

Building

Capacity for Sustained Improvement

BY GAIL A. DIGATE and LEWIS A. RHODES

Complaints increase about the inability of America's public education systems to permanently improve. Changes vanish when champions move on, and new ideas rarely transfer to other settings.

What change-seekers really want is *sustained change*—new levels of results that continue to be generated over time. This outcome, however, requires that the enabling processes supporting the ultimate classroom changes develop concurrently. This involves significantly more people at the beginning of the process who are connected within a common vision in ways allowing them to develop collaboratively the new knowledge required.

Conventional change processes seldom tap into the latent resources created by the interdependence of individuals committed to the same ends. Instead, these individuals hope that by achieving better results, they will convince others to support and institutionalize changes. This "create the change and they will come" approach has led to the current situation, where pockets of excellence can be created—but not for long.

Leadership Teams

In two states, sustainable educational change has resulted from new strategies and tactics that simultaneously modify the school system's perma-

nent infrastructure—the interwoven fabric of relationships, roles, and rules that become "the way we do things around here."

Since 1990, more than 40 school districts in Illinois and Massachusetts have worked together to build capacity for sustained improvement through vertically-structured, district-level work groups called Learning Leadership Teams. Team members reflect the interdependence of district, building, and classroom levels.

The District Learning Leadership Team concept was initiated in 1989 by a team of Motorola executives and educators from the Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy and Illinois State Board of Education.

The initial design was based on an understanding of organizational change derived from two primary sources: systemic change as defined by the National Science Foundation and Motorola's experience in turning around its work processes and results to become in 1988 the first recipient of the prestigious Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award. Additional insight with respect to the value of vertical teams was provided by the American Association of School Administrators and IIDIEIA, the Institute for Development of Educational Activities, Inc.

Since 1992, the Learning Leadership Team process has become the

collective creation of Motorola and its school district partners in Illinois and Massachusetts. In these districts, LLT is a recognized strategy to support sustainable change efforts that ultimately improve performance in the classroom. Most teams focus on continuous improvement of work processes, particularly in curriculum, instruction, and student assessment.

What makes the LLT a powerful process for sustainable, systemic change? First, it is a *district* strategy anchored in the classroom. This critical difference in the strategic focus of change rests on an explicit assumption: quality results require a sustainable system in which all components are aligned to support the fundamental work process that generates those results.

This is such a basic way of thinking about organizing work for quality results that many quality practitioners assume that everyone knows it. Sadly, this is not yet true in much of today's public or private sectors.

The design team therefore began with a basic tenet that often eludes those interested in systemic reform: The fundamental unit of sustainable, systemic change is the school district. The district, not the building, is the smallest unit that can provide a sustainable infrastructure with the capacity to build the coherent interactive relationships and roles necessary to

support the everyday functions of those who work directly with students.

Dealing with the district as a responsive system of support, rather than a rigid bureaucracy, the Leadership Learning Team concept provides a process for ongoing, integrated training, explores applicable tools (quantitative and qualitative) that can be applied immediately to work situations, builds trust among multiple stakeholders through teamwork and relationship building, and uses time in ways that allow people to reflect, learn, and practice in a safe work environment.

Working Processes

Various members of the district convene as a vertically representative team—rather than a collection of individuals—to work on systemwide problems affecting instruction. Typically the team includes members of the board of education, superinten-

dent, central-office administrators, principals, teachers, union leaders, parents, community and business people, representatives of health and human services agencies, as well as colleges of education.

At least three people, including two school district employees and a Motorola manager, are established as the district's facilitator team to support the continuing work and training of the LLT. An experienced consultant from Motorola also is assigned as the lead trainer and coach to the facilitator team. Motorola provides the same coach to the school system for at least three years.

The Learning Leadership Team receives training and coaching on strategic thinking, team development, problem-solving strategies, marketing, communications, and quality standards and tools. Education and community members learn

new ideas from business; in turn, business gains new insights and strategies from education.

LLT members attend team meetings, typically one six-hour session per month during school time. Meetings focus on improving systemwide work processes as well as continual learning and practice for team members.

Between meetings, LLT members contribute to work groups tackling issues of internal organizational needs and customer requirements.

Effecting Change

Magdalene Giffune, superintendent of the Foxboro, Mass., Public Schools, says her district expanded its curriculum redesign efforts by applying the LLT process. "The work immediately assumed legitimacy with many people in our community because a recognizable business outside of education said, 'Yes, this process is important.'"

