

Implementing a Principle-based Approach to Transforming School Systems Submitted to the OD Practitioner

In most of our nation's schools, we still see significant gaps in achievement among students of different race, economic status and English language fluency. To make matters worse, current practices to improve achievement are not coming close to showing the results that they had promised. A main drawback of current approaches to school change is they fail to recognize that the achievement problem is a systems problem (Fullan, 2005). In fact, current improvement efforts are often built on a mechanistic view of organizations, which limits their potential impact and sustainability. For example, efforts to improve literacy are often addressed through numerous new "programs" rather than adaptive solutions that recognize the complexity of the underlying issues.

At the Ball Foundation, we believe that in order for every child to achieve at high levels, there must be deep and lasting changes in professional practices that support teaching and learning. In essence, school systems need to fundamentally change the way they do business. We see this as transformation, not merely reform. We believe that an *organic view* of organizations, rather than a mechanistic view, best supports this approach to transformation.

The Ball Approach to school transformation offers a theory of change that builds on an organic view of organizations. It is based on the belief that school districts are complex, self-organizing systems where change is fostered by the embodiment of a set of fundamental principles or "simple rules" (Holladay, 2005) in practice. We, at Ball, partner with urban school districts to implement a long-term systems change process that is grounded in a set of seven inter-connected principles.

Principles of the Ball Approach

The seven principles of the Ball Approach guide the ways in which we support school district change. They are the basis for building a district's capacity to implement instructional, leadership and organizational practices. We teach and model these principles in our work and use them to guide partnership actions. The seven principles of the Ball Approach are:

- Build shared purpose
- Use inquiry to guide practice
- Build on assets
- Create adaptive solutions
- Attend to content and process
- Access the capacity of stakeholders
- Work in systemic ways

These principles are informed by the fields of organizational development, systems and complexity, and human and adult learning. They also come from our years

of experience of working in schools and school districts. The Ball Foundation did not invent these principles, nor did we identify all possible ones. After careful research, analysis and reflection, we selected those principles we determined held the highest potential to create conditions for transformation in our work.

When the Ball Foundation works in partnership with school districts, these principles are put into action (see Table 1) to build district capacity for adaptation and innovation. Our experience has shown us that these principles work in concert with one another in a dynamic, cohesive interplay. While our focus may be directed at one principle, the other six are simultaneously present, informing and guiding work design and action.

| Key Principles | Implications for Partnership Work |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| Build shared purpose | Bring people together to discover what they really care about, to determine their highest aspirations for students, and invite them into something larger than themselves |
| Use inquiry to guide practice | Bring people together in dialogue, in learning and reflection where they ask questions that matter, seek relevant information and data, and plan and implement actions with ongoing feedback |
| Build on assets | Identify and build on strengths, values, traditions, practices and accomplishments |
| Create adaptive solutions | Co-create with partners to acquire, share and use information that generate new relationships and connections to solve problems |
| Access the capacity of stakeholders | Engage staff, students, families and community members in learning about the district, sharing what is important and making choices about what is best for the school district |
| Work in systemic ways | Engage people in ways that help them gain access to each other and information about their world and see interconnections within the school system as well as with the outside environment. |
| Attend to content and process | Create learning processes that make meaning and find connections among ideas, people and situations |

Table 1: Principles of the Ball Approach and Implications for Partnership Work

Putting the Principles into Practice

We begin by creating a “partnership team” made up of a diverse group of district personnel. We ensure that those with authority, resources, expertise, information and need (Weisbord & Janoff, 2007) are represented on the team. A typical team consists of the district superintendent, teachers, principals, instructional coaches, teacher union leaders, administrative support and other district executive leaders. This team works together with Ball Foundation staff in designing the partnership work to create conditions for transformation in accordance with the seven guiding principles.

The Foundation recently partnered with a mid-sized, urban, K-12 California school district of 17,000 students in 21 schools. The majority of the students are Hispanic and many are socio-economically disadvantaged and/or English language learners. The district, like many others in the country, is struggling to increase achievement for all students in a climate of dwindling resources and increasing accountability. We partnered with the school district hoping to substantially increase literacy achievement and close the achievement gap. Here we illustrate how the above principles were put into practice in our partnership with this school district.

Over the course of eighteen months, we (the Foundation and the school district) engaged in a process of systematic inquiry to discover district assets in support of student literacy and to determine the professional practices that would be the initial focus of the partnership. The following narratives illustrate how three of the seven principles were intentionally put in to practice. However, bear in mind the inter-connected nature of this set of principles. All of the principles were present in the partnership work.

