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Introduction

This edition of *The Adaptive School* represents much of our learning about school systems and groups in the past 15 years as we have worked with educators in settings that span the globe. Although each school is unique, there are social patterns that are easily recognizable when people gather in groups to work together. Drawing on these experiences and looking at group work through the theoretical filters of biology, ecology, quantum physics, complexity science, systems thinking, and cognitive and social psychology, we offer a practical set of principles and tools for developing and facilitating collaborative groups.

The Adaptive School is about developing strong schools in which collaborative faculties are capable of meeting the certain challenges of today and the uncertain challenges of tomorrow. Some schools are flourishing. Others are making remarkable gains in improving student achievement, increasing attendance, attaining higher postschool accomplishments, and developing satisfying relationships with their communities. Some schools produce only fair results; others languish. We believe that all can be better.

As realists, we recognize that difficult and different challenges beset schools and communities in their quest to serve students. Issues differ from school to school. Urbanism and ruralism bring their own special problems. Defeatism, extremism, apathy, or politics infect some schools. Schools can become obsessed with ensuring predictable results, or they can struggle to overcome the effects of extreme poverty, neglected children, or the burdens of ponderous bureaucracy. Money can bring its own problems. Some affluent communities

lobby for traditional definitions of success at the expense of other needs. In some districts, the teachers and the students struggle daily with inadequate and outdated materials and facilities. Regardless of the nature of the issues, our premise is that the means for improvement exist within the school community. The practical ideas and tools in this book show how to activate these resources if they are dormant and focus them if they are scattered.

We believe that leadership is important and that the most effective leadership is informed, deeply developed, and widely distributed. To be adaptive and meet the demands of omnipresent change requires more than linear thought, old problem-solving formulas, and recycled strategic plans. In the work of school improvement, human energy matters as much as the elements of good management do—maybe more.

How to Use This Book

This book is informed by the central notion of adaptivity, five principles of dynamic systems, and focusing questions that bring attention to fundamental issues for capacity building

in schools (see sidebar). These ideas are initially mentioned in chapter 1 and elaborated in the following 10 chapters. They form the conceptual backbone of the chapters and provide a rationale for the tools and approaches that we present.

The book is designed as a sourcebook to support you in developing and facilitating collaborative groups to improve student learning. You can use it as a basic text for yourself or with a study group and as a reference book for diagnosis and problem solving. We encourage you to choose the approaches that best serve your interests and needs.

Read from the beginning to the end. The chapter content is designed sequentially, with each chapter building on the preceding ones.

Check the table of contents for an issue of specific interest and read that chapter. It will provide references to other chapters.

Refer to the problem-based user's guide (Table I-1) to search the text for information about specific problems.

A major section of this book is the toolkit of strategies, which makes up Appendix A.

Adaptive: Changing form, clarifying identity

Dynamic principles:

More data do not lead to better predictions.

Everything influences everything else.

Tiny events produce major disturbances.

You don't have to touch everyone to make a difference.

Both things and energy matter.

Focusing questions:

Who are we?

Why are we doing this?

Why are we doing this this way?

Table I-1. Problem-Based User's Guide

1. What to do about group members who:

| | | |
|---|---|--|
| (a) don't listen | PAG/PAU Attention First Show, Don't Say Round-Robin Reflection Norms Inventories Grounding Trios PPPI | Appendix A Appendix A Appendix A Appendix A Appendixes B–E Appendix A Appendix A |
| (b) are uncomfortable speaking up | Paraphrasing Gatekeeping Grounding Learning Partners Round-Robin Reflection Norms Inventories | p. 33 Appendix A Appendix A Appendix A Appendix A Appendixes B–E |
| (c) dominate | Presuming Positive Intentions Caping Stop and Redirect Balance Participation Learning Partners Satisfy, Satisfy, Delay Round-Robin Reflection Airplane Stacking | p. 38 Appendix A Appendix A p. 67 Appendix A Appendix A Appendix A Appendix A |
| (d) are unaware of the effects of their behaviors on others | Meeting Inventory Challenge Relevance Set & Test Working Agreements Round-Robin Reflection Group-Member Capabilities Norms Inventories Structuring Conversations about Data | Appendix L Appendix A p. 70 Appendix A p. 27 Appendixes B–E Appendixes I & J |

Chapter 1 What Is an Adaptive School?

When pioneering navigators first sailed away from the coasts of Asia, Africa, and Europe, they were guided by their dreams, the stars, and primitive compasses—sailing into territories marked on their fanciful charts as unknown lands and seas of mystery. Undoubtedly, many in the ship's crews cast apprehensive glances at the receding shores of the familiar, trusting in the soundness of their vessel and the courage and skills of their leaders. The results of these voyages were both heroic and tragic, opening new vistas yet dramatically altering the lives and cultures of the people these early explorers encountered.

