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Leadership Succession

by Andy Hargreaves

One of the most significant events in the life of a school is a change in its leadership. Yet few things in education succeed less than leadership succession. Failure to care for leadership succession is sometimes a result of manipulation or self-centeredness; but more often it is oversight, neglect, or the pressures of crisis management that are to blame.

Succession is often mismanaged because basic assumptions about leadership are flawed. People tend to equate leadership with administratively senior individuals (Leithwood, Jantzi, and Steinbach 1999). Heroic leaders who turn around failing schools stand out. Transformational leaders, rather than transformational leadership, get the greatest attention in leadership research (Gronn 1996). However, distributed leadership—leadership that spreads across organizations without diminishing the importance of the principal's role—is starting to draw more attention (Crowther et al. 2002; Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond 2001).

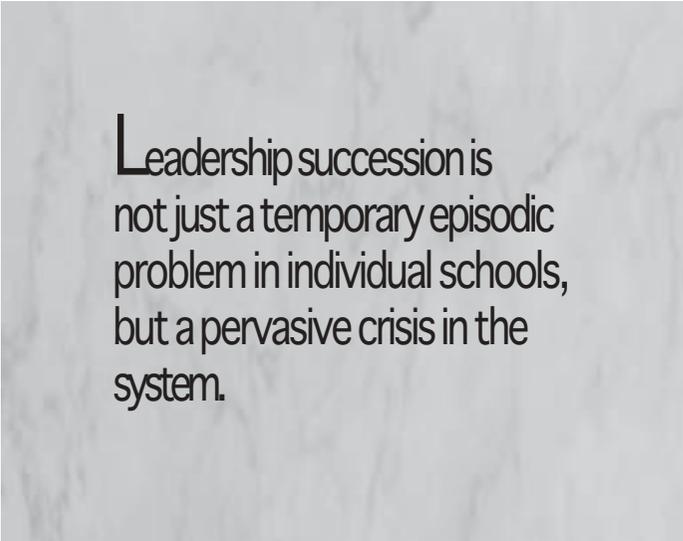
Principals' impact on their schools is often influenced greatly by their predecessors and successors. Whether or not they are aware of it, principals stand on the shoulders of those who went before them and lay the foundation for those who will follow. Sustainable, significant improvement depends on understanding and managing this process over time (Hargreaves and Fink 2003).

Reformers and change experts rarely grasp the long-term aspects of leadership. Quick-fix changes to turn around failing schools often exhaust teachers and the principal, and improvement efforts are not sustained. The principal's success in a turn-around school may lead to his or her own rapid promotion, but can result in regression among teachers who feel abandoned by their leader or relieved when the pressure is off.

Hargreaves

Sustainable improvement and the contribution principals make must be measured over many years and several principals, not just one or two. What legacy do principals leave on their departure? What capacities have they created among students, community, and staff? How should others build on what has been achieved? These are the core questions of succession.

Leadership succession is not just a temporary episodic problem in individual schools, but a pervasive crisis in the system. In the past decade, school districts have become more demanding about replacing school principals. The exodus of principals precipitated by the retirement of aging Baby Boomers and those choosing early retirement due to standardized reform pressures are creating heightened instability in school leadership (Association of California School Administrators 2001; National Clearinghouse for Comprehensive School Reform 2002).



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Several colleagues and I have investigated leadership succession as part of a Spencer Foundation–funded study, *Change Over Time?*, in eight high schools in the United States and Canada (Hargreaves, Moore et al. 2003; Hargreaves in press). The database for this study includes more than 250 interviews with teachers and administrators who worked in these schools from 1970–1990. One of the most significant factors affecting the life of a school and the sustainability of its improvement efforts, we discovered, is

leadership succession. Our results showed that successful succession depends on sound planning, successful employment of *outbound* and *inbound* leadership knowledge, limiting the frequency of succession events, and preserving leadership in the face of movements toward more management.

