On the Frontier of School Reform with Trailblazers, Pioneers, and Settlers

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Educators leading restructuring efforts need to recognize five roles that people play in this process and provide training, encouragement, and support differentially for each of these roles.

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Improvement focuses on doing the same things better with the intent of changing and enhancing the performance of individuals within existing systems. Restructuring is aimed at changing systems so that new types of performances will be possible and encouraged and new or different outcomes can be produced.

Educational leaders and those in charge of training and development activities in schools have had much more experience in trying to improve things than they have had in trying to restructure. As a result, the training and support which is provided to encourage and facilitate restructuring is often inappropriate.

Distinctions between improvement and restructuring are significant and have implications for those who lead restructuring efforts and for those who provide training and support to participants in the restructuring process. Unfortunately, too few educational leaders and staff developers seem to appreciate the significance of the distinction. In this article, I share some of the lessons I have learned about providing training and support to those who are trying to restructure schools.

Differences That Make a Difference

Staff development which is aimed at improvement is typically based on prior experience and research. This is seldom the case with staff development aimed at encouraging or supporting restructuring. Restructuring creates new conditions which neither the staff developer nor the participants have experienced. Restructuring, therefore, always requires one to be willing to act beyond the data and without benefit of guidance from empirical research. Creating new systems, which is what restructuring is about, calls for faith, logic, wisdom, and intuition, at least to the degree that it calls for disciplining action with facts.

Most staff developers have been taught to place experience and research at the center of their agenda. They are often not prepared to proceed in areas where faith and a new vision, more than research and prior experience, must serve as a guide to action. Yet, this is what they must do if staff development is to be relevant for the restructuring effort.

Four Key Questions

Four key questions must be answered if the process of restructuring is to move forward effectively. These questions suggest four different types of "lessons" that must be taught by leaders and need to be learned by

all if the restructuring process is to be properly directed. The content and structure differs for each of the four lessons.

1. What is the new circumstance or system that we are trying to create? This question asks that a vision, direction, or intention be clearly articulated. It must be articulated in a way that the person asking the question understands the answer and in a way that is appealing and compels action. This requires a *concept development* lesson.

Those who are best at concept development often seem to rely heavily on Socratic dialogue, focused discussion, and pointed questions, combined with the use of metaphors and counter examples intended to distinguish the concept of concern from other notions with which it might be confused. (For example, I began this discussion with a distinction between improvement and restructuring, and now I am using that distinction as an example of another concept—the concept of a concept development lesson.)

2. Can it be done? This question is a request for real-life, hands-on experience or testimony from those who have had such experience. This requires a *demonstration* lesson.

Demonstration lessons require models and exemplars which are real or contrived, empirically demonstrable, or theoretically described. Those who ask the question "Can it be done?" seek assurance that what they are being called on to do is possible and that, if they commit effort to the task, it is likely that they can do what the concept or vision calls them to do.

Modeling and illustrating are techniques associated with demonstration lessons. Where real life situations do not yet exist, simulating actions based on theoretically derived models are often used.

3. Should we do it? This question calls for the analysis of values, beliefs, commitments, context, studies of the past, and anticipation of the future. This requires a *values clarification* lesson.

Value clarification lessons, like concept development lessons, rely heavily on dialogue, discussion, and logical analysis. Such lessons require detailed attention to the values which participants bring to the discussion, the values which the proposed change promises to enhance or serve, and the values which the change is likely to threaten. For example, the value of security is most likely to be threatened by any radical change. Thus, those who promote restructuring must be carefully attuned to the significance various actors give to security, for it is in protecting this value that some of the greatest resistance to change can occur.

4. How do we do it? The last question is a request for assistance in developing the skills and habits required to do the job. This requires a *skill development* lesson.

Skill development lessons, like demonstration lessons, usually rely heavily on modeling and simulation. But skill development lessons are more likely to be active and involve opportunities to practice, coaching, experimental efforts, and corrective feedback. Demonstration lessons are intended to be persuasive, to show that things can be done. Skill development lessons are intended to develop understandings, skills, attitudes, and habits of mind the permit one to do with confidence and ease that which is at first exceedingly difficult, awkward, and, perhaps, even threatening and frightening.

