C H A P T E R   O N E

Why Reframe Professional Lives of Educators?

Our interest in reframing the professional lives of educators began some 15 years ago. Working with highly committed and creative teachers as well as dedicated principals who sought to transform their schools, we sensed that the long hours they spent seldom brought the results they wanted. Often, we witnessed frustration and disenchantment. Why couldn't we find a way for educators to overcome the barriers they encounter in realizing the goals they have for the students they serve?

Over the years, we developed a model for designing the professional life of schools that enables educators to work smarter, not more, and achieve the goals they set for themselves and for their students. It is a model based on systems thinking and designed to help educators manage the ever-changing conditions and expectations thrust upon them. The model also helps dissolve the frequent frustrations that arise from great ideas seldom realized, great plans thrown in the circular file, or much effort expended to produce only meager results. Despite the shifts in expectations and needs of educators in the past 20 years, the way we organize professional lives remains largely the same.

Even as late as the 1990s, the daily life of a teacher resembled that of the independent contractor who only shared the school's

parking lot with other educators. With the classroom door closed, teachers honed their craft as educational entrepreneurs.

By 2001, public accountability for student performance that attached labels to students and schools became almost universal in the United States. The structure of professional life changed. Fewer independent contractors occupied classrooms—at least in the subjects and grades responsible for creating the accountability labels. Now, educators frequently collaborate within grade- and subject-level teams creating vibrant, but inwardly focused, silos of professionalism. Teachers not involved in the proficiency triathlon—usually kindergarten through second-grade teachers in elementary schools; social studies, art, music, and vocational/ technical teachers at the secondary level; and physical education teachers at all levels—often live "outside" these silos. Yet, many of the problems, as well as the solutions, exist outside the silos.

Certainly, many educators find the 30 years of national concern about public schools a bit tiring. Reform fatigue hits many. Establishing a robust and adaptable system for organizational learning, however, will be essential as schools continue to be subjected to mandates from local, state, and federal entities. Educators enter yet another phase of new expectations—to adopt more rigorous academic standards, intensify their reliance on diagnostic data to determine student needs, and expand their instructional tool kits to address the diverse learning needs of students. With the right structure for processing and absorbing these waves of change, teachers and students can thrive.

Peter Senge (1990) introduced systems thinking to educators. What was (and still is) missing are the structures and processes schools need for systems thinking to make a difference. We seek to provide educators the missing tools to develop what organizational gurus call "the learning organization." Envisioned by Donald Schon (1973), a learning organization is one that is "capable of bringing about its own transformation" (p. 28). You may be working in a learning organization if you don't recall thinking, "Here we go again." But creating that condition requires that we pay attention to how we organize professional life at schools—how information flows, the form in which leadership is shared, the diversity of perspectives we use to solve problems, and the degree to which our interdependence as educators becomes

an opportunity rather than a nightmare. We need ways in which teachers are heard and principals gain some relief.

Before we dig deeper into what it means to be a learning organization, we consider cases where things are not working. Scientists usually cannot understand the importance of certain aspects of human systems until things fall apart, that is, when things break down or don't seem to work as expected. For instance, if we all have strong support networks in our lives, we cannot appreciate their value. If we begin by reviewing cases where organizational structures or processes compromise the quality of decisions, we can better appreciate the types of structures and processes that can improve school situations. In this chapter, we gain a better understanding of the importance of certain school practices by reviewing cases where things are not working as they should. In the next chapter, we take on the serious business of understanding what a learning organization relying on systems thinking looks like, and the structure and processes needed to support it.

ORGANIZATIONAL PROBLEMS

Case 1: Constipating Structures

Some years ago, the state of California decided to enhance the leadership skills of its teachers. Principals from all over the state identified teachers from each of their schools for a summer workshop designed to improve strategies for identifying problems and evaluating alternative solutions. Researchers subsequently met with the teachers and principals to assess the impact. For several years, the training had little discernable impact, yet the teachers considered the summer training highly effective (Chrispeels & Martin, 2002). Why this disconnect?

