

is important because of the “upstream errors flow downstream” principle. You recall that this principle suggests that mistakes made early in a work process, if not caught, will create larger problems downstream. A cluster organized as a feeder system represents your entire core work process. Educators in those clusters will then be able to examine their entire “work stream” to identify and correct errors.

Even though the unit of change for creating and sustaining systemic school improvement is a cluster of interconnected schools, these clusters will produce whole-district improvement. Thus, the ultimate unit of change in the Step-Up-To-Excellence framework is the whole district.

Charter and Train Cluster Improvement Teams

Once you identify the clusters in your district, then the SLT and the Knowledge Work Coordinator invite each cluster to establish a special team that will lead improvement within each cluster. I call this team a Cluster Improvement Team (CIT).

The Strategic Leadership Team gives each CIT a formal charter. A *charter* is a set of “marching orders” that define performance goals, major tasks, and expected outcomes. Each CIT also receives training on principles of systemic improvement, collaboration, and creative thinking.

Conduct Cluster Engagement Conferences

At the beginning of step 1, you conducted a District Engagement Conference that resulted in a new vision for the future of your district, a set of redesign criteria, and a strategic direction for the district to move along. Now, that information is fed forward to each of the clusters and used by each Cluster Improvement Team and the faculty and staff in those clusters.

Cluster Engagement Conferences are designed and conducted in exactly the same way as the earlier District Engagement Conference. The focus of the Cluster Engagement Conferences, however, is on how each cluster can be redesigned to clearly support the district’s grand vision, redesign criteria, and strategic direction. The primary outcome of this special three-day event is a vision statement for each cluster that is un-

ambiguously aligned with the district's vision, redesign criteria, and strategic direction. It is okay if each cluster creates a different vision, as long as it clearly supports the district's grand vision and strategic direction and complies with the district's redesign criteria. A secondary outcome is the continuing development of a climate of trust, commitment, and collaboration.

Charter and Train Site Improvement Teams

Many school districts already have school improvement teams in place. A Site Improvement Team (SIT) is similar in structure and function to a school improvement team. The difference is that in the Step-Up-To-Excellence methodology, these teams are not chartered and trained until after each cluster conducts its Cluster Engagement Conference.

The Cluster Engagement Conference results in a vision statement for each cluster. This vision must support the district's vision and strategic direction and it must fit within the parameters defined by the district's redesign criteria. Each Cluster Improvement Team then charters and trains a Site Improvement Team for each school in its cluster. Each SIT receives training on principles of systemic redesign, communication skills, and creative thinking.

Conduct Redesign Workshops

Up to this point in step 1, you have created a framework for navigating whole-system improvement. This framework provides the foundation for creating innovative ideas to improve your entire school system. Now, people begin collaborating to invent creative ideas to improve your district's (1) core and supportive work processes, (2) internal social "architecture," and (3) relationship to its external environment.

The change navigation framework you created also increases the fluidity of your district's hierarchy and introduces entropy (this was discussed earlier in chapter 4). To increase the entropy and fluidity, you now engage your faculty and staff in what I call Redesign Workshops.

Redesign Workshops are designed using the principles of Participative Design articulated by Emery (Emery & Purser, 1996; Emery,

1993). These are also special three-day events that engage faculty and staff in a structured process of creative thinking to identify improvements in their clusters' core and supportive work processes, internal social architecture, and the clusters' relationships with their external environments (which include relationships with other clusters, with the central administration, and with their neighborhood communities).

Each Cluster Improvement Team organizes and conducts a Redesign Workshop for its respective cluster. The CIT invites teachers and building administrators from each Site Improvement Team in its cluster to participate in the workshop. Each SIT nominates a teacher and a building administrator from its team to attend the cluster's Redesign Workshop.

At the same time that the CITs are conducting their Redesign Workshops, the superintendent of schools is conducting a special Redesign Workshop for the central administration office staff. The purpose of this workshop is to invent ideas to transform the central administration office into a Central Service Center. One of the outcomes of this special Redesign Workshop is a vision statement for the new Central Service Center that views educators in the clusters and schools as customers to be served.

The district's grand vision, redesign criteria, and strategic direction and each cluster's vision statement put a mental "fence" around the Redesign Workshops. This fence creates a boundary within which people can exercise their creativity. In essence, what the fence communicates is that the innovative ideas for improvement that come out of the Redesign Workshops must be unambiguously aligned first with each cluster's vision and then, ultimately, with the district's grand vision and strategic direction. Innovation is encouraged, but it must have a fence around it.

