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SPOTLIGHT

Leadership and Management: Forging the Path to Turnaround

by Nathan Levenson

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Leadership and management skills are often the missing ingredient required to ensure comprehensive, coherent, well-implemented turnaround efforts.

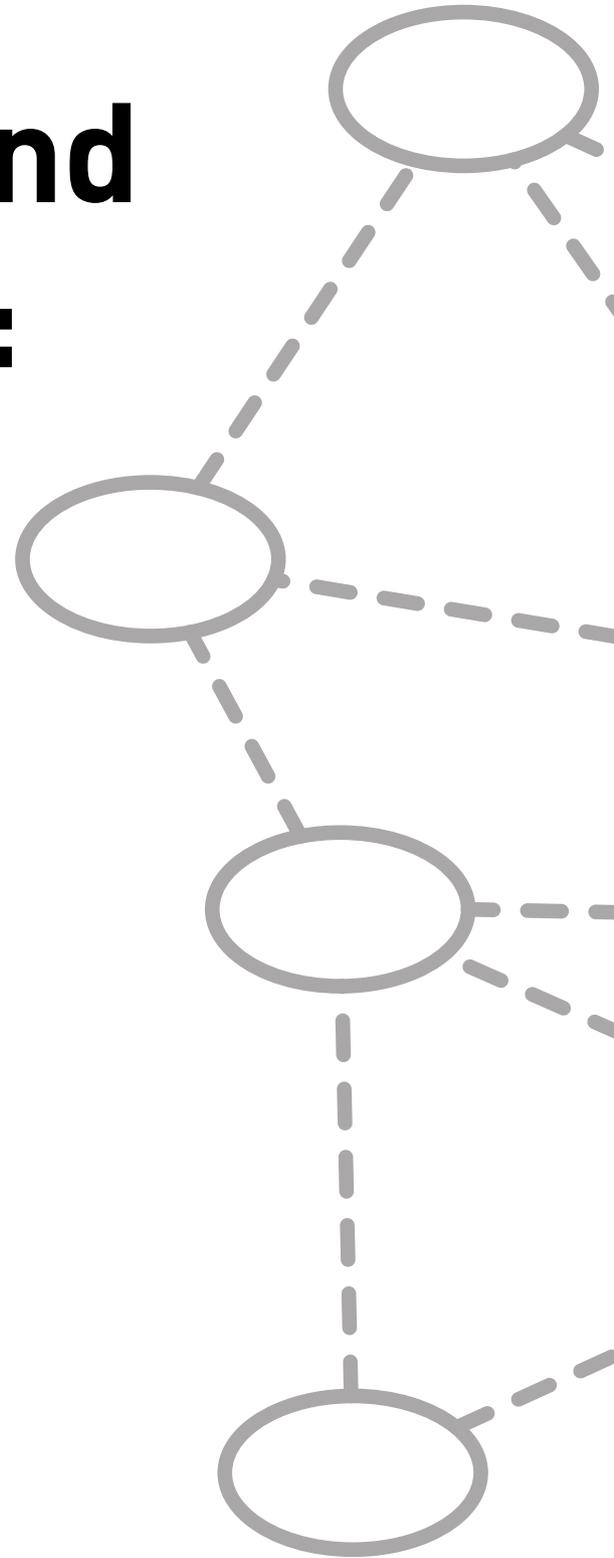
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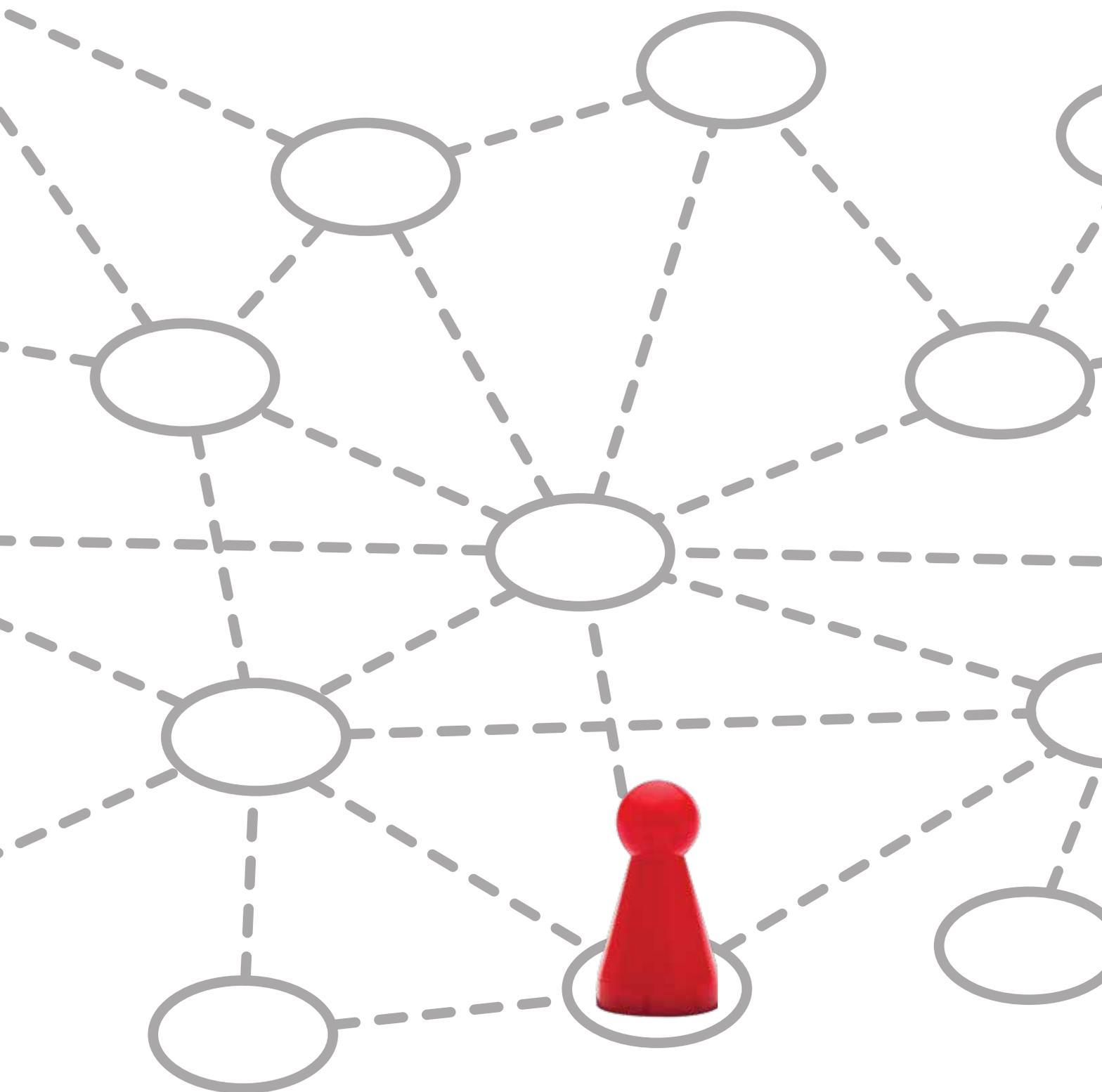
Forging the Path to Turnaround

