



Sabu, Inc.

Thinking Partners with
those who must deal with
whole elephants

Lewis A. Rhodes

M E M O

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

DATE: 4/26/02

A Pause to reflect... (At times it's helpful to walk the talk of reflective practice. Memos like this are non-interactive, but at least provide an opportunity for me to get my thoughts out and look at them.

WHAT AM I DOING.... AND WHY?

It seems like a couple times a week, while shaving, I'll look in the mirror and ask myself "*What in the world are you doing?*" And those times that I come up with an answer, it's usually followed by "*...then why should it be so hard?*"

A friend asked me a similar "*Why are you doing it?*" question last week after I had described the flow of events over the previous seven-day period. These included:

- Beginning on Monday and Tuesday with the national *Baldrige Quest* conference and what it revealed about two different approaches to systemic change hidden within it;
- The MCPS superintendent's *TrendBender* presentation, on Wednesday, about the unexpected "miracles" that had been created here.
- Followed by his Leadership Team meeting on Thursday 4/2/02 where some of the learnings of the first three days were absent and clearly needed; and then
- On Sunday, David Broder's Post column describing his epiphany about systemic change caused by one of this year's *Baldrige* education winners -- Chugach, Alaska. And, although because of it's geography and demographics, that district might seem irrelevant to MCPS's concerns [as opposed to suburban NY's Pearl River ([whose staff couldn't understand MCPS principal Eva Wetten's approach which they didn't see as "Baldrige"), it actually is the closest in terms of overall approach and results.
- And, in between, during that week, Jay Mathew's 4/9 article in the *Post* presented the "age-old" conflict between student-directed learning and teacher-led learning, but concluded with a central point about belief – it was Dan Domenech's quote: "There is no sure-fire program for the poor kids and no sure-fire program for the rich kids." ... "There is a program that will work with any child if the teacher believes in it and knows what he or she is doing."
- Also on Tuesday, driving to the Quest conference, and thinking about all this in MCPS's context, NPR broadcast a story about the San Diego School Board decision to be made that day about retaining their Supt. [Berson]. Apparently a lawyer with the right instincts (he said -- "*we have not had the skills and knowledge to do it for all children...*") but not the knowledge of the system's nature that would enable him to develop it.

It was like the Board had hired someone who had never played an instrument to conduct an orchestra.

He had fallen back on traditional -- logical but not scaleable-- approaches...e.g., mandated, one-at-a-time training before acting. One consequence: unions and parent groups were fighting it. [Interestingly, San Diego was a district I had studied for an *NSF* research project, and at that time had such a close union-management relationship that people used to joke that the Supt., [Tom Payzant] and union president [Hugh Boyle] were "in bed together."

Yet, outsiders -- NPR called them people "from a distance" -- think that San Diego's selection "is the right way to go." These include the Gates Foundation and others.

Then when I arrived at *Quest* that morning, I happened to sit next to San Diego staff member. Her comment was "*everything that was good about his reforms was lost because he didn't know how to implement them.*" She talks to teachers who are demoralized because they're losing their effectiveness in the classroom

After presenting this history of my week to my friend, I tried to encapsulate it in terms of how it left me feeling -- naturally, a metaphor that I'm sure will sound sappy to most other people. I told him:

"I feel like I'm being swept along in the midst of a fast-flowing river whose speed and direction I don't control.

And when I look closer, I can see that I have all around me the essential pieces for a "boat" that can be constructed to effectively navigate that river.

As I'm swept along, I'm trying to draw the blueprints for that boat for people all around me who are already paddling as fast as they can in boats that aren't getting them where they want to go. ...And they can't slow down to build a new one."

At which point my friend asked: "*Then why are you doing it...you are supposed to be retired?*" This caused me to think for a minute...and then the "rest of the story" became clear.

"...Because all around me in the water are students, teachers, administrators...and even superintendents... who are drowning. They are driven -- like the person in the *Starfish* parable -- to "at least save this one." But no one is trying to save the *starfish-savers!*"

So that's the *Why* for *What* I'm doing. Now I wish I had a better idea for *How*.