Abstract: Primary Experience

Title: Mindfully Moving Educational Systems Toward High Performance and High Reliability

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Principle: Mindfulness

We attribute the success of HROs in managing the unexpected to their determined efforts to act mindfully (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001). Mindful organizations develop and utilize enabling structures and processes. These include structures and processes that enable problem identification, solution-finding, collaboration, innovation, improvisation and creativity. Mindless organizations develop and utilize inhibiting structures and processes.

Situation:

A series of research studies has led Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) to the conclusion that the solution to ensuring America’s students are able to compete on a global stage lies in re-thinking the role of schools and school districts (Marzano and Waters, 2009). Our research, when added to that from McKinsey & Company (2007), has led us to the conclusion that the primary job of school leaders is to ensure high quality and low variability in the quality of instruction provided to every student in each school. In turn, the primary responsibility of district leaders is to ensure high quality and low variability in the quality of instruction and learning across every school in the system.

Organizations that ensure this sort of universal high quality have existed for years; those who study them refer to them as high-reliability organizations (HROs). To avoid disaster, these organizations put into place multilayered structures and processes to prevent errors and to respond quickly before errors can cascade into catastrophic system failures. They also mindfully anticipate and manage the unexpected (Hoy and Sweetland, 2001; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007).

Methods of implementation: McREL’s P-Chart: Elements of Social Systems

McREL developed a “P-chart” framework to be used as a heuristic to assist with creating coherence in a school district by organizing and aligning school boards, school districts, and schools. The P-chart is based on the premise that school districts are social systems, which reflect varying degrees of alignment, coherence, and reliability. The “P’s” include:

- Purposes
School districts, like other social systems, adopt and articulate purposes. The purposes of school districts may be presented in statements of philosophy, mission, and/or vision.
**Principles**
In coherent, high-reliability systems, operating principles align with system purposes while in incoherent, low-reliability systems, implicit principles (i.e., “how things really get done”) are often in conflict with the organization’s stated purposes.

**Policies**
In school districts, school boards adopt formal policies to guide the decisions, behaviors, and actions of everyone in the system. However, typically there are many more policies within the system, which may be informal or implicit agreements about “ways of working” in the system.

**Practices**
In school districts these might be practices to carry out curriculum, instruction and assessment processes, professional development, quality assurance, communication, budgeting, human resources, or the many other processes found in school districts.

**Results:**
Alignment alone doesn’t guarantee high-reliability districts. A district may be fully aligned and coherent, yet to purposes that don’t serve student needs—for example, aligning the system to the purpose of creating high achievement for a selected few students. More common, however, are districts that have clearly articulated new purposes (e.g., the belief that all children are capable of learning to high levels), but fail to fully examine and update their operating principles, policies, processes, etc. in light of their new purposes.

**Conclusion:**
School districts are much more likely to become mindful, high-reliability systems when they establish purposes that embody commitment to high levels of achievement and quality instruction for all students and adopt operating principles, policies and practices consistent with these purposes. The P-chart can help to foster an examination of the various structures and processes of a district and the extent to which they enable mindful operations.

References:


