A CULTURE OF POSSIBILITIES

A call for the engaged leader was presented in a previous chapter. In that chapter the engaged leader was described as a person who inspires participation, encourages meaningful work relationships between stakeholders, and is enthusiastic about the possibilities that emerge from this type of dynamic, interactive, inclusive process.

I went on to describe the engaged leader as one who works to include the voices of all stakeholders as the organization (school) works to accomplish stated goals. The engaged leader is an advocate of empowerment. The engaged leader helps to create the kind of teaching and learning environment that causes others to critically examine their own priorities, abilities and perspectives. It is the kind of environment that causes individuals to continually improve their work, and challenge and help other stakeholders to do the same. Much of the success of this work depends on the ability to connect with others in meaningful conversations and actions.

The national movement to evaluate the success of teaching and learning in public schools had curtailed the growth of collaboratively engaged and inclusive organizational environments. This movement has hindered the ultimate goal of our educational system: helping to empower learners to learn how to learn for themselves. High stakes testing continues to promote memorization and rote learning, at best. The future of students is unfairly impacted in this environment of high stakes testing. High stakes testing continues to promote rote learning, resulting in the temporary memorization of information for most. Often memorized information has little to no depth of understanding or connection to important aspects of student's lives. Students experiencing teaching and learning in these settings are seldom able to move beyond true or false and right or wrong statements. While most students are taught in a black and white world of either – or, they are asked to live in the multiple colors that exist in between black and white, with little to no preparation. They develop limited abilities to address 'why'; think about the 'what ifs'; to elaborate on topics being addressed; and demonstrate a lack of ability to create new ways of thinking and conceptualizing the world around them. In other words, learning to think critically and freely about issues is not adequately addressed.

I am not promoting any type of conspiracy theory to limit access to the *American Dream* for some in our society. However one wonders, how can anyone support the results of a high stakes testing program that is creating a more tiered society within our country. After-all, most, if not all, quality private schools understand the importance of empowering students to think and learn for themselves. They know,

and their actions support, that future leaders must be prepared to matriculate through college. Graduates must have the ability to develop new ways of thinking and living, continue to create new technologies, and motivate others, from all walks of life, to work with them. High stakes testing has resulted in a high number of learners in these environments dropping out of school, filling our prison systems, lengthening our unemployment lines, and adding to the welfare numbers. Our system of high stakes testing is creating citizens with limited options before them and lacking the ability to think critically about issues that have the potential to improve their lot in life. Many of the jobs requiring high levels of thinking, creativity and leadership are being secured by individuals graduating from our private schools, or from other countries. These results just cannot be part of a plan that enhances the future of our county, right? Yet high stakes testing continues along this path of disastrous results. One can only wonder, why? High stakes testing has become another gate keeper, convincing most students that they are not prepared for higher levels of learning, or full membership in our society.

The process of high stakes testing is also tied to the evaluation of teacher performance in many public school districts. Often included is the over-all evaluative performance of each school, and its leadership. Educator's jobs are often on the line. The impact of these rules has seen more cases of testing fraud as high stakes testing has spread across the nation. Teachers and administrators have been accused, and many times, prosecuted for infractions such as:

- falsifying student test scores,
- making sure that certain students are marked absent during testing periods,
- securing advance copies of the test,
- promoting students to avoid testing, and
- finding ways that allow students to cheat on these test.

These and other unethical activities have taken place as a way to avoid embarrassing reports that are shared with the public and, in some cases, to ensure pay raises and avoid loss of employment. Some teachers have simply reverted to just teaching to the test, over and over again. The true purpose of teaching and learning has been lost in many of our public schools. Our students are not being prepared to maximize their capacity to learn.

District ratings also have an economic impact on the city and area communities. Ratings of school districts, based primarily on high stakes test scores, have become an important evaluative measure when corporations consider relocation and/or expansion. Parents often consider this data when selecting where they choose to live and raise their families.

It seems that those supporting high stakes testing have either lowered their expectations of most students attending public schools, are misguided when it comes to how and when learning occurs best, are purposely guaranteeing a workforce of followers and high unemployment, or all of the above. Either way, engaged leaders must lead a process that moves us away from this way of teaching and learning, and

still achieve high levels of academic success. High stakes testing has joined other standardized test, SAT, ACT, GRE, GMAT, MCAT, etc. to unfairly limit the number of individuals seeking to improve their lives through a quality education.

