The Principal as Change Agent. The Best of ERIC on Educational Management, Number 55.

ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, Eugene, Oreg.

National Inst. of Education (ED), Washington, D.C.

Dec 80

400-78-0007

5p.

ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403 (free).

MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.

Administrative Change; Administrator Attitudes; Administrator Characteristics; Administrator Role; Attitude Change; *Change Agents; *Change Strategies; *Educational Change; Educational Needs; Motivation Techniques; *Needs Assessment; Organizational Change; *Principals; School Administration

Twelve essays and books reviewed in this annotated bibliography contribute information about how principals can identify the need for change and how they can implement successful change strategies. The literature contains several case studies as well as empirical research data. One study concludes that change is more likely to occur when administrators are hired from outside the district. Outsiders were also found to be more committed to their careers and to believe they had more persuasive ability in initiating change. Another author emphasizes the importance of questioning the motives of administrators when they propose changes. Among elementary principals, those with more experience or those who employed teacher aides were more frequently viewed as comprehensive change agents. The interpersonal climate of a school, the technological level of a district, and the personal characteristics, attitudes, and behavior of principals are also seen as important factors in the initiation of change. (WD)
The Principal as Change Agent


Atkins and Kauffmann arranged this interview with three principals from the suburbs of Boston in response to their concern "that a significant voice is missing from the sometimes noisy debate about education"—that of "thoughtful practitioners reflecting on their practice." In this article, the three principals—Mary, Barbara, and Richard—discuss how they were selected for their positions, how they judged what had to be changed in their schools, and how they went about implementing those changes.

Mary entered a school that was "very drab, very quiet, very structured." Mary had had "no administration courses whatsoever" and held no theory of change—traits she considered an advantage. Instinctively, she felt the need to change the school's environment. Mary identified several traits of the principal as effective change agent. The principal should be a supplier of information, be able to "look at the structure of the school and isolate where the power is," and then be able to work with or around that structure. Finally, the principal should be an important role model, for "people don't do what you say, they do what you do."

Richard also entered a school that was in rough shape, with both the parents and staff badly divided. He refused to take sides and promoted a philosophy of "diversity as a strength." He formed and worked with numerous teacher committees to deal with specific problems, "which helped harness a lot of randomly dispersed energy onto a specific goal."

Barbara entered a better situation, but the school still had its problems. Her main change strategies were to increase the staff's access to information and to alter the power structure of the school. Essentially, "it came down to wrenching the power away from the aides" and redistributing it to teachers and team leaders.


What specific techniques can be used by principals to foster change and innovation at the building level? In this article, Drake and Schuttenberg report in some detail the efforts of an urban junior high school principal "to lead his school toward educational excellence through the use of a collaborative strategy" of change. The principal utilized several resources from both inside and outside the school to effect change. He participated in a "year-long inservice Leadership Training Program," which enabled him to "forge closer ties with the central office and utilize its resources." He also had the assistance of a consultant from a local university who helped assess the organizational health of the school. The principal took pains to open communication channels and involve teachers, students, and parents in the change process. Information was exchanged with the faculty by consulting with both the locally elected representatives and with informally organized faculty groups. Students and parents participated as members of various school committees.

A "Needs Assessment Task Force," consisting of teachers, parents, and students, was appointed by the principal to examine "the district and school educational philosophies" and then formulate and prioritize educational goals.

The "Organization Perception Questionnaire" was administered to nearly all the school's staff members. The data were analyzed first by computer, then by a faculty committee that made recommendations for needed improvements. Nearly three-fourths of the twenty recommendations were implemented that year, the authors report, to the great satisfaction of the committee members.

Finally, six volunteer staff members participated in a workshop on planning educational change at the local university. The authors report that the organizational improvement program has been highly beneficial and has created a participatory atmosphere in the school.

Ganz, Harold J., and Hoy, Wayne K. "Patterns of Succession of Elementary Principals and Organizational Change." Planning and Changing, 8, 2-3 (Summer-Fall 1977), pp. 185-190. EJ 169 808

What kinds of elementary principals make the most effective change agents? To help answer this question, Ganz and Hoy studied sixty New Jersey principals to determine the pattern of succession of the principals "as related to administrative behaviors, career orientations and change perspectives."

