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Baldrige Belief-Busting Epiphanies

Jerry:

During our chat last Friday you cited one of the “impediments” to fulfilling your vision of what is possible here as the “size and complexity of an organization” whose change requires that the people in it “first want to.” In business, you noted, this comes from “near death experiences.”

Have you ever wondered why? And what might have the same effect here?

I have, and I find that 9/11 has provided a way to understand how a single experience can generate an *epiphany* --- all of a sudden the same world looks different. Some fundamental beliefs that shaped the way we saw reality are now challenged.

So what does this have to do with MCPS and “Baldrige?”

For people to “want to” change an organization, some unquestioned beliefs about it have to be challenged by *them*. And it may not always have to be a negative, “near-death” experience that challenges it. There are three equally powerful belief-busting epiphanies right in the MCPS backyard. I think you have watched people experience two of them. And it’s the third that this memo is about.

- The first happens when people go to a school like Waters Landing and, counter to their beliefs, find kids taking charge of their own learning from Kindergarten on. Visitors come away “astonished” when they find students from the 1st grade up using “data” to drive their own learning. Using it to know where they are in terms of where they need to go, and taking ownership of the journey.

They came, like most adults, not believing that children *want* to learn, and therefore have to be “made” to. And they leave knowing what is possible for *all* children.

- The second belief-busting epiphany I’ve seen happen has been when people have a chance to talk with MCPS teachers and staff involved in the Reading Initiative.

“Teaching is impossible, yet teachers teach. Expected to give individual attention to each child, the teacher knows that it can’t be done.” I heard Stanford’s Larry Cuban say this over thirty years ago when he was a Arlington’s superintendent. I didn’t think at the time what it must be like to go to work every day knowing that you *can’t* do what *want* to

do, or if you can right now, you can't sustain it for long. Again, most adults - inside and outside schools - do not believe that it is possible to attend to the learning needs of each child. Nor do they believe that teachers will change their practices quickly and together.

Yet, I saw the epiphanies that came from the Reading Initiative's presentation at a recent MCBRE meeting. It is possible...and it can happen in any school.

- And finally is the critical belief that raises doubt in some people's minds over everything you do. A belief that coherent district-wide sustained change is not actually *possible*. Here is where the epiphany creating challenges are needed, because without this, the other two can't be supported.

And this is where a unique opportunity is coming up in three weeks if a team from the district and from the business community can be put together to take advantage of it.

From April 7-10, NIST will be holding its annual *Quest for Excellence* Conference in DC. At it, the Baldrige Award winners for this year will present, and this will be the first year that there will be three education winners. But that's not really why I think a Montgomery County team needs to be there.

I've been to several of these, and found them epiphany-producing because they challenge the belief that a "whole" organization and culture can't change, and relatively quickly. It is *possible*, and it doesn't matter whether your organization produces widgets or learning.

It's the nature of the presentations that does it. One's understanding of what happened in that organization gets woven horizontally and vertically when you have a chance to get the "big picture" and then in subsequent sections track a category, or a sector, or role, or both. In the last one I chose to stay with the CEO role group and could see the common pattern of beliefs that shaped their actions.

So in order to bring this third belief-busting challenge into the mix as soon as possible, what has been suggested to Bob is that MCBRE find a way to support sending a team -- and facilitator -- to this conference. Team members would follow their paths of interest during the day, and then at the end come together to debrief in terms of relevance to district-wide change in MCPS. The deliverable "product" of this effort would initially be a new level of understanding of how to leverage the presently fragmented efforts in MCPS [some, but not all, called *Baldrige*]. It would be a base of understanding that both the district and the business community need to frame subsequent efforts that can engage others in belief-busting experiences.