

Of Hubs, Bridges,

Leaders seeking change must abandon the fantasy that human organizations function as hierarchies—and recognize the reality of networks.

Douglas B. Reeves

Why is true change to the status quo in schools so elusive? Because the fundamental task of leaders catalyzing change in an organization is to transform what I call “islands of excellence” into true systemic change. And most leaders perform this important task the wrong way.

You have witnessed it dozens of times: A leader becomes enthusiastic about a change initiative. Senior management attends an off-site retreat. Groups generate vision statements, purchase coffee cups and pens emblazoned with slogans, and spend extraordinary levels of time and resources to extend the initiative throughout the organization, and . . . *nothing happens*. A few people embrace the initiative, but the leaders don't admit that these enthusiastic few had already been implementing similar strategies without direction from headquarters. These isolated individuals who carry out the desired change are the islands of excellence, and their isolation is the reason that more than two-thirds of reform initiatives are never fully implemented (Kotter, 1995).

Most change initiatives fail not because of a feckless principal or inade-



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and Networks

quate training, but because they are built on an inaccurate model of how organizations function and on faulty assumptions about human behavior. I offer here an alternative framework for creating and sustaining change.

The Hierarchical Model: Playing Telephone

The failure of most change initiatives is related to the much quoted 20/80 rule, whereby 20 percent of the workers do 80 percent of the work. Leaders assume that the engaged 20 percent will even-

time the last child in the chain is asked to repeat the message, it bears little resemblance to the original words that Andy whispered to Jane. A superintendent may imagine that his or her clearly articulated message passes methodically—and accurately—from workers at the top layer of the hierarchy down to those at the bottom. In reality, if this chain of communication is ever completed, the superintendent's message retains only a fraction of its original power by the time it reaches the classroom.

frantic manhunt for the elusive information. The data are finally found shrink-wrapped in the filing cabinet of another school, unopened because the principal felt that the faculty "wasn't ready for this yet."

These examples, and dozens more, are not the result of malevolent administrators. Rather, they are evidence of the *knowing-doing gap* (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000, 2006): The school leadership knows what to do, but the stultifying effect of hierarchical communication impairs effective action.

The majority of employees take their cues from a trusted colleague rather than from the boss, the employee manual, or a silver-tongued trainer.

tually bring along the remaining 80 percent, but years after most change initiatives are started, disproportionate impact remains the rule. In fact, the disproportionate impact of a few outstanding people—the islands of excellence—can be extraordinary. But the majority of workers beyond these islands languish in mediocrity (Barabási, 2003).

The traditional procedure that school leaders use to spread change operates like the children's game of "telephone," in which Andy whispers a message to Jane, who in turn whispers whatever she heard to James, and so on. By the

My own experiences working in schools throughout North America are illustrative. I have heard a superintendent insist that a reading initiative is being implemented consistently throughout the school system, but found in a quick scan of buildings that the schools allocated highly varying amounts of time to the initiative—anywhere from 45 to 180 minutes per day. Or the director of instruction may assure the superintendent that teachers are analyzing standardized testing data in every school, but a visitor's request to know what percentage of students tested as proficient in reading sets off a

Networks: How Change Really Happens

Taking Cues from Trusted Colleagues

The failure of hierarchical models is understandable when we consider how we form human belief systems. Most leadership initiatives assume that, as rational beings, people will listen to the evidence, learn the new procedures, and follow directions. Leaders find it maddening when, even after they present the evidence and clearly teach new procedures, staff members don't implement the changes.

