



# Quality Network News

A Service of the Total Quality Network of the American Association of School Administrators

## Leading the Charge

### Are You Ready for Leadership-by-Fact?

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**B**ecause management deals with the nature of future actions, W. Edwards Deming stressed that predictions would be sounder if based on facts. Thus, "management-by-fact" evolved, stressing the use of workplace data and information in making decisions.

But management-by-fact in a work setting that is structured according to old assumptions rather than facts can result in fruitless quests to make better decisions about the wrong things. Education faces this situation today. Changing that contextual culture now requires "leadership-by-fact."

#### Reality As Theory or Fact?

Peter Drucker points out that schools are not alone in this task. Along with most of society's institutions, "the assumptions on which the organization has been built and is being run no longer fit

reality. These are the assumptions that shape any organization's behavior, dictate its decisions about what to do and what not to do, and define what the organization considers meaningful results. They are what I call a company's theory of the business," Drucker says.

School leaders face a choice: to operate on old assumptions or to accept new theories about teaching and learning as facts and help others to see the same reality. Here are three theories, increasingly recognized as facts, which practitioners can start to base their leadership-by-fact strategies.

■ *All children do learn.* Learning is not a possibility like we've heard in the motto that all children can learn. Rather, all children *do* learn because learning is a built-in, on-going process—it's not a choice! Accepting continual learning as a fact of life means that the school's daily work process must start at a different place, that is, with what a child already knows and with the ways that he or she already has in place for learning more.

One implication of this fact would be to use testing more as a diagnostic tool at the beginning and during instruction rather than at the end, and to build instruction around the strengths of each student's perceptual or learning style.

■ *The school district is already a system.* Your school district is a collection of interrelated functions intended to accomplish a common purpose. Although it may be that the district doesn't usually operate

as one, the district is still the accountable and sustainable system whose most important acts are those that influence individual actions as they work to attain a common purpose.

You may recall that King Solomon knew that if a child was cut in two, a connected "system" of interdependent parts would die. Accepting this truth opened possibilities for different "solutions."

School leaders, in accepting this truth, can have a different starting point for their actions. For example, systemic change strategies can start at the essential part of any system—its connecting relationships. As changes take place, all the involved and related parts of the system can adjust.

In any system of interdependent parts, this continual adjustment process is fundamental for change to be sustained. It's called "growth" in living systems; "continual improvement" in organizations.

■ *The actions of the last worker on the line, or in the chain of command, encapsulates all the work and decisions of everyone—practitioners, policy-makers and decision-makers—before him or her.* In industry, the last worker's interactions with the product is known as the moment-of-truth. The more frequent the informed interaction between that last worker and the results wanted, the greater chance that the final product will be closer to what's needed. (Appropriateness to needs or requirements is the primary definition of quality.)

Accepting that quality is largely created through interactions in that "space" between the "last"

workers and the desired results holds profound implications. If those interactions are driven by the knowledge embedded in the heads of each participant, the system's management responsibility becomes one of developing and supporting the front-line person's capacities to act in those moments-of-truth.

#### Consequences of Belief

These three facts of life represent fundamental truths about the nature of the work setting that, if believed, can define the starting point for new leadership-by-fact strategies. The degree to which these are accepted as reality will be the determining factor.

Acting as if they were not true may explain why certain things seem to work in schools and others don't. And if you're already a leader-by-fact, to what extent does not being able to act on one's beliefs contribute to education's decreasing sense of personal and organizational efficacy?

Fortunately, effective management processes exist today that derive from each of these fundamental truths about the work of students and adults in schools. Seldom however, have they been integrated into a systemic school strategy because the framework, or mental model, for understanding why to do it must come from system leaders who accept new facts of life.

Today, your greatest challenge is to use the growing knowledge from cognitive and organizational research to help the American public, and the education profession, face the facts. ▲

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