Few of the teachers who attended the workshop became (or were already) members of a school leadership team. Despite this, most met regularly at each of their respective schools. They identified school problems, analyzed possible solutions, and, in some cases, made recommendations to their principal. In one school, newly trained teacher-leaders reviewed the challenges faced by their school and concluded that the class schedule was a great impediment to learning and needed to be changed. With great

enthusiasm, they discussed their recommendation with the principal. She promptly dismissed it. A reasonable inference, not mentioned in the case study, concerns future actions of these teachers and their principal: The teachers likely closed their classrooms' doors and avoided professional responsibilities beyond their classrooms. The principal likely acquired further evidence that one should avoid recruiting teacher-leaders for fear that some unworkable proposal emerges.

These schools are no different than most high schools—populated as they are by a number of advisory groups, councils, or committees. Even with much specification about the role of each group, a principal is often hard-pressed to know which committees should be consulted. Consider the structure of relationships shown in Figure 1.1. Seven different advisory groups, likely with overlapping responsibilities, are available to the principal. A student discipline advisory council interacts with two others groups, but not the safe schools team. The technology committee appears to have no connections with other groups. What is the likelihood that great ideas get lost or morph into something entirely different as they travel from one group to another? How much time and energy do administrators expend trying to explain one advisory group's reasoning and evidence to another one?

> It is usually a bad idea to establish a special committee to investigate a problem.

Do the roles of the academic advisory council, site leadership team, and the shared leadership team overlap? Proposals likely get stuck between advisory groups or, worse yet, in an administrator's office. This structure for sharing leadership simply increases administrators' burdens and frustrates participants.

So what lessons can be extracted? A myriad of advisory groups with overlapping responsibilities and advice flow mostly through administrators and ensure that nothing much will happen. Marzano and his colleagues' (2001) case for shared leadership makes great sense to all school administrators, but clearly some ways of sharing leadership are more problematic than others.
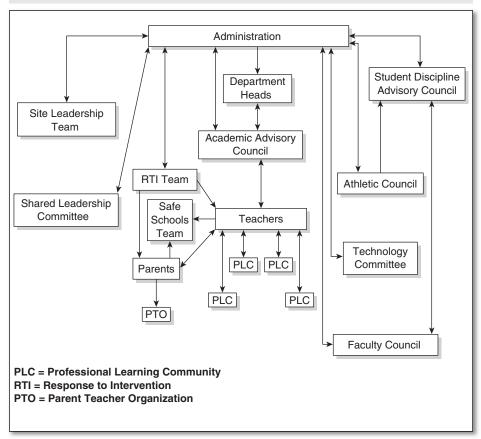
Figure 1.1   Organization Chart for Anon High School

PLC = Professional Learning Community
RTI = Response to Intervention
PTO = Parent Teacher Organization

Case 2: Debilitating Processes

Most of us can remember where we were when the Columbia shuttle disaster occurred in 2003. We were nervous to learn that mission control had lost contact with the astronauts. As broadcasters reached for comforting explanations, Columbia debris scattered over Texas, Arkansas, and Louisiana. Finally, the dreadful and unexpected news: the Columbia shuttle had burst into

flames on its re-entry into Earth's atmosphere. Rescuers found only shattered remains of the shuttle and its occupants.

Less well-known, much less remembered, is the fact that the *process* of making decisions contributed to this disaster. Much could have been done—possibly even a rescue—if the review process had been different. Transcripts show that conclusions were reached *before* evidence was explored—a process that blocked discovering alternatives.

In fact, James Surowiecki's (2004) investigation finds that staff engineers were quite concerned about the damage falling foam had done to the wings' tiles during liftoff. They initiated discussions with their supervisor about the risks involved and how they might acquire data to assess the risks and possible solutions.