1. Build Shared Purpose

This principle recognizes that successful organizational change starts with a meaningful purpose that compels people to action (Holman, Devane & Cady, 2007). The theory and research on organizational and systems change points to the importance of creating and building on shared moral purpose and vision so that stakeholders' "head, heart and spirit" are engaged (Holman et al., 2007, p.12).

In the first three to four months of our work with the school district, we convened a variety of stakeholder groups throughout the district in a World Café process and asked people to share their stories and talk about the following questions:

- Where do we want to be in five years? What is our aspiration for our students, our district and ourselves?
- How and why is the district succeeding in meeting the literacy needs of its students? How and why is it being challenged?
- What do I do—in my classroom, on my grade level team, or with my colleagues—to meet the literacy needs of students?
- What would I like to learn or become better at, that would lead to our success in meeting the literacy needs of students?

The partnership team, facilitated by Foundation staff, was responsible for designing and implementing the processes of engagement to answer the above questions.

As a result of the first few months of engagement, we had begun to develop a picture of what people in the district felt was important in meeting the literacy needs of all students and what strengths already existed in the district. As Hamel (2007) says, "The mission matters. People change for what they care about." (p.171-172). Connecting people through their common aspirations for themselves, their students, and their district helps to build this shared purpose.

2. Use Inquiry to Guide Practice

Systematic inquiry can be a powerful driver for organizational learning and change (Preskill & Torres, 1999). An elementary school teacher on the district partnership team described the importance of inquiry by sharing this story. “I had to build a higher stone wall in my back yard” he related “but I couldn’t do that without first building a stronger foundation. Inquiry,” he maintained, “is the process by which one learns how to build the foundation for the partnership work. Without it, the stones will fall no matter how hard we work to build the wall.”

In order to delve deeper into the topics raised during the engagement conversations, we asked the partnership team to consider the following: What questions, if answered system-wide, would have the greatest impact in reaching high levels of literacy for all students in the district? These *areas of inquiry* would help define what assets to look for in the district and the kinds of practices on which the overall change process would focus.

The partnership team considered the data from the engagement conversations and generated more questions. They also sought input throughout the district to validate, refine, narrow, and prioritize the areas of inquiry. Through a process facilitated by the Foundation, the team narrowed to five areas of inquiry that represented the breadth and depth of professional practice in the school district around literacy. The five areas of inquiry were:

- Best practices in literacy instruction
- Use of professional communities for continuous learning
- Family and community engagement to support student literacy
- Professional growth and learning for all staff
- Specific practices to support English language learners

Framing partnership work in terms of questions is one way we embody the inquiry principle. We ask questions in order for the partners to determine what actions to take. Similarly, the areas of inquiry developed by the partnership team would determine a course of action over the life of the partnership with the Foundation. As Weisbord (2004) claims about one of Kurt Lewin’s greatest insights, “diagnosis does not mean just finding the problem, but doing it in such a way as to build commitment for action.” (p.77)

3. Build on Assets

Asset-based approaches differ from traditional deficit-based approaches in seeing the glass as half-full rather than half-empty (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). They start with the assumption that every organization has assets, reframe the way problems are stated and build energy and purpose around what is working and why.

Once the partnership team agreed on the areas of inquiry, the next step was to discover what assets the district had and what assets the district needed to acquire relative to each of the areas above. By assets, we mean the collection of information and

experience found in classrooms, schools, and the district that enable exceptional practices and high levels of literacy achievement for students. Every person in the district has some unique information and experience to offer. Thus, our process for discovering assets was intentionally designed to be interactive, participatory, and stakeholder-focused.

Over two consecutive nights, the partnership team convened approximately 200 teachers, administrators, classified staff, and parents in order to engage a broad group of stakeholders in an appreciative inquiry activity. The participants told stories of peak experiences, looked for common core factors that made such experiences possible and envisioned future possibilities if such core factors were institutionalized. The process was designed to allow everyone to discover a broader picture of assets in each of the areas of inquiry, both existing assets and desired assets. At the time, this was the largest number of people in the district to participate in and experience the work of the partnership.

As we anticipated, this process generated a lot of energy and enthusiasm. It also generated a long list of district assets, both existing and desired. The partnership team and Ball Foundation staff worked hard to categorize these assets as well as add others based on our own experience. Together, we used the asset categories to design a district-wide assessment that included parent, teacher, and student surveys; teacher and administrator one-on-one interviews; and classroom walk-throughs. The assessment revealed areas of focus for the partnership – in other words, points-of-entry where we could build on existing assets while bridging towards desired assets.