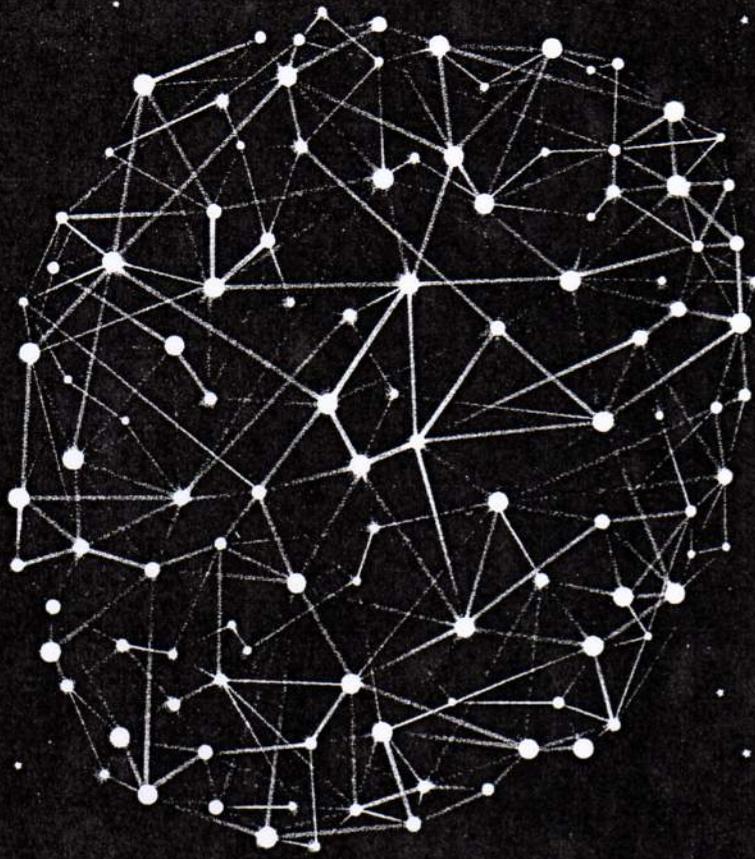
But changes in behavior do not follow the creation of a personal belief system; they precede it. Behavior does not stem from a rational consideration of evidence, but from an emotional attachment to a trusted colleague. Most workers do not feel this kind of attachment to higher-ups. In a 2004 survey, the Gallup Organization found that 55 percent of adult workers did not feel connected to the organizations that employed them—and 16 percent felt actively disengaged from their organiza-

Change spreads throughout a system on a nonlinear communication path of nodes, hubs, and superhubs.

Nodes, Hubs, and Superhubs

The emerging science of networks suggests an alternative framework for systemic change. Rather than assuming that leadership can distribute a message in a linear manner down through the hierarchy of an organization, the network framework suggests that change spreads throughout the system on a distinctly *nonlinear* communication path of nodes, hubs, and superhubs. A *node* is any single point of contact in a network; within an organization of people, a node is one individual. A *hub* is a node with multiple connections to other nodes. Within a school, a hub could be a grade-level leader, a department chair, or a principal. A *superhub* is that rare node in a network to which an exceptionally large number of other nodes and hubs are connected. In a school, the superhubs do not necessarily hold administrative titles, but they are those to whom colleagues come for advice. The superhub gets 20 times more e-mail than colleagues do. She or he receives regular classroom visits and informal observations from friends and colleagues.

Albert-Laszlo Barabási (2003) impressively documents the pervasiveness of this kind of network in biology, on the Internet, and, most important,



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trusted colleague rather than from the boss, the employee manual, or a silver-tongued trainer (Rath & Clifton, 2004). In other words, even the best leaders cannot transform islands of excellence into systemic change by relying on better bosses, clearer employee manuals, or more eloquent trainers. The delusions of strategic plans and management charts notwithstanding, organizations function not as hierarchies, but as networks.

tions (B. Sanford, personal communication, Aug. 11, 2005). Kouzes and Posner (2003) found high levels of distrust of leadership in organizations of all kinds. Leaders can certainly endeavor to become more credible, open, and trustworthy. But employee disengagement seems to be more an inherent characteristic of organizations than a reflection of poor leadership.

Gallup found that the majority of employees take their cues from a

in such organizations as schools. According to the traditional hierarchical model, nodes (people within an organization) are connected only to one or several overarching hubs (the official leaders). In reality, although information about change may be officially passed down through this linear hierarchy of hubs and nodes, when people have a question or need advice about the proposed change, they do not ask the official leader or trainer. They ask "Jill."

