

(2009)

The Convoy Revisited: How did it Steer through troubled waters and Develop its capacity at the same time?

The principles that framed the initial essay [Total System Management: The Leader as Convoy Commander](#) can be found in [Making Sense Through a Systemic Leadership and Management Lens](#). The past 10-years of the continuing journey of the Montgomery County MD Public School System “convoy” highlighted at this site was captured through that same “lens” of understanding. And many of the learnings from that journey are presented in [Catching Them Doing Something Right](#).

But its most significant learnings may relate to the “Convoy Commander” role as “system leader” and its relationship to a fundamental paradox that continues to limit systemic educational reform today. Identified in 1995 by the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) after a 3-year study of educational reform in schools, districts, and states supported by OERI/USDE and the Carnegie Foundation, CPRE concluded:

“...This policy research makes it clear why, regardless of changes in policy and practice, *all* efforts to make fundamental modifications to the processes of schooling have failed. Schools have not had the capacity to change themselves.

They ...”fail to consider the many factors that interact to determine educational capacity” and rely on “strategies (that) target individual teachers... and ignore the other parts of the educational system that directly impact a teacher’s ability to teach.”

Schools do not have sustainable processes that provide ways for continually adjusting their work to reflect changes in the needs to which they respond.

“**Building Capacity for Education Reform,**”
Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE).
O’Day, Goertz, & Floden, December 1995

That requirement that challenges educational change’s continued history of failure provides an appropriate template for understanding the MCPS journey as one that has been:

- developing its capacity to change itself;
- integrating the daily efforts of the other parts of the educational system that directly impact a teacher’s ability to teach;
- * developing sustainable processes that provide ways for continually adjusting their work to reflect changes in the needs to which they respond.

And, most significantly, they’ve accomplished much of this not as a separate “change” effort, but as a complement to the school system’s on-going navigation through the changing economics and social current of “troubled waters.”

The purpose of telling their story on this site through some of the documentation and its links, is to seek applicable learnings for others, and to explore what additional questions we need to ask about the concurrent roles of superintendent as *system leader* and *system developer*, and how they can be integrated on-the-job?

Consider the following some of my continuing thoughts-in-process and the questions they raise. (In no special order) Others are included as part of the “Catching them doing something right story.”

- First, in looking back, the section of the 1994 Convoy paper on “*Systems Leadership Requirements*” pretty well described the context of the MCPS superintendent’s role and actions That I observed over the past 10 years.

Systems Leadership Requirements

Although *systems* leadership and management build on *natural* individual and collective survival behavior, accepting this for schools may not be easy. This becomes clearer once one is

willing to compare the assumptions underlying the human work in both systems - the convoy and the schools.

First, note what beliefs or assumptions your leadership actions seemed to accept about the convoy:

- The roles and actions played by everyone in the convoy reflected natural (purposeful, goal-seeking) human behavior. These were just the ways people working together would *naturally* accomplish their mutual purposes . . . if given the *Trust, Time* and *Tools* to act on their intrinsic beliefs and drives. . . and if their lives depended on it!
- Because you were involved in a situation driven by critical, life-threatening conditions, this eliminated a lot of "choices" you might have had for managing differently. For example,

-you had no choice but to "let" each captain run his own ship within a larger framework you provided;

-you had no choice but to play a complementary role that would link the parts of the convoy into a whole -- a system with capabilities for survival beyond what any one component could develop for itself.

Sometimes having *no choice* leads us to do the *right things*.

- Each unit's accountabilities were for their own survival and security, and at the same time, they shared responsibility for the successful accomplishment of their (and the system's) mission. Your choice as leader was to inform and empower these *intrinsic* motivations since their fulfillment was a vital prerequisite for accomplishing your overall purposes. As Peter Senge notes: to control things in complex, dynamic situations, each must have contextual knowledge of how things *fit*; and power to make decisions within their own "box."

- You also have accepted that not everything can be anticipated nor controlled. Thus the core management process of each unit had to have the capacity to adjust to the needs of continuously changing situations. Your *system* management must support this continuous process of awareness (information intake,) learning (analysis and prediction,) and continuous adjustment. To reinforce everyone's understanding that this is *the-way-we-do-business*, you hold each unit accountable for that learning process.

How do these assumptions compare to those that underlie many leadership acts in schools?

