The Change Process in a Culture of Learning: An Essay Review

Linda J. Coleman
A. G. Rud
Purdue University

If change were easy, schools under pressure to improve would transform overnight. People, however, not programs are responsible for implementing positive change in schools. Ron Scapp in *Managing to Be Different*; Stephanie Marshall, in *The Power to Transform;* and Jonathan A. Supovitz, in *The Case for District-Based Reform,* each look at school transformation as a human process. In this essay review, we shall concentrate on what these authors tell us about transformation and reform in education. Even though one author focuses mostly on higher education (Scapp), one with building

and district reform (Marshall), and one with district and systemic change (Supovitz), all three speak truths about change and reform that transcend their particular settings and are useful and germane to work by educators in today's schools, colleges, and universities.

New theories and concepts of education are not discovered serendipitously. They are shared, adopted, and implemented by staff members and administrators who have accepted these theories and concepts as valid and useful for their particular setting. Change, then, becomes an exercise in relationships and communication. The challenge for a leader is to find a direction that will introduce improvements to the system, communicate that direction, gain the support of those responsible for implementing the new practice, and then follow through with support for the change process. Change challenges the structure of an organization, causing it to become unstable. But this instability is generative, one of Stephanie Marshall's favorite terms. She believes that "Although, to system members it feels like the ground is shifting, this point of greatest instability also holds the greatest potential for transformation. Now even the smallest disturbances can disproportionately influence the dynamics and direction of the system. It is at this point that the system can embrace a new self or identity and is then truly able to creatively reorganize itself into new forms" (Marshall, p. 33).

In the current era of high-stakes testing and accountability, educators are asked to improve scores and other measures of achievement, with threats of severe sanctions if they do not succeed. As a result of using the "fear stick" as motivation for change, schools look at test data and respond by trying to "fix" the system. This concept of fixing an ineffective system, in many cases, works about as well as putting a Band-Aid on a flat tire. The bandage may slow the leak from the tire, but the tire will continue to lose air until it is flat and the car immobilized. If instead the flat tire were replaced with a new tire, the car's ability to move would be improved. Similarly, Marshall suggests that, rather than fix an ailing education system that is fundamentally flawed, schools must create a new system of learning that better matches learning goals for this century.

As education leaders face these increasing challenges of federal and state mandates, they are also navigating through numerous cultural and administrative obstacles to improved student achievement. Obstacles such as long-standing traditions and routines, limited financial resources, decaying facilities, and cynical staff can all make the road to significant improvement difficult. A number of the nation's schools have flourished in spite of these and other obstacles. Success in these schools, defined as a significant and sustained improvement in student academic achievement, has been linked to knowledgeable leaders who could also direct, assist, and motivate staff (Ross, Tabachnick, and Sterbinsky, 2002).

In a meta-analysis of research completed since 1970, Waters, Marzano, and McNulty (2003) identified leadership traits or actions that promote change for increased student learning. Twenty-one basic traits are identified and examined from the viewpoint of the education leader and then sorted into focus areas for further analysis. The area of

focus which they found to have the largest measured effects on change was culture. The operational definition of culture in this meta-analysis included five leadership aspects: the promotion of cooperation among staff, the promotion of a sense of well-being among staff, the promotion of cohesion among staff, the development of a shared understanding of purpose, and the development of a shared vision of what the school could be like. The results of this study point to a human factor in change. The human factors revealed in this study included promotion of cohesion, communication, and relationship building.

Managing to Be Different

Ron Scapp suggests that managing change can be a minefield of relationships and career decisions in the quest to alter the status quo. Scapp warns that in change, "[t]here is, however, a price to pay. In the simplest terms: messing with things can cost. It can cost time, emotional energy, promotions, and even the very support of those students and colleagues who are benefiting from your efforts. Part of the reason why so many administrators quickly return to business as usual, if they bother attempting to do things otherwise, is due to the inevitable flack [sic] they get—from all corners. If one is willing and actually able to disrupt the status quo then one must be ready for the fallout" (p. 33).

Those involved in change often encounter environments or situations of insecurity and fear. No one wants to lose the respect of colleagues or risk career status. Change poses an uncertainty about the future that tends to stop otherwise knowledgeable and capable individuals. They may see the need for alteration of strategies or structures, such as those of assessment or instruction, but the momentum of change is halted by fear. This anxiety can grow and work its way through a school system to feed a culture of fear.