One of the most important elements within an educational culture of possibilities is a focus on connecting. Connecting with others and ourselves provides the bridge needed to connect internalized understandings, knowledge, with new information. Connecting in this way helps us to internalize, and therefore learn, new information. Connecting in this way represents a better teaching and learning process than the techniques utilized in support of high stakes testing.

Engaged pedagogical practices are utilized by excellent teachers in many school settings. These teachers embrace the premise that students learn best when they are actively engaged in the teaching and learning process. It is important here to realize that both students and teachers are learners in this type of learning environment. Teachers utilizing engaged pedagogical methodology believe that the knowledge each student brings with them is essential to the internalization of the new information that they want learners to learn. Connecting, bridging between what students already know with information the teachers wants them to learn, becomes a major point of focus and action. In these settings all are teachers and all are learners. All participants make valuable contributions to the teaching and learning process and all voices are very important.

A great way for teachers to connect with students is during guided practice sessions. Most lesson cycles provide students with opportunities to practice what was just taught. This time is often called guided practice. During guided practice the teacher works the room, stopping by each student to see if they are successfully understanding the concepts that have recently been taught. Guided practice sessions offer great opportunities for teachers to connect existing knowledge with new information and new ways to think about something. Similar techniques are employed by the engaged leader.

Engaged leaders use this process of connecting to bridge existing knowledge of the mission, vision and action steps of the organization with the changes needed for continued success. This process helps to bring clarity where the organization currently stands, the need to address real and potential shortfalls, and the action steps to move forward in successful ways. Change is often met with opposition by stakeholders, primarily due to perceived negatives, what I am calling perceptual barriers. Much of the opposition and perceptual barriers are caused by a lack of vision regarding the future. Often stakeholders become concerned about their role in the organization and how that role will be changed, or eliminated. Prior experience with organizational change fuels these kind of concerns. They often refer to organizational change that resulted in downsizing, the call for new sets of skills and abilities, a diminishing value of their previous contributions to the organization. These perceptual barriers to change can be improved when more clarity of the purpose and proposed results can be shared early and throughout the process. Connecting becomes the pathway facilitating the changes that need to occur.

One such way to accomplish a better change process is through a 'straw-person' approach. This straw-person approach is made up of several key steps. We will provide a general outline here. The Engaged Leader begins this approach with a series of small group discussions within every unit/department of the organization. These discussions should begin with an overview of the organization focused on its perceived strengths, weakness, opportunities and threats. A generalized vision of the future of the organization should also be shared. The ensuing discussions should then focus on framing and refining the vision of the future and the potential action steps needed to accomplish said goals. Each of these discussions should end with a written response from the leader that capsulized all that was said and accomplished. All of these written responses should be shared on a website designated to document and share the process of change and is available for all stakeholders to review and make comments. The key for success of this initiative is the sharing of tentative goals, throughout the entire process of refinement that is inclusive of all stakeholders who choose to engage. All stakeholders should have the ability to provide their own thoughts, without reprisal, throughout the process.

Unit/department leaders and key stakeholders, as identified by each group of stakeholders, should then meet to review all input and develop a position paper to bring clarity and direction to the establishment, or to reaffirm the existing, mission, vision and action steps needed to move forward. This straw-person document is then used to conduct a series of SWOT analysis sessions scheduled by units/department and additional sessions open to all stakeholders. A SWOT or SLOT analysis is part of some strategic planning processes. It is used as an evaluative tool designed to identify the strengths within organizations and those attributes that can be utilized for strategic advantage. The process also helps individuals identify the weaknesses and/or limitations within the organization. Opportunities to improve performance and outcomes emerge. In addition, potential and real threats are exposed before more harm is done. The SWOT sessions should all begin, using skilled facilitators, with each person framing their reactions in writing to the straw-person document. During the next step individuals move into small groups of no more than five to discuss and refine their thoughts. This step is followed by the actual SWOT process with the entire group. These interim steps help to encourage and hear the voices of all participants. It helps to avoid the often occurrence of dominate voices only being heard. The results of each session is then included on the website for all to review, discuss, and make comments.

