Building School Readiness for Teaching Improvement: The First Step

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In 2016, we published a paper entitled 'Readiness for School Reform'. This paper provided an insight into the concept of *'School Readiness for Teaching Improvement'* by providing an account of an underpinning theory complete with an examination of an associated process and a reporting format. In this paper the premise of 'readiness' is further explored by examining the concept of 'alignment' in a school. More specifically, the paper provides an insight into a series of considerations and steps for developing alignment in a school's staff.

In 2016, we published a paper about a school's staff being ready for whole of school teaching improvement agendas (Lynch and Smith, 2016). This paper provided an account of the underpinning theory, incorporated an outlining of the associated appraisal process and the corresponding 'report'. In this paper, the premise of 'readiness for teaching improvement' is further explored by examining one key concept, 'staff alignment' (see Schiemann, 2012).

The Concept of Readiness for Teaching Improvement

The concept of readiness for teaching improvement [as illustrated by what we term a Readiness Report[1]] (Lynch and Smith, 2016) is built on a school establishing, in all its staff, states of 'alignment', 'capability' and 'engagement' (Schiemann, 2012; 2014). In simple terms 'Readiness for Teaching Improvement' can thus be understood as an inter-related combination of:

Alignment: the extent to which staff agree to and have a knowledge of (a) the goals and the associated strategies of the school as well as (b) the espoused values and expectations of stakeholders. This element of readiness can be expressed in terms of alignment to the 'strategic plan' and the 'processes within the school' (Schiemann, 2012).

Capability: the extent of skills, technologies and associated processes that staff rely upon to effectively and efficiently complete their jobs. This element of readiness is expressed in terms of 'staff capability factors' and 'resources available for staff to do their job' (Schiemann, 2012).

Engagement: the extent to which staff are working towards the goals and aspirations of the school. This can be understood as staff actually doing what they say they are doing. This element is expressed in terms of 'staff satisfaction with the school as a workplace' and 'their commitment to the school' (Schiemann, 2012).

A state of 'readiness' essentially means that these three states [A.C.E.[2]] are present at optimal levels, in all staff. They are, in effect, the foundations of a successful change agenda in any organisation (Schiemann, 2012).

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[1]This work is published at http://www.ijicc.net/images/Volume2issue22015/Readiness_Lynch_and_Smith.pdf

[2]This work is based on Schiemann, W.A. (2012), *The ACE advantage: how smart companies unleash talent for optimal performance*, Society for Human Resource Management, Alexandria, VA.

Building a State of Readiness

In planning the building of 'readiness' in a school's staff, the school leader is advised to begin work by focusing on the 'alignment' of their staff. Alignment is a state where staff are 'galvanised' to 'the plan' and are in agreement to the 'associated processes' designed to achieve it. Because a school has teaching and non-teaching staff, and thus different contributions to be made in the school, the scope and substance of what the leader aims to align staff to will differ for each and 'in a teaching improvement sense' have more significance to key players such as teachers, para-teaching specialists, teacher aides and the like. But be advised, a school's global staff represents the central resource for an effective school and if all staff are not aligned accordingly, a school will have pockets of sub-optimal performance and invariably conflicting agendas, miscommunications and misaligned processes (Schiemann, 2012).

What does an aligned school look and feel like?

A school that is aligned is one where all the staff know what the school plans to achieve and why, and further, they understand the need for and thus accept and appreciate the associated new policies, procedures and structures that come into play. In more simple terms, everyone has bought into what is planned!! But building alignment is not just about telling staff the agenda, it requires the seeding, collaboratively building, nurturing and ongoing tending of a central proposition (the plan) to achieve full alignment effect. We can appreciate the aligned school as having the following attributes:

1. Staff can clearly articulate what the school is aiming to achieve and each demonstrates an excitement about what it means for them, their work and the school more generally.

2. Inter-staff conversations transition from day-to-day 'gripes and snipes' about day to day things to pieces that seek clarification, offer up suggestions and possibilities and generally speak in positive terms about what could or should be.

3. Staff begin to locate the 'proposition for change' in terms of themselves and in doing so begin to formulate conceptions of how they will position themselves to be part of the agenda. Staff in effect come to terms with their existing 'self-interest' and thus see 'their new place' or 'their new fit' requirement.

As alignment consolidates in the school the rhetoric of what can and/ or should be, gives way to tangible actioning of things that contribute to achieving the plan/ agenda. This is reflected as 'Capability' and 'Engagement' elements. But these too have to be built and sustained.

How is Alignment developed and consolidated within a School?

Schools are busy places and essentially (have to) continue to operate irrespective of any desire for a new plan of action. Couple this with long established mindsets --- i.e. the old way of thinking about and doing things --- and one begins to appreciate just how hard it is to create alignment and then of course sustain it. It's a bit like trying to repair a bus while it continues on its route. A school-based change agenda requires some clever strategic thinking and a great deal of perseverance. All of which is time consuming and mentally draining (Lynch, et al., 2015).

One can understand the building of alignment as a function chiefly of the school's leadership. Effective leaders explain, motivate and enthuse their staff to consider new ideas and new propositions and in doing so they aim to galvanise staff to agreement and acceptance of a plan of action for change. There is a plethora of readings available on leadership, change management and the like (see for example, Schiemann, 2014; Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012; Marzano, et al., 2005; Lynch, et al., 2015; Sell, et al., 2016), each offering a perspective on the role of leaders and thus we encourage further reading in these areas to fully appreciate what it means to be an effective school leader (Lynch and Madden, 2016; Lynch, et al., 2016).

