

Leading for Change ... Tony Wagner

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Five 'Habits of Mind' That Count

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There are many things we do right as educators—most notably, working hard to make a difference in the lives of children, despite ever-escalating challenges. I'm beginning to see, however, that we educators are handicapped when it comes to leading efforts to improve teaching and learning. People in a host of other professions—business, law, medicine, engineering, architecture—have been trained to analyze and solve problems as a matter of everyday practice. We have not.

In all the professions listed above, and in many others as well, individuals or, more frequently, teams are given real-life problems in their field to study in graduate schools or continuing education programs, most often through a pedagogy called the case method. They are asked to analyze the issues and then make recommendations for strategies that might solve the problem or produce change. While the case-method pedagogy can sometimes be a game of “guess what’s on the teacher’s mind,” with practice and coaching from professors, graduate students learn what kinds of data are most important to attend to in their analyses, as well as the questions to ask that might yield a deeper understanding of the problem. Once out on the job, these professionals are called upon to use their analytic skills on a daily basis and are rewarded as they become more skillful problem-solvers.

None of this is routine in the education profession. In our graduate schools, we still teach aspiring principals and superintendents much more about management than about how to make change. The case study method or other similar approaches are very rare in most graduate programs. As a result, most graduates of even better schools of education lack both exposure to and practice in the analytic skills that are the foundation for effective problem-solving.

Nor are most educators asked to use these skills on the job. At the Change Leadership Group, which I co-direct at Harvard University, we have identified three culturally embedded traits that thwart educators’ opportunities to regularly practice problem-solving skills:

Reaction. We educators are expected to be responsive to a cacophony of urgent needs and demands every day. We can’t say no, and everything is a priority. Most of us haven’t developed the discipline of reflection as a way to remain focused on the truly important vs. the merely urgent, and we’re inclined to think that because we’re busy we must be making progress toward our goals.

Compliance. The education culture has tended to reward compliance to authority at all levels over active questioning or genuine discussion of issues. Compliance is usually how so-called “change” is implemented in our profession. The board or superintendent or principal hears about some new program and adopts it. Rarely is there any problem analysis or discussion of how and why this particular strategy may be better than another, or how its success will be evaluated. The result is that the “reform du jour” is half-heartedly implemented until some new leader or “better” reform comes along.

Isolation. Educators work alone more than any other professionals in modern America. Most professions have come to recognize the value of teamwork as a better way to understand and solve “problems of

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practice.” Groups are far more likely to come to a deeper understanding, and to better solutions, than are individuals working alone, no matter how talented.

Fortunately, there appears to be new interest in forms of collaboration among educators. “Critical-friends groups” and “professional learning communities” are increasingly popular. And my group, for one, sees great potential in what we call “leadership practice communities” as a way to develop education leaders’ problem-solving skills. (“**The Challenge of Change Leadership**,” Oct. 27, 2004.) For these forms of collaboration to be effective as tools for change, however, individuals and groups need to cultivate new habits of mind that will help them overcome their lack of preparation and practice in this work. Deborah Meier and her faculty at New York City’s Central Park East Secondary School developed what they called the “Five Habits of Mind” as a structure for “teaching students to use their minds well.” (See Ms. Meier’s 1995 book, *The Power of Their Ideas*.) To them, and others in the Coalition of Essential Schools who adopted those habits of mind, the goal was to get students in the habit of routinely asking essential questions in their discussions and written work, questions such as these: What is the evidence for this, and how credible is it? Whose point of view is being represented here, and what are other points of view on this topic or issue? There are many others.

So what are some questions change leaders might learn to wrestle with? What might be the equivalent “Five Habits of Mind for Change Leadership” we could work on together? In our work, my colleagues and I have identified a sequence of questions that, if pursued rigorously, and courageously, can lead to a deeper understanding of the challenges we face as well as more effective strategies for dealing with them:

- What is the problem we are trying to solve, or the obstacle we are trying to overcome, and what does it have to do with improving teaching and learning?
- What are our strategies for solving this problem, and how and why do we think implementation of these strategies will cause the change that’s needed—what’s our “theory of action”?
- Who (teachers, parents, students, community) needs to understand what, in order to “own the problem” and support the strategies we’re implementing?
- Who is accountable for what for implementation of this strategy to be successful, and what do they need to be effective?
- What evidence (observable changes in short-term outcomes or behaviors) will we track that will tell us whether our strategies are working?

Einstein once said that “the formulation of the problem is often more important than the solution.” Too often in education, we start with answers before we have understood the problem we’re trying to solve.

Working with the Small Schools Project in Seattle, I recently advised a talented group of district teams that had been funded by the Gates Foundation to move their systems toward the goal of “all students college-ready.” Most had been hard at work on this goal for a year and a half when we suggested that they make time to revisit their change strategies. We asked them to discuss in their teams what they saw

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as the most significant obstacles to getting more students ready for college, and then to see how their list of initiatives stacked up to the problems they identified. Many were surprised to find that they did not agree on what “college-prepared”—a key element of college-ready—really meant. Nor had they considered what might be the most significant obstacles to this goal. As they discussed these issues, and then looked at all of their activities, they began to see that many of the latter did not address the barriers they’d belatedly identified.

For a number of people on the teams, the half-day deliberations were as challenging as any they’d experienced in our work together, and this was just a start. Having had these discussions, the teams were now better positioned to consider the final three questions from the list above.

Broad “ownership” of the problem a school or district needs to solve is rare in compliance-driven change efforts, where concern for positive PR trumps true public engagement and unfavorable data are downplayed. Also, accountability for the implementation of change strategies often is ill-defined or nonexistent. Where it does exist, it is perceived as part of a top-down “command and control” system. To be effective, however, accountability has to be two-way and horizontal as well as vertical. The question is not merely, “What am I holding you accountable for?” It is also, “What do we need to do to help ensure your success? What is our reciprocal and relational accountability to one another? How do we each own parts of this problem?”

Finally, there is much talk about the importance of assessing results, but often the assumption is that test-score improvements are the only way of gauging the success of a reform strategy. While they are important, test scores are not the only measure, and the results typically come too late to be useful in evaluating the effectiveness of strategies. We need to identify shorter-term qualitative and quantitative measures that can serve as proxies for the improvements we seek. “Evidence-based professional development” is one example. If we spend time as a school or district on developing teachers’ questioning techniques in classes or their strategies for improving students’ writing, we can collect evidence fairly quickly to determine whether there are changes in what the teachers do in classrooms, or whether student writing shows improvement.

These five habits of mind for change leadership are not a recipe for change. Rather, they suggest the kinds of questions we need to routinely ask ourselves and each other. As we get better and more consistent at discussing such questions, two things are likely to happen: The problem-solving skills we educators need to transform teaching and learning will be developed in powerful ways, and, more importantly, students will see that habits of mind are not just for them; they are for all of us who want to learn how to problem-solve and think in more rigorous and disciplined ways.

With both adults and young people working hard, both separately and together, to develop effective habits of mind, students are far more likely to be truly college-prepared. They will have developed the skills that matter most for higher education—and the world beyond the classroom.