The researchers administered questionnaires to both the principal and the faculty of each school at regularly scheduled faculty meetings. Thirty of the principals were "insiders" (persons promoted from within the district) and thirty were "outsiders" (those hired from outside the district).

A key finding of the study was that "change is more likely to occur from administrators who are outsiders rather than insiders." This is true for superintendents and secondary principals as well as for elementary principals. The authors speculate that "perhaps
principals who are insiders spend too much time maintaining and protecting their own position rather than dealing with educational issues that may produce change.

The study also found that elementary principals who are outsiders tend to regard a change of jobs as necessary for advancement in their profession. Outsiders also were more committed to their careers and believed they had greater ability than insiders in convincing superiors of the need for change. The authors note that there may be times when insiders are more desirable, if implementing change is the objective, however, outsiders will probably be more successful.


Planning for educational change seems simple enough: first, identify the need for change, next, establish objectives and a plan of action to reach those objectives; and finally, establish an evaluation procedure to monitor the change process. Unfortunately, unforeseen problems usually come up that frustrate the change process. Krajewski and Zingraff here outline a conceptual model designed to help principals identify "innovational constraints" and thus plan comprehensively for successful change.

Constraints can be of several different types: psychological, physical, temporal, sociocultural, legal, and fiscal. The constraints can be applied by the administrative hierarchy, students, parents. In the authors’ model, a matrix is formed with types of constraints as columns and those applying the constraints as rows. Using a rating scale of high, medium, and low, the principal indicates "the correlation between the constraint and the personnel group involved."

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The combinations given high ratings will likely be areas of significant constraint on the change process. The principal, having identified these areas, should then analyze them in detail. To help in this process, the authors have included two examples and a list of possible causes for the constraints given.

Once the process is complete, the principal will have both a fairly sophisticated, logically developed list of significant constraints and a good deal of insight into how to deal with these constraints. The principal can then establish objectives and specify a feasible plan of action for dealing with the constraints.

Licata, Joseph W. "In the School's Social System Is the Principal an Effective Change Agent?" NASSP Bulletin, 59, 395 (December 1975), pp. 75-81 E 1135 572

In acting as a change agent, the principal has the advantage of being familiar with the language, norms, needs, and aspirations of his school's social system. But the principal's role also has several drawbacks, some of which are described here by Licata.

First of all, the principal is an intimate part of the school system and thus may not be able to see the system "as a whole." In addition, the time and energy needed to act as a change agent may be severely restricted by "the day-to-day crises connected with running a building." The principal usually will not have the expertise necessary to implement change in many specialized areas, and may not have the power to do so even if he or she does have the expertise. Finally, the principal will likely have difficulty trying simultaneously as a helpful change agent and as a dispenser of rewards and punishments to teachers.

Despite these drawbacks, says Licata, there are ways for the principal to help "develop a social-emotional climate which facilitates innovation." The principal's verbal behavior is a key factor, because it communicates whether the principal is more interested in supporting himself or in supporting others.

When the principal is "other-supportive," he or she is helping to provide a climate for teacher, student, and parent participation. And since subordinates tend to model the behavior of their leader, the verbal behavior of the principal can influence the climate of change at all levels in the school building.


Teachers will often resist any changes made in the curriculum or instructional program. Thus, it is imperative that the chairpersons of curriculum committees be individuals who can help others to accept changes, states Littrell. Usually, chairpersons are selected on the questionable bases of "seniority, youth, light loads, turn-taking, or status." A much better method of selecting chairpersons, says Littrell, is to use a technique based on "the research which has identified the characteristics of good change leaders."

This research indicates that good change leaders are viewed by teachers as "not too different" from themselves and "only slightly better" in instructional ability and socioeconomic status. Preferably, these leaders are "not innovators" but instead are "early adopters of innovation." They have access to information outside the school area through attending conferences and reading journals and are perceived by their peers to have good judgment.

Based on these findings, Littrell constructed a questionnaire presented here that is designed to help principals identify teachers' preferred chairpersons. The anonymous questionnaires asks teachers to identify and characterize the persons they would turn to first for instructional advice.

