PILLARS OF SUPERINTENDENT LEADERSHIP
Superintendent as Moral and Intellectual Leader
by George Thompson

Are school districts learning organizations or bureaucratic institutions?

One way to analyze and determine if a school district is a learning organization or a bureaucracy is to study the organization chart. There are usually clear patterns. Actually, the absence of a so-called org chart could be an indication that the district is on a path to become a learning organization. In bureaucratic districts, the organization chart clarifies who is in charge. The boundaries in which independent departments work are illustrated through boxes with white spaces between them and with arrows coming from them, almost always pointing downward, but sometimes sideways. The primary customers of the organization usually appear at the bottom of the chart—if they appear at all.

There is a good chance that such a study would reveal a lot of boxes with the word "accountability" appearing in them, closely followed by "school improvement" and "data." Further exploration would offer that the data mentioned refers to past test data. To an outsider, it might appear that data about the past is used to improve schools so they can be accountable to the state for what has already happened. It makes sense until you think about it.

Most, if not all, of the brief job titles in the boxes would lead you to conclude that the organization's major functions are operational and managerial. Perhaps this is the reason school districts are called school systems, because there are so many operational systems—finance, human resources, school operations, transportation, food service, instruction, etc. No wonder there are so many boxes. Perhaps this explains why some superintendents use management titles such as Chief Executive Officer.

I share this to make the point that the bureaucratic mindset is deeply ingrained in our mental image of school. In addition to its presence on the typical org chart, this mindset is reflected in the way we communicate. We often use language more aligned with that of hospitals, factories, warehouses, prisons, government institutions, or the military (think "war room").

Learning organizations, on the other hand, are more adaptable and flexible. Peter Senge describes them in his 1990 book *The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of The Learning Organization*, as follows:

Organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together. p. 3

While learning occurs in bureaucracies, what is learned is often technical as opposed to what Senge calls *generative learning*—that required to create and re-create. In bureaucracies, information that people need to do their work is often trapped within walls, silos, and compartments, as illustrated by org charts. In learning organizations, boundaries are permeable and facilitate the flow of information and the development and transmission of knowledge. *Learning Communities* and *Communities of Learner*s are commonplace. Dialogue and conversation are valued. When everyone benefits from what is being learned, the organization becomes a learning organization.

Informed by the work of Senge, Peter Drucker, and others, Dr. Phillip Schlechty used these two ideal types of organizations, a bureaucracy and a learning organization, to analyze and make sense of what goes on in schools and school districts. He understood that students were more than raw material and products and that their future would depend on schools having the capacity to support them in creating and using knowledge. Such schools would need to be more about the future than the past, and they would need to support continuous innovation. In short, schools would need to transform into learning organizations.

Schlechty also understood that the systems in need of attention in schools are not operating systems; they are the more critical social systems that, if designed properly, give meaning to operating systems. As he wrote in his 2009 book, *Leading for Learning: How to Transform School into Learning Organizations:*

Bureaucracies are designed to organize and manage certainty and ensure predictability. Learning organizations are designed to create the type of leadership structures needed to deal with uncertainty in disciplined, productive, and creative ways—to transform problems into possibilities and perplexities into insight. pp. 45–46

Schlechty reasoned that it was the job of leaders, especially superintendents, to ensure that establishing direction, as well as developing and transmitting knowledge, received their time and attention:

Leaders in bureaucracies are primarily concerned with strengthening formal controls that support the enforcement of operational standards and minimize disruption to routines. Leaders in learning organizations are primarily concerned with establishing direction, creating and transmitting knowledge, and developing people who are capable of self-direction and self-control. p. 46

Schlechty defined the Six Critical Social Systems as follows:

- Directional System, which includes those systems through which goals are set, priorities are determined, and when things go awry, corrective actions are initiated.
- The Knowledge Development and Transmission System, which includes those formal and informal systems that define the means by which knowledge related to the moral, aesthetic, and technical norms that shape behavior in schools and school districts is developed, imported, evaluated, and transmitted.

- The Recruitment and Induction System, which includes those systems through which new members are identified and attracted to the organization and brought to understand and embrace the norms and values they must understand and embrace to be full members of the organization.
- The Boundary System, which includes those systems that define who and what are inside the organization, and are therefore subject to the control of the organization, and who and what are outside the organization, and are therefore beyond the reach of the systems that make up the organization.
- The Evaluation System, which includes those systems through which measures of merit and worth are assigned, status is determined, honor is bestowed, and the method and timing of negative sanctions are set.
- The Power and Authority System, which includes those systems that legitimize the use of sanctions, define the proper exercise of power, and determine status relationships.

I was fortunate to have worked for a superintendent who was also my mentor. He understood, long before Peter Senge wrote *The Fifth Discipline*, and before Phil Schlechty wrote about the Six Critical Social Systems, the importance of the superintendent's role in setting and clarifying direction. He would often say, "If you don't know where you are going, chances are you are not going to get there."

The problem with focusing only on operational systems is that it complicates efforts to link them together, which may explain why they are not linked together.

When leaders fasten attention on the social systems, the direction is more likely to be shared, and those impacted by the direction are more likely to have ownership of it. The Directional System is not an operational system, but bureaucracies attempt to operate the direction, usually through strategic planning efforts that result in what I call "drive-by direction," exemplified by slogans disguised as vision and mission statements.