Develop a Redesign Proposal

Each Redesign Workshop lasts three days. Over that period, participants create innovative ideas to redesign their clusters' work processes, internal social architecture, and environmental relationships. The central administration staff do the same thing for their office.

The major outcome of all the Redesign Workshops is a collection of wonderfully creative ideas for improving each cluster's core and sup-

portive work processes, internal social architecture, and environmental relationships, and, thereby, improving schooling throughout your entire district. Each Cluster Improvement Team collects the ideas from their Redesign Workshops. The superintendent does the same thing for the ideas that come out of the special workshop for the central administration office staff. The Knowledge Work Coordinator organizes all of the ideas into a single redesign proposal. The redesign proposal is then submitted to the Strategic Leadership Team for review and approval.

The SLT's review and approval process focuses on making sure that the redesign ideas are (1) aligned with the district's grand vision, redesign criteria, and strategic direction; (2) aligned with any extant state and federal rules and regulations; (3) truly innovative; and (4) fundable.

The SLT may find ideas that do not meet the preceding criteria. If they do find some, they meet with the respective Cluster Improvement Team and Site Improvement Teams to discuss why they think the ideas do not meet the criteria. Unilateral decisions to discard ideas are unacceptable within the context of Step-Up-To-Excellence. In some cases, together, all the involved parties may decide to discard an idea. Or, they may change their minds and re-include it in a redesign proposal.

Find and Distribute Human, Financial, Technical, and Time Resources

After the District Engagement Conference conducted earlier, which resulted in a grand vision for the district, a set of redesign criteria, and a strategic direction, the Strategic Leadership Team starts estimating the kinds and amounts of resources it might need to move its district along the strategic direction toward the district's vision (some ideas about doing this are found in chapter 7). By the time the district's redesign proposal is put in the SLT's hands, team members should have a rough estimate of the resources they will need.

Given the specific redesign proposal and the approved redesign ideas, the SLT now begins the process of finding and allocating the needed resources (see chapter 7 for more advice about this process). A large chunk of the resources will be found by reallocating existing resources and dedicating these to implementing the new, desirable ideas. Another source of funds will need to be "external" monies from the state and federal governments and private foundations. This external

money, although needed to jump-start a redesign process, should not be relied upon to sustain systemic improvement. Ultimately, the SLT creates a permanent line item in their district's operating budget to sustain whole-system change and makes the redesign process a part of the core operations of the district.

Once the resources are found and collected, then the SLT distributes the resources to each Cluster Improvement Team, which in turn continues disbursing the resources to the Site Improvement Teams. At this point, the various teams begin implementing their redesign proposals.

Implement the Redesign Proposal

It's one thing to have good intentions and wonderful ideas. It's quite another thing to turn those into reality. Good intentions (as in, "our hearts were in the right place" or "we meant well") are meaningless. If you hold a piece of paper with all your good intentions on it in one hand and a brick in the other, you know what you have—a brick and a piece of paper. You have to do something to turn your ideas and intentions into reality. Doing something requires implementation activities. Everyone has to produce results!

Implementation activities should be planned logically so that the changes you desire roll out in a natural, logical, and flowing sequence. A well-crafted implementation plan is needed. The Strategic Leadership Team, Cluster Improvement Teams, Site Improvement Teams, and the Knowledge Work Coordinator all have important roles to play during implementation.

For implementation purposes, each improvement team should be empowered to seize opportunities at the intersection of anticipatory planning and unexpected events (discussed in chapter 4) as long as these opportunities are in compliance with the district's grand vision, redesign criteria, and strategic direction.

Encourage Formation of Organizational Learning Networks

When you implement your redesign proposals, individual, team, school, cluster, and district performance levels will temporarily decline as everyone moves toward the edge of chaos (see chapter 4). Move-

ment down the performance curve is unavoidable and necessary. At some point, that downward slide will bottom out and everyone will start to move back up the performance curve toward your district's grand vision.

Another tool that is part of the Step-Up-To-Excellence methodology, called Organizational Learning Networks, can be used to facilitate movement of individual and team learning down and up the performance curve. These are small "communities of practice" or study groups for people who share a common interest or common practice. These networks form, explore a topic, learn a new skill together, disband, and re-form with new members to explore different interests. Although these networks are not "ordered" to form, when they do form, they are expected to share their learning with others in their schools and clusters. These networks are absolutely essential for helping your school district create and diffuse organization-wide professional knowledge and skills.