The unit/department leaders and key stakeholder group then reviews each document to refine the straw-person document once again. Of critical importance throughout this process is the emphasis placed on outcomes. These outcomes help all stakeholders identify their roles in the organization as it evolves/changes. Sometimes this process will help some individuals see the need to separate from the organization when they have a disconnection with the new direction.

A series of presentations to stakeholders by the engaged leader should then take place. The presentations should be designed to bring clarity to the set of action

steps that have emerged to address the proposed revisions. It is very important that each member of the organization sees their role. Therefore each presentation will be somewhat different, based on the unit/department being addressed. Again, the presentations help each person envision their role in this process of change. They can also help to finalize the process with their thoughts and comments.

After some time for reflection, discussion, and possible refinements, a celebration to launch the change process takes place as the move forward begins. Scheduled updates and a process for continued assessment and refinement is structured within the change process.

The engaged leader actively works to connect the goals of the organization with the knowledge base and personal realities of each stakeholder as part of the strategic planning and continuation process. The engaged leader makes and maintains individual connections with all direct reports and key stakeholders. She/he charges these individuals to make similar connections with their direct reports and key constituents. The goal of developing and maintaining these types of connections is to make sure, as best we can, that the goals of the organization remain the primary focus. Individual needs are wed to organizational goals in ways that create an environment that Glickman describes as a cause beyond self. The needs of the many (in this case the organization) outweigh the needs of the few, or the one.

For example, a question has emerged from several sectors of the college regarding student enrollment during the annual self-assessment of the strategic plan. Some stakeholders point to diminishing state and federal revenue streams as the reason to make the decision to increase student enrollment by at least ten percent next year. Other stakeholders feel that an additional five hundred students (the ten percent) would create a number of challenges. These challenges would offset the additional revenue generated by these additional students. The additional students would cause some classroom overcrowding, long lines in the food centers, triple beds in residence halls that were specifically designed for two, and high levels of stress and dissatisfaction from all sectors. It was also believed that standards would need to be lowered in order to achieve this ten percent increase in one year. Despite these concerns, supporters for the enrollment increase proposal see it as the best way to address the pending state and federal revenue shortfalls. They also express concern for potential layoffs as a way to counter these projected budget shortfalls. Those opposed to the ten percent increase in student enrollment believe that overcrowding will change the culture of the college, stretch resident hall staff much too thin, and limit direct contact between student and faculty members. Most of those supporting the increase in enrollment represent the ranks of staff members. The majority of those opposing this proposal to increase enrollment represent the ranks of the faculty.

The engaged leader, and leadership team must find ways to bring clarity to the situation, squash rumors, and provide options that most, if not all, stakeholders can embrace. What would you, as an engaged leader, do? Here is one way to address these concerns:

A series of discussions regarding the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of each position would occur. Leadership would then develop one or more straw person scenarios to be vetted by those actively involved in the process.

Each session would follow a similar series of steps:

1. Each session would begin with an overview of the challenges.
2. After some review and reflection, a generalized vision of projected outcomes, a straw person proposal, would be shared.
3. Each individual would be asked to write down their own reactions to the straw person proposals.
4. Small groups would then be established where reactions to the straw person proposal would be discussed and refined.
5. Responses from each small group would be posted on a dedicated website for all to review.
6. The same process that took place in small groups would then occur with the larger group exploring each small group reaction and working to develop one draft document.
7. A leadership team would take all of this information to modify the straw person proposal.
8. The final step would consist of reaching consensus and a final document to direct next steps.

This process offers everyone with the opportunity to connect their personal concerns and realities with organizational challenges and goals. The process helps to empower each person to wed personal and organizational goals. It also allows for a clearer pathway for the organization to move forward. Of course there are often outliers at times. However, the process creates a better environment of engagement and inclusion. It also improves the organization's chances for success.

Please remember that this overview provides just a generalized outline of this change process. Each organization will find the need to modify this work based on the input and reactions of stakeholders. The key for the engaged leader is to create and maintain as transparent process as possible. The engaged leader must strive to maintain an environment that remains open to all input from stakeholders. The engaged leader must be dedicated to the establishment of an organization that is as transparent as possible, inclusive, and flexible. This kind of environment will energize stakeholders and create the kind of synergy that maximizes the talents and skills of all. The Culture of Possibilities will lead the organization to very high levels of success.

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