Superintendent as Moral and Intellectual Leader

Superintendents who see their role as that of moral and intellectual leader, and those who work closely with these superintendents, use the Six Critical Social Systems as a framework for strategic thinking and action. Once the district direction is clear, these leaders first ask the question, *What kind of organization is required for our district to move successfully in this direction?* If the answer is a learning organization, the systems in need of redesign are Knowledge Development and Transmission, and Recruitment and Induction. Direction in a bureaucracy is determined by the Power and Authority System and controlled by the Evaluation and Boundary Systems.

I am often asked, "Aren't power and authority important in a learning organization?" Indeed they are, but decision-making and the exercise of power are driven by direction— values, beliefs, desired results. Authority is shared in order to nurture what Schlechty referred to as self-direction and self-control.

The next question most frequently asked is, "What about accountability? How does accountability work without coercion and the use of power?" This is one of the reasons we have partnered

with John Tanner, founder of [bravEd](#). The beliefs and assumptions that underlie Tanner's emphasis on True Accountability and his efforts to learn from accountability in effective organizations are closely aligned with the Schlechty Center's view of accountability in learning organizations. According to Tanner in the launch of bravEd's new [learning portal](#),

"Accountability in effective organizations is any system that allows the organization to develop and maintain trust with its most important stakeholders. Stakeholders are those people who define what the organization does and without whom the organization would not exist, which in the case of schools is the students, their parents, and their communities. What currently passes for educational accountability has nothing to do with this trust, but something else. Now that we know that we're, all of us, obligated to put something better in place."

Tanner sees accountability as being part of the Knowledge Development and Transmission System as opposed to simply an operational system or part of the Power and Authority System. Accountability can both develop trust and accelerate the organization's movement in its desired direction. He says,

"It is critically important to recognize the stark contrast this represents to what currently passes for educational accountability. That system is a backwards-facing series of mechanisms that can make it difficult in most schools, and practically impossible in those a state labels as failures, to shape themselves for the future. That is a dangerous place for any organization to be, and the fact that the entire field of education is directed to do that should be alarming to us all."

It is the superintendent who has the moral authority to redesign systems and ensure that they are linked in a way that is coherent and moves the organization in the direction of a learning organization. Yes, it requires the support of the board, but who is better positioned to gain that support than the superintendent? Yes, it requires the support of staff, but who is in a better position to gain that support than the superintendent?

Phil Schlechty advocated that the most important role of superintendent is that of moral and intellectual leader. To that end, the Center has—taking what Phil wrote about superintendent leadership in his books, along with what we at the Center have learned from our own work with superintendents, especially those who have participated in our Superintendents Leadership Network, identified 10 characteristics of superintendent leadership that we call the Pillars of Superintendent as Moral and Intellectual Leader.

Pillars of Superintendent as Moral and Intellectual Leader
A Schlechty Center Framework

Models and Develops Trust: Gives priority to building personal trust and trust in the organization.

Clarifies the Vision: Consistently and continuously communicates and clarifies a clear and compelling vision of the future.

Knows What He or She Believes: Understands the need to be clear about what he or she believes and understands that shared beliefs are the foundation of the direction of the organization.

Enhances Capacity: Attends to developing the capacity of the organization and the capacity of the people who are part of the organization to support continuous innovation.

Educates Community: Educates the community, especially community leaders, and informs policymakers about the condition of education.

Thinks and Acts Strategically: Employs systems thinking to understand how systems are linked to one another and how they interact.

Personalizes Relationships with Principals: Develops personal relationships with all principals in the district.

Unifies Central Office Staff: Educates central office staff so they understand and are committed to the direction in which they are being led.

Shares Authority: Shares authority rather than delegates it. Views authority as affective and highly personalized.

Personalizes Relationship with the Board: Strives to work as part of a team with the board in order to focus on the needs of children and the future of the community.

Relationship Between Pillars and Critical Social Systems

These pillars of moral and intellectual leadership have a future orientation. They are all forward-facing. They are also closely aligned with the high-level critical social systems in order to move the district in the direction of a learning organization. A superintendent who models and develops trust, clarifies the vision, and knows what he or she believes is well-positioned to lead the redesign of the Directional System. A superintendent who attends to capacity building, educates the community, and who thinks and acts strategically is positioned to lead the redesign of the Knowledge Development and Transmission System. Finally, a superintendent who personalizes relationships with principals and with the board, who unifies central staff, and who shares authority is positioned to lead the redesign of the Recruitment and Induction System.

In describing these pillars, it is not our intent to minimize the importance of the technical, management, and administrative functions of the superintendent's role. Management and compliance requirements are important and are not going to disappear anytime soon. Operational systems are important and will still be needed. Indeed, these same pillars could be used to describe a superintendent as CEO and manager, but the descriptors for each pillar would be different. They would be more about rules, organization charts, job descriptions, and top-down compliance-based accountability programs.

Superintendents as moral and intellectual leaders will cause the work inside of these operational systems and management functions to be aligned with the Directional, Knowledge Development and Transmission, and Recruitment and Induction Systems. These superintendent leaders will ensure that all district activities, including those organized by operating systems, will have a future orientation and contribute to developing trust—not just in the leader, but in the organization.

Pillars of Superintendent as Moral and Intellectual Leader	Critical Social Systems
• Models and Develops Trust • Clarifies the Vision • Knows What He or She Believes	Directional
• Enhances Capacity • Educates Community • Thinks and Acts Strategically	Knowledge Development and Transmission
• Personalizes Relationships with Principals and with the Board • Unifies Central Office Staff • Shares Authority	Recruitment and Induction