While the above stories illustrate how three of the principles of the Ball Approach were put into practice, it is important to recognize once again that all of the seven principles were present in the partnership work. For example, bringing groups of people from across the school district together at every stage was an attempt to “access the capacity of stakeholders” while “working in systemic ways”. Keeping the literacy practices front-and-center while paying attention to the rigor and integrity of the change process demonstrates what we mean by “attend to content and process”. We also paid heed to “create adaptive solutions” in customizing the entire approach to the context, needs and goals of the particular school district and being open to what came up through the inquiry process.

Impact on District Organizational Capacity

The first eighteen months of the partnership between the Ball Foundation and the school district created high energy and engagement among district stakeholders. District stakeholders took ownership of the work, increasing the likelihood that improvements will be sustained and will continue to grow and adapt beyond the life of the Ball Foundation partnership.

Capacity for inquiry was built within certain individuals and groups in the district, enabling them to engage in evidence-based instructional and organizational practices. There is also evidence that their capacity for engaging in inquiry was transferred to the classroom. Below is an excerpt from a classroom teacher’s article about the influence of

the Ball partnership on his classroom practice. Bear in mind that this teacher works in an “alternative” High School where students are sent for reasons of poor attendance, unstable home lives, teen pregnancy, gang activity etc.

“I had [students] interview partners with prepared questions about positive experiences they have had as students, about their best qualities, and about the qualities they could have that could make them “good students”. I followed this activity with an exercise in which they imagined themselves being interviewed on the day of their graduation about their phenomenal success and what they had to change about themselves in order to become successful. Then, with all of these positive ideas they had identified about themselves, I had them set some goals. This made for a noticeably more positive beginning to the school year.” (Review, Fall-Winter 2007, p. 2).

In addition to increased capacity for inquiry, connections were made across the system regardless of formal roles. In systems that are typically hierarchical and often reinforce isolation within schools and classrooms, connecting people across traditional boundaries increased the systems’ collective knowledge and its ability to act on that knowledge. The asset-based approach made these connections even stronger.

Finally, leadership and organizational practices changed in positive ways as educators in the district applied the principles of the Ball Approach to their own work. District leaders adapted traditional planning processes based on stakeholder input and feedback. Principals and administrators took the initiative to form a network that would work toward becoming a community of practice around instructional leadership.

Conclusion

Significant and sustainable improvements in student achievement demand fundamental and system-wide changes in educational practice. The Ball Approach is an attempt to build capacity in the school district to implement instructional, leadership and organizational practices that represent a “new story” (Marshall, 2006) of human engagement. In other words, people engaging differently with themselves, with each other and with knowledge.

In an organic view of organizations, this change can come about only through the enactment of a set of principles that recognize that (see Table 2),

- The *whole system* needs to be involved; not just parts of it
- The issue needs to be approached as being *complex*; not merely complicated
- *Adaptive* approaches need to be employed; not just uniform strategies
- *Social structures* need to be created for access, communication and peer-exchange; not just hierarchical ones

The Ball Approach represents our effort to enact a set of principles in school district transformation. However, we strongly believe that any systems transformation effort would benefit from a principle-based approach that builds on an organic view of systems and organizations. We are curious about the application of these principles or any set of

principles grounded in an organic view of organizations in other areas – non-profits, business, government etc. We hope to hear from others in the organizational development field about their experience with using such principles in systems change

| Current Approaches to School Reform | The Ball Approach to School Transformation |
|--|--|
| <i>A mechanistic view of organizations</i> | <i>An organic view of organizations</i> |
| Approaches to improvement focus on one aspect of the organization to the exclusion of others | Approaches to improvement recognize that multiple aspects of an organization contribute to the problem and that the whole system must be involved in creating the solution |
| The problem is approached as a complicated issue—one that has known “technical” solutions that require experts to solve | The problem is approached as a complex issue—one that is understood through relationships and patterns of connectedness among those who have a stake in it |
| Approaches are intended to be brought to scale based on wide distribution of uniform strategies with quick and significant results | Approaches recognize that social change happens through adaptive strategies that change structures and ways of functioning and require time |
| Communication and dissemination happens through hierarchical and top-down structures | Communication and peer exchange happens through social structures, made up of networks and communities |

Table 2: Mechanistic vs. Organic View of Organizations

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