| Nathan Levenson

DMC Spotlight represents the thinking and approach of The District Management Council

Nearly every state in the nation has placed a growing focus on improving chronically underperforming schools and districts. A byproduct of more than a decade of state tests under No Child Left Behind, hard data now exists that clearly identifies individual schools and whole districts that lag well behind their peers and can't seem to get on an upward trajectory. State and federal agencies are working hard to ensure that the students who attend these schools—who are for the most part poor and often minority—get a better education. Much has been tried, ranging from consulting support to state takeovers, and from new principals to charter conversions. Despite heroic efforts and vast sums of money, we seem closer to the beginning than the end of turning around the nation's most troubled schools and districts. And, the challenging job of turning around a school or district is about to get even more difficult. The nation's schools are being asked to raise the bar with the much more rigorous Common Core curriculum, students are expected to meet a higher standard on the new assessments, and districts are being asked to implement very complex educator evaluation systems. →





The District Management Council (DMC) has had a front-row seat watching these efforts. DMC has worked closely with school districts and state education agencies (SEAs). We know firsthand that this is hard work. We and our partner districts have learned a lot, made some missteps along the way, and seen some slow and steady progress as well. Our experiences and lessons learned have convinced us that the approach to turnaround might be most effective if turned on its head.

If the Ingredients Are the Same, What's the Big Difference?

From our experience, starting with management and leadership first as opposed to the list of reform initiatives can make the difference between success and frustration.