As the shuttle circled Earth, team managers held a conference call—including the team leader for the engineers. As the conference call neared its end, the head manager asked the engineers' supervisor about possible damage to the tiles. He reported that the staff was hoping to have the opportunity to evaluate the situation. Neither the team leader nor others on the conference call asked any follow-up questions, such as how the engineers might complete such an evaluation. Instead, the team leader ended the exploration of the issue by saying: "I really don't think there is much we can do so it's really not a factor during the flight because there is not much we can do" (Surowiecki, 2004, p. 174). In fact, there were several things that could have been done.

The process for reviewing potential problems that led to the Columbia disaster not only eliminated evidence on the foam, but also obscured the organizational causes of potential problems. The board investigating the Columbia accident concluded:

> Many accident investigations make the same mistake in defining causes. They identify the widget that broke or malfunctioned, then locate the person most closely connected with the technical failure: the engineer who miscalculated an analysis, the operator who missed signals or pulled the wrong switches, the supervisor who failed to listen, or the manager who made bad decisions. When causal chains are limited to technical flaws and individual failures, the ensuing responses aimed at preventing a similar event in the future are equally limited: they aim to fix the technical problem and replace or

retrain the individual responsible. Such corrections lead to a misguided and potentially disastrous belief that the underlying problem has been solved. (Columbia Accident Investigation Board, 2003, p. 177)

Consider a school situation analogous to the Columbia disaster, but certainly with far less tragic results: a principal in a large suburban district convened a small group of teachers representing each grade level. He reported their superintendent's priority for the year to increase parent involvement in the district's schools. The principal presented his thoughts and proposed that each teacher have a minimum of one parent volunteer to assist in his or her classroom two times per week. When he asked for comments, suggestions, and concerns, one teacher inquired about how the parents would be recruited and trained. Another said she thought having more parent involvement would be "nice" but wondered if parents were really interested or had the time.

With no more discussion forthcoming, the principal concluded the meeting and sent out his expectations for increased parent involvement in the staff memo: The next school newsletter would include an invitation to parents to volunteer in classrooms. The parents should contact teachers if they could volunteer at least twice a week. The principal would track the number of volunteers with sign-in sheets submitted by each teacher.

While the prior experiences of some teachers surely prompted some enthusiasm for the proposal, others feared attracting only helicopter parents who would focus more on their own child's activities than the needs of other students or the teacher. From the principal's perspective, it was a productive meeting. He had a plan to address his superintendent's concern. He could check that task off his list. So, what happened next? Not much. The teachers waited for parents to respond to the newsletter. When parents failed to call, it confirmed the teachers' suspicions: parents are too busy or don't care to be involved.

Why did this plan fail? The meeting was organized and efficient, but it was not effective. The focus was clear. Yet, key elements needed to create a successful outcome were missing. The principal focused on achieving compliance rather than advancing school goals. Failing to seek out the buried wisdom in his staff, he lost the opportunity to assess how parent volunteers could contribute to

school goals. More tragically, he reduced the level of energy and effort teachers applied to the task and increased the likelihood that teachers would keep good ideas to themselves.

It becomes obvious upon analysis why this effort and similar well-intentioned efforts—repeated daily in schools everywhere—cause frustration. To administrators, it reinforces their concern about sharing leadership. Teachers become more reluctant to share insights that might prove invaluable. Unfortunately such experiences also provide proof to teachers that "meetings are a waste of time, administrators don't listen, parents don't care, and this too shall pass."

Case 3: "Not My Problem" Fallacy

It's no surprise that many teachers think the last thing they need is another meeting—even if it is to ask their advice. Teachers want to attend to the challenges of creating powerful learning experiences for their students. However, the hard evidence on achieving excellence in education points to the need for educators to affirm the fundamental interdependency of their work (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

Often, the depth of the interdependence is not obvious or so taken for granted that it's just an accepted part of the situation. Whether or not a teacher begins class with a room full of distressed students can be a function of what happened on the bus to school, the ugly or affectionate words in the hallway, or the tough exam in science.

The energy students apply to their work in any given class may be more a function of their accomplishments in the music room than the spellbinding story just read to them. A parent-teacher conference can be compromised by the frustration the parent experienced at the school's front office.

