

The Pushme-Pullyu Is Alive and Well, But Dr. Doolittle Is in Trouble

BY LEWIS A. RHODES

There it was, in full color on the back page of Education Week — Dr. Doolittle’s Pushme-Pullyu, the “two-headed” animal that first had intrigued me as a child and that I later used, when working as a Washington-based policy analyst in the 1960s, as a metaphor for the seemingly contradictory stresses of change.

Initially I could see why the author also chose it as a metaphor to comment on the No Child Left Behind Act. Claiming that NCLB’s theory of action is “heading in opposite directions at the same time,” he blamed the law’s “either/or” condition on the battle between its two heads — the “use what works” and the “use whatever works” camps of educational reformers. The law, he sadly concluded, won’t change much because this competition between the two camps will doom any changes that could have added freedom and flexibility to the day-to-day operations of the nation’s schools.

His conclusion, however, seemed strange for someone who claimed to know about the fundamental nature of Pushme-Pullyu, as Dr. Doolittle had to. After all, Doolittle, like superintendents and other CEOs, was responsible for the health and growth of a total, connected, natural system — a given reality over which he had no control.

Doolittle, of course, was famous for being able to “talk to the animals,” but it really was his ability to listen that was special. Like today’s “Horse Whisperers,” his knowledge of the animals’ inherent

nature helped him understand the meaning of their actions. This gave him the capacity to envision “both/and” treatments for what the article’s author was addressing as an “either/or” auto-immune disease in which each head attacks the other in order to be successful.

Doolittle’s Knowledge

What did Dr. Doolittle know about the reality of connected natural systems that enabled him to avoid the “Blind Men and the Elephant” syndrome in order to serve the needs of an organized whole? Here are three principles that, non-metaphorically, relate to the day-to-day operations of the living, natural systems we call schools.

“Doolittle, of course, was famous for being able to ‘talk to the animals,’ but it really was his ability to listen that was special.”

► While the Pushme-Pullyu looked different on the outside, it shared a core, fundamental nature with all other animals. Anyone interested in its survival had to understand this common nature that drove its behavior.

► Even though its two heads naturally offered different perspectives of the environment in which it had to survive, it was never an “either/or” animal. It was always “both/and.” Survival depended on its capacity to make sense of, and then act on, the single world both of its heads perceived.

► Its ability to grow and survive as a system was a function of internal, interconnected processes that served to support both heads at the same time.

The Both/And Paradox

This paradox is not a school problem alone. It’s a universal condition that drives the nature and structure of all organizations. I even find it represented

in Michelangelo’s picture on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel of God trying to connect to Adam. There I like to think of God on one side as the developer of “Policies for ALL” and Adam on the other trying to translate them into “Practices for EACH.”

There’s a similar fundamental difference in the nature of the purposes driving the daily actions of those at the two ends of people-serving institutions like schools. Some are accountable for what happens to ALL, others to EACH.

The ALLs are at the Pushme-Pullyu’s head that says “use what works.” They are knowledge driven. The EACHs are at the “use whatever works” end and are driven by situational needs and available resources at the time.

But in Michelangelo’s picture I also notice the small, disconnecting gap between the two fingers. Critics often miss this and expect that somehow policies will miraculously flow smoothly across that gap to emerge as practices at the other end. (The late John Gardner termed this a “Penny Gumball Machine” belief — that is, a coin inserted at the top produces gumballs at the bottom.) And it’s this gap that the superintendent, as system leader and CEO, has the primary responsibility to bridge.

But to do this requires starting, as Dr. Doolittle did, with the nature the two heads share in common. They each are biologically wired to make a difference through their decisions. The good news is that in schooling the difference they both want to make is with students. The bad news is that because of the seemingly different roles they play in the system, we’ve dissected the animal into two seemingly more manageable but disconnected work systems. One system’s success depends on its capacity for responsiveness to the needs of each child, while the other’s success depends on its responsibility for the equitable use of resources for all children.

We create and operate, in effect, two systems of people, both essential, working in relative isolation from each other but whose success depends on the interconnectedness of their work.

When a Performance Review Is Seen as Criticism

BY STAN BIPPUS

Even when we acknowledge that this condition exists, the nature of the gap-closing strategies and processes we often create are non-sustainable because they don't include the support each head needs from the other. Missing are the gap-closing internal, interconnected processes that provide the capacity to grow and survive as a system because they support both heads at the same time.

A Need for Doolittle

The Pushme-Pullyu paradox represents the current schizophrenic state of thinking about educational policy and practice that is stressing practitioners and policymakers at all levels.

But that stress has another dimension. Driving both the "what works" and the "whatever works" camps of educational reformers is the frustration of those who know what must be done but don't realize they really don't know how to do it at scale.

Actually, when you know something about how children learn and what teaching entails, then knowing what to do isn't hard. The hard part comes when you must know how to do it for all students. And the assumption is that individual teachers, administrators and policymakers already have this knowledge. Most don't because the prevailing bipolar view of the system has denied them integrated experiences from which they could learn and develop that knowledge.

The system hasn't been the unit of sustained change.

For the system leader, however, the scope of the problem and its nature makes this essential knowledge. Survival of the two-headed system (and often their own) can depend on their unique knowledge and skills to resolve what is, in effect, a quantum paradox — one where it is necessary to understand and address simultaneously the needs of the particles and the wave, the forest and the trees, the EACHs and the ALLs.

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It is sometimes difficult for those of us who've worked as superintendents to maintain a positive working relationship with employees we are required to evaluate. Ideally, we should be able to express our thoughts, opinions and expectations regarding a subordinate's job performance without that employee becoming defensive, threatened or offended.

It takes a long time to build relationships with subordinates to the point where they can handle a supervisor's criticism and concerns as well as compliments. It takes an even stronger relationship to remain positive when subordinates perceive the superintendent's judgments of their job performance to be inaccurate. Far too many employees take suggestions for improvement as criticism of them personally rather than using a performance evaluation to examine their own professional behaviors and actions.

In my view, personnel evaluations generally do not effectively address weaknesses in job performance. As a result, few improvements in performance or attitude usually follow.

Honest Feedback

Some observers might argue that superintendents and other supervisors in education who cannot communicate their performance concerns to employees are weak and ineffective leaders. In some cases, this may be true. However, most superintendents do not have the luxury

of having honest feedback received in a positive and constructive manner by members of the administrative team.

Positive working relationships between superintendents and those who serve in the superintendent's cabinet are critical to the success of all. Unfortunately, superintendents do not have the time it takes to build these trusting relationships with every subordinate before they may need to communicate job performance concerns. They have to be able to comment on work performance issues from day one without fear of hurting someone's feelings or creating an adversarial relationship simply by doing so.

Most employees cannot handle honest feedback of their performance without it affecting the relationship with their supervisor in a negative manner. Most superintendents can only dream of having an open and honest working relationship with their administrative team or even their school board, where every thought, suggestion, concern or criticism is received in a positive and constructive manner.

A Third Party

If my assumptions are accurate, what can be done to get all issues on the table? Of course, no one approach will work in all situations.

One avenue might be to use a disinterested third party to collect the data that will be used to assess an employee's job performance. This could increase the odds significantly that personnel evaluations will have a more positive impact on the effectiveness of employees in meeting their responsibilities. I found internal and external peer evaluations to be ineffective because colleagues are reluctant to voice negative concerns to a fellow administrator.

A third-party evaluator is a professional consultant who comes into a school district to collect information about employees' work based on the expectations in their job description. The data is collected through observations and interviews with employees themselves, colleagues and, where appropriate,

continued on page 40