Succession Planning

A central issue in leadership succession is whether a transition in leadership establishes continuity or provokes discontinuity—and to what extent this is deliberately planned. The intersection of these possibilities creates distinct types of leadership succession.

Planned continuity occurs when the assignment of a new principal reflects a well-thought-out succession plan meant to sustain and build on the goals of a predecessor. Sustained school improvement over long periods and across multiple leaders requires carefully planned continuity. The most successful instances of planned

continuity were found in three purpose-built innovative schools, where insiders were groomed to follow their leaders' footsteps.

These included Blue Mountain School, Stewart Heights Secondary School, and Talisman Park Collegiate High School. Realizing that the first crisis for an innovative school is when the founding principal leaves (Sarason 1972), Blue Mountain's Principal Ben McMaster planned for his own successor from the outset. While McMaster's imprint was everywhere—in the school's philosophy, organization, design, and culture—he was alert to the possibility of an ensuing principal importing a significantly different philosophy. He canvassed the district to find an individual who would understand and commit to the school's mission and be able to maintain its momentum. After four years, the district promoted his assistant principal, Linda White, and moved him to a larger, high-profile school.

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White continued Blue Mountain's emphasis on relationships and was open, accessible, and dedicated to maintaining the school's philosophy. She stated, "I'm on the same road and any detours I take only will be for a few moments in the overall scheme of things before I come back onto the main road again." She emphasized the preservation of existing values, rather than the creation of new ones.

Planned continuity occurred only in the most innovative schools and in cases of isolated transitions. More often than not, leadership successions were intended to create discontinuity—to move a school in a different direction than under its predecessors. A new principal assigned to turn around a failing school, give a jolt to a "cruising school" (Stoll and Fink 1996, 86), or implement a top-down reform agenda all fit this category. Several leadership succession events in schools we studied were ones of *planned discontinuity*. They represented efforts to get complacent or drifting schools to meet their students' needs more effectively.

Bill Andrews was appointed to Stewart Heights Secondary School in 1998. Once a small school serving a middle-class population, Stewart Heights was now surrounded by urban development and reflected increasing cultural diversity. Student demographics were changing, but the long-serving staff stayed the same, pining nostalgically for the days when they had been a small village school.

Andrews's broad experience and knowledge of the school district, gained through two prior principal positions and time in the district office, allowed him to move quickly

Hargreaves

and confidently to shake the school out of its historical lethargy. Andrews articulated firm expectations for staff members' performance and student behavior and demonstrated that change was possible. When guidance personnel complained that student schedules could not be completed by the beginning of school, Andrews personally attended to the timetables of more than 80 students, modeling that problems were from then on solvable. He aggressively addressed management and building issues, making public spaces more welcoming, and mobilized the staff behind a coherent set of school goals. He was not reluctant to initiate and engage in debates among staff members. For example, to heighten staff members' awareness of student needs, he presented teachers with survey data showing that 95 percent of staff members were satisfied with the school while only 35 percent of students and 25 percent of parents were satisfied. This highlighted a common problem that staff members had to solve together. An experienced teacher explained:

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He brought a willingness to think about kids, to do things for kids, and to make kids look good, as opposed to managing the status quo. I think for a long time, this school had a good reputation . . . and so it just went along. In the meantime, its reputation in the community kind of went away, but nobody within this building really realized it. I think with the principal's arrival, he knew the problems, and he set out to deal with them and to make changes. I think for the most part, it's been good.

Andrews pushed the school a long way forward during his brief tenure. Parent and student satisfaction levels soared. Plants and benches made the school feel less like a factory and more like a community. The School Improvement Team gained support for improving student learning. In this and in similar schools, planned discontinuity served its intended purpose of bringing about needed change.

Planned discontinuity was effective in shaking up schools in our study, but not at making changes stick. This succession strategy can yield rapid results, but leadership needs time to consolidate the new culture and heal the wounds that disruption inevitably creates. Because of his quick and visible success, Andrews was promoted to another position after less than three years. Other leaders of planned discontinuity in our study also were transferred before their existing work was complete. The result was constant change throughout the school system, but little lasting improvement.