Efforts to improve chronically underperforming schools or districts must be built on a solid base of strong, deep leadership and management, which provide the talent to implement a coherent, multifaceted turnaround strategy (see Exhibit 1).

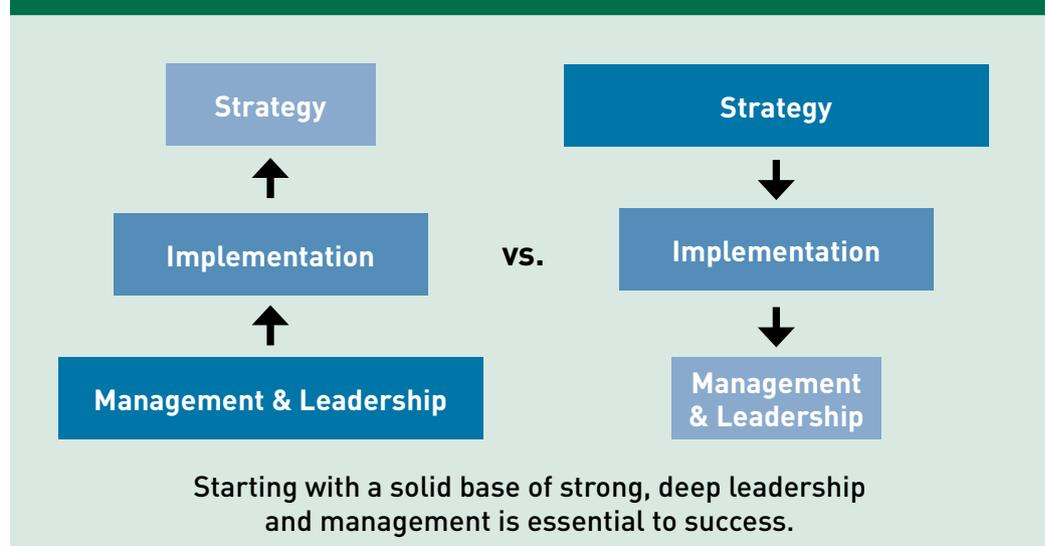
To be sure, schools and districts that have made progress in reducing dropout rates and closing achievement gaps do employ sound, thoughtful reform initiatives. However, they often don't have a better set of initiatives than their

peers who are not successful. For example, an examination of the list of Broad Prize-winning districts, large urban school systems that have significantly outperformed like communities, does not reveal a secret sauce. Broad Prize winners—Charlotte-Mecklenburg (NC), Gwinnet County (GA), Boston (MA), Long Beach (CA), Houston (TX), Aldine (TX)—and other high-performing districts like Montgomery County (VA), Fairfax (VA), and Baltimore City (MD) have implemented plans that are not all that different from those used in most turnaround efforts. They include all the basics, such as using data, teachers planning together, a dose of extra time, instructional coaching, and teacher evaluation systems.

Higher-performing schools use many of the same ingredients used by their less-successful counterparts. The difference is like the difference between beef bourguignon and camp stew. Both have beef, onions, carrots, mushrooms, and seasonings, but in one case the ingredients are carefully measured, chopped, and added in just the right order, while in the other, they are all just thrown in the pot together. Same ingredients, but a very different meal.

A key distinguishing element of successful turnaround plans is that they are multifaceted, yet focused, coherent strategies where the various

EXHIBIT 1: ORDER MATTERS



initiatives fit together and reinforce each other. This is the difference between having one or more “strategies” (i.e. initiatives) vs. having a Strategy—an overarching approach composed of interrelated and interconnected actions and plans. A jumble of somewhat unconnected proven practices seldom creates big gains, even if each piece is logical and has worked elsewhere.

We have seen districts create formative assessments, data teams, accountability systems, and public dashboards to create a strong focus on data. Yet, data as the magic bullet doesn’t work. Data must be paired with new schedules to allow teachers time to review the data, instructional coaching to provide behavior-changing support to those teachers needing help, a human capital strategy that recruits teachers and principals who are strong in data analysis, a promotion process that rewards principals based on improved student results, resource allocation decisions that support robust IT departments, and so on. Data must be integrated into a comprehensive strategy.

