

INTEGRATING AND SUSTAINING HABITS OF MIND

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BUILDING LEARNING ORGANIZATIONS

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To thrive in the 21st century, schools must become adaptive organizations capable of continuous learning, growth, and change. We make this statement because of the incredible amount of information now available to help educators refine and improve their work in all areas of curriculum, instruction, administration, and parent and community relations. Much of this same information was available in the past, but technology has fundamentally changed information management. Schools need new organizational habits to take advantage of the wealth of data that technology makes so rapidly available.

Successful learning organizations continually collect, analyze, and learn from data, and they self-modify on the basis of what they have learned. They generate and gather these data from a variety of sources, and they use the data to seek even more information. Learning organizations study innovative practices, but they also continuously examine the costs and benefits of such change, weighing these factors against the results of students' performance on both internal and external measures.

In the early '90s, businesses called this kind of reflection and modification "reengineering." Companies discovered the significance of examining *process* to improve the quality and productivity of their work (Hammer & Champy, 1993). Soon, total quality management (TQM) became a popular, catch-all descriptor for the process of examining and attending to systematic measures of progress.

Educators adapted many of these business practices, calling the concepts and principles "restructuring" and "outcome-based education" (Bonstingl, 1992). About the same time, schools also began to feel the effects of a world in which technology made organizational learning more efficient. In this early romance with technology, many districts focused

more on hardware and software than on how to best use technology to achieve their goals. Eventually, schools realized that technology is only a tool that facilitates sharing organizational knowledge, improving decision making, thinking more effectively, and learning more efficiently.

Technology can help educators collect data, but humans need to talk about these data, make sense out of the information, search for patterns, and ultimately solve problems together. To take advantage of this kind of “internal school knowledge,” we must rebuild the culture. Changing the culture means changing its habits. Many teachers already study student assessment data and student work, and they share information with colleagues about what happens to students from class to class and year to year. Those conversations, however, are limited by the amount of discipline and practice people have had in thoughtful, critical dialogue.

The habits of mind can guide groups away from a highly individual, personal approach to a social and collective understanding. As educators learn how to effectively practice the habits of mind, the school culture shifts from personal knowledge to shared knowledge. The school is no longer just a set of classrooms adjacent to one another; the school becomes a community of learners. Members of this school community—not technology—build the learning organization, and we believe the habits of mind should be the foundation of all their work.

FINDING THE KEY

If schools are to learn from their successes and failures, sharing information is key. Yet schools often face many barriers to sharing the kind of information that leads to organizational learning. Some barriers include lack of time, sparse opportunities to think with other teachers across grade levels and in other buildings, and the proprietary nature of the work of disciplines. Schools also find a variety of barriers in departments, individual teachers, and an unwritten code that says examining practice threatens teachers’ evaluations.

To promote a learning atmosphere, adults themselves must learn how to use the habits of mind to support sharing. Teachers, administrators, and other school personnel must be able to practice the habits of questioning and posing problems, thinking flexibly, and listening with understanding and empathy, to name just a few. Consider the chart in Figure 1.1. Does your school match the description of a pro-sharing culture or an anti-sharing culture, or is it somewhere in between? After you’ve spent some

time considering your school, read through the following two examples. They describe how staff members in a high school and an elementary school shared information to resolve challenging questions about improving practice and better serving students.

FIGURE I.1
Pro-Sharing Culture vs. Anti-Sharing Culture

Pro-Sharing Culture	Anti-Sharing Culture
Learning occurs through teaching and sharing. Systems and incentives support sharing information and insights.	No learning occurs through teaching and sharing. No systems or incentives promote sharing information and insights. Many incentives and systems work against sharing.
Reflection is purposeful and planned. Communal understanding is achieved through story telling.	Little time or attention for reflection is provided. Staff members feel they are constantly fighting the clock, so they don't take the time to identify lessons learned from projects.
New knowledge is continuously exchanged and created. As experimentation occurs, people share and learn.	Little or no new knowledge is exchanged or created. Assumptions about projects or activities go unchallenged.
Staff members share common areas of interest and expertise. Individuals are hired and promoted on the basis of technical expertise as well as their potential to contribute to the common vision and goals.	Staff members possessively guard their areas of interest and expertise. Individuals are hired and promoted mainly for their technical expertise.
Staff members openly discuss common challenges and problems. Sharing success <i>and</i> failure is part of the professional ethic.	Administrators and staff members are reluctant to talk about projects that did not work well. Sharing success is acceptable, but sharing failure is frowned upon.
Staff members share personal and professional relationships across grades, subjects, and departments, which promote shared knowledge.	The different missions and visions of grades, subjects, and departments produce different cultures. This environment inhibits personal and professional relationships and obstructs transfer of knowledge.