Most cases of succession ended up being a paradoxical mix of *unplanned discontinuity* and *continuity*: discontinuity with the achievements of a leader's immediate predecessor, and continuity with (or regression to) the mediocre state of affairs preceding that predecessor. Successful leaders are often removed prematurely from schools they are improving to mount a rescue in another school facing a crisis. Much less thought is given to the appointment of their successors.

Charmaine Watson, a first-time principal, was selected to head up Talisman Park Collegiate High School in 1995. Situated in an affluent, well-established neighborhood, Talisman Park's largely middle-class student population had become more diverse during the past decade. Watson's predecessor had pushed Talisman Park's teachers to confront school change by advocating an inclusive approach to planning and problem solving that involved students.

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When her predecessor was suddenly transferred, Watson was rushed in to replace him. Watson had little opportunity to interact with staff members before assuming her new role. Having taught at Talisman Park earlier in her career, she understood the school's history and culture and did not hesitate to try to make changes that would benefit all students.

Watson set out to democratize the school by taking major decisions to staff members rather than previously powerful department heads. She initiated a whole-school strategic plan that focused on improving assessment strategies for student work, engaging students in instructional technology, and involving parents and others in the community in developing school goals. Watson participated with staff members in professional development activities and encouraged teachers to diversify their teaching to meet changing student needs.

Though most staff members appeared supportive of Watson's approach, a small but influential group of staff members resisted her initiatives. Though she had the credibility of teaching at Talisman Park during its glory years and was seen by most staff members as a capable leader, she was only partly successful in instilling her vision of an inclusive learning community. Watson had not yet become an insider and, unfortunately, never got the chance to lead from the inside out. In response to a number of unexpected retirements, the district abruptly (and from Watson's point of view, traumatically) transferred her to a school that was experiencing leadership problems.

The district replaced Watson with Ivor Megson, a former assistant principal. Megson's arrival coincided with significant government reforms impacting teachers. These reform initiatives and teachers' resentment toward them forced Megson to move away from the

school's reculturing program and fall back on the traditionally influential department heads to implement the reform agenda. The results achieved from Watson's reculturing work were undone in a matter of months.

Stronger leadership cultures that make planning, selection, and rotation more effective are needed.

At Stewart Heights Secondary School, Jerry West replaced Bill Andrews, who had been catapulted into a superintendent's position. West had no time to establish himself as a leader and little opportunity to acquire knowledge about the school or his new role. In a

school that had three principals in four-and-a-half years and an escalating government reform agenda, West elected to make no changes in his first semester and build relationships one at a time, leading to a climate of apparent inertia. Departmental power structures reasserted themselves to fill the void, and staff members set about correcting student behavior rather than continuing Andrews's commitment to whole school change.

West's promotion occurred simultaneously with the peak pressure to implement the government standards agenda. He stated:

Sometimes the rules change, day-by-day, in terms of what we can and can't do. As we were making our own changes, moving forward in the direction that we believed we needed to go, other changes and outside pressures were imposed on us as well. So, things that you want to do have to take a back seat sometimes, and that can be quite frustrating.

Though Andrews's take-charge style significantly improved Stewart Heights, he undoubtedly irritated and sometimes alienated some staff members, but the force of his leadership and personality kept pushing them forward. But Andrews's short tenure and premature replacement left his mission truncated, and the cracks he had opened widened into chasms when he left. Rapid rotation of leadership, poor succession planning, and the onset of an overwhelming and undersupported reform agenda undermined two years of considerable improvement. After just three years, West himself was named principal of another school.

Our study pointed out that leadership succession often is undermined by poor planning. Recent success is discontinued, improvement gains are eliminated, and earlier,

more mediocre patterns are reestablished. School administrators often believe that improvement goals can be achieved by moving outstanding principals around a district and replacing them with less experienced or effective leaders who will maintain the gains that have been made. This study showed that, in most instances, these panic appointments and rotational practices lead to a perpetual cycle in which schools move forward and backward with depressing regularity.