Five Types of Roles

There are five types of roles that become activated in the restructuring process. Each of these role types requires support from staff developers and other school leaders. Some of these roles are more prominent at some stages of restructuring than at others. Further, those who play these roles have vastly different training and support needs related to the lessons for the four key questions previously posed. It is, therefore, critical that staff developers understand who they are addressing at distinct stages in the process, for the needs of different actors will be different from time to time.

1. Trailblazers. Paradigm-breaking journeys are not for the timid, and one should not expect everyone to volunteer to undertake such a journey. Those who take the first steps in restructuring are trailblazers, for they are willing to go—in terms understood by *Star Trek* fans—without maps to places where no person has gone before them, without the benefit of empirically based models, and with little to guide them except belief in themselves, a desire for novelty, the freedom to try, and a vision that motivates and guides them.

The most important requirement for trailblazers is a clear guiding vision. Trailblazers want to know that there is someplace to go that is different; they are motivated by novelty and excited by risks. Once trailblazers have found a vision in which they believe, all they want and need is encouragement and support for that pursuit. Most of all, they want to be recognized for their unique brand of courage, and they want to be celebrated, recognized, praised, and honored—at least most of them do. Staff developers and school leaders must, therefore, find ways to celebrate the trailblazers among them.

Trailblazers are not egomaniacs but they are often monomaniacs with a mission. They know where they are going, even if they are not quite sure how they are going to get there or what obstacles they will confront on the way. When they confront obstacles, they are likely to view them in highly personal terms, for the vision of the trailblazer is a personal vision, and anything that stands in the way of the pursuit of that vision is a personal threat. Thus, trailblazers need much personal and personalized support.

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Staff developers and other school leaders should be sensitive to the fact that trailblazers need to be constantly reinforced that the vision they are pursuing is worth the quest and that others, especially powerful others, see that what they are about is important. It is important enough, in fact, that the trailblazers should receive unusual latitude and unconventional forms of support (e.g., noncategorical funding, flexible schedules, and special access to the human and physical resources of the system).

Equally important, trailblazers need to be

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constantly reminded that it is a community quest they are on, not a private venture. Because the vision the trailblazer pursues is a private vision, it is up to other leaders in the system to link it to a larger shared vision. For example, Lewis and Clark were motivated by the excitement of exploring new frontiers, and Thomas Jefferson linked their quest to a vision of America that spread from shore to shore. Teachers who become enthusiastic about one curriculum innovation or another also often need leaders to help them see the linkage between their private adventures and the common good.

Since trailblazers lead the way into a new world, whether that world is a physical frontier or the creation of a new way of doing business, they do not have access to a body of research and experience to guide them. What then do trailblazers use as guides?

First, they use experiences they and others have gained in circumstances that are analogous to those they are about to confront. For instance, it is not coincidental, I think, that the language of space travel is laced with language which refers to early explorers who took voyages on the ocean, just as space ships now take voyages to the moon. And names of spacecraft often refer to explorers in other times.

Trailblazers need the opportunity to read about and visit with trailblazers from other fields (e.g., business, the military, medical services, and so on). They also need time to discuss and assimilate what they learn from these encounters. It is from such experiences that relevant analogies are discovered and come to be understood. I have found that leaders whose language is rich with metaphors and who argue by analogy are particularly good at inspiring and directing trailblazers.

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A second source of guidance for trailblazers is the experiences of other trailblazers who are moving in roughly the same direction and over the same terrain. The rendezvous was one of the ways early trailblazers on America's frontier got information from other trailblazers. Today, we refer to such rendezvous as "networks" where people who are moving in a common direction develop mechanisms to ensure regular interactions. Providing opportunities for such networking is one of the primary contributions staff developers can make to the continuing growth and development of trailblazers.

It is important to understand that networks and rendezvous do much more than provide opportunities for the sharing of information. Such networking provides opportunities for self-affirmation and more than a bit of bragging and storytelling. Networking turns lonely ordeals into shared ordeals. Lonely ordeals debilitate; shared ordeals inspire and motivate.