Jill is a superhub, or what Malcolm Gladwell (2002) calls a *maven*—one of those relatively rare people who not only knows a disproportionate number of other people, but also seems to influence them. Colleagues seek out Jill for advice on everything from restaurants to computers. To comprehend the role of people like this, ask yourself this question: The last time I needed help on a computer problem, whom did I ask? Surveys that I have conducted with various organizations show that there is a less than 20 percent chance that an individual will consult a designated help desk or information technology department. More common responses include, "my assistant," "my teenage daughter," or "Jill, the social studies teacher who seems to know everything about computers."

If you ask teachers to name those whom they would go to for help with classroom assessment, chances are slim that many would answer "the district assessment office." They are more likely to seek out a classroom teacher who is known for creative, engaging, rigorous assessments—a "Jill." Try asking where teachers would go if they needed help implementing a strategic plan, and you could probably count on the fingers of one hand the number of teachers who list the strategic planning office as their

School leaders should harness the power of networks by listening to their key members.

resource of choice. Compare that number with those who choose a particular senior teacher known for transforming strategy into action.

Leaders who want to authentically change the status quo must abandon the fantasy that their colleagues will conform to hierarchical expectations. They must instead find the islands of excellence within their school culture

and leverage the enormous potential that such individuals hold. They must, in brief, find Jill.

Finding Jill

Leaders seeking change may not be able to create a Jill. But if we can find Jill and others like her, we can nurture and leverage their superhub status to garner commitment to our change

Practical Strategies for Using Networks to Bring Change

- Select one struggling student and one gifted student to observe intently. Keep weekly journals on instructional practice. What worked? What didn't? What's next? Read from these journals at faculty meetings.
- Create an annual "Best Practices Book" every year, with each teacher contributing a single page. Give all teachers a copy of the booklet at the end of each year, and give it to new teachers as a welcome gift.
- Survey students about which teachers they would seek out for help. Ask students to identify specific teaching practices that have aided their learning.
- Some teaching cultures regard openly sharing success stories as self-promotion. Allow anonymous sharing: Before each faculty meeting or professional development session, give each teacher a form on which to anonymously record challenges and success stories. Compile the best success stories into a PowerPoint presentation.
- Focus meetings on concrete discussion of practices or questions. Make it clear that negative comments ("That will never work with *my* kids") are out of bounds.
- Arrange seats in a circle or horseshoe at meetings, so there is no back row from which "Jack the Jerk" can safely lob toxic bombs.
- Make staff development voluntary—a radical step, but worth considering. Negative people actively interfere with the learning opportunities of others and do not apply the learning themselves.
- Create a rubric that clearly defines "jerk" behavior. Some toxic hubs think their acerbic comments and put-downs are funny. But professionals should not tolerate bullying within a faculty meeting any more than they would on the playground.

Bureaucracy defends the status quo long past the time when the quo has lost its status.

—Laurence J. Peter

initiatives. A true superhub can powerfully share information, squelch negative rumors, teach key skills, and model values consistent with the improvements we seek.

Finding Jill is not easy. She may not appear on the organizational chart, at least not in one of the boxes showing official leadership. She may appear to be unexceptional, yet she has tremendous influence. To find Jill, we must understand the characteristics of the network within which Jill operates. Barabási describes a network as a web without a spider:

In the absence of a spider, there is no meticulous design behind these networks. . . . Real networks are self-organized. They offer a vivid example of how the independent actions of millions of nodes and links lead to spectacular emergent behavior. (2003, p. 221)

The most direct way to find the Jills within any organization is simply to ask numerous people within the group, "When you have a work-related problem, from whom do you ask advice?" The names given most often are the superhubs.

I have seen this kind of approach work wonders in troubled schools, such as Simpson-Waverly Elementary School in Hartford, Connecticut. A few years ago, Simpson-Waverly seemed an unlikely place for change to make inroads. Student mobility and poverty were high, with 94 percent of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch and many students not living with their

parents; teacher morale and academic achievement were low. Great teaching was happening at Simpson-Waverly, but it was isolated. Although the school's superhubs were well-connected, their quality practices were not being shared and replicated.