While special area teachers may be the most important resource for struggling students, they are seldom consulted. Teachers in mathematics may have developed some questioning strategies that could be useful in science classes, but science teachers will never

> **Student Life in a Middle School**
>
> "The good thing is that they have a lot of activities. The bad thing is that teachers don't pay much attention to what happens outside their classroom. If it happens outside their classroom, they don't care. It is not their problem."
>
> Reported on Great Schools website for a Florida school

learn about them. Perhaps educators could assist a struggling student if they had more information about available community resources. These are unrecognized interdependencies.

Reframing the way we organize schools begins by acknowledging the interdependence of a school's various parts and finding ways to exploit this interdependence. Student learning and well-being can only improve. We need to reframe the way we organize schools to improve information flow so that feedback reaches leaders more easily and encourages innovation to develop through informal networks.

While professional learning communities help educators increase their depth of understanding about the conceptual underpinnings of a subject and improve their instructional strategies, absent other structures or communication channels, schools will be unable to solve big problems. Any problem—student motivation, student truancy, or, say, postsecondary aspirations—has multiple causes and affects what teachers are able to accomplish in the classroom.

Organizational systems theorists emphasize that solving important problems requires multiple perspectives and seemingly diverse approaches to the solution. Ian Mitroff and Abraham Silvers (2010) find that lacking diverse perspectives, we often solve the wrong problem. They use the story of a manager for a high-rise office building who was receiving an increasing number of complaints about slow elevators. Engineering consultants proposed a complex solution limiting elevators to only a subset number of floors. The costs were staggering. A psychologist who worked in the building provided a different perspective: The wait time in this office building did not differ from others in the area. Working from theories about human behavior, she suggested they consider adding distracters in the lobby that would allow future passengers to occupy themselves—mirrored walls. It worked, and at much less cost. Many failures occur because we fail to acquire the multiple perspectives needed to solve the problem.

Case 4: Where's Help When You Need It?

Consider an interesting lesson from the military. As far back as the Civil War, medics saved many lives, but there were so many injured in their respective battalions that they were only able to save a small percentage of the soldiers needing help. Most of the injured soldiers bled to death before a medic arrived.

The most stunning reversal of the fates of many of America's youth in the military came when leaders realized that the most common cause of death could be reduced by preparing all soldiers to provide basic medical assistance: tourniquets. Increasing the number of people capable of providing relatively simple remedies in a timely manner to those injured likely saved many soldiers' lives in the past decade.

Tools and Imagination Can Save Lives

My son told me how wonderful the care packages we had sent them from the ladies auxiliary were and wanted me to tell everyone thank you. He said one guy got a female care package and everyone gave him a hard time. My son said, "Marine X got some really nice smelling lotion and everyone really likes it . . ." I told my son I was really sorry about the mistake and could send Marine X another package. He told me not to worry about Marine X because he shares my home-baked cookies with him.

Of course . . . there were those tampons. When he brought this up, my imagination just went running.

As they left one day on a mission, Marine X wanted the lip balm and lotion so he grabbed a bunch of the items from his care package and got in the Humvee. As luck would have it, he grabbed the tampons, too, and everyone teased him about "not forgetting his feminine hygiene products."

My son said things went well for a while, but then the convoy was ambushed. A Marine was shot. He said the wound was pretty clean, but it was deep. They were administering first aid but couldn't get the bleeding to slow down. Someone said, "Hey! Use X's tampons!" They put the tampon in the wound. "Mom, did you know that tampons expand?"

They successfully slowed the bleeding until the guy got better medical attention. "Mom, the tampons sent from the Marine Moms by mistake saved a Marine's life."

