



Quality Network News

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Leading the Charge

Strawberry Shortcake for 25,000 Kids

By Lewis Rhodes, associate executive director, AASA

Does the scope of a problem change its nature? For 35 years, school reformers have demonstrated that new ideas can work in one or two buildings — but seldom transfer to entire school systems. This brings increasing disenchantment to business, foundation, and government supporters of systemic change, including those who felt — rightly — that quality management could help educational leaders get a handle on the complex dynamics of total system change. Now these supporters, expressing frustration at our apparent slowness to accept new ideas, are beginning to look for ways to bypass the “system.”

This condition and the reaction to it are not new.

HIGHLIGHTS

Talking Quality
A Baldrige Award for Education?

▲ Page 2

Systems Leaders Speak
Using Systems Thinking to Improve Student Learning

▲ Page 3

From the Trenches
Achieving Competencies at Mt. Edgecumbe

▲ Page 4

The Quality Toolbox
Using Force Field Analysis

▲ Insert

The pattern has been repeated over three decades. One reason is that large-scale change is counter-intuitive. One must deal with things that seem to have little to do with the “problem” at hand. This phenomenon is illustrated in Roger von Oech’s metaphor, “Strawberry Shortcake for 25,000 People”:

...suppose that you have a recipe for strawberry shortcake that serves four people. One day you invite over seven friends to eat this dessert. To make it, you simply double the recipe....On another occasion, you invite over one friend for this dessert. To make it,...you halve the recipe. Now suppose that you invite 25,000 of your closest friends over for strawberry shortcake. Now...the most difficult parts of the problem are no longer given in the recipe. These things include doing futures buying of strawberries on the commodities market; making deals with the teamsters to deliver enough cream; large-scale renting of bowls, spoons, tables, and chairs; and traffic flow coordination...."

Note that the ingredients and their proportions remain the same. What changed is the problem. It is now one of quality and quantity. For this, a “culinary leader” is effective to the extent that he or she can use processes that bring the basic ingredients together, in the right proportions and relationship, at the right time.

This leadership is driven

by a vision of what strawberry shortcake looks and tastes like. But vision is not enough, especially in a dynamic world of unforeseen complexities. Leaders need sufficient hands-on experience to know what each ingredient contributes and how much they can vary the

“large-scale change is counter-intuitive.”

relationships among them and still produce a quality outcome. They must also have ways to harness the experiences of others.

The problem of managing quality and quantity requires skills, understandings, tools, and processes that have not been part of our schooling “recipe.” Until now, school systems have had no way for all their parts to learn and adapt together. Consequently, millions of foundation, government, and industry dollars have been poured into successful — but usually isolated — demonstrations that survive only as long as outside support is maintained.

Reformers, operating from an unquestioned “if-we-demonstrate-it-they-will-come” belief, seldom included the processes needed for system-wide continuous learning, thus nothing has changed systemically. The *system* was never included in the reform as an active learning partner.

We have been like the inexperienced farmer who has seen, smelled, and tasted apples and wants to grow them, yet fails to understand the complex root system of the apple tree and the network of veins that must nourish it as it develops. He grafts branches from successful trees onto trees that lack the internal channels or cultural roots to support them for long, and after one season, they wither and die. Successful apple growers know that process and product are inseparable. The vision of the fruit as the end product serves a critical function throughout the years-long process. The vision provides a continuing answer to the question “why?”

Clearly, having to address quality and quantity simultaneously makes systemic change a different problem, one that requires outside support for its resolution. School leaders have few resources they can apply to infrastructure and process changes because they don’t appear to the public as relating directly to children.

Where among our disenchanting external helpers will we find those with enough faith in a self-correcting process like quality management to support the less glamorous changes that can allow complete districts to become active learners? Where will we find those who know that if they want “strawberries,” they must nurture the growth of the plants. ▲