



# Sabu, Inc.

Helping those  
who must deal with  
*whole elephants*

# M E M O

814 Lamberton Drive  
Silver Spring, MD 20902-3037  
Phone/Fax: 301-649-1296  
E-mail: lewrhodes@AOL.com

**Lewis A. Rhodes**

**DATE: October 16, 2001**

**TO: XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX**

**RE: WHO WAS THAT MASKED MAN...?**

## Coming out of the closet...

When Steve Seleznow and Larry first asked me to capture some ideas I had discussed with them in the form of *20,000 ft. Memos* -- and Jerry later asked me to share that same perspective with him -- I didn't immediately realize I was taking on a feedback role that was different from anything I had ever seen or personally experienced in education. One that depended upon trust, and some degree of confidentiality to maintain it, and which because it was atypical would be hard to explain to others. It also was one that had three limiting consequences:

- Without understanding why I was doing it, and how the information would be used, some would quite naturally not trust me, see me as "snitch," and fear what I might do with what I was noting.
- Some of my thoughts about the systemic connections I perceived [ and specifically how I thought they might be addressed] sometimes got in the way of creative, dedicated people running as fast as they could as they discovered this for themselves.
- And finally, while there may be glamour in "mystery," it's also lonely [the Lone Ranger at least had Tonto].

But those alone aren't sufficient for my determination to "out" myself at this particular time.

What drives it, instead, is my increasing understanding of the unique *experience* and *knowledge* resources you have been collaboratively developing within yourselves that has meaning far beyond this county's boundaries.

My "outing" story, below, is about the *what's* and *why's* of what I'm learning from you, and how it may fit with what you are attempting to learn from your work, and what others also might learn.

## Why 20,000 feet?

When I first began to listen in on your conversations the word "culture" would show up -- usually as some strange, unseen force which you were swimming upstream against and "someday" hoped to change. You were not alone in your sense of this "enemy," for trying to get a handle on culture always has been difficult. As Marshall McLuhan noted, it's like asking a fish about water -- the surrounding context that supports and limits its actions and which, because it has always been there, the fish just takes for granted.

Back in the 60's, Seymour Sarason [in an appropriately titled book, The Culture of the School and the Problem of Change] provided a novel way to make that transparent medium visible-- a Martian in a spaceship hovering over a school. It could see what humans did -- their actions, but not their words or reasons. And, over time, it could see which actions seemed to be "regularities," and how those regularities seemed to be related to others. Those, he suggested, seemed to be the unquestioned ways *we do our business* in schools. His purpose however [which he achieved for me and for others I have talked to since then, including the present U.S. Secretary of Education] was to force each of us to ask "Why?"

Hopefully, my *20,000 foot Memo* writing relationship with the Montgomery County School System, may have the same consequences.

"...and so these men of Indostan  
disputed loud and long.

Each in his own opinion  
Exceeding stiff and strong.

Though each was partly in the right,  
they all were in the wrong!"

**The Parable of the Blind Men & The Elephant**

## MCPS from 20,000 ft.

Specifically, what might Sarason's *Martian* see if it looked at MCPS right now? What are you doing differently. Which of these acts are becoming "regularities" embedded in different relationships and roles? And then why?

Again from *20,000 ft.*, the answers to those questions are pointing to a better understanding of *leadership at the system level*. What is it that a leader does that enables an entire organization to change its "regularities?" Why does he or she do it? And what would he/she have to believe to act that way consistently?

The answers emerging from your experiences are exciting for two reasons. First, because residing in *your collective experiences* is a developing knowledge base critically needed by all those "reformers" who no longer believe schools *can* change.

And second, what's happening here is *predictable*, but the theories that allow one to understand it come from "non-educators" [such as Wheatley, Senge, Deming, Drucker] who view all organizations as living systems that [1] have, in their members, the built-in power to fix themselves to better accomplish their purposes. And [2] operate with "simple rules" at one level, that permit those at other levels to respond appropriately to the seeming chaos and complexity of everyday reality.

## A Non-Martian view

But I'm not a Martian. And I brought to my perch and perspective my own experiences. In particular, for some time now, I've struggled to communicate what I thought I was seeing as a hidden cause of many of the problem conditions that continue to get in the way of schools accomplishing what they have the potential to accomplish -- i.e., *make a significant difference* in the developing life of *each* child whose life they touch.