Scapp understands how the prospect of change can alter one's identity and even cause one to question the worth of any transformation. It is much safer to be a spectator, particularly if one is not accustomed to the exercise of power or agency. "Because we so often do lack power we attempt to stay clear of situations that we believe can cause us unwanted attentions or problems. Sometimes (more often than many of us would like to admit), we act as if we are only spectators of events and decisions taking place all around us and refuse to see ourselves as participants, even when there are opportunities to act and be fully engaged. We believe we can position ourselves at a safe distance from power; in other words, we think we can hide" (p. 64). Scapp works to bring both himself and others with whom he collaborates in from the safe distance of hiding from power. He does this by stressing the necessity of constant and informed communication among all parties in an educational setting.

Approaching power carries risks, however. Scapp addresses the fear of "messing up" in an academic world of high stakes. "In a climate that perniciously promotes a rhetoric of greater efficiency and accountability, messing around with a different paradigm is greeted with suspicion and hostility, if it is acknowledged at all" (p. 45). Leaders must meet this suspicion and hostility with a fearless vision that binds people

together in a direction of possibility. Tregoe, Zimmerman, Smith, and Tobia (1989) describe vision as part of a process that lies at the beginning of a strategy/operations continuum. Together, vision and strategy comprise the framework for decision making in choices that can impact the future of an organization.

Simply having a vision is not enough. Visions must be communicated through constant dialogue. This cannot be accomplished without a careful navigation of relationships and power structures. In Chapter 3 of his book, "It only looks like a mess," Scapp provides an example from his own experience as a facilitator for teachers of a dual credit high school course. After a particularly productive meeting with the teachers where dialogue was open, honest, and productive, the principal walked into the room and immediately dispelled the positive atmosphere with negative comments about the "mess" of half-eaten food and drinks on the meeting room table. Although the teachers in the meeting had made strides towards positive change, their commitment was shaken by a few negative words from the individual in power. The principal's words and tone conveyed restriction rather than possibility to these teachers.

Scapp believes change involves challenging the status quo or accepted vision, which inevitably leads to challenging power. Participation in power struggles may form a perception or misperception of the nature of leaders who contest the status quo. Addressing perceptions and misperceptions can boost acceptance of change initiatives. A response may take place visibly or invisibly, as Scapp discusses in Chapter 5. Much of what administrators do can go unnoticed, or fly under the radar of those whom they lead or to whom they report; but attention should be given to both visible and invisible efforts to address perceptions and misperceptions of how changes in organizational structure and behavior are to occur. The type of dialogue that is held publicly must also be held privately.

Scapp draws an analogy to a complex power grid where individuals are plugged in at various points. Individuals become part of the "circuitry of power" (p. 21) subject to surges, breaks, and relays in the grid. They are confronted by the forces that drive the organization. In this complex system, an individual's position becomes extremely important and a determining factor in whether or not they will short circuit or be removed from the power structure. Participants migrate to the outer boundaries where there are fewer encounters with potential surges that could illuminate their weaknesses, short circuit their abilities, and effectively remove them from the grid. They try to avoid confrontation, change, or new interactions that could threaten their position in the organization. They are comfortable, where they do not have to try new ideas or practices and are less likely to be exposed as inept or incapable of supplying power to the organizational change process. The leader's challenge is to bring these boundary participants in from the edge and help them to participate fully.

Scapp's discussion in Chapter 6 suggests that open and genuine dialogue within the organization is the first step to achieving such participation. Individuals who are

invited into dialogue where their opinions and concerns are heard are more likely to be willing to cooperate in looking at possibilities for needed change. This type of open exchange of views empowers those in the organization who may otherwise feel powerless and fear change. Scapp closes his brief book by challenging educational administrators to ask the tough questions and to begin building solutions based on an atmosphere of community dialogue.

The Power to Transform

Like Scapp, Stephanie Pace Marshall wants to transform schools through a change process. She approaches the topic with an explicitly narrative means, and focuses on the power of story to unite people toward a common goal. Right from the first pages of her book, the topic of transformation is introduced with a story of change and challenge. She describes a private school that inadvertently admits too many students for the upcoming school year (pp. 3-5). The staff must quickly choose whether to accommodate the extra students or rescind admissions. Marshall, as the school's leader, decides to accommodate and thus a challenge arises. The staff becomes divided in framing the challenge; one camp takes a negative view, while the other camp is optimistic. Marshall reflects on what she learned: "This experience was an