Conduct On-Track Seminars

Another important tool that is part of the Step-Up-To-Excellence approach is the On-Track Seminar. There is an old saying that goes something like this, "There's a lot of slip between the cup and the lip." In other words, even the best implementation plan cannot guarantee perfection—there will be "slip." No matter how well you plan, there will be unexpected consequences, surprising new problems, and stunning unanticipated opportunities.

On-Track Seminars are specially designed discussion groups built on the principles of "evaluative inquiry" (Preskill & Torres, 1999). The purpose of these sessions, which are conducted for the various redesign teams and the Knowledge Work Coordinator, is to conduct what the literature calls "implementation feedback." The results of these periodic seminars are used to make needed course corrections for the redesign effort or to seize unexpected opportunities for improvement that might pop up during the implementation period.

Let's digress for a few minutes to take a look at Preskill and Torres's (1999) model for evaluative inquiry in learning organizations. I'm excited about this model because it complements the Step-Up-To-Excellence

methodology and dovetails nicely with a summative evaluation methodology that is described later under step 5—Stufflebeam's (2000) Context, Inputs, Processes, and Products (CIPP) model.

Evaluative Inquiry in Learning Organizations

School districts are learning organizations. Preskill and Torres (1999) developed their evaluative inquiry model for learning organizations. Their model also reinforces a lot of what I've been talking about so far regarding Step-Up-To-Excellence; for example, they say:

Continuous organizational change is resulting in less organizational stability and a redefinition of who we are and what we do in the workplace. The traditional structures that have given us a feeling of solidity and predictability have vanished. This shift has placed a greater emphasis on the need for fluid processes that can change as an organization and its members' needs change. Instead of the traditional rational, linear, hierarchical approach to managing jobs, which focused on breaking down job tasks and isolating job functions, tomorrow's jobs will be built on establishing networks of relationships. (p. xvii)

According to Preskill and Torres, their evaluative inquiry model not only helps you gather information for decision making and action, but it also helps you question and debate the value of what you do in your district. The principles of evaluative inquiry undergird the On-Track Seminars that are used to provide you and your colleagues with implementation feedback.

Evaluative Inquiry Has Three Phases and Incorporates Four Key Learning Processes

Evaluative inquiry moves you through three phases: phase 1—focusing the evaluative inquiry, phase 2—carrying out the inquiry, and phase 3—applying learning. During each of the phases, people come together to engage in a learning process that incorporates four key learning processes: dialogue, reflection, asking questions, and identifying and clarifying values, beliefs, assumptions, and knowledge.

Preskill and Torres's evaluative inquiry model is 100 percent compatible with Step-Up-To-Excellence. It is also compatible with Stufflebeam's CIPP model for summative evaluation that is described later under step 5. This level of compatibility offers a great deal of benefit to your efforts to redesign your district. The linkage of the evaluative inquiry model to the CIPP model provides one powerful evaluation model to assess your district's overall performance. It not only produces evaluation data, but also produces individual, team, and system learning. Now, that's commanding!

How Long Will Step 1 Take?

The amount of time needed to complete all of the redesign activities up to implementation will be relatively short; for example, the various engagement conferences are only three days each. The amount of time needed to implement your redesign proposals, however, will vary depending on the size of your district, the complexity of the redesign ideas, the political environment in your community, and your district's relationship with its teachers union. On average, according to the literature on whole-system improvement, implementation periods may take eighteen to thirty-six months (Pasmore, 1988), with some as long as four years (Odden, 1998), and still others extending to five to seven years (Kotter, 1995).

STEPS 2 TO 4: CREATE STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT

During and following the implementation period, you and your colleagues will need to focus sharply on creating strategic alignment. Alignment activities are conducted during steps 2 through 4 of the Step-Up-To-Excellence framework.

Strategic alignment is a systematic way of linking people, priorities, practices, and processes with your districts' strategic goals and grand vision. More than anything else, strategic alignment is a structured, planned way of ensuring that everyone in your district is committed to making a contribution and adding value to the services you provide to children.

Schwan and Spady (1998, n.p.) talk about the importance of strategic alignment in their comments about why strategic change fails in school districts. They say:

What's missing in most cases is a concrete, detailed vision statement that describes what the organization will look like when operating at its ideal best to accomplish its declared purpose, as well as a systematic process we call *strategic alignment*. Strategic alignment occurs when the structure, policies, procedures, and practices of the organization totally support the organization's vision.