Sustaining the Fruits of Change

The problem of sustaining educational change is a different problem than change itself. Complicating the issue further is that the solution is counter-intuitive. Consider this analogy: All who want better apples know that the fruit itself is the unit of visible change. All efforts to improve the fruit must ultimately be visible in the apple.

Those who work in the orchard, however, recognize that the unit of sustainable improvement and change is not the apple, or even the limb on which it hangs, but the tree that supports and nurtures both through its invisible infrastructure of roots, veins, and capillaries.

If one wants better apples season after season, one must have ways to understand and sustain the healthy interdependence of the tree and the apple.

"Scaling-up" strategies have become the current preoccupation of reformers concerned about exciting new "apples"—practices with demonstrated effectiveness in isolated settings—but which seldom gain districtwide acceptance. Unfortunately, most strategies start with self-fulfilling negative assumptions about the nature of the "tree"—unresponsive, unchangeable bureaucracies that must be bypassed or neutralized if effective changes are to be "scaled-up." The accompanying article reports on a half-decade of experience in Iowa, Illinois, and now Massachusetts that challenges this assumption. Its insights about systemic change can be especially relevant to reformers interested in turning isolated answers into sustainable solutions.

Previous attempts to transform bureaucratic cultures faced a fundamental barrier—educators' lack of experience working in a setting where the system is not a controlling enemy—a bureaucracy to be flattened, decentralized, or destroyed. Few had ever experienced sufficient positive interdependence in the organizations of work, family, or society to trust that new and different ways of working collaboratively could be sustained until they become the usual ways to do business. Recognizing that one is influenced negatively by a system is one thing; understanding the system so that it can be managed more productively—and then trusting that system—are quite different challenges.

Learning Leadership Teams address this experience deficit in the fundamental learning structure of their work processes that provide continuing, personal experiences with positive interdependence as the means to better results. Opportunities to grow *professionally* (to develop new knowledge and skills that work better in practice than what one did before,) and *personally* (to learn about oneself in the context of one's work-related actions and interactions) can be provided as part of work. Key to the institutionalization of effective practices, *organizational* change can develop from this professional and personal change.

Educators can connect, collaborate, and learn as part of their daily roles. These learnings can become a sustainable base of knowledge and understanding across a district and community that can remain as permanent infrastructure whether individual champions stay or leave.

— Lewis A. Rhodes

She adds: "The systematic training that Motorola provided gave everyone a sense of the 'big picture' and helped us define the system's work. Now our staff has integrated the big picture into its thinking and gets the important, as well as the urgent, work done."

Giffune lists these major benefits from her district's investment in the process: (1) self-directed and self-managed teams, (2) a heightened awareness and understanding of the system's problems and needs, and (3) the resources individual buildings and departments require for continuous improvement. Giffune credits the LLT strategies and tools with expansion of the district's curriculum efforts and believes the math and science curriculum development progressed more in 10 months than in the previous five years.

"It is gratifying to me, as superintendent, to see adults employing cooperative learning tools to solve real

problems in the education work place," Giffune says.

To learn what customers expect, the Learning Leadership Team in Mansfield engages cross-sections of the community to identify long-term systemwide goals and objectives.

Simultaneously, teachers, parents, and administrators examine ways to identify and improve the interdependence of work at district, building, and classroom levels.

In Mansfield, the Learning Leadership Team has improved the system's work processes according to Diane Lowndes, director of curriculum and instruction, and Donald Nicoletti, superintendent, in these key ways:

- *Meeting effectiveness.* Meetings are planned with thought given to outcomes and use of process tools and strategies that best suit each outcome. Agendas are facilitated to ensure integrity for the team process and con-

crete results.

- *Self-assessment of team performance.* Teams employ self-assessment instruments and techniques to identify how they behave in relation to explicitly defined team values and then use this data to continuously improve team performance.

- *Districtwide application.* LLT tools and strategies used during meetings to enhance discussions, reach decisions, and solve problems also are used in the classroom to help students perform their work and with other groups such as local school improvement councils and parent advisory committees.

- *Use of data, information, and knowledge.* Quantitative and qualitative input is solicited from the system's stakeholders so their needs and wants are considered and satisfied. Data are gathered by various means, including surveys, interviews, and focus groups. This information is analyzed by teams that apply their knowledge of customers' requirements to establish goals and develop strategies that continuously move the district ever closer to its vision. As a natural part of their team processes, members engage in ongoing study by reading and discussing current literature applicable to their work.

- *Facilitation by system leaders.* The role of district and building administrators has been redefined to include that of facilitator, a function and responsibility distinctly different from the control responsibilities of a meeting chairperson.