The first step as a leader in building alignment is to personally reflect on the following questions and seek personal clarity and resolution to them:

- o   Why are you seeking to change things?
- o   What is the compulsive agenda that motivates you to embark on such a plan?
- o   Do you fully understand this compulsive agenda and appreciate where, if implemented, it will take you (and the school)?
- o   What are your reference points (a data profile?) for such an agenda and are they going to stand up to scrutiny?
- o   What are your strengths as a leader? What are your weaknesses?
- o   Who around you will attend to the things that you are not good at?
- o   Who will constitute your leadership team?

The logic in these questions is that each comes to represent the foundations of 'why change' and represent key considerations for any change plan. They are also the likely questions that staff will ask and thus being prepared with answers demonstrates that you are 'on top' of your job as the leader and that the proposition has been well thought out.

The second step is to establish the conditions and arrangements for you as the leader to lead and for 'designated others' to attend to the day-today routine, yet critical elements of school management. This is how you deal with the school as a busy place, one that does not stop while change is attempted. In simple terms, decide who will be the 'teaching (reform) leader' and 'who' (and how) will attend to the 'day-to-day' management things? This is an important consideration, because it's the latter elements that will distract and cloud the performance of any whole of school teaching improvement plan. If the Principal is not going to act as the teaching leader (the leader of teaching improvement), then s/he must symbolically present themselves at key meetings to give the project authority, status and to signal its importance (Marzano, et al., 2005). Our considered opinion is that the Principal should lead such agendas as this is about core business (Lynch, et al., 2015; Sell, et al., 2016).

The third step is to appreciate that you now have to 'sell' the agenda for change to your staff. While 'sell' is a crude term in this context, the reality is that alignment is an acceptance and an agreement by each staff member to go on 'this journey' with you. In effect you have a proposition to present to them (note how it is not presented as fait accompli by calling it 'The Plan"). Your objective at the start is to get staff to see it as a 'viable proposition'. You will want their input to achieve it and hence 'the plan' is a refined outcome of such a process. Further, collaboratively developing the plan is an aspect of building 'engagement'. So it's a proposition at this stage and you want all staff 'to buy it' completely i.e. build alignment. There are many published examples of how to manage a change agenda in schools (see Marzano et al., 2005; Hargraeves and Fullan, 2012; Lynch et al., 2015; Sell, et al., 2016). Our advice is source one and come to appreciate its central tenets. Seek personal development in leadership if required and position yourself to hear regular feedback on your performance and the progress of the plan.

A central tenet of a school being 'ready' is the leader knowing what is happening in terms of the plan, at every juncture. The leader must be up-to-date on the plan's junctures and outcomes and ready to take corrective actions when needed. Feedback is the mechanism that keeps the leader

focused and the plan on track. Don't process feedback personally, realise everyone is now 'in the same boat' and feedback is how engagement and capability are ultimately built! So accept feedback as part and parcel to achievement in schools.

In summary, the following inform these steps[3]:

- Achieve clarity on the intention and the outcomes required for such changes. Generate the 'compulsive agenda for change' (data / trends is a good strategy);

- Invest personal leadership time to achieve deep change in staff;

- Create avenues for staff to provide feedback on progress and opportunities for them to increase their understanding of what is planned and the implications;

- Identify and develop key (talented) teachers as 'change agents' as they will be a powerful resource in such agendas. This circumstance comes to represent 'other staff' taking the lead on 'sub projects' and in doing so you begin to build the required 'capabilities' and 'engagement' factors of readiness.

With these points in mind, the following are appreciable facts as a school engages with a whole of school teaching reform agenda (Lynch, et al., 2015; Sell, et al., 2016):

- Alignment takes time to be achieved. Do not rush alignment. It's like a cake, it must be cooked well through!

- Staff will always process a change agenda in terms of what it will mean for them. If they cannot see a 'place in the sun' or they think they have no way of re-establishing themselves in the new agenda, you effectively place yourself in a battle of many (staff) wills. The trend in schools to date has been that staff will simply out-wait the leader: and they invariably win when pushed.

- Staff are rational people when they are engaged in critical conversations about what might be and why, especially when such 'opportunities' are well thought out, logical and focused to achieving clarity. The more 'vocal staff' are best met in informal one-on-one situations. You need to invest time in these types of people because they invariably are

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[3] Sourced from http://ncca.ie/en/About_Us/Strategic_Plan/leading_and_supporting_change.pdf

able to garner an audience of discontent and you will often find once 'won over' they become your 'agents for change'.

- Staff asking questions, no matter how 'loaded' they may seem, need to be accepted as an established way of staff seeking to know more about the agenda. Treat questions as an insight and an opportunity to plan your next steps in alignment.

If you've already started the change agenda and it's not working, start again. Start again by going back to the first step, as outlined in an earlier section.

In conclusion, our message for the school leader is: think about what has been suggested herein, come to understand what leadership requires, conduct a personal leadership audit and seek out an 'outsider' to act as your critical friend. Sometimes, leaders can't see things clearly because they are too close to it all. The readiness report should be conducted at key junctures as a test in time on your ACE progress[4]

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[4] See Lynch and Smith, 2016.

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