They continue by observing:

The alignment of the organizational vision with the actions of those who are part of the organization is a critical step in creating real and lasting change. Such alignment is best fostered and assured through the supervision process. Every supervisor in the district—from the superintendent to the teacher—is a linking pin. Every individual links one part of the organization to another. If the vision is lost by any pin, implementation of the vision becomes an option for anyone supervised by that pin, and in turn for anyone who reports to that pin's supervisees.

Getting All the Horses to Pull the Wagon in the Same Direction

Creating strategic alignment is like getting a team of horses to pull a wagon in the same direction. You can't have each horse trying to pull the wagon in a different direction. In much the same way, change-leaders in school districts cannot have teams, schools, clusters, and individuals all doing their "own thing" with total disregard for their district's strategic goals and grand vision. This is not exactly an effective way to manage a district.

Step 1: Get the Horses out of the Barn

Before you hitch all the horses to a wagon, you have to bring them out of the barn. In the same way, before educators can step up to excellence they have to redesign their district to move toward higher

levels of performance. Once a school district is redesigned as described earlier, then educators align the work of individuals with the goals of their teams, the work of teams with the goals of their schools, the work of schools with the goals of their clusters, and the work of clusters with the goals of the district. The alignment process starts at the level of the district and then works inward to the level of teams and individuals. Let me tell you a little bit about each of the steps in the alignment process.

Step 2: Align the Performance of Clusters

Remember, you not only want to align each cluster's work with the grand vision and strategic direction of your district, you also want to make sure that each cluster's newly designed internal social architecture is motivating and satisfying; that each cluster's core work processes (teaching and learning) and supportive work processes (administration, supervision, secretarial, pupil personnel services, cafeteria, busing, and so on) are working as desired; and that each cluster has positive relationships with its external environment. You also want to make sure that policies, procedures, rules, and so forth that may interfere with individual and team performance are removed or changed.

Step 3: Align Performance of Individual Schools

Step-Up-To-Excellence recognizes that school-based management is a necessary element of systemic school improvement; however, by itself, it is insufficient to produce systemic improvement. Instead, the focus of school improvement needs to be "scaled-up" to improve entire school systems. Rhodes (1997) also supports this view when he says, "The scope and nature of the local school system makes it the optimal unit in which can be embedded the needed infrastructures to sustain that process. The process of systemic change cannot end there, but it is the only realistic place that it can start" (p. 33).

Just as each ship in a naval fleet sailing out of port goes under its own power with its captain and its crew, each school in a cluster must

do the daily work of schooling. This work is not possible in any other way. It is in the classrooms in these schools that teachers help children learn. But each school should not “sail” alone with total disregard for the goals of its cluster, the work of its sister schools, or for the strategic vision of the entire district. The teaching and learning inside each classroom of each school must be linked clearly and powerfully to the goals of the clusters, and with the district’s vision and strategic direction. The fleet must sail together as one.

Step 4: Align Performance of Teams and Individuals

By completing steps 2 and 3, you are applying the “outside-in thinking” technique.² This ensures that the conditions for effective team and individual performance are in place and functioning well. Now, you take a look at how teams and individuals are performing in your newly redesigned school district. Please remember that I am not just talking about teachers here—“teams and individuals” include education specialists, administrators, supervisors, cafeteria workers, bus drivers, janitors—everyone in the district.

The logic behind alignment activities (i.e., the reason for moving sequentially from step 2 through step 4) is that if you want your district to achieve higher levels of performance, then you must ensure that conditions to support effective performance are in place and functioning at each level. And if you want to sustain systemic improvement, you want to make sure these conditions stay in place. If the conditions for success are not in place at the district and cluster levels, it is unreasonable to expect improvement in individual and team performance. Further, roadblocks and obstacles to success (e.g., obstructionist policies, faulty procedures, and so on) must also be removed starting at the level of the district and moving inward toward the performance of individuals. Removing obstacles in this manner is called “outside-in” change management (Beckhard, 1983). Here’s how it works within the Step-Up-To-Excellence framework:

1. Change-leaders first ensure that the district-level vision and strategic direction are in place as expected.

2. Then, they examine district-level policies, procedures, expectations, and the like to ensure that these things will help people succeed in improving their clusters, schools, and teams.
3. Then, they ensure that each cluster has its conditions for success in place and functioning and that these conditions are aligned with the district's vision and strategic goals.
4. Then, they look at individual schools to determine if they have their required conditions for success in place and whether their performance is aligned with the goals of their clusters.
5. Then, they look at the various teams to make sure that they have their required conditions for success in place and functioning and to see whether their performance is aligned with the goals of their schools.
6. At each point—moving from the outside in, necessary corrective actions are taken to ensure that the desired conditions for success are in place and functioning as expected.
7. Then, *and only then*, the performance of individuals is evaluated and aligned.

The reason for this outside-in alignment sequence is that by doing it this way, you create a work environment within which the performance of teams and individuals is supported by the conditions and resources they need to succeed. Then, if teams and individuals are not performing as expected, they have no excuse for less-than-expected performance levels and they can be held accountable for not performing as expected.

Creating strategic alignment, as described here, accomplishes three things: first, it ensures that everyone is working toward the same district-level broad strategic goals and grand vision. Second, it weaves a web of accountabilities that makes everyone who touches the educational experience of a child accountable for his or her part in shaping that experience. And, third, it removes (by using the outside-in tactic) bureaucratic hassles, dysfunctional policies, and obstructionist procedures that limit individual and team effectiveness. Deming (1986), among others, says that it is these hassles, policies, and procedures that cause at least 80 percent of the performance problems that are usually blamed on individuals and teams.

Using Implementation Feedback to Create and Sustain Strategic Alignment

Implementation feedback is where you take a good look at how the improvements you are making in clusters, schools, and teams are being implemented. Feedback is also collected about the effectiveness of new policies, procedures, and working relationships. Then, everyone is expected to take the necessary actions either to reinforce what they're doing right or to correct what they're doing wrong. Individuals and teams are then held accountable for taking these actions and producing results (remember, good intentions are not good enough—people have to produce results).

Within the Step-Up-To-Excellence framework, implementation feedback is provided in the On-Track Seminars that are conducted periodically. These seminars produce results that are used to keep your redesign effort on track and to help create strategic alignment.

Cummings and Worley (2001) discuss the importance of implementation feedback for organization development purposes. They say:

Most OD [organization development] interventions require significant changes in people's behaviors and ways of thinking about organizations. . . . Implementing such changes requires considerable learning and experimentation as employees and managers discover how to translate these general prescriptions [the required changes] into specific behaviors and procedures. This learning process involves much trial and error and needs to be guided by information about whether behaviors and procedures are being changed as intended. (p. 175)

Since Step-Up-To-Excellence is an organization development intervention, and since creating strategic alignment is an important goal for this intervention, implementation feedback becomes a primary tool.

Another important reason for using implementation feedback is related to one of the core principles of sociotechnical systems design; that is, *minimal specificity*. This principle advises change-leaders to define minimally the specifics of desired improvements. In applying this principle, then, individuals and teams have the freedom and authority to add specificity as needed. This freedom to add specificity, however, creates a problem for a school district because as

specificity is added, unintentional and intentional deviations from what was expected occur. Thus, to achieve strategic alignment, change-leaders have to bring everything back into alignment. Implementation feedback helps do this.

Weave and Strum a Web of Accountabilities

Another very important outcome of Step-Up-To-Excellence is that when you redesign your district's internal social architecture in accordance with the principles discussed so far, what you are creating is a "web of accountabilities" (Merrifield, 1998). It's ineffective and unfair to hold classroom teachers solely responsible for student success. Instead, you need to adopt the mental model of a web of accountabilities. You weave this web by tying together the various redesign teams that you created with the Organizational Learning Networks that are used to promote organizational learning. The link pin that holds this web together is the Knowledge Work Coordinator. This networked "web" focuses on helping your district achieve its grand vision and strategic direction.

The performance of individual teachers, administrators, and support staff must also be woven into this web. Once woven, the web is strummed so all in it feel the vibration of accountability pulsing through their individual and collective consciousness. Everyone in the web—from school board members to the night-shift janitor—must clearly realize the consequences of nonperformance, and each one must also clearly realize the rewards associated with success and high performance.

Benefits of Creating and Maintaining Strategic Alignment

By creating and maintaining strategic alignment, your school district may experience the following benefits:

1. Greater success as people, priorities, practices, and processes are aligned with a district's strategic goals and vision
2. Improved service to students and their parents because of improved work processes, a more satisfying and motivating work environment for employees, and stronger relationships with external stakeholders