In current times, we too are leaving the shores of the familiar as the forces of change roil the educational seas. Demographic shifts in student and staff populations, social and political upheavals, advances in learning theory, the revolution in cognitive psychology, and the pulse of technological innovation all shape the environment around and within schools and school systems.

Our personal and organizational maps for this new world are in many ways incomplete. There are no preprogrammed global positioning technologies to plot future voyages and alert us to the turns ahead. What we most need to develop are the mental, emotional, and social tools for finding our way in these shifting landscapes. We also need new lenses to see the world not as a reflection of ourselves but as images of the many possibilities within the human landscape.

New tools help us to see new sights, think new thoughts, and do new things. For productive school improvement efforts, many of these new tools are both cognitive and cultural. How we think influences the ways that we work to-

gether. How we work together influences the ways that we think about that work.

Evolutionary forces shaped human brains and response systems to meet the demands of much earlier times. If a saber-toothed tiger were to bound through the door, these systems would immediately trigger a host of chemical, physical, and emotional reactions. Modern humans still possess automatic routines for Pleistocene-era problems.

The fast reflexes that supported our hunting and gathering ancestors will not help educators to develop the forms of schools and schooling that we need in this new era. These demands require new minds and models that are better suited for the challenges of today. Most of all, educators need new sensitivities that can discern what is not readily apparent to the senses and help to craft new ways of improving schools for the journey ahead.

As educators, authors, and consultants, we are actively exploring new possibilities and developing ways of thinking about adult interactions in schools. Our own thinking is influenced by the emerging sciences of quantum mechan-

This can be followed up with an inquiry into the qualities and conditions of the assignments that are an exception to the initial statement.

Putting Ideas on the Table

Ideas are the heart of group work. In order to be effective, they must be released to the group. “Here is an idea for consideration. One possible approach to this issue might be . . .” When ideas are owned by individuals, the other group members tend to interact with the speaker out of their feelings for and relationship to the speaker rather than with the ideas presented. This is especially true when the speakers have role or knowledge authority related to the topic at hand. To have an idea be received in the spirit in which you tell it, label your intentions: “This is one idea” or “Here is a thought” or “This is not an advocacy, I am just thinking out loud.”

Knowing when to pull ideas off the table is equally important. “I think this idea is blocking us; let’s set it aside and move on to other possibilities.” In this case, continued advocacy of the idea is not influencing other group members’ thinking. This is a signal to pull back and reconsider approaches.

Productive group work is driven by data, both qualitative and quantitative. Data about student learning, school climate, teacher satisfaction, parent satisfaction, and the like are important grounded ideas to put on the table. Collaborative work in schools requires data as well as impressions. In fact, important learning is possible whether or not the data align with the impressions of group members.

Providing Data

Data have no meaning on their own. Meaning is a result of human interaction with data. Many schools are data-rich and meaning-poor. Adaptive groups develop the capacity to discern what data are worth paying attention to and

what collaborative practices help people to engage with data in ways that increase their ownership and willingness to act on conclusions.

Data can be quantitative or qualitative. Schools are difficult places to motivate and govern with numbers. A 6 percent rise in student reading scores is often not as compelling as a teacher’s tale of the slow reader who makes a breakthrough. Reasoning by anecdote is often more common than reasoning with data. Interpreting and using data are learned skills that take time and practice to develop.

Knowledge, meaning and commitment result from dialogue and discussion about what story is told by the data. Without organized story making, people in organizations make up their own explanations for events. Part of the reason for this is protection from unwanted truths.

Three Point Communication

Third Point is a nonverbal strategy that comes from the work of Michael Grinder. It establishes a triangle, with the facilitator as one point, the group as a second point and the data or focusing information as the third point.

Third Points might include professional articles, text selections, samples of student work and displays of quantitative or qualitative data. The focus on the third point increases participants’ psychological safety, separating the information from the facilitator and allowing group members to talk with and about the data without having to make eye contact with colleagues.

Skilled facilitators aid this process by depersonalizing the information under consideration. They do so by using impersonal language to describe the information—*the* data, *this* information, *that* chart, *the* article, *the* student work—instead of using personal pronouns to describe information—*your* students’ work, *our* results, *your* test scores. The goal is to turn data and in-

The Five Cs: The Qualities of a Good Facilitator

Facilitating a meeting is improvisational work, requiring a foundation of knowledge and skills, a clear sense of purpose, a juggler's gift of attending to everything at once, and knowing what to do when you don't know what to do. You don't have to be flashy to be a good facilitator, but you do need to be developing the five Cs: clarity, consciousness, competence, confidence, and credibility.