In Wheeling, Ill., a suburb of Chicago, the Learning Leadership Team has made its most significant contribution to decision-making, says Bill Meyer, assistant superintendent in District 21. "It has shaped a critical pathway to examine what the real business of school should be. We are making better decisions because LLT has established a level playing field to share ideas from many groups in our community."

The scope of team-driven decisions covers such things as hiring, curriculum redesign, and instructional delivery methods. Meyer says the LLT process has energized his district to consider holistic approaches; examine interpersonal styles, preferences, and skills; assume personal responsi-

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bility for learning; and agree on high standards of performance.

"We subsequently developed a continuous improvement process that provided six weeks of intensive training during the school day to teams of teachers who are working together to recreate the middle school curriculum.

For the past two years, Lake Park High School in Roselle, Ill., has been creating a continuous improvement process to ensure that all educational decisions are made closer to the learner. David Victor, the school's principal and team facilitator, says his team has learned three fundamental lessons from applying the LLT process:

- Teams must communicate effectively with the internal and external publics affected by their work.
- A key ingredient to team effectiveness is the existence of a well-defined mission, clear understanding of how the team will operate and conduct its work, and agreement on decision-making procedures.

- Determining how the work will be done is accomplished best through a collaborative process that engages each team member in reflective thought, discussion, and consensus decision-making. Time spent in these activities at the outset of the team's work enhances its performance tenfold and builds the foundation for long-term results.

Essential Messages

Four lessons emerge from conversations with educators in participating districts.

- *Relationships are manageable elements of change.*

Relationships among adults in schools provide the scaffolds supporting the varying roles they play. New networks of relationships must begin as temporary scaffolds before they can develop into a more permanent supportive infrastructure. Changes in relationships, then roles, and finally rules evolve as responses to per-

ceived needs. This process generally moves through several stages.

Stage 1: In a setting for problem-focused communication involving all who have a systemic relationship to the problem, dialogue and reflective conversations about common concerns shape awareness that the stakeholders are connected by common values and beliefs and share common desires for results. The outcome of this stage is trust.

Stage 2: Awareness and consideration of new organizational relationships become explicit from agreement on now commonly perceived and understood outcomes.

Stage 3: Exploring and modifying new relationships in work settings continue until they can be trusted to support new roles for individuals.

Stage 4: Exploring and modifying new roles and their enabling support infrastructure become an integral part of regular district operations.

Stage 5: The new relationships and



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roles become formalized through new rules and policies.

- *Learn from the trial-and-error problem solving of daily practice.*

In the flow of daily work, not everything can be successful, but acknowledging it often can be "risky." Yet sustained success requires learning more from things that do not work out as planned. When others join in collaborative learning and knowledge-building, perceived risk of trial-and-

error learning are reduced. Supported self-correction saves time and energy in the long run.

- *"Feeding" collective wisdom yields results.*

Continual learning requires information. The LLT vehicle generates and processes information as a nutrient for growth among individuals, teams, and organizations. Feedback is focused, regular, and instructive rather than random, casual, and

destructive. Data are interpreted through a common frame of understanding so they can be woven into organizational knowledge.

When mixed with experience throughout the district, this knowledge transforms itself over time into the transparent way-we-do-business.

- *Essential new roles of system leadership.*

A key role in the design of LLT strategy was Motorola's clear understanding that lasting changes in the way that work gets done require that the core work be viewed as part of a sustainable, manageable system of support.

Now, after more than five years of LLT experience, participating school district leaders see more clearly how to make that happen. School system leaders must maintain a sense of the whole; assume accountability for the ways the work gets done; and provide opportunities within work processes for regular relevant conversations keyed to system results.

These opportunities build on relationships formed around common purpose developed and nurtured by a vertical team's work. They establish a learning-centered scaffold that bridges the conventional boundaries of the school system. Experiences working in these new roles and relationships provide the positive data needed to overcome stereotypic roles and functions that confine people and constrain meaningful work processes.

This data advances knowledge, widens and deepens understanding, and provides a continually enlarging base on which to create a sustainable infrastructure of new practices, processes, and policies. The district becomes a collaborative, knowledge-building community.

Gail A. Digate, president of Leadership Learning Systems Inc. in Yorkville, Ill., is contracted by Motorola as lead coach/trainer for Learning Leadership Team districts in three states and was part of the original LLT design team at the Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy. Lewis A. Rhodes, an associate executive director at AASA, directed the association's development of the district vertical team concept in collaboration with IIDIEIAI.

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