Alert staff developers and trainers who listen to these stories can learn much that will be of value to pioneers (the second type of role). Furthermore, if staff developers watch carefully, they can get some insight concerning which of the trailblazers have the temperament and the style to be guides as well as trailblazers. After all, the pioneers and settlers who come later will need guides as well.

Leaders and staff developers need to create conditions so that what is learned by the trailblazers is not lost. Trailblazers tell stories. Unfortunately, they seldom turn the stories into lessons for others. It is up to the staff developers, therefore, to turn the stories of trailblazers into lessons that can serve as sources of guidance for those who would follow. This is much like the map makers of the early Fourteenth Century who translated the tales and reports of the early explorers into crude maps which in turn were rendered more accurate and refined with further exploration.

Trailblazers need public acknowledgement for their efforts. They need the opportunity to tell others about places they have been and about what they have done. Such story telling not only serves as source of information for others, but it also serves as a continuing source of motivation for the trailblazers. Futhermore, telling stories also gives one the opportunity to listen to the stories of others and thus to learn from others as well, especially from other trailblazers.

Staff development budgets that do not make provision for sending trailblazers to conferences where they can brag a bit are not adequate budgets. And staff developers are not doing their job if they do not seek every opportunity to put local trailblazers out in front, including helping them write proposals that will get support for their work and that will permit the trailblazers to share their work at conferences.

2. Pioneers. Closely following the trailblazers are the pioneers. Like the trailblazers, pioneers are an adventurous and hardy lot and are willing to take considerable risks.

Pioneers have many of the same needs as trailblazers. Like trailblazers, concept development lessons (i.e., the development of a vision that links a personal quest to a larger agenda) are the most important lessons they must learn. But the pioneers also have considerable need for assurance that the trip upon which they will embark is worthwhile. More than the trailblazers, pioneers need demonstrations to provide assurances that the journey can, in fact, be made. But pioneers understand that there are really few people who can teach them "how to do it" since only the trailblazers have gone to the frontiers which they are set to explore.

Thus, pioneers need concept development lessons, value clarification lessons, and demonstration lessons. They do not need skill development lessons, and staff developers would be ill-advised to try to provide them.

Why does all of this mean in practical terms? First, it means that when staff developers approach pioneers, or are attempting to recruit them, their best allies are those who write about trailblazers (e.g., Fiske, 1991, *Smart Kids Smart Schools*; Sizer, 1992, *Horace School*). Such writings do not provide research data, but they do provide anecdotal accounts, reports, and stories. Such stories can inspire prospective pioneers to take the journey. These stories contain some possible lessons regarding what one must know and be able to do to survive the rigors of the journey.

Trailblazers can help motivate pioneers, especially if they are colorful and good sto-

rytellers. Davy Crockett did much more to inspire pioneers than he did as a true trailblazer. Indeed, one could argue that Davy Crockett was a staff developer rather than a trailblazer since he often took the stories of others and embellished them a bit, making himself the hero. He used the stories to inspire others to act. Thus, an effective trailblazer may provide needed assurances to encourage pioneers.

I have found that trailblazer teachers and administrators are invaluable sources of inspiration and direction for pioneers, and even for settlers (which are discussed next). But a caution is in order. Too often staff development specialists, in their quest for authenticity, remove trailblazers from their natural habitat on the "frontier" and move them into the central office, or worse to the university campus, in the hope that the stories they will tell will reach a wider audience.

Sometimes this works, but more frequently it is a bad experience for both the trailblazer and for those with whom they work. The team work that it takes to "build community," which is what pioneers must do, requires a different style than does the early explorations of new frontiers.

Monomaniacs with a mission can quickly come to appear to others to be egomaniacs whose only mission is to advance themselves. Trailblazers are needed, but they are not easy to live with in the more sedate environments of committee meetings and seminar rooms.

3. Settlers. After the trailblazers and pioneers come the settlers. Settlers need to know what is expected of them and where they are going to go. They need much more detail and more carefully drawn maps than do those who have gone before them. Settlers are bold, but they are not adventurers. They need to be persuaded that the venture upon which they are being asked to embark is worthwhile. Thus, staff developers must provide value clarification lessons that help the settlers understand why the change is needed.