Clarity

Facilitators must be clear about their role, its boundaries, and its responsibilities, and they must be able to communicate this unambiguously to the groups with whom they work. They need to know to whom they are ultimately responsible. See Appendix F for the distinctions among contact, intermediate, and primary clients. Facilitators know the importance of language and strive for precision. The following list shows some examples of facilitator language:

- *To get attention.* "Look this direction."
- *To clarify purpose.* "Today's task is to ____ [approve, generate, select, identify, explore, resolve]."
- *To give directions.* "Identify some ideas you would like to explore as a team. Prepare to share your two most important ideas."
- *To encourage participation.* "Here are some suggestions for how to get the most value out of today's meeting. Be responsible for your comfort and learning. Don't wait for a break to make yourself comfortable. Be responsible as well for your learning. If you can't hear someone, say, 'Louder, please!' If someone is speaking too abstractly and you need a concrete example, please ask for it."

- *To enlarge perspective.* "Who is not in this room and can't speak for themselves on the topic? What do you imagine their concerns might be?"
- *To invite group awareness.* "How is the group doing on its norm of listening to one another? Tell your partner."
- *To foster understanding.* "Who can offer a summary paraphrase?"
- *To encourage agreements.* "Are you ready for a decision?"

Language can obscure or clarify. Precise language is a gift to the facilitator and the group. It saves time and frustration, eliminates ambiguity, conveys respect for the group, and fosters facilitator credibility. Attaining language precision can be a useful lifetime goal regardless of one's role. Strive to be organized, brief, and specific. Use words and phrases that have one meaning. Use nouns more than pronouns. Tell the group what it is to do, why or how that relates to the bigger context of its work, and the specific intention to be achieved at each stage. Use advance organizers like "There are three steps. Number 1 is . . ."

Consciousness

Facilitators are simultaneously aware of multiple events in the external environment and in their internal world. They work to hone their sensory acuity. Facilitators pick up cues that group members are engaged, socializing, fatigued, impatient, apathetic, curious, excited, or just going through the motions. Facilitators can detect nuances in voice tone and hear even when they are turned away from the group. They pay attention to breathing, room temperature, and sight lines. They shuttle from looking outward to looking inward. Facilitators maintain their own resourcefulness, take stock of their energy, notice when they might be making

- What is the best possible outcome of addressing this?
- What are the worst and best possible outcomes of *not* addressing this?
- What outcome do you imagine that your adversary has?
- Would it be okay if your adversaries achieved their outcomes?

Addressing the Sources of Conflict

The traditional working culture of schools challenges the effectiveness of much of the established knowledge about conflict. Adaptive leaders know that schools are living paradoxes, operating simultaneously as thing models and energy models. In the spirit of “thingness,” schools have been organized for more than a century as machines, a collection of smaller units making a part-to-whole universe: objectives to lessons and units to curriculum, a racecourse of relatively standardized ground that students must cover in their journey to the finish line (Tyler, 1949; Wiggins & McTighe, 2005; Zais, 1976).

In this model, principles of cause-and-effect prevail, values are formalized into contracts, event-level thinking is the norm, and tacit rules govern daily behavior. Transactions tend toward formality and politeness (Sergiovanni, 1994). A teacher once told us that each year students were coming to her without requisite skills, but she would be hesitant to bring up the problem with the students’ prior teachers for fear of offending them.

Schools are also quantum systems—“bundles of energy in motion,” more like communities than businesses. Drawing from the science of chaos and complexity theory, we get a different picture of the organizing energies of the planet (Gleick, 1987). Using sophisticated mathematical modeling, scientists who study complex systems provide us with images of

different and often nonlinear patterns of organization. Such systems are best understood by studying the behavior of the complex whole rather than the behavior of the parts (Gharajed-agh, 2006).

Complex systems organize around “strange attractors.” For schools, some of these strange attractors are the core values, vision, and mission of the school or district that draw people together like magical magnets in a common purpose. In these schools, the staffs energetically work to provide children and young adults with more than a sense of artificial belonging; the principles, passions, and conflicting energies of living systems apply.

Our central premise is that schools are enterprises of both things and energy, yet “thing” mental models dominate most approaches to conflict. When educators learn to see their schools as dynamic systems of energy and information, they are liberated to practice more effective ways of working with conflict. To understand how behavior operates in these systems, we have identified 10 energy traps that serve as lenses for analyzing and responding to conflicts.

10 Energy Traps

Certain ways of perceiving conflict limit possibilities and constrain energy in increasingly destructive loops. Energy traps establish counterproductive, recursive patterns throughout a system. Microphone feedback is an example: The closer the microphone is to the speaker, the louder is the squeal as the signal cycles repeatedly through the sound system, grating on the nerves of the listeners. The summer sun beating down on Death Valley, California, produces waves of energy that heat the rock walls of the valley, trapping energy that builds up throughout the day. A similar phenomenon occurs over cities on warm days and nights with