Successful strategies are comprehensive, with various initiatives all clearly connected to a theory of action. There isn’t one path to school and district turnaround. Some districts embrace a more centralized approach, others more school-based, and some provide significant autonomy through charter schools. While there are multiple paths that can lead to success, a successful turnaround strategy requires intense focus on a clear path. Successful turnarounds align nearly all the district’s efforts to support the selected path to raising student achievement, and have the discipline to abandon old programs, policies, practices, and spending patterns. There must be clear through lines from school board policy to budget decisions to the daily life of a classroom teacher.

Beyond better coherence, more successful turnarounds are also characterized by great implementation—they do the same thing as others, but they do it better. In our work across the country, we see districts and schools having data meetings, using DRA or DIBELS reading assessments, intervention technology like READ 180, principal walkthroughs, and many other building blocks of a comprehensive and coherent strategy, but the results vary greatly.

Implementation seems to differ in two ways. First, higher-achieving schools implement with greater intensity; second, they worry about the small details. These schools and districts do fewer things, but they carry out each initiative more deeply. Professional development for K-2 reading, for instance, might be five days in the summer for new staff, part of every faculty meeting, supported by intensive instructional coaching throughout the year, part of most data meetings, and the primary topic at professional learning community (PLC) time. In less-successful schools, professional development is split among many topics (all good topics, but too many). Faculty meetings are about school and testing logistics, and data meetings are about looking at data rather than using the data.

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These higher-performing schools and districts also sweat the details. They focus on getting the details right all the time, and in every aspect of running a district. For example, common formative assessments are perfectly timed and closely connected to district pacing guides, so students are being tested on what was actually taught, not on some purchased set of assessments unconnected to that month’s actual instruction. The data is processed quickly, summarized, and provided →

to teachers before their data meeting. Even fine details like the class lists are updated every day so that when students move within the district, their data follows them to their next school; and students new to the district are assessed the week they enter to create a baseline. In addition, Human Resources records are accurate, meetings are scheduled well in advance and seldom cancelled, trash barrels are emptied before they overflow, and the buses run on time. These and a thousand other small details don't raise achievement per se, but they create a culture of getting every little thing right, which carries over to all the little pieces that feed into the big strategic initiatives. Few schools or districts question the value of getting these details right, but many struggle mightily to make it happen.

ideas. This is not a conducive environment for a focused, coherent strategy.

Making a hard job even harder is the reality that long-struggling systems have already tried most of the basics—a focus on reading (done that), data teams (got them), or professional development (always done that). Since these efforts haven't succeeded, there is pressure for big, bold plans like performance pay or much longer school days. Few want to try again the basics that already failed to raise achievement.

Not *What You Do*, but *How You Do It*

In many struggling schools and districts, it's difficult to deeply embed new efforts. The obstacles that create insufficient learning are the same ones that hobble implementation. These obstacles can include systemic challenges such as schedules that are driven by history, not strategy; promotion based on longevity, not ability; or departments working in silos, rather than in teams. Small things can also become large barriers, such as leadership meetings being cancelled regularly, or key players leaving the meetings early, or ending a meeting without clear next steps and definitive decisions.

In order to plan strategically, and implement well, struggling schools and districts must first ensure that they have strong leadership and management. The bar is high, because one strong leader isn't enough.

Leadership has many definitions and comes in many forms. In a turnaround situation, a strong leader must create urgency, provide hope, set a clear vision, maintain focus, and cajole, push, or invite many to embrace change. Strong leaders need to prune away old programs, maintain coherence despite the allure of the latest fad or newest grant, and resist pressure from the public or the school board to tackle one more problem.

Able managers can ensure that the needed logistics are in place for deep implementation, including ensuring that school schedules support district strategy, running productive meetings, managing projects well, stewarding scarce resources, getting accurate data on-time and in a useable form, and a multitude of other small (yet important) details.

There isn't one path to school and district turnaround.

Obvious, but Hard

It doesn't seem like groundbreaking news to proclaim that coherent plans, implemented well, are better than jumbled plans implemented not so well. The more newsworthy finding is that leadership and management skills are often the missing ingredient *required* to ensure comprehensive, coherent, well-implemented turnaround efforts.

Effective leadership and strong management skills are essential, especially in turnaround situations, precisely because they are turnaround situations. Many schools and districts designated for turnaround didn't decline overnight; they have struggled for years. During this long-time struggle, lots of grant money has funded a multitude of initiatives and the difficulty of the work has led to a turnover of leadership, bringing a steady flow of new administrators with yet more

Growing and Searching for Talent

If successful turnaround starts with leadership and management talent, and lots of it, then a foundational element of improving chronically underperforming schools and districts is a system to build and find people with these key skills. In DMC's experience, we have seen many paths to this goal.

