

Why a School Doesn't Run -- or Change -- Like a Business

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As the pace of change accelerates in many areas of American life, those who govern our schools can encounter -- and sometimes cause -- growing frustration. More and more trustees are becoming convinced that innovation is vital to preparing students for an ever more challenging future. This is especially true among trustees who themselves work in fields undergoing explosive change. Eager to help their schools innovate, they are often amazed and chagrined by the resistance they encounter and by the schools' persistently slow pace of implementation.

They press administrators to employ corporate-style approaches to recalcitrant staff: financial incentives, numerical improvement targets (in test scores or college admissions), supervisory pressure, fire-and-hire. For their part, heads and administrators know that schools often respond badly to such measures, but struggle to explain how and why.

Consulting to a variety of corporations and to scores of schools has helped me to see that businesspeople, though they bring real commitment and the best intentions to their trusteeship, live by assumptions that are very different from educators'. They can govern more effectively -- and reduce their own frustration -- by understanding the features that distinguish schools and their implications for decision-making.

What Makes Schools Unique

Schools are much more like families and religious institutions than like corporations and other professional organizations -- so much so that corporate models and assumptions rarely fit them well, especially with respect to four key facets of school life and culture: mission, operations, outcomes, and personnel.

Mission. Education is fundamentally a backward-looking enterprise. At the leading edge of a new millennium in a nation obsessed with innovation, this may seem a terrible condemnation; it is not. Looking back is an inevitable, central feature of schooling. A school's mission is to transmit knowledge and values, to prepare children for the future, which it can only do by teaching them about the past -- not just history, but the assembled body of knowledge in each subject. We can only teach what we know. Moreover, much of our curriculum, though certainly not all, is, if not fixed, slow-changing (fractions, the meanings of *Hamlet*, the causes of the American Revolution, and so on) and many independent schools especially pride themselves on their devotion to enduring truths and established traditions. Continuity is a core value in school life. Good teaching is always creative, but not perpetually innovative, and while it benefits from regular refreshers and occasional overhauls, it doesn't demand the kind of continuous updating that, say, law or medicine or high technology do.

Operations. Given its mission, a school must be sufficiently businesslike to survive, but it is no more about profit than a family is. It serves, but is no more a "service organization" than a church or a synagogue is. Because its goals are to teach skills and build character and citizenship, teachers' daily work -- instructing, advising, counseling, coaching -- is most akin to that of parents and pastors. This means that a school's norms of behavior are closest to those of a family or a church: nurture, caring, cooperation, generosity, and the like. It also means that teaching is both very personal and highly individual. Even in schools where faculty work in teams these units rarely function like those in medical, legal, or corporate settings: much of their daily work still involves one teacher with a group of students.

Outcomes. A school's "product" is never clear cut. America's current frenzy over accountability and "high-stakes" testing rests, at heart, on a simplistic, misapplied factory model of education: raw resources enter; workers make inputs; outputs emerge; faulty outputs must indicate faulty inputs. But a school's "value

added" is extremely hard to measure. For one thing, our best-performing schools, public and private, usually serve wealthier students; our worst-performing schools, poorer students. For another, a complex array of external factors, from divorce and poverty to the Internet and TV, affects the motivation and performance of all students. (American youth now spend an average of 38 hours per week in front of TV and computer screens.) Moreover, teaching is never the consistent delivery of a defined "input." No lesson, even with the best students, is uniformly replicable. When I taught three sections of honors English, using the exact same texts and lesson plans, no two classes were ever the same. The response of each section was different, and varied from day to day, depending on who was absent, who had just fallen in love, how many had mastered the homework, and so on.

Personnel. Of all the special features of schooling, the most important is its people. Teachers differ from those who select corporate careers. Education attracts people with both a strong service ethic and a desire for job security, not entrepreneurs with a thirst for risk and competition. It is the only field that offers tenure (even if this is only implicit in independent schools), and it draws those who will trade salary for stability. Teachers tend to switch employers less frequently than other professionals, to look for a school that is a good "home" and stay there. They are hardly insensitive to money, but it doesn't drive their careers as much as it does those of corporate managers. Like the clergy, they don't expect to grow wealthy. Also like the clergy, teachers tend to be less worldly than corporate professionals. Trustees often find them naive about budgets and overly sensitive to criticism, however mild. But in schools, unlike corporate, medical, and legal settings, conflict avoidance is a way of life. Teachers are, after all, people who thrive in -- and often prefer -- the company of children and adolescents and who try to accentuate the positive. Would we want our children taught by people who *didn't*?

Though not high-flying risk-takers, teachers do share one thing in common with entrepreneurs: a love of autonomy. Their occupation permits them maximal freedom and minimal supervision. Few independent schools require teachers to adhere to a strict, centralized curriculum, but even in those that do, teachers have great latitude in emphasis and approach. They cherish their freedom and tend to see themselves -- and to behave -- as artisans in their separate studios, practicing their craft as they see fit. This outlook can seem antiquated and shortsighted to those who seek definitive, structured student outcomes, but there is a real-life logic to it because, as noted above, teachers' work is so idiosyncratic and unpredictable and requires so much improvisation.

Fostering Constructive Change

None of this means that board members must accept the *status quo* and not press for improvements. It does mean that approaches to governance and strategies for change must respect the realities of school life. This respect begins with key perspectives about motivation and innovation and calls for clarity, focus, and continuity in the leading of change.

Motivation. Educators do not respond to the same incentives as businesspeople and school heads have much less clout than their corporate counterparts to foster improvement. Most teachers want higher salaries but react badly to offers of money for performance. Merit pay, so routine in the corporate world, has a miserable track record in education. It almost never improves outcomes and almost always damages morale, sowing dissension and distrust, for three excellent reasons, among others: (1) teachers are driven to help their own students, not to outperform other teachers, which violates the ethic of service and the norms of collegiality; (2) as artisans engaged in idiosyncratic work with students whose performance can vary due to factors beyond school control, teachers often feel that there is no rational, fair basis for comparison; and (3) in schools where all faculty feel underpaid, offering a special sum to a few sparks intense resentment. At the same time, school leaders have limited leverage over poor performers. Although few independent schools have unionized staff and formal tenure, all are increasingly vulnerable to legal action for wrongful dismissal; it can take a long time and a large expense to dismiss a teacher. Moreover, the cost of firing is often prohibitive in terms of its damage to morale. Given teachers' desire for security, the personal nature of their work, and their comparative lack of worldliness, the dismissal of a colleague sends shock waves through a faculty, raising anxiety even among the most talented.

Innovation. As should be clear by now, schools, for good reasons, change at a glacial pace. All the characteristics above make them conservative organizations and guarantee that they will be harder to change than almost every other kind of institution -- except perhaps a family or a church. (Imagine trying to innovate in your family or your place of worship; changing a school is only slightly less difficult.) Schools *do* change, but far more slowly and incrementally than companies do. In reality, it would be awful if this weren't so, if schools were readily flexible rather than agencies of continuity. The traditions of schooling link the generations of our society. They give shape and meaning not just to our children's lives but to our own. And meaning, it turns out, is crucial to innovation. How any of us react to any change depends chiefly on what the change means to us. Change is always pressed in the name of progress, but its early impact is frequently to cause loss because it upsets the patterns, practices, relationships, and assumptions by which we have lived and which have made our lives meaningful. This is true of big changes and small ones -- not just of implementing a new curriculum, but of changing the daily schedule. And while workers in all settings experience change as loss, this is especially true in education, where continuity is so important.

Clarity. When a board is convinced that change is necessary, the first step is to work with the administration to make the case for improvement. Innovation often falters because trustees and administrators fail to grasp how an initiative comes across to teachers -- what it means to them. For any major change teachers must be clear about three essential points -- *why, what, and how*: why they (or the school) can't continue a current practice; what new practice must be adopted; and how they will be helped to accomplish this. This means acknowledging candidly aspects of the change that cause loss, and allowing people time to grieve and time to make the change their own. It also means a sustained effort to be sure that the change is "user-friendly," that teachers' questions and concerns are addressed, and their suggestions solicited and considered.

Focus. In schools, "change" too often means "addition," rather than "replacement." Because we have a national consensus that schools must innovate, but not about how, schools are at the mercy of all sorts of proposals, many promising (but not all) and none simple. Many schools' improvement plans are overloaded, involving a series of complex projects in curriculum, instruction, technology, assessment, inclusion, and governance. And most plans require most teachers to be engaged in most of these initiatives simultaneously (whereas corporations frequently form project teams that each concentrate on one aspect of an innovation). Because change is so inimical to schools, it is vital to concentrate on a very few key priorities. Ideally, each faculty member would be engaged in one major change at a time and a whole school would be pursuing no more than three. The paradox here is that a school can accomplish more change by tackling an achievable agenda than by over-trying.

Continuity. A related paradox is that even as a school faces change, it must preserve continuity, which is so vital to the meaningfulness of school life for both teachers and students. Making change meaningful is the best way to sustain morale and generate commitment. Three steps are helpful here. First, wherever possible, change must be linked to the enduring values that have bound people together and that lie at the heart of the school, not simply sold as the latest new idea. Second, everyone needs to know what won't change, what they can count on to remain in place. Third, people need to be reminded of their strengths and helped to maximize their "old" competence as they struggle to master new tasks, roles, and behaviors.

Working with educators and trustees, as they have struggled with issues of change, has left me with a tremendous respect for the realities of school life. Schools are simply less suited to innovation than most organizations, and they adapt more slowly. We may wish they were different, but they have good reason to be as they are. The business they are in, the raising of the young, is not just traditional but timeless. We can best help them fulfill their mission in new ways by meeting them on their own terms, tempering our expectations, concentrating our efforts, and celebrating their strengths.

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Thinking of Adopting a Corporate Model? Read This First

A report, noted in *The Wall Street Journal*, suggests that the organizational model for schools and other nonprofits, while different from the corporate organizational model, has much to recommend it. In fact, many businesses and corporations are discovering that they can learn valuable lessons from the nonprofit sector. "The people who run charities and other nonprofits," the *Journal* reports, "have a long history of managing under uncertain conditions, satisfying multiple stakeholders, building passionate work forces, and developing nonfinancial measurements of goals -- the kind of issues that are becoming hot topics in corporate management." The report comes from the Harvard Business School Publishing Corp. in Boston. Judith Kidd, assistant dean of Harvard College for Public Service, says it's key for businesses to find a way of getting more people to think about nonquantifiable issues and to build viewpoints of many stakeholders into a company's strategic plan. As a bonus, the *Journal* notes, nonprofits "excel at finding the next generation of leaders." Change is always pressed in the name of progress, but its early impact is frequently to cause loss, because it upsets the patterns, practices, relationships, and assumptions by which we have lived and which have made our lives meaningful.