The Principal as a Systems Thinker

Being able to see the forest and the trees as parts of a system gives the busy principal a healthy perspective in making daily decisions.

Gary Schomburg

Principals deal daily with an overwhelming variety of issues, problems, and challenges that require solid and consistent decision-making. However, in my experience as an elementary school principal, I found it difficult to see the “big picture” when dealing with issues involving staff, students, parents, or the community. A book that helped me gain some perspective on my decision-making process was *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* by Peter M. Senge (1990).

In this seminal work on organizational behavior and leadership, Senge promotes the theory that all businesses and other human endeavors are systems bound by invisible fabrics of interrelated actions, and that systems thinking is the art of seeing the forest and the trees. While Senge uses the book to describe a business model, many of its principles can be directly applied to the daily life of principals.
Today’s problems come from yesterday’s solutions. Moving a weak teacher to another grade level or academic team may seem like a logical solution and sometimes is helpful. But my experience has been that the weak teacher merely remains weak in a new situation. The same principle applies to moving an unruly student from teacher to teacher. Sometimes you find the right combination, but it is usually best to deal with the heart of the behavioral issues rather than simply change the scenery. Perhaps suspension or expulsion is necessary and required by district policy, but one wonders if this merely pushes the problem down the line for someone else to solve. A better approach would be to use school counselors, social workers, and psychologists to help deal with the system in which the child is involved—family, friends, and school. Somewhere in that system may be the answer to the behavior and keys to a more permanent solution.

The harder you push, the harder the system pushes back. Principals are notorious for spending many hours at work or taking loads of work home with them. But simply working harder sometimes covers up weaknesses in the system that should be addressed. It would seem wise for principals to examine their workload to see if it is the result of systemic flaws or could be done more efficiently. An example of what Senge calls compensating feedback—the system offsetting the results of hard work—is when test scores in reading decline because of extra effort put into raising math scores.

Behavior grows better before it grows worse. In the rush to help students prepare for high-stakes tests, principals sometimes use a triage method in providing extra tutoring to raise students’ test-taking ability. This may pay off in improved test scores, but what is being done systemically to ensure that the scores are sustained next year? What is being done to strengthen and align the curriculum or to improve classroom instruction?
I remember a situation early in my career as a principal when I tried to help a teacher who had a challenging group of students in her class. One method I used was to sit near the worst offenders during classroom instruction. Those classes I attended went well, but there was no long-term improvement. More systemic work needed to be done not only with individual students but with the teacher’s management skills.

The easy way out usually leads back in. It is comfortable for us to look for solutions in familiar places, but the answer may lay elsewhere and be more difficult to find. Using the same old ideas to solve persistent problems is an example of nonsystemic thinking.

Take staff hiring, for example. My worst hiring decisions were made when time did not allow proper review of applicants and I was unable to involve other teachers in the selection process. It was always easier to do the hiring myself from a small list of candidates from the usual sources, but broadening the search and involving staff usually brought better long-term systemic results.

The cure can be worse than the disease. Moving too quickly to student intervention can be addictive and dangerous, creating increased dependency. The obvious example in the school setting would be providing support for staff or students that allows them to progress without the work necessary to build self-reliance. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act puts intense pressure on principals to provide supports that will bring test scores up to adequate levels within specific timelines. But more long-term systemic benefits would derive from focusing on strong classroom instruction rather than pullout intervention programs.

In my experience, all teachers welcome any assistance they can get in helping students. However, the best teachers have a sense of ownership of their students and work hard to help make them successful through their own efforts. These teachers pay attention to how students are progressing through frequent monitoring and make changes in their instruction before asking others to intervene.

Another example is the degree to which staff lean on the principal to handle student discipline. Teachers who simply send all discipline matters to the principal’s office never learn to use different strategies to prevent behaviors or improve instruction. Faster is slower. Senge says that systems have an optimal rate of growth, and

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that when growth is excessive the system itself will seek to compensate by slowing down.

Any principal who has started in a new position with ideas of accomplishing all of his or her proposed changes in the first year understands this principle.

My personal experience came with a new position and a mandate that significant improvement must occur in three years. Since I had three years to be successful, priorities were set regarding what needed fixing and these areas were attacked that first year. Although those initial changes met with resistance, once it became apparent that they were working, resistance declined and paved the way for more changes in the following years.

**Cause and effect are not closely related in time and space.** The tendency to think that they are closely related sometimes leads to wrong assumptions and solutions. For example, principals dealing with a student’s behavior issue tend to look for the immediate cause. In some cases, however, the actual cause is somewhere in that child’s background that includes family, friends, past teachers, and others.

The same can be said for staff issues. My first administrative position was in a district that had gone through a terrible strike a few years earlier. I struggled to understand staff behaviors and attitudes until I heard about the strike and how those negative feelings carried over.

As principals, we sometimes don’t realize the impact we have on students, staff, and parents. Those of us who have been around awhile can cite examples of people telling us years after they left the school about how a comment we made to them, a tough situation we helped them with, or our style of leadership made a lasting impression on them.

**Small changes can produce big results, but the areas of highest leverage are often the least obvious.** In taking over a school that had significant issues, I chose first to work on the student schedule even though significant improvements were needed in many areas, including student achievement and classroom instruction. I believed that the first small step was to create a smooth-running operation. While student test scores were the ultimate targets, the process to getting there started with a schedule that allowed teachers to concentrate on instruction and reduced squabbling.

Once that was accomplished, our focus for raising test scores was to start with student writing. With the help of our district curriculum specialist, we implemented a process of regular buildingwide writing prompts that were scored by teachers, the curriculum specialist, and me. Areas of weakness were identified in each round for teachers to work on for the next round. This idea of regular assessments and instructional adjustments led to improved writing scores the first year. The concept of monitoring student progress and making instructional improvements carried over to other subjects as well.

**You can have your cake and eat it too, but not all at once.** Static thinkers tend to make either/or choices, like rewarding individual achievement versus having everyone feel valued. However, effective principals do both by recognizing individual staff achievement while working to support and help all staff on a daily basis.

A practice that proved effective was to have teachers recognize one another at staff meetings for going beyond the call of duty. We asked them to present awards to their peers for acts of kindness or exemplary work.
When your school achieves specific goals, it is important to praise the entire staff through e-mail, newspaper articles, and special celebrations. When choosing individual teachers for local or regional recognition, it is important to select those who are strong models of quality teaching and truly representative of the staff.

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Dividing the elephant in half does not produce two small elephants. Within most schools the staff is divided between core subject teachers and those who teach in special areas such as art, music, and physical education. It is also divided by grade level and job functions such as counselors, custodians, and secretaries. It becomes difficult at
times to treat the staff equally or as a single unit when their job expectations are different.

As a principal, I asked my academic teams to take ownership of their students, reasoning that if they considered the students theirs, the students would benefit. This brought about many positive results, but sometimes upset the system when decisions were made that impacted the jobs of other staff, such as special area teachers or cafeteria personnel.

Articulation between grade levels and academic teams is always a major challenge for principals, who must get all staff to see how their actions are interrelated and impact others.

*There is no blame.* We all tend to look for outside circumstances upon which to blame our problems. We have all heard complaints like, “If those teachers last year would have done their jobs, I wouldn’t be in this situation” or “If parents would support us when their children misbehave, our classrooms would be manageable.”

The simple message of Senge’s last principle is to stop looking for blame and start working within the system to bring overall improvement. The principal’s role is to build a sense of ownership with the staff so that they see it as their mission to help all students achieve as much as possible. Unfortunately, NCLB has created a culture in which a school’s staff is to blame for the failure of the students to perform well on standardized tests, and entire staffs can be replaced for not meeting prescribed goals. Even with these sanctions hanging over their heads, principals should not work to shift the blame, but should use the high expectations of NCLB as a focal point for strengthening the ownership of their mission.

Being able to see the forest and the trees in the school setting gives the principal a healthy perspective when making the numerous daily decisions required of a school leader. By understanding that schools are part of a larger system, in which all components are interrelated in some way, principals are able to make decisions that will have long-term high leverage and ultimately benefit students for years to come.

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**Reference**


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**WEB RESOURCES**

The Society for Organizational Learning, founded and chaired by Peter M. Senge, seeks to translate systems theory into tools for organizational change.

[www.solonline.org](http://www.solonline.org)

The Free Management Library offers a comprehensive listing of resources for leadership and management.

[www.managementhelp.org](http://www.managementhelp.org)


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