Littrell outlines the procedures the principal should use in tabulating and interpreting the results of the questionnaire. The end product is a list of individuals who "are perceived by others as best satisfying the criteria for good change leaders."


"Promoting change is a more complex process than simply systematically planning the change of a curriculum, school philosophy, or staff utilization," states McIntyre. Effective change requires, above all, a change in the attitudes of those affected by the change. Thus the success of a principal as change agent depends, in large part, on his or her understanding of how and why people's attitudes change. McIntyre here describes several models of attitude change to help principals toward an understanding of this critical aspect of organizational change.
The "congruence model" provides "a generalized attitude scale which permits one to predict the direction of the individual's attitude change." For example, if a principal is highly rated (a "+3") in the eyes of teachers, and this principal wants to introduce a textbook perceived as a "-1," there will most likely be a change in attitude toward the textbook because of the principal's prestige.

In the "reinforcement theory" of change, the acceptance of change is dependent on the incentives offered to make the change. Incentives may be "arguments or reasons supporting the proposed change" or "rewards and punishments" that would follow acceptance of the change.

The "dissonance model" maintains that "coercion can be a positive force in changing an individual's attitude." Teachers induced to change their attitude by coercion will be forced to rationalize their action by acknowledging, at least publicly, that their attitude has indeed changed. Finally, McIntyre reviews Maslow's "Hierarchy of Human Needs" model, which assumes that "a self-actualized person is more conducive to accepting change."

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"Principal effectiveness is a multidimensional concept," states Miskel, and includes three components: "innovation effort, perceptual evaluation by subordinates, and perceptual evaluation by superordinates." Each of these three components might influence the other two. In addition, two "situational factors"—the interpersonal climate in the school and the technology level of the school district—may influence each of the three components of principal effectiveness.

To determine which variables had an influence on the components of effectiveness, Miskel conducted a study in thirty-nine of the largest school districts in a midwestern state. From five to twelve principals in each district were surveyed, along with eight teachers serving under each principal, and the immediate supervisor of each principal.

Innovation effort was defined and measured as the "number of new programs initiated or maintained by the principal to improve the organizational functioning of the school building." Technology level ("the extent to which the school district uses modern administrative practices") and the interpersonal climate of the school were measured using a "Situational Description Questionnaire."

The results of the study showed a complex pattern of influences on the components of principal effectiveness. Each of the three components of effectiveness was found to influence the other two.

In addition, the subordinates' evaluations of the principal were affected by the interpersonal climate of the building, and the innovation effort of the principal was affected by the technological level of the district.

Miskel concludes that the difficulty in starting new programs may be explained in part by the complex system of variables that affects the principal's innovation efforts, which can "continue to make the forces surrounding innovation and the expected role of the principal very hard for the administrator to understand and control."


Although teachers, parents, and students participate in the change process, states Trump and Georgiades, "the fact remains that the person in charge sets the tone and the methodology of change." Thus, it is essential that the principal understand the nature and process of change. To help principals gain this kind of understanding, the authors here "raise questions and suggest possible answers" about the change process at the school site. The advice presented is based on the authors' experiences in the NASSP's Model Schools Project.

The first step is to identify what needs to be changed. To facilitate this process, the authors list numerous examples of possible changes that a principal might be considering. After establishing a tentative list of needed changes, the principal should prioritize the list and check with others on the rankings.

The steps taken by a principal to elicit change are essentially the same steps taken by a good teacher to stimulate learning. The goals of the change should be identified and understood. Positive motivation should be used to stimulate people to change, and the individuals involved should participate in decision-making. Finally, plans for evaluation of the change process should be made at the same time the change itself is being planned.

Other chapters deal with collecting information needed for effective change, coping with dilemmas in the change process, and accepting personal responsibility for outcomes. The balance of this publication contains a mix of questions, examples, and suggestions designed to stimulate thinking about the change process in schools.

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Prior to publication, this manuscript was submitted to the Association of California School Administrators for critical review and determination of professional competence. The publication has met such standards. Points of view or opinions, however, do not necessarily represent the official view or opinions of the Association of California School Administrators.

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