1 STRENGTHEN EXISTING LEADERS

Perhaps the most common approach is to support **current** central office and building leaders in developing their leadership and management skills. This often takes the form of professional development, PLCs, coaching, and working alongside consultants or other outside organizations. This approach has the benefit of minimizing disruption, valuing institutional knowledge, and appreciating years of service.

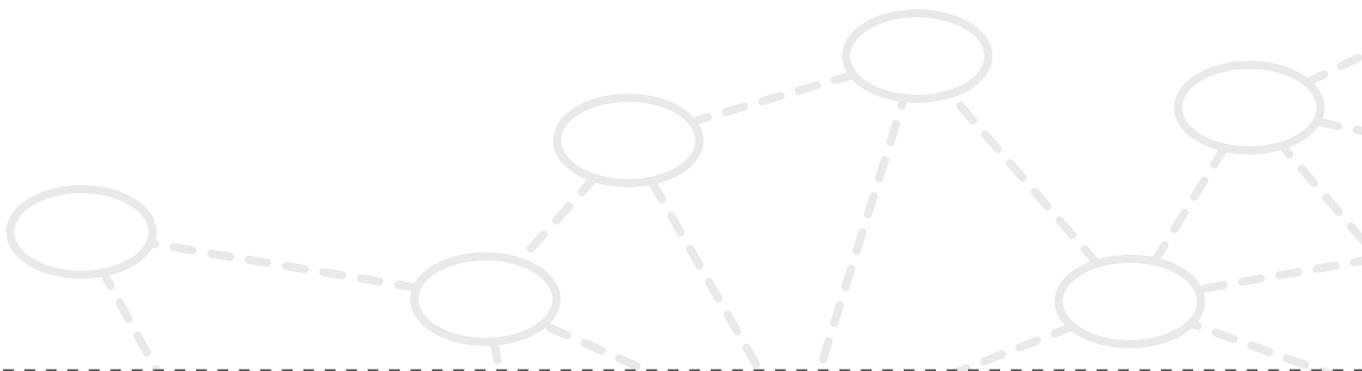
For leaders with natural aptitude and great attitude, these efforts can yield good results, especially when linked to a focused, comprehensive plan and lots of teamwork.

Often, however, this approach falls short. It's not because current leaders aren't talented and capable, but because they may be talented and capable in ways that are not relevant to the school's needs at this juncture. The very name "turnaround" suggests a major change of course. Principals hired when the job description prioritized the ability to run a building smoothly may not be the right people to provide vision, create urgency, hold difficult conversations, and lead change. A curriculum director might have been promoted due to deep content knowledge and longevity in the district, but key management skills such as scheduling and implementation expertise may not have been critical components of the screening and hiring process. A new course sometimes requires leaders with different skills.

2 CONDUCT A TALENT SCAVENGER HUNT

Many schools and districts are chock-full of people **with** leadership and management skills, but some might not yet be in leadership roles. Traditionally, districts post openings, candidates apply, and the best person gets the job—but only the best of those who applied.

A more proactive approach is to seek out people with talent, and then to encourage, persuade, or entice them to apply for leadership roles. Which teachers have the highest growth scores? Who stepped up during the rollout of a new initiative and kept the project on track? Who is the go-to person for advice on helping struggling students, building a schedule, or managing a crisis? Who runs a meeting that leaves people feeling energized, focused, and accountable? These people are potential next-generation leaders, but they might not apply for the next open position. A formal or informal conversation could reveal what's holding them back. Maybe they don't realize their strengths, or they fear if they fail, they can't return to their old positions. In chronically low-performing organizations, these stars might feel that the leadership has been part of the problem, and so they don't want to join the team unless they believe they can make a difference and be part of the solution. Each may have his or her own unique obstacle, but personalized and proactive support can remove the barrier. →



3

STRENGTHEN THE PIPELINE

Since successful turnarounds require many bold leaders and skillful managers, a steady flow of potential candidates is also required. Both job foreshadowing and distributed teacher leadership are no-cost, proven methods for building the pipeline of future leaders.

The more newsworthy finding is that leadership and management skills are often the missing ingredient required to ensure comprehensive, coherent, well-implemented turnaround efforts.