Clearly, better succession planning is needed. Districts could begin by requiring that succession issues be incorporated into every school improvement plan. Stronger leadership cultures that make planning, selection, and rotation more effective also are needed. Poor planning, however, is not the only source of succession problems. Three other issues also are important: leaders' knowledge of improvement and succession processes, frequency of succession, and the changing nature of leadership in times of large-scale reform.

Inbound and Outbound Knowledge

Wenger (1998) described several "trajectories" leaders can take as they move through their organization—*inbound*, *insider*, and *outbound*. Drawing on Wenger's work, we found that leaders use three kinds of knowledge during the succession process.

Inbound knowledge is leadership knowledge needed to make one's mark on a particular school or turn it around. *Insider knowledge* to improve schools is gained after becoming known, trusted, and accepted within the community. *Outbound knowledge* is what is needed to preserve past successes, keep improvement going, and leave a legacy.

Our research data showed that school systems are preoccupied with inbound knowledge. This pattern is common among charismatic leaders. Lord Byron Secondary School was established in 1974 as one of the most innovative schools in Canada. A charismatic principal, Ward Bond, was appointed to set its distinctive direction. When he left after just three years, Bond's adoring teachers acknowledged that he was a "hard act to follow" and that his successors could never quite live up to his legend, therefore beginning a long process of "attrition of change" (Fink 1999). Charismatic leaders often convince staff members to believe in their mystical qualities rather than in themselves. Their inbound knowledge can inspire great change, but that change cannot be sustained after they have gone.

Inbound knowledge is also overemphasized in circumstances of planned discontinuity. Bill Andrews and Charmaine Watson fulfilled their district's mandate to turn their

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Hargreaves

“cruising” schools around. Their districts, however, did not allow them to remain long enough to solidify a new culture and embed their improvements. In the most recent years of our study, almost no principal stayed long enough (five years or longer) to acquire the status of trusted insider.

Failing schools are prone to quick-fix obsessions with inbound knowledge. Sheldon School in New York currently faces “in need of improvement” designation under No Child Left Behind legislation. Once the jewel of its district, Sheldon went into decline following race riots in the 1970s, the subsequent flight of European-American students to the suburbs, the establishment of a magnet school that attracted Sheldon’s best students, and the loss of connection to its community when the magnet initiative forced a school on the opposite side of the city to close and bus some of its most difficult students into Sheldon (Baker and Foote in press).

There is a fundamental flaw of inbound, top-down forcefulness as a succession strategy to rectify school underperformance. Instead of inspiring improvement, this strategy only entrenches resistance.

In the school’s better days, one of Sheldon’s principals, Len Adomo, was regarded as autocratic. Blocked from involvement in important decisions, teachers turned to their union as an outlet for their frustrations. The more fractious the union became, the more Adomo dug in. Virtually every issue became a bone of contention. As staff members became more militant and students became more demanding, the district escalated the

conflict by appointing principals they thought would stand up to the union. Each successive, autocratic principal reinforced the teachers’ militancy so that “Sheldonism” became a synonym for unbridled union resistance to change. This standoff resulted in the school’s almost complete inability to address its changing student population. This example shows the fundamental flaw of inbound, top-down forcefulness as a succession strategy to rectify school underperformance. Instead of inspiring improvement, this strategy only entrenches resistance.

Outbound knowledge was considered in only three of the innovative schools in the Spencer Project: Durant, Lord Byron, and Blue Mountain. Each groomed an assistant principal as a likely successor to the incumbent principal and as someone who would continue promoting the leader’s and school’s vision. Creating distributed leadership (Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond 2001) added to these principals’ successful outbound trajectories.