Anonymous Internet Story

Schools have come a long way in providing experts to support classroom instruction: many schools are staffed with literacy coaches, a parent involvement coordinator, and perhaps a technology coordinator. Incorporating new technologies or practices in classrooms, however, usually introduces simple problems that,

unfortunately, require immediate attention. Proximity matters. When we introduced instructional management software to schools in the 1990s, one technology specialist devoted the vast majority of her time to assisting educators with basic computer skills (such as moving the cursor or accessing the server). It was impossible for her to respond in a timely manner to these needs. In schools, the adoption of new technologies or instructional approaches fails when the support needed to solve a simple problem is not available immediately.

The proximity of basic remedies for common glitches teachers experience with new tools or resources in the classroom is an essential part of reframing the support system within schools. Every team of educators—grade level, subject, or professional learning community—should have a person capable of "applying a tourniquet."

In the absence of coaches and coordinators, school administrators often fail to get help when it's needed and rely heavily on educators who volunteer to serve on advisory or support groups. Yet, such volunteers rarely distribute themselves evenly throughout the organization. Instead, volunteers for a data analysis team may be concentrated in the math department and the technology team comprised mostly of the science instructors. A history teacher hoping to learn to use a whiteboard may find that no one nearby knows anything about it. That is, unless he's got time to go to the science department, one floor or two wings away. Why should anyone be surprised when new technologies stand idle in the classroom?

Improving professional practice, then, requires attention to proximity. Some level of expertise needs to be embedded as close to the instructional challenges as possible. More than most professionals, the needs of educators are especially time sensitive. If connection to the Internet for the day's lesson fails, or is merely slow getting started, a wise teacher drops the plan immediately before chaos can emerge. Learning is lost and the time spent planning wasted.

Case 5: Schools as Pandas

Few animals are more vulnerable to shifts in their environment than pandas. They only eat *arrow* bamboo leaves; other

types appear to be no substitute. In 2008, all the arrow bamboo in the panda's natural habitat began blooming—something that happens only once every 60 years. After they blossom, the plants wither and die. The bamboo does not grow for about 10 years. Pandas' inability (or unwillingness) to change to different sources of foods puts their future in doubt. The environmental shift in the supply of arrow bamboo is an externality that critically impinges on their future.

Schools demonstrate similar vulnerability shifts in their environment but for a different reason. Schools are vulnerable to changes in their environment because of their complexity. Schools must ensure the safety of large numbers of students and create meaningful learning experiences that address the needs of diverse students while maintaining compliance with various policies, regulations, and legislative mandates. The complex set of constraints created by bus schedules, extracurricular activities, or the management of a lunch schedule can make a simple shift in the "externalities" quite complex.

The environment in which schools operate changes constantly—perhaps due to a new superintendent, shifting academic standards, revised schedules for annual testing, a new remediation policy for those students failing to demonstrate proficiency on state assessments, or even natural disasters. The challenge is to find a process that can sensibly absorb the "shocks" that come from changes in their environment.

Analysts of school district issues rightly view schools as "part of the system" in their work. This is appropriate and likely even healthy. That said, from the point of view of a school in a large district, the adaptation is largely in one direction—schools adapting to district policies and decisions. School boards make decisions; state and federal legislators make laws. Schools do the adapting. If it were one system, with schools constituting subsystems, one would see *mutual* adaptation.

School adaptations to various shocks are no less likely than districts to solve the wrong problem. Worse yet, some strategies schools select can inadvertently undermine the essential goals or produce unanticipated consequences. For instance, a principal faced with a shift in school attendance boundaries chose a strategy for incorporating the new students and transferred teachers that had unanticipated consequences. In systems language, the new

attendance boundaries were a "shock to the system"; that is, some external source was forcing an adaptation of "the way we do things around here." Hoping to make the students and parents comfortable in their new surroundings, the principal assigned all the teachers from the other school to students who attended that school. The parent-teacher association prepared a great welcome night for the new students, but the subsequent physical and social isolation reinforced the boundaries of the separate communities—encouraging rumors and misunderstandings. Clearly, this strategy failed to take into account all the issues.