“Job foreshadowing” means screening, hiring, and structuring work in anticipation of future jobs. The case of assistant principals is a great example. While the assistant principal job description might include handling discipline and daily operations, the next step up to a position as principal might require very different skills, including creating a vision, helping teachers become more effective

teachers, and planning strategically. Some districts explicitly screen assistant principals for the ability to be a great principal over time. They then craft opportunities to test and develop principal skills, such as tasking the assistant principal with leading a critical teaching and learning effort or working with a group of teachers to improve outcomes. In many ways, this becomes a multi-year job interview and a chance to build and hone management and leadership skills.

Distributed teacher leadership is another way to build a talent pipeline. Virtually all administrators start as teachers, but classroom teaching doesn’t provide much opportunity to hone or showcase what’s needed to be part of a future turnaround leadership team. By creating school-based leadership roles or appointing teachers to district project teams, districts can enable teachers to test the waters, develop skills, and be identified for future talent recruitment. And, their involvement can greatly improve the quality of the work at hand. A number of districts, for example, have created lead reading teachers at each elementary school. These are full-time teaching positions, but for a small stipend or added recognition, the reading teachers are asked to help implement the district’s literacy effort in their school. They may lead data team meetings, informally gather feedback on teacher professional development needs, or help plan with the principal. More than a few have become very effective principals or curriculum directors. As importantly, some strong teachers learn that they are more comfortable working with students than leading adults.

4

HIRE AND PROMOTE BASED ON NEEDED SKILLS, NOT JUST EXPERIENCE

Because leadership and management matter, it is best to fill openings with people who already have the needed abilities, rather than trying to build this capacity after they assume leadership roles. This may seem obvious, but many forces make this hard

to do. In some systems, longevity plays a big factor in promotion. One district knowingly appointed a weak leader who was a poor manager to lead a turnaround school because she had “waited years as assistant principal, and it was finally her turn.”

A hiring process that relies heavily on asking about prior experience can sometimes lead to hiring someone with related experience, but not necessarily the key skills needed for turnaround. “Have you done X, Y, and Z?” is easy to ask and easy to answer, and fits nicely into a typical interview process. However, it is harder for candidates to prove that they can inspire staff, create urgency, run a good meeting, build a smart schedule, and achieve results. A process that relies too heavily on experience can also exclude some great people. Some of the most successful special education directors were formerly successful building principals, for example. They have implemented teaching and learning efforts, raised achievement, managed budgets, led staff, and worked with parents. Yet, in many districts, they wouldn’t even have been offered an interview because they didn’t have experience as a special education teacher or administrator.

Interview questions that ask for evidence of improving student outcomes as well as examples of strong leadership, hard decisions, and creating urgency can shed more light on a candidate’s suitability. Even better than asking is observing. The best observation is to witness internal candidates being tasked with relevant and demanding leadership and management issues. For external candidates, simulation can provide useful information. For example, principal candidates for a struggling school can be asked to role-play in front of real teachers. One candidate was given recent and historic test scores that showed overall low achievement, pockets of significant growth in certain classrooms, and several classrooms with very low-performing teachers. Each candidate was asked to write a separate letter to parents and to staff, and then conduct a faculty meeting sharing the results and next steps.

5

CONSOLIDATE POSITIONS IF TALENT IS IN SHORT SUPPLY

In the best of worlds, every school and every department would have a great leader. In some districts, though, the bench isn’t deep enough and the candidate pool isn’t wide enough; so, then what? Rather than settling for leaders who don’t have the desired skills, it can be better to ask an existing strong leader to oversee more. For example, one district combined guidance, health, physical education, and social and emotional supports under one excellent director. It was a big job, but the district could not find four leaders for each of these areas. They didn’t just heap four times the work on the director’s plate, however. They avoided the common pitfall of rewarding good work with more and more work. Instead, the →

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district created teacher leaders for each of the four departments, and assigned a full-time secretary to support the director.