And as I've watched energy and resources continue to focus on each separate problem condition, I found myself "trying harder" to communicate what seemed to me to be a common condition underlying schools' powerlessness to make the difference that each teacher and administrator in them *wanted*, and *needed*, to make. My articles, presentations, reports, and papers tried to describe what I saw as this gap, or hole, in the way we understood the common work schools engage in. Specifically, that each school *system* really functioned as *two* purposeful systems -- one accountable for responding to the needs of all children, and the other accountable for responding to the needs of each. And something was missing in the middle to connect them.<sup>1</sup>

I even decided to use *Sabu*, the elephant boy as a logo to keep reminding me that the "elephant" of the school district is *already* a total connected system with "parts" that are interdependent -- not the end product of a piece-by-piece construction project [a la Frankenstein] For me, the "elephant" already "on-the-table" is what we always start with.

But "trying harder" to communicate *what* was missing -- and *how* the gap could be bridged as part of daily practice -- wasn't satisfying me.<sup>2</sup> Something was "missing" in my own experience that I wasn't in touch with, and have only discovered through my continuing interactions with MCPS and, in particular, its *leadership teams*.

When I had talked about what could reframe these two accountabilities within a mutual responsibility, the only experiences I could draw from that indicated it was actually possible came from non-school organizations. There has not been [until now] a total district<sup>3</sup> that was operating *as if* dealing with the system as a system was a pre-requisite for *systemic* improvement.

Then [like *Peter Rabbit* who found the world he was looking for in his own backyard] I had this unique opportunity to sit in on some your work, and at the same time observe it from the outside. And as I've reflected on the notes you've seen me taking, I've begun to realize that the "missing connections" I had been looking for, had been growing in front of my eyes as new *roles* -- and *sustainable relationships* among them -- that were becoming the system's connective tissue. They weren't being "installed," or "adopted" from others. They were developing from the inside-out as solutions to current problems that everyone now seemed to "understand" differently.

---

<sup>1</sup> Articles and reports such as *Connecting Leadership and Learning, The Missing Vision-Action Connection., Education's Connectivity Crisis, Putting Unions and Management Out of Business,* *Connecting Leadership and Learning*

<sup>2</sup> "Scenario: The Collaborative Knowledge Building Community: What Might it Look Like?"; "Closing the Gap Between Rhetoric [Talking the Talk] and Reality [Walking the Walk] A Scaffolding Strategy"

<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, the "District" is the only organizational unit in schooling usually called a "system." Yet understanding of districts as systems seldom drives "systemic" change approaches. And, as far as I can tell, only one national reform

As I have concentrated more and more on *why* MCPS here and now, two missing connections in my own knowledge became clearer. The “causes” of the unique systemic results that have appeared in such a short time might be found at *two levels*<sup>4</sup> of understanding district leadership. First, in a new type of operational knowledge that you are discovering and applying as you collaboratively develop district-wide strategies and processes. And related to it -- as a *Yin* is to a *Yang* -- seem to be the *spaces and structures* Jerry, Larry and James have created for that discovery process. And these seem driven by some “simple rules”<sup>5</sup> or principles.

#### If that's what's so...so what?

What all this means [at least to me] is that you all are engaged in something that has meaning far beyond this county's boundaries. In facing, and then dealing with, the realities that shape the connected wholeness of the work of schooling, you are developing a body of knowledge and wisdom that offers “answers” to problems and conditions that others continue to struggle with through disconnected efforts. [If you want a quick example, look across the river to Fairfax. Same general demographics going in...@ but coming out, no sustainable, systemic progress in the time period that you have begin to produce them.]

As I see it, that's the *good* news. The *bad* is that this knowledge is tightly woven through your on-going experiences -- and learning from experience isn't possible when you are running as fast as you all are running. The nature of your work doesn't allow sufficient time to surface, learn from, and apply it to your own continuing work.

oOo

And that brings this story up to the present where I am working with Jerry to find one or more foundations willing to support that specific need. And doing it in a way that would end up embedding *learning-from-working-the-work* as part of the connective tissue of your “learning community.”

#### Martians, elephants, rabbits...and Starfish: One final metaphor.

Back on the ground, I occasionally find myself asking “why am I doing this?” [So does my wife.] My answer probably only makes sense to me in terms of the popular metaphor about *Saving Starfish* in which the teacher running along the shore picking up and throwing back into the water one starfish at a time, responds to an observer's comment - “*That's not going to make any difference*” -- with “*Oh...but it will for this one!*”

What I might add to the truth of that story is that from 20,000 ft. one can see something the shore-based observer can't -- the *Starfish Savers* running along the shore don't last for long. They burn out, drop out or, because of its seeming fruitlessness, many don't enter the profession to take on the task at all.

So what drives my continuing concern is the need to save the starfish savers...and that's what it seems you all are really about.

---

<sup>4</sup> Maybe Einstein was right that “Problems cannot be solved at the same level of consciousness that created them.”

<sup>5</sup> Supported by *Chaos/Complexity* theory which suggests that simple rules on one level give rise to complex relationships on the next.