Instead of implementing a top-down approach and expecting faculty to carry out instructions, Principal James Thompson Jr. changed his orientation from hierarchical leader to talent scout. Thompson made it his business to identify "in-house experts," the Jills who were carrying out excellent teaching practices. He changed his role at faculty meetings from principal-as-talker to principal-as-listener. Instead of using meeting time to make announcements, Thompson sent such information by e-mail and used meetings to publicly question teachers whose students he had noticed doing high-quality work: "Ms. Jones, I noticed Jerome's writing has improved dramatically. Please tell us how you accomplished that." To make this sharing of practices—and mistakes—a risk-free endeavor, Thompson stressed that the focus was on learning, not evaluation.

Once he had identified his islands of excellence, Thompson created peer-to-peer teacher networks and established a structure for mutual observation. Although he had neither more hours in the day nor a different union contract than his counterparts, Thompson used the time he did have wisely. He freed up teacher time that was traditionally

controlled by administrators and devoted to meetings so that those hours could be used for teacher networking and collaboration. Through such networking, the islands became isolated no more, and their influence extended throughout the school.

Simpson-Waverly now outperforms some of its more affluent suburban neighbors on measures of achievement, and the school has become a statewide model for academic excellence. Personnel from the central office and other district schools often visit to observe the school's collaborative meetings.

Not all principals are as open as Thompson; leaders are sometimes reluctant to admit that Jill is a volunteer, not a conscript. Jill may not be found in the central office or in the staff development department. Should she choose to join the ranks of organizational leadership, administrators should provide this treasure of influence with development, promotion, and leadership opportunities. But for the most part, leaders must accept Jill on her own terms. We can observe her work, listen to her advice, and emulate some of her communication patterns, but we cannot mandate that Jill become anything other than who she is—an extraordinary source of power and influence within the organization. Jill will not necessarily listen to our exhortations and commands. It's the other way around: School leaders need to listen to Jill, inviting this exceptionally influential colleague to meetings, conferences, and informal discussions.

Even when Jill is sincerely opposed to a proposed change, leaders will benefit from understanding her point of view. If Jill opposes a proposed initiative, chances are that a great many of her colleagues do as well. Leaders can only influence Jill if they know her

Understanding networks is leaders' central challenge in transforming the status quo.

identity and are willing to engage in colleague-to-colleague dialogue rather than issue commands. If leaders don't learn from Jill, they may find themselves reeling from the impact of her opposite: a toxic hub known as Jack.

The Influence of Toxic Hubs

The good news is that leaders can inspire change by nurturing their super-hubs; the bad news is that most networks also feel the effects of a toxic hub, a person connected to many others who uses that influence to sow discord and undermine morale. Almost every organization has such a person, and this "Jack the Jerk" is usually far more visible than Jill. Jack is sometimes tolerated by an organization because he possesses some degree of technical ability. But whatever his or her merits, a toxic hub is not worth the cost in heightened aggravation, lowered morale, and poor communication. Just as Jill has a disproportionately positive influence in an organization, Jack the Jerk's influence is disproportionately negative. Just as a single computer infected with a virus can spread its ill effects to many others if that computer is a hub in a network, so can a toxic hub in an organization create enormous damage.

Harnessing the Power

If Isaac Newton were addressing organizational leaders on the subject of gravity, he would not ask for a vote about who believes in gravity. He would drop an apple on top of the reluctant observer and say, "That's gravity!" So it is with the force of

networks. Like gravity, networks are neither inherently positive nor inherently negative. They are an undeniable fact of life that can work for good or ill.

Understanding, identifying, and deploying networks for positive results is the central challenge of leaders who seek to transform the status quo. Rather than trying to contrive networks through organizational charts or rigid hierarchies, school leaders should harness the power of the networks that they already have by listening to their key members—which is the greatest leadership technique of all. **EL**

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