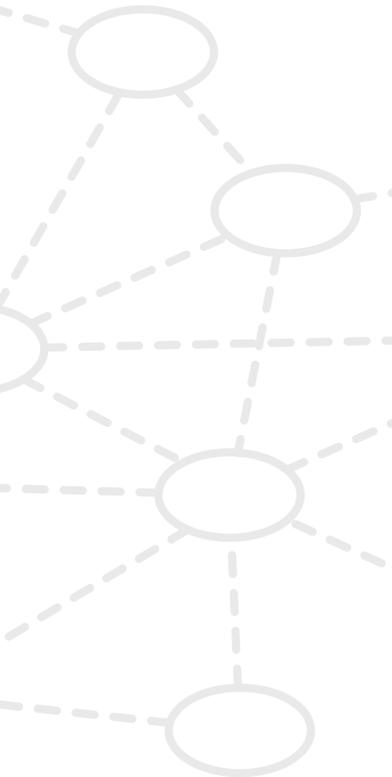
They also explicitly charged the director with identifying and developing future leaders for these departments. The director tasked the teacher leaders to manage key projects in the department to test and hone their leadership skills. Very quickly, all four departments benefitted from the vision and skills of the talented director; in the short run, the teacher leaders were empowered, and in the long run, new leaders emerged.

Another twist on consolidating talent is to ask sitting principals (or a small group of principals) to lead district-wide strategic efforts, especially if central office staff aren't up to the task of change management. This double role can be overwhelming for a new principal, but a seasoned veteran with a strong track record of success might relish the chance to have a district-wide impact without having to leave his or her school.

All the Necessary Ingredients

These five approaches can lead to stronger and deeper leadership for chronically struggling schools and districts. Many districts provide significant opportunities to promote from within and empower teachers and others. In all cases, however, the district must explicitly prioritize leadership and management, and integrate identifying and growing leaders into the day-to-day fabric of how the district functions.

Like making a great meal, successful turnarounds require all the right ingredients. These include a coherent and comprehensive strategy, and deep and faithful implementation, but even this isn't enough. Strong leaders and able managers are also key ingredients to a winning recipe. When schools and districts proactively develop, promote, and hire leaders with skills and talents to make turnarounds work, we will see more turnarounds meet their high aspirations. ♦



Successful turnarounds align nearly all the district's efforts to support the selected path to raising student achievement, and have the discipline to abandon old programs, policies, practices, and spending patterns.

What do good K-12 leaders and managers do?

Since strong leaders and able managers are so important, especially in turnaround situations, it's important to delineate their skills and attributes. Context clearly matters and no one universal definition will likely suffice, but several key commonalities can be identified.

Regarded by many as the authority on leadership, Dr. John P. Kotter concludes there are three main processes of good leadership: (1) establishing direction, (2) aligning people, and (3) motivating and inspiring.¹

In a K-12 setting, this means creating a vision that is clear, coherent, and focused on results. Leaders must identify and focus on the key elements that will raise achievement, and gently push aside the multitude of mandates, legacy programs, and special interests that are part of running a school or district. It also requires getting many disparate stakeholders onboard. Building coalitions, finding common ground, knowing when to bend and when to hold firm are all key attributes of good leaders. In K-12, leaders must be able to work well with unions, school boards, finance people, teachers, parents, and many other stakeholders who share a desire to help children, but who may differ greatly on how to achieve this goal. Finally, leaders are also cheerleaders. Raising achievement in a time of scarce resources, increased public scrutiny, and the introduction of the Common Core is slow, hard work. But it's important work that changes lives. Leaders remind us that the cause is important, that progress is possible, and that today's setback is tomorrow's lesson learned.

Being an able leader is necessary, but not sufficient. Strong management skills are also needed. In a K-12 setting, this means being able to run an efficient meeting, get the data right, build and manage budgets, make decisions based on hard information, and set the right pace of change.

Perhaps the greatest management challenge in K-12 is the ability to deliver unpleasant news. Telling a teacher that the lesson was poorly delivered, informing a department head that her favorite program isn't aligned with the district's strategy, or having to inform a well-meaning but ineffective principal that his contract won't be renewed is never easy. Good managers don't avoid conflict and don't shy away from making tough decisions, but they do it in a diplomatic and caring way.

Kotter concludes that strong management without much leadership can become bureaucratic and stifling, producing order for order's sake. Strong leadership without much management can become messianic and cult-like, producing change for change's sake—even if movement is in the wrong direction.

When both strong management and strong leadership are present and in balance, almost anything is possible. This is a tall order and unlikely to happen by chance. Bringing about change in K-12 settings requires a conscious focus on ensuring that schools and districts have a deep bench of leaders and managers.

¹ John P. Kotter, *A Force for Change: How Leadership Differs from Management* (New York: The Free Press, 1990), p. 5.