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OPPORTUNITIES
for ACTION

ORGANIZATION



- *Changing culture is difficult, especially at large, decentralized organizations*
- *But by providing direction from the center in a way that still encourages local innovation, large organizations can successfully reshape their culture*
- *The direction from the center ensures that the change is consistent with the organization's overall strategy*
- *Local innovation stimulates engagement by allowing staff a role in ensuring that the change is tailored to the specific environment*
- *A large, decentralized public-school system in Australia successfully adopted this approach*
- *The lessons learned during that endeavor can apply to similarly complex organizations in both the public and the private sectors*

Driving Cultural Change

Think Globally, Innovate Locally

Changing organizational culture is tough work. You need to transform how people work and how they work together—a particularly difficult task in large, complex, and decentralized organizations. A cultural-change program must overcome tradition, fear, uncertainty, doubt, inertia, and both active and passive resistance.

Despite the challenges, it's possible to change the culture in these organizations by properly balancing direction driven from the center with local innovation. The direction from the center ensures that the change is consistent with the organization's overall strategy, while local innovation ensures engagement by allowing the change to be tailored to the specific environment. A large, decentralized public-school system in Australia successfully adopted this approach, and the lessons learned during that endeavor can apply to similarly complex organizations in both the public and the private sectors.

The state of Victoria's public-school system has achieved significant cultural change across its 40,000 teachers, 500,000 students, and 1,600 schools. That transformation originated in 2003, when the state government began looking for ways to further improve an already high-performing school system. Earlier reforms had established a decentralized management model that encouraged local schools to make many key management decisions. The reforms were working well, but many schools were developing a reputation for resisting change, especially when it came to programs introduced by the center.

Supported by a growing body of evidence showing that teacher performance and engagement help improve student outcomes, the state education department identified several cultural changes needed in government schools. Following the review, the education minister defined the five criteria essential to a *performance and development (P&D) culture*, and challenged all schools to demonstrate that these elements were in place by 2008.

The education minister gave each school latitude in building a new culture. Such local control helped spark innovation and

imitation: schools were keen to learn from one another. Many introduced measures—such as encouraging students to provide regular feedback to teachers—that were radical for Australian public education and that would almost certainly have been rejected if they had been dictated from the center. The ability to shape cultural change at the local level fostered ownership and was critical to the success of the program. By the end of 2008, 94 percent of Victoria’s state schools had been accredited by a third party as having created a P&D culture. The program has become an exemplar of a new approach to school reform.

For organizations struggling to make cultural change stick—particularly those with many autonomous business units—the experience is instructive. If a public school system, with its strongly unionized environment, can leverage local innovation to drive fundamental cultural change, then so can other large public-sector agencies and private corporations.

Think Globally

The P&D culture initiative sought to establish “a more enriching, supportive, and motivating environment for teachers as a body of professionals.” The premise was that an effective culture “ultimately promotes more innovative and creative teaching and produces improved student outcomes.” The initial stages of the initiative were driven from the center (the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development), which established the five criteria necessary for accreditation as a school with a P&D culture:

- ◇ Effective induction and mentoring for new teachers
- ◇ Use of multiple sources of feedback on an individual teacher’s effectiveness
- ◇ Customized teacher-development plans
- ◇ Individualized professional development
- ◇ Endorsement of the presence of the P&D culture by the teaching staff

These criteria were designed after consulting a broad array of stakeholders and conducting an extensive survey to understand what really matters to teachers. In order to ensure that the initiative had strong local buy-in, the government added the fifth criterion, requiring that teachers themselves endorse the presence of a P&D culture. Schools could apply for accreditation at any time

before the end of 2008. A third party, the University of Melbourne, verified the process, which enhanced its credibility and gave teachers confidence that it wasn’t just a bureaucratic check-this-box exercise.

Innovate Locally

Individual schools were allowed to decide when they were ready to design their own initiatives, and each needed to convince its own staff that these initiatives would help build a coherent P&D culture. School heads first asked their teachers whether they agreed with the objectives of the P&D culture. When—as in almost all cases—the teachers did, the heads then asked them to help develop an approach to achieving accreditation that suited their particular circumstances. This bottom-up process unleashed remarkable innovation in delivering on the most challenging element: the use of multiple sources of feedback for individual teachers. Some of the local responses included the following:

- ◇ Teachers nominated a member of the school leadership team to visit their classrooms periodically and provide feedback on their teaching styles
- ◇ Student feedback surveys were introduced for all classes
- ◇ Students in each class elected a fellow student to collect and discuss with their teacher every six weeks their views on what was working in the classroom and how classes could be made more effective
- ◇ Teachers paired with colleagues, periodically sat in on each other’s classes, and then offered constructive criticism
- ◇ Annual data collected for each teacher showed their students’ achievements against expectations, based on aptitude tests at the start of the year

These were radical changes. Before the transformation, it was rare for teachers to visit or observe one another’s classes. Teachers solicited feedback from students only infrequently: they feared what students might say and assumed that the students would be poor judges of teacher quality. If the head office had required, for example, including student feedback in evaluations, teachers would likely have instituted an industrial, or job, action. But given the opportunity to develop their own performance-feedback methods, teachers in many schools were willing to try previously unthinkable options.

By giving schools a strong and meaningful say, the accreditation process has led to many positive changes:

- ◇ *Catalyzed teaching-practice discussions in schools.* “The initiative has opened up communication—it is now far more open and direct. It has set up the right conversations about lifting achievement,” a regional administrator said.
- ◇ *Sharpened the focus on understanding, assessing, and improving teaching performance.* As the principal of a school said, “The formal performance system is too blunt. It only deals with unsatisfactory performers [the bottom 3 percent]. The P&D culture initiative has provided a framework for improving performance across the board.”
- ◇ *Transformed teachers’ trust in data as a tool.* “Data were previously collected and sent to the department. Schools have now realized that you can use data to help students improve. They have been used in a supportive way and helped people develop trust,” a teachers’ union representative said.
- ◇ *Increased trust and transformed the possibilities for direct and immediate feedback.* “There has been a significant paradigm shift regarding feedback. People are now much more receptive,” a department official said. Previously, it was “unheard of to have teachers in other teachers’ classrooms.”

Local ownership has created a positive-feedback loop for schools. Because the data were developed locally, teachers trust and are more likely to accept feedback based on those data. The schools are then able to establish better priorities and targets and make even greater use of data in the future.

Drive Results

The P&D culture initiative is recognized as one of the most successful elements of the government’s school-reform program. In staff surveys, most of the accredited

schools have sharply increased their scores on professional growth, interactions with colleagues, school morale, and supportive leadership. Interviews with school heads and teachers support these findings. As one school principal noted, the process increased the level of trust, which then created a stronger culture. And a teachers’ union representative said, “Some very cynical teachers changed their minds. They thought it was just another program but have seen that it can really make them feel valued and improve their professional esteem.”

These improvements are producing better outcomes in the classroom. In 2008, Victoria’s students’ achievements were equal to those of the best students in Australia. The P&D culture initiative is not solely responsible for this success—it is in fact part of a broad suite of reforms. Nevertheless, as an instrument of cultural change, it has been a significant success story with a clear theme: although cultural change should be based on a consistent framework and strategic direction, building ownership by empowering local innovation and adoption is critical to making cultural change successful—and making it stick. If a large school system can change, so too can other sprawling organizations.

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For more information about the state of Victoria’s P&D culture, see www.education.vic.gov.au/management/schoolimprovement/panddc/default.htm.

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