Proceed With Caution Toward Change

I began my first principalship with anticipation and excitement, armed with the wisdom of my educational leadership courses and the insights born of classroom experience. Despite all my preparation, it was still a year replete with surprising lessons that I won’t forget. My most daunting challenges came in the area of change-making.

I replaced a 20-year veteran principal who had a long tradition of, well, traditions. Thus, my first challenge was to update the school. The facilities, curriculum, and teaching methodologies, while sound, were starting to show their wear, and enrollment at the school had been in a steady decline for almost a decade.

However, I remembered the caveat that I had heard many times over: Make no changes in your first year; just observe. But despite this sound advice, I found myself facing circumstances that seemed to warrant immediate attention. I weighed my options: Should I leave things alone and risk further decline in enrollment, or should I defy the accepted wisdom and change something. And if so, what should I change first?

To Change or Not To Change

To answer these questions, I took a look at the whole picture from the outside in and the inside out. We were perceived from the outside as a school that faced possible closure if the current downward spiral of enrollment continued. We had lost one-third of our student body in the four years prior to my arrival, and there were no signs that this trend would shift. To stem this tide, we had to show that the school was willing to make substantive changes to attract new students.

From the inside, confidence about the future was slipping. Although the faculty felt justifiably proud of the school’s long-held reputation for academic excellence, both the enrollment drop and the closures of other under-subscribed schools in our geographic area made them feel insecure. Parents of current students were also concerned since they were anxious about having to find alternatives for their children in case the school closed.

Weighing these factors, it seemed clear to me that there was an imminent threat to the school’s future and that was a condition serious enough to warrant change. Given our situation, I decided to take the plunge and change one thing.

Pick Something SAFE

First-year principals can successfully introduce the concept of change by keeping in mind the guidelines for a SAFE project:

- **Stands alone**—it isn’t personally connected with any of the school’s constituency.
- **All are aboard**—there is consensus that this project should be targeted.
- **Finances**—the budget will support the project.
- **Efficient**—parameters are well-defined, turnaround is quick, and results are observable.

Choosing a target area was difficult for me. It was important to avoid anything that touched upon teacher performance in the classroom. Sensitivities were so high that even small suggestions about updating resource materials or altering teaching strategies would have been perceived as criticism. Teachers might easily make the leap and assume that I was blaming the enrollment drop on them.

Changes to the facility would have been helpful since much of the plant needed significant updating, but with budget constraints, this did not seem to be a practical goal for the first year. I also knew that I couldn’t choose an extensive project because I had limited time to complete it. I wanted to take on something that could be done quickly, even during my first few months, and that would have an immediate impact. Ideally, the change would be a sign of more good things to come.

Luckily, there was a project that presented real possibilities in all these areas—our Web site. Simply put, it was an anachronism. This was not a result of anything but inattention since the site had been designed many years prior to my arrival and was rarely used. It looked like a prime candidate for my first change.

As a tool for growth, the Web site held enormous potential. It could present a renewed image of the school to prospective families while updating our entire approach to communications. It could serve the dual purpose of being a marketing tool and change agent. And those benefits would present themselves almost immediately.

However, despite it being a manageable project in terms of budget and time, it was most important to consider: Would altering it insult the efforts of those who had created it in the past? Was anyone’s identity tied to what was currently posted? Would changing it...
result in extra work for any of our current employees? If so, would that cause resentment?

Fortunately, there was unanimous agreement in the school community that the site needed to be updated, and my supervisor was on board with anything reasonable—and inexpensive—that would add to the school’s visibility and marketability. With buy-in from all stakeholders, I was off to a good start. Next, I met with parents who had offered to assist with the site’s design. Fortunately, I brought some expertise to the process because of my educational media background. This proved to be a real asset since I was a credible leader for the project. I listened carefully to all the ideas that were presented and tossed some of my own into the mix.

The Web site overhaul was a huge success. Parents welcomed the new, easily navigable format and the wealth of information about the school’s programs and activities. Students enjoyed seeing pictures of their projects and the events in which they participated. Teachers were initially hesitant about the extra workload of posting class material, but enjoyed the easy access to essential information. Faculty and families alike appreciated e-mail as a simple and practical mode of communication.

Prospective families almost universally made the Web site their first stop in school shopping. From a marketing and public relations perspective, the school’s enhanced Web profile brought numerous new inquiries about enrollment possibilities. The site provided all the essentials with the added benefit of pictures, video, and links to current news.

First-Year Success

A wizened professor once opined that you make changes in schools like you make changes in a cemetery—one body at a time. While we might attribute this perspective to the cynicism of an older veteran, one must admit that many educational institutions seem to move at the rate of tectonic plates.

Yet a first-year principal can ill afford to expend the necessary energy to fight this reality. It may, in fact, be the best choice to make no changes in the first year of your tenure. If, however, your institution is faced with the prospect of imminent failure, continuing precipitous decline or negative public sentiment, you may want to pick one SAFE area to target for change.

Choosing such a project can yield positive results for both you and your school. For you as a principal, it can position you as a forward-thinking leader; for your school, it can send the message that you recognize the need for growth, and you’ve taken a step in that direction.

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