- We have assumed that because each teacher and principal is accountable for total navigation of his/her "ship," that meant they could function *alone*.
- We have expected that, without continuous interaction with support systems, somehow they could respond to the dynamic complexities impacting the flow of daily situational decisions they must make; and at the same time stay on course towards accomplishing society's larger systemic objectives.
- We have assumed that a coherent system of education required aligning the *intended* curriculum, the *taught* curriculum and the *tested* curriculum -- an assumption apparently based on another -- that instruction is the delivery or presentation of curriculum. This misunderstanding of the *work process* of schools is comparable to assuming that ships reach their destinations by traveling in straight lines.

Remember, the convoy's goals and plans for achieving them were in alignment, but these two important elements were just the two poles for a *continual, local, goal-driven problem-solving management process* -- a process of planning and acting that required continuous, situational choices based on knowing where one is and what one's options are for acting - always in the direction of the larger system's goals. Accepting the reality of that process "drove" the convoy's systemic support for continuous learning and improvement.

Similarly, schools *systems* require instructionally-driven systemic support and alignment, as opposed to *curriculum-driven*. How is this different?

The core work process [instruction] requires knowing and continually starting from where *students are*. In connecting district and building support processes to this need curriculum goals still play an important direction-setting role, but do not serve as the primary criterion for judgment.

- And, finally, we have assumed that the learning required for continuous improvement of professional practice was an "after-work," in-service activity rather than a survival requirement that had to be a natural consequence of the daily work process.

- The MCPS experience over the past ten years offers insights about how “Systems Leadership” at all levels happens, can happen, and can be reinforced.

For example, let’s look at what each process requires for each “ship” and the “convoy” as a whole:

Navigating [through the medium of *time*] requires:

- *knowing where you came from* -- and that has been established in MCPS through good use of data [both statistical and “experiential”]
- *knowing where you are* in terms of that starting point. “Miracles” that are surfacing are beginning to illustrate the scope and nature of that progress -- but not necessarily its direction.
- *knowing where you need to go* -- a reference point for determining how far to go, in what direction, what intermediate points may be, and what conditions might be anticipated before you get there.

But this direction-setting reference point is different for the two processes.

For the “*navigational*” role of system leadership these *ends* are usually described as “results,” “outcomes,” “objectives,” or “goals” and have measurable indicators that can be used to know when you get there or how far along you are on the way.

The “*Changing-the-boat-as-you-go*” process, on the other hand, requires an additional direction-setting reference point: a general “blueprint” (or mental model) of what a vessel that can get them *all* to where they *must* go should look like. And this cannot be the type of rigid “blueprint” one thinks of when building a “new boat” from scratch.

Think instead of the chart on the physicians wall that portrays a bounded entity of interconnected parts along with the connections that enable it to function as a whole. Doctors use this (almost without having to think about it) as the direction-setting reference point for their diagnostic-prescriptive navigational process.

- Actually, “*Changing-the-boat-as-you-go*” may not be the right way to describe the process. A better term for this parallel leadership process might be *developing-the boat-as-you go*. The difference between “change” and “development” is more than semantic. “Change” is an indicator or measure of development, not a process or goal.

“Development,” on the other hand, is a process of a specific type -- it is *inside-out*. Its nature has been characterized as a *transformation* process and maybe the best example is how a caterpillar becomes a butterfly by tapping into *capacities already within the system*.

But, as we might learn from the butterfly metaphor, this requires a safe organizational “cocoon” that supports this capacity-development process. And that is what this school district provided through the collaborative problem-solving scaffold it developed to support its “work.” It offered a safe space and support for the trial and error nature of incremental learning.

And it offered a way to support the exchange of continual information to and from the “navigational” process. Overall, it seemed to help create and sustain a common sense of what they are doing and developing together as a *total work setting* within which they all can make a difference and know it.

- “Navigation” is one way to understand the integrating nature of a core work process on the accomplishment of a total organization’s mission through the problem-resolving success of each of its parts. The *Superintendent-as-Convoy Commander* related the nature of that navigational task to schooling.

The question it, and the material on this site, should raise is “What is schooling’s core work and how does the *system-of-work* that the school district represents align, support and sustain it.

- Deming used to say that what makes system leaders different is that they work on the system not in it.

But in either case, system leaders are workers too... and they need tools that enable them to get their hands around the *scope and nature* of their work. But it's hard to get our hands around conditions one can't first get our minds around.

That's where the system-seeing lens added value. Take, for example, the seemingly oxymoronic condition "*Interdependent Autonomy*" that shows up in Making Sense through a Systemic Leadership and Management lens.