In the majority of schools, however, the school improvement sustainability and reform initiatives were repeatedly undermined by excessive emphasis on inbound

knowledge of leadership. Principals who are making strides in school improvement need to remain in their schools for more than five years if their changes are going to stick—otherwise schools become like early flying machines: repeatedly crashing just before take off.

Accelerating Succession

Another factor affecting succession success is the frequency of cumulative successions. Demographically driven retirement, the difficulty of retaining leaders in urban schools, and the popular practice of moving around principals to plug the leaks in failing schools mean that principal turnover is accelerating dramatically. Talisman Park had six principals in its first 68

years, yet another five in the subsequent 14 years. Stewart Heights had just four principals in 28 years, then three leaders in quick succession in the next five. Lord Byron School had four principals in its first 14 years, then just as many in the most recent five.

This revolving door breeds staff cynicism that subverts long-term, sustainable improvement. Jerry West at Stewart Heights observed, “It’s only been one-plus year [of his time in the school], but teachers are already asking how long I’m going to be here.” The quest for future leadership must be defined less by how to rotate principals between schools and more by how to retain them when schools are doing well.

The Changing Nature of Leadership

Growing teacher cynicism about the principal position stems not only from increasing leadership changes, but also from changes in the nature of leadership. A department head at Talisman Park who had worked under five different principals spoke for many when he said:

Principals in the ’70s and ’80s were totally committed to the overall program of the school. When they went into the hiring process, they knew exactly what they wanted and what they needed. Their number one focus was the school. As time went on and principals changed, the principal was less interested in the school and more interested in his own personal growth.

During the three decades covered by the *Change Over Time?* study, leadership has changed a great deal. Until the mid- to late-’70s, leaders were remembered as larger-than-life characters who knew people in the school, were closely identified with it, and stayed around for many years to see things through.

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Hargreaves

By the mid- to late-'90s, leaders were seen as anonymous managers who had less visibility in and attachment to the school, seemed to be more wedded to the system or their own careers and, because of accelerating succession, rarely remained long enough to ensure their initiatives would last. The pressures on urban principals by No Child Left Behind, where one of the prescribed options for repeated failure to improve involves removal of the principal, only will exacerbate these tendencies. Threats to sustainable improvement posed by poorly managed leadership succession raise fundamental questions about the nature of educational leadership.

Our research suggested that the recent standardization agenda has contributed to an emerging model of leadership that is reactive, compliant, and managerial. This model deters potential leaders from becoming principals who can inspire learning communities that promote higher learning for all students. Depleted pools of outstanding leadership limit options at times of succession. Better leaders belong in and are attracted to systems that let leaders lead. Sustainability of improvement and leadership requires less rather than more micromanagement and standardization in educational reform.

Conclusion

There are many ways to improve leadership succession in education.

- Succession needs to be planned thoughtfully and ethically, and be an integral part of every school and district-wide improvement plan. Deeper, wider pools of leadership talent must be created so that succession issues are easier to resolve.
- Distributing leadership makes succession less dependent on the talents or frailties of particular individuals. It is not equally shared leadership—it may be more or less shared depending on the situation.
- Leaders are not all the same. When a good leader leaves an organization, it *should* wobble a bit and there *should* and *will* be a sense of loss. But temporary unsteadiness should not turn into widespread feelings of despair or institutional states of collapse. Schools need to cushion the departure of key leaders and develop leadership capacities to provide a pool of growing talent from which future successors may be selected.
- From the first day of their appointment, leaders need to give thought to the leadership capacity they will build and legacies they will leave. Incorporating succession issues into leadership training and development programs will help them do this.
- The alarming rise in rates of succession should be reversed immediately, and principals should be kept in schools for longer than five years when their improvement efforts are doing well.

For any of this to make a difference, we must pull back from the precipice to which overly standardized reform has brought us, where motivational leaders wedded to the long-term success of their schools are being reduced to managerial vassals of a standardized system that moves them around the accelerating carousel of principal succession. Sustainable leadership depends on more than improved succession planning. It comes down to a battle for the soul of leadership itself.

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