggest new and/or additional areas of need and/or follow-up.
4. Self-evaluation: Participants are given the opportunity to assess what they have gained and how they plan to use their newfound knowledge.

The third area involves an evaluation of the faculty members’ application of the newly learned knowledge and skills in the classroom. Standards developed by the National Staff Development Council describe the characteristics and components of a quality professional development system (D. Ashburn, personal communication, January 18, 2002). Individual states use these standards to generate their own evaluation protocols. Schools are required to assess the extent to which their professional development program contributes to expected student performance gains. Some of the recommended measures for these gains include standardized achievement tests, teacher-constructed tests, portfolios, action research, and checklists of performance when

appropriate (Florida Department of Education, 2005a). The Florida Professional Development System Evaluation Protocol recommends that districts investigate “linkages among professional development activities, student and instructional personnel needs, school improvement plans, annual school reports, student achievement data and personnel performance appraisal data” (Florida Department of Education, 2005b, p. 1).

### *Summary*

The successful implementation of Growth Infusion relies heavily on the skills and support of the leader. One role of the leader in creating an effective culture of learning involves developing a common purpose and vision. An organization’s purpose and vision is akin to a road map enabling it to journey to predetermined destinations. It is the responsibility of the leader to facilitate the movement of the stakeholders along the route and revisit the vision and purpose frequently. Modifications should be made as needed to keep the organization on the track of self-renewal. In pursuit of the vision, the leader must also demonstrate a concern for the stakeholders by acknowledging their needs and helping them to meet these needs through the organization’s commitment to quality. An open adult learning environment where trust, encouragement, caring and support are prevalent can serve as a foundation for meeting these needs.

To maximize adult learning, the experience should have meaning to the learner. Providing opportunities for reflection and application adds individual relevance. Further reflective opportunities are provided through evaluation of the learning activity. Evaluation is a part of the learning and growing experience of individuals as well as of organizations. Evaluation can bring the organization full circle so that the group and the individuals will continue to learn and grow together.

The culture of a learning organization manifests upon observation and assessment of tangible property and existence of written documents that express values and beliefs in the unwritten, yet firmly established patterns of behavior. “In study after study, culture was a key factor in determining whether improvement was possible” (Deal and Peterson, 1999, p. 5). As with any change of this degree, the effort involved at the onset is great, but once these elements are immersed within the culture, Growth Infusion becomes a way of life.

This framework, by no means, in itself would encompass all aspects of a school culture, for there is great complexity that accompanies a study of an organization’s culture. The fact that multiple cultures within a larger one exist adds to this complexity. The intention of Growth Infusion is that the culture of learning be recognized as one where learning above all is the ultimate goal.

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