Shocks to the system, or externalities, can be quite debilitating unless there are structures and processes for looking at the new situation from a variety of perspectives. Having structures in place that are ready and able to help adapt to the new policies or expectations coming from "outside" is essential. With various perspectives and expertise ready to support an administrator's decisions about how to adapt, the new ways of doing things can be transformative rather than debilitating.

Case 6: One Best Solution

It was clear to educators at this high school that student absenteeism was greatly compromising student learning and, consequently, the opportunities that students would have after graduation—presuming, of course, that they graduated. Even though their average daily attendance was almost 95 percent, 30 percent of students were absent more than 20 days in a given year. Knowing that parents cared about their children's performance—and even more about their future opportunities—it seemed like a no-brainer to get them involved in reducing absences.

The district's new management software allowed schools to establish a notification system—automatically calling parents in the morning if their child failed to appear in their first period class. Once operational, the educators saw only a slight improvement in student attendance. Even those statistics failed to reflect the experience of afternoon classes, where the low rate of attendance continued. Frustrated, school leaders called a special PTO meeting to discover other ways parents could encourage their children to attend school. Educators were thrilled by the large turnout of parents. They wrestled with additional incentives—such as

awards for perfect attendance with weekly recognition for those with a perfect record. Awards and parents' interest brought enthusiasm, but little change.

While parental support and expectations are critical factors in high school students' attendance decisions, there are, in fact, multiple causes, some more important than others. Teachers know there are bright students who routinely skip classes. Are they working on projects for other classes? Are they just bored? What do we know about the incidences of "invisible" bullying—perhaps on the Internet or taunting after school? Tackling the problem of attendance requires that we begin with the assumption that there are multiple causes and likely all of them must be addressed to achieve a meaningful difference.

One of the reasons that the Mayo Clinic has such an extraordinarily high reputation as the place to go with life threatening illnesses is due to the way they organize the work of specialists. The clinic convenes a number of specialists (say, cardiology, pulmonary, and oncology specialists) to discuss a possible treatment regimen for a patient. Each brings a different perspective on the patient's symptoms or illnesses, the efficacy and dangers of certain treatment protocols, and the likelihood of success. For most of us, though, having a complex health problem rarely results in various specialists sitting down to discuss the issues. Instead, one specialist limits his diagnosis to those symptoms with which he is familiar. Just as success rates for seriously ill patients are higher when physicians collaborate to solve a patient's medical problems, so too with educators.

CONCLUSION

Identifying common problems in all types of organizations introduces us to the elements in the organization of professional life that require attention if we are to create a learning organization—an organization capable of transforming the quality of life and learning for everyone. If we want a school where educators create smart solutions to nagging problems, increase commitment to a school's best vision of its future, and gain satisfaction from meaningful improvements, we first need to adjust some structures and processes.

Schools with constipating organizational structures have ambiguous or overlapping roles and responsibilities. Communication channels are largely confined to links between administrators and advisory groups. Nothing changes in the way they do business because competing realities and solutions cannot be satisfactorily resolved—thus, the propensity to do nothing. Teachers' frustrations often lead to withdrawal from any advisory endeavors, since nothing ever happens.

Schools with poor processes for assessing problems often will fail to solve them. They may focus on compliance and miss opportunities to use new policies to solve existing problems. To the extent that the professional life in schools reinforces the myth that the challenges a school faces are "not my problem"—the quality of classroom instruction is diminished.

Successfully changing practices in organizations requires that needed information or expertise be in close proximity to those expected to make changes. Educators occupy one of the most time-sensitive roles found in any profession. Lacking quick support, they unlikely will be able to change how they organize classroom experiences for students.

Organizational structures need to allow schools to be proactive, rather than reactive, to the continuing influx of new policies and expectations. Proactive approaches allow educators to evaluate the implications from a variety of perspectives and to reduce the frequency of unanticipated problems that frustrate everyone.

Gaining, then, some appreciation for how professional lives in schools affect the quality of life experienced by both students and educators, we're ready to further investigate reframing a school's organization in ways that make everyone less frustrated and more successful in meeting the needs of students.