Settlers also want assurance that the task can be accomplished and that they are not set on a fool's mission. Thus, settlers have considerable need for demonstration lessons (e.g., site visits where pioneering work is already under way, conversations with pioneers and trailblazers, testimonials from those who have tried, books and articles that provide rich descriptions of what can be expected, and so on).

Much more than either pioneers or trailblazers, settlers want skill development lessons. They want to be sure they know how to do what will be required of them. Indeed, many potential settlers will not move until they have assurance that the requisite knowledge and support are available to them.

School leaders and staff developers who support them must, therefore, give attention to providing systematic training which is supported by coaching, opportunities for feedback and critique, and, above all, protection from negative consequences for failed efforts.

Perhaps the most critical thing to remember about settlers is that they need strong, constant, and reassuring leadership that inspires them to keep going when they are tempted to turn back. Change of the sort envisioned in an honest restructuring agenda is likely to create uncertainty, doubt, and confusion. The new practices called for are likely to be frightening and demanding, and the results may be no better—at least in the short run—than doing things the "old way."

Fullan's (Fullan with Stiegelbauer, 1991) notion of the "implementation dip" comes to mind here; he assumes that a natural part of the change process is short-term deterioration in performance capacity. This occurs because the new way is unfamiliar and requires learning and practice. While the old way of doing things may not be as good as the new way, at least it is familiar and people know how to do it.

Without persistent leadership by people who have been there and without encouragement from others who are going there (settlers traveled in wagon trains and were not isolated travelers), it is unlikely that settlers will stay the course. Thus, it is critical that staff developers and leaders understand the terrain well enough that they can point out progress when settlers become discouraged.

Benchmarks of progress and feedback regarding progress toward these benchmarks are essential. To this extent, assessment and constant monitoring, coupled with public appraisals of progress toward restructuring goals (as opposed to the goals of restructuring), are important. For example, a restructuring goal might be to have teachers and building administrators become more systematic in the use of data regarding student performance as a means of evaluating the merit and worth of decisions the administrators and teachers make. But, informed student performance would be a goal of restructuring.

Helping settlers learn how to use evidence of progress is a necessary antecedent to answering the question "Does restructuring improve student performance?" Until restructuring has occurred, this question cannot be answered. Therefore, the first-order assessment question is "What evidence is there that we (those who are engaged in restructuring) are, in fact, doing our business differently today than we did business yesterday, and why do we think the new way of doing business will improve our results?" Settlers need the answers to such questions to keep them going and also to provide assurance that where they are going is worth the effort.

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4. Stay-at-Homes. There are two conditions that motivate change. First, present conditions are so intolerable or dangerous to one's interests and values that the only alternative is to do something. The Separatists who left England to settle in America were driven by such motives. Second, there is a new and compelling vision—one that so inspires hope of a new day, a better life, or a fuller realization of existing values—that causes risks to seem tolerable when measured against rewards. The Utopian settlements on the American frontier are examples of such vision-driven change.

I have found the best strategy to use with stay-at-homes, at least in the early stages of the restructuring process, is benign neglect coupled with as much generosity of spirit as is possible.

However, as the Declaration of Independence states so eloquently, fundamental changes are not lightly undertaken, and people will tolerate a great deal rather than give up what is known. Furthermore, intolerable or threatening conditions, which can serve as an initial impetus for change, cannot sustain change. In fact, negative forces are seldom adequate to motivate fundamental change and are almost never adequate to sustain it.

The Mayflower Separatists—who had among them some trailblazers, some pioneers, and a substantial number of reluctant and frightened settlers—may have left England because of oppression, but it did not take their leaders long to recognize that a new and compelling vision would be required to sustain them. This new vision, expressed first in the Mayflower Compact and reinforced by visions based in religious symbols, was as important to the settlement of the new world as were the oppressive conditions that started the movement to that world.

Stay-at-homes are not bad people. Indeed, in the long-view of history, they are inconsequential people for no one remembers the stay-at-homes after the change has occurred. How many Tory supporters of King George are American students expected to recall?

At the time a change is being contemplated, however, stay-at-homes receive a great deal—I think too much—of attention.

Some of the most effective saboteurs have many qualities and needs which are similar to trailblazers.