How do you tap the creative power of autonomous workers (e.g, teacher/principal) while they are responding to the immediate conditions of their work that their roles call for? Seemingly logical strategies such as decentralization, and moving decision-making power closer to the frontline never seem to work for long.

What's not being asked is how this *job* requirement for independence as a creative problem-solver fits into the system's need for interdependent relationships among the *roles* through which its work is performed? How do you leverage the interdependence of autonomous workers in support of their efficacy?

As a tool, this lens offers a way to get our minds around these questions and to see the possibilities for an accountability process that integrates *shared responsibility* for results, and *interdependent accountability* for actions. The Convoy Commander always has one, and MCPS has all its elements, if not the full understanding.

- • Looking at MCPS' experiences through that lens, another dimension of complexity becomes evident. The district and the *community* that must support it are on a journey together that requires developing a mutual understanding in the community of *how* to navigate the school district "vessel," but at the same time *as* they build it. It is the only way that can get them where they know they *must* go...together. MCPS, through its partnership and engagement strategies with the political and business communities offers examples of several successful processes.

- While the *Superintendent-as-Convoy Commander* dealt with the core nature of that navigational task, it did not recognize another dimension of a system leader's need to support two processes at the same time -- continual navigation through winds and waters that one does not control, and changing the people-carrying vessels as-they-go through the plans and actions one does control.

- Ironically, we [society] already "know" how to integrate these two interdependent processes in a core work process so that they continually support real-time actions. But it requires the coherent understanding and specific actions of the system leader or CEO. And where present and future leaders be engaged in experiences that develop that understanding and skill?

Why can't the corporate sector CEO's of "World-Class" organizations (such as *Baldrige* winners) understand how the principles they live by apply equally to the organized work of schooling?

- The Convoy's management system is an example of an integrated learning management system. The "system's" success in getting everyone one on every ship safely to their mutual destination is totally dependent upon the continual learning generated by each ship's real time navigation process. The ILMS creates and maintains the exchanges of information that essential process requires.

When MCPS information support development is viewed in that context, it becomes clear that they have more than the beginnings of an ILMS that applies the same capacity-development principles to everyone in the system -- starting with the children.

They seem to be effectively responding to the challenge CPRE identified over a decade ago.

"The most critical challenge is to place learning at the center of all reform efforts--not

just improved learning for students, but also for the system as a whole and for those who work in it.

For if the adults are not themselves learners, and if the system does not continually assess and learn from practice, then there appears little hope of significantly improving opportunities for all our youth to achieve to the new standards.

For this to happen, however, requires a fundamental change in orientation ...to one in which all work is designed and evaluated with an express goal of enhancing capacity to improve student learning.

...impact on improved learning will depend upon what happens within the system itself. Our data suggest that **what is needed is a coherent and strategic approach to capacity building**, ...one that takes into account the needs and goals of the individual learner, school, and district, and state, not just for the immediate initiative, but for the long term.

Only in this way can systemic reform's promise of "top-down support for bottom-up reform be fully realized."

- As this site develops further, we will more clearly describe the "process" that is linking MCPS' concurrent navigational and development requirements. At times I've described it as a "Tactical Support Process" that -- by providing the information to navigate from where *each* is to where *all* need to get together -- connects the systems strategies to everyday tactical needs. At other time, as a "Collaborative Problem-solving Scaffold."

In either case, related thoughts can be found in [RESOURCES](#).

These include:

-A December 1999 *20k ft. memo* - [SCAFFOLDING STRATEGY – MEMO - 1999](#))

-A more extensive blueprint that can serve this purpose can be found in the [Scaffolding* SUSTAINED School System Change](#) concept.

And interestingly, its consequences were captured in "[Putting Unions and Management Out of Business](#)," *School Administrator*, December 99 [*Forecasting the Future: What's Ahead for Public School? 16 Experts weigh in*]

It "forecast" what a school system in which "labor" and "management" played collaborative roles might look like in '2009." And it's interesting to compare that forecast with the story of MCPS' roles and relationships today told here.

- Finally, (if you really want your head to hurt) here's another way to bring the Convoy Commander's role closer to the superintendent's.

Think of a school district as a convoy of ferryboats from which the children disembark each day to join smaller family convoys commanded by their parents.

Now how can the maps and tools be shared between these separately accountable system leaders who share responsibility for the "cargoes" safe arrival?