

THE DECATUR STORY: Reinvention of a School Corporation Leadership and Empowerment in Decatur's School Transformation

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This is the second in a series of articles to be published in 2007 that addresses reinvention of the Metropolitan School District of Decatur Township.

As described in the previous issue of this journal, in February 2001 Indiana University's School of Education offered to facilitate fundamental school transformation in the Indianapolis Metropolitan School District of Decatur Township. The previous article indicated that school transformation differs from school reform in that it entails changing the paradigm of education from the factory model of schools, which uses fixed time and standardization to focus on sorting students, to an information-age model of schools, which uses flexible time and customization to focus on successful learning for all students. This kind of change requires a change from a paradigm of management to one of leadership in a school district.

In organizations based on manual labor (factories), supervision is the kind of management needed. It is based on the assumption that the supervisor knows what the worker should do and how to do it. Peter Senge (1990) has called this the "command and control" form of management. By contrast, in organizations based on knowledge work, leadership is what is needed. It is based on the assumption that the knowledge worker knows best what to do and how to do it. Russell Ackoff (1999) argues that with knowledge workers, leaders "have a responsibility for creating the working conditions under which their subordinates can function as well as they know how" (p. 287), which includes providing extensive professional development opportunities to improve their know-how. Ackoff calls these people "transformational leaders," while Phillip Schlechty (1990, 2001) refers to them as "developmental leaders." Transforming the paradigm of a school district is certainly knowledge work and therefore requires first transforming to this kind of leadership.

In Decatur Township, therefore, the transformation process began with a focus on

changing the paradigm from supervision to leadership that would empower all stakeholders, including parents and other community members, to reinvent their schools. This required a fundamental change in the culture of the school district, at all levels of the system, similar to Michael Fullan's (2001) call for "reculturing" educational systems. The transformation process was initiated in Decatur by forming a Core Team comprised of top leaders of the major stakeholder groups: the superintendent, a school board member, the president of the teachers' association, a building principal, and a PTA president. To this we should have added a highly respected non-teaching staff member. The Core Team adopted a set of process values (see the previous issue of this journal) as the foundation for the new transformational culture.

Among the most important process values for changing the paradigm of leadership were: (1) the importance of empowering all stakeholders to decide what changes to make in their school system, (2) building trust, and (3) decision making through consensus building. This is not just a change to a democratic form of decision making, in which the majority wins and the minority loses. With consensus building, the majority listens to the concerns of the minority and seeks ways to address those concerns. This is done through a process akin to what Peter Senge (1990; 2000) advocates in his second of five disciplines of a learning organization (mental models) – a process entailing dialogue for surfacing people's assumptions by climbing the "ladder of inference" (Senge, 2000, p. 68).

When a strong enough transformational culture and commitment to transformational leadership had been built in the Core Team, it expanded into a 25-member Leadership Team to cultivate their culture in that larger team. This expanded team was comprised of formal and

informal leaders in all stakeholder groups. As this team developed its culture for transformational leadership, it began to spread that culture more broadly through informal conversations, workshops for principals, and community forums for all school and community stakeholders who were interested. Due to this cultural change, the stakeholders of Decatur recently supported reinvention of Decatur Central High School into five interest-based small learning communities, with one of these communities housing the national model of New Tech High. Also the community supported without any opposition an \$85,000,000 bond issue to reconstruct Decatur Central High School with a design to support and house these five learning communities. This gives some sense of the power of this type of cultural change.

Based on our experience, the IU facilitators have developed a process model, the School System Transformation protocol, to provide guidance for facilitating a district-wide systemic transformation effort. We have learned much about how to help all stakeholders, from the top of the hierarchy to the bottom and even outside the hierarchy, to become transformational leaders. Ackoff argues that this kind of leadership cannot be taught, but that tools and techniques for this kind of leadership can be taught. We have come to recognize that transformational leadership requires a certain kind of mindset and values about people and their work – about how to help ordinary people accomplish extraordinary things. We agree with Ackoff (1999) that such leaders are driven by ideas, that they “are skillful at finding ways to beat a system, not surrendering to it” (p. 285), that they manage the interactions rather than the actions of their subordinates, that they deny assumptions made by most managers, that they understand the nature of systems and how transforming a system differs from reforming it, and that they focus on changing the way their system is conceptualized.

This kind of leadership brings with it a very different view (or paradigm) of accountability. Supervision relies on a reactive approach to accountability, through extrinsic punishments and/or rewards. In contrast, transformational leadership relies on a proactive approach to accountability, through intrinsic motivation by developing a deep commitment of all stakeholders to their goals and providing all participants with the professional development and other kinds of support they need to be

successful in pursuit of those goals.

Developing this kind of leadership in Decatur has not been a quick process. In fact, such cultural change is basically the collective effect of changes in many individuals’ mindsets or mental models about leadership, and this is a highly time-intensive process. It occurs primarily through many small-group discussions (or dialogue sessions in Senge’s terms). Yet, while it is by no means complete in Decatur, this cultural change has already generated a tremendous amount of energy and excitement in those whom it has touched. And it has done much to create the capacity for all stakeholders to transform the paradigm of education from the time-based, sorting-focused, standardized, factory model of schools to an attainment-based, learning-focused, customized model of schools that can provide a quantum improvement in helping all children to reach their potential.

References

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