This is because most leaders need approval from those they want to lead, which is usually everybody in their sphere of influence. Thus, those who do not respond enthusiastically—or at least compliantly—with the desires of change leaders are often viewed as problems.

Effective leaders seem to understand that early in the change process it is probably not wise to spend too much energy trying to convince the stay-at-homes that they, too, need to move to the frontier. These leaders accept the fact that some will never come along, and those who do change will only do so after the pioneers and settlers have done their work very well. Of course, some will only come to the new land for a visit.

One of the greatest dangers when dealing with stay-at-homes in the restructuring process is that the strategies used to entice them to change may backfire and thus may convert these relatively benign actors into supporters of the saboteurs discussed below. Saboteurs' favorite strategy is to sow distrust through rumors and disinformation, and they will destroy even the best organized wagon train if they can gain enough followers. The most likely source of recruits for the saboteurs are the stay-at-homes and the more timid settlers who feel pressured to move before they have the assurances they need and before they have identified leaders they trust.

I have found the best strategy to use with stay-at-homes, at least in the early stages of the restructuring process, is benign neglect coupled with as much generosity of spirit as is possible. One must remember that those who do not particularly want to change are not necessarily opposed to others changing if they choose to do so. Many stay-at-homes stay at home because they truly love the place. As John Dewey has observed, "Familiarity breeds contempt, but it also breeds something like affection. We get used to the chains we wear, and through custom we finally embrace what at first wore a hideous mien."

And there are, of course, those who are simply too timid to go to unfamiliar places. Such persons are not likely to be encouraged to move by direct assaults on what they currently value or by threats to what little security they now enjoy. Rather than will join with the saboteurs who do not want to change for other reasons.

*5. **Saboteurs**.* Saboteurs are actively committed to stopping change. Not only do they refuse to take the trip, but they do not want others to go either.

Many of those who take on the role of saboteurs do so because they receive benefits from this role which are not provided if they were to support change. I have also been struck by the fact that some of the most effective saboteurs have many qualities and needs which are similar to trailblazers.

Saboteurs are often lone rangers. They are not afraid of taking risks. The difference is that while the trailblazers will go to places that others fear to go, saboteurs are likely to remain in place when others are beginning to feel afraid to stay. Loneliness does not have the same meaning to them as it has to the settlers, and isolation often inspires the saboteur to even greater effort. To be persecuted, it seems, is to be appreciated, and, in a perverse way, to be isolated or excluded is to be honored.

Saboteurs can cause trouble, no matter where they are. But I have found that the best place to have them is on the inside where they can be watched rather than on the outside where they can cause trouble without its being detected until the effects are felt. Certainly, saboteurs can be disruptive, and some will not cooperate even enough to communicate their concerns.

If, however, change leaders continue to reach out to saboteurs and critics and try hard to hear what they are saying, sometimes there is much to be learned. It might be learned that some saboteurs were once trailblazers and pioneers who at some time in the past had the misfortune to follow leaders who did not give them the support they needed and abandoned them at the first sign of trouble.

A Concluding Comment

Creating commitment to change is not the same thing as overcoming resistance to change. To create commitment, one must understand motives. Trailblazers are motivated by novelty, excitement, and sometimes by the possibility of fame and glory. Pioneers sometimes begin their journey because of intolerable conditions, but they will stay the course only if they become convinced that the new world is really better.

Settlers need to know, almost for certain, that the world they are being asked to move to is better than the one they are leaving and that the way to get there is known. And, most of all, they need to know that they are not taking the trip alone.

Stay-at-homes will only move when all—or nearly all—of their friends and neighbors have deserted them or when they muster the courage to "come for a visit" and find that they prefer it.

Some saboteurs will never come along, and if they do, they will make the trip as difficult as possible. Saboteurs, however, are people who in some prior movement to another frontier, behaved as trailblazers and pioneers, but were betrayed by their leaders. As a result, they became cynical about the prospects of change. Most of all, they want to be assured that those who are sounding the latest call to move to a new frontier will stay the course rather than turn around and go back.

Whether the present demand that our schools be restructured will be responded to positively remains to be seen. But of one thing I am confident: Without leaders who will stay the course and without staff developers who understand what draws men and women to the frontier and what these people need to keep on going, all our efforts to reform schools will fail.

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