**Focus Your Team**

*The clearer the target, the more people hit the mark.*

In their top-selling book *Switch: How to Change Things When Change Is Hard,* Chip and Dan Heath review and synthesize decades of research about change and change leadership. One of the greatest findings their research unveils is that “what looks like resistance is often a lack of clarity.” Specifically, others may seem unwilling to move because they aren’t sure what the direction is or what their first step down the path should be. Therefore, a key responsibility for superintendents (who largely get things done through the work of others) is to facilitate organizational focus and clarity.

In a previous article called “Grow Your Team,” I detailed how a superintendent early in the role can build movement forward through intentional leadership development approaches involving the entire administrative team. In this article, I want to focus how that growth is further stimulated by developing clear focus and feedback that allows for collective responsibility and accountability to be nurtured.

Getting Started

A key lever for building focus is to align the sites and leaders in a district with the overall system. This involves identifying a common mission, vision, and strategic objectives for the district, typically through a comprehensive strategic planning process. Such a process, done well, can be one of the greatest opportunities for a new leader to pull people together around a common focus that stimulates forward movement.

Providing Focus, Feedback, and Accountability

As a strategic plan is being put in place, a new superintendent will also want to look closely at the systems set up that provide organizational focus, feedback, and accountability.

This may involve building structures for feedback and accountability or refining those already in place. Regardless, some key considerations are the following:

* **Focus Each School** – Your system should have a process for data-informed, continuous school improvement in place. Such a process should lead to each school having an annual plan, which details building-based goals and specific actions adults in the system will take that are designed to result in specific student achievement gains for the given school. Such efforts will also typically require that district leaders promote understanding about cycles of inquiry, performance measurement, and team selection and facilitation.
* **Provide Clear Measures of Progress** – With clear goals in place, clear performance targets can be identified. An increasing number of systems are finding performance scorecards and/or dashboards to provide a more balanced and transparent means of communicating progress in student achievement than traditional methods. Given that annual continuous improvement plans generally include specific staff initiatives to pursue, superintendents are wise to also embed some sort of progress monitoring tool that helps school and district leaders lay out specific milestones of progress for each improvement initiative. Such a tool also typically includes when a given milestone is “due” and who is responsible for accomplishing the specific task. By building a quick check-in of such a tool at regular meetings, focus is sustained, collective accountability is enhanced, and momentum forward is built.
* **Differentiate Support** – Just as no two students are the same, so is it true for any two schools or school leaders. Therefore, wise superintendents understand that the degree of support they/their teams provide should be differentiated as needed. Moreover, given the challenges of leading and managing change, superintendents often find that securing effective coaches for principals may present one of the best returns on investment of any a district can make. Overall, an effective coach can provide a safe sounding board for principals for working through the complexities of change leadership, ensuring questions are addressed, and strengthening focus and commitment so that movement forward continues.
* **Include Stakeholder Feedback** – Leadership is hard work, especially because it ultimately involves encouraging others to move to a new place in their thinking and actions. Therefore, it seems critical that annual feedback loops are built in to provide each school leader opportunity to gain an objective “sense of the pulse” of those he/she leads. Over time, feedback systems can be built in that gather input from staff, parents and (where appropriate) students. Good instruments can be obtained (or can be homegrown) that build upon research in the field and that increasingly allow for national benchmarking of results, if such comparative data is desired. Such efforts broaden feedback to school and district leaders and also help identify areas for future focus of leadership effort.
* **Provide Comprehensive Supervision** – With these systems in place, a superintendent is able to hold a robust mid- and end-of-year performance review with each principal. Asking principals to submit a self-reflection somewhere in this process prior to one of the review meetings is particularly insightful to build understanding and assist in continuous growth. Key discussion points for each meeting can center upon A) what the school scorecard is telling us, B) how the school’s continuous improvement plan is responsive to the data on the school scorecard, C) how stakeholder feedback informs the school’s improvement work, and D) what coaching or other support/resources might be needed to meet the school’s / district’s goals for the year. More than anything else, these meetings should provide excellent opportunity to deepen the dialogue around continuous improvement, with the goal of providing exceptional service to the school’s students and the larger community.

Developing Line of Sight

By developing clear targets and processes for building focus, feedback, and collective accountability, school superintendents hope to develop a “line of sight” for every employee in the system. This means that every employee can see how his/her role aligns with where the system is going and how his/her efforts contribute to the advancement of the organization’s vision.

**Reference**

Heath, C. & Heath, D. (2010). *Switch: how to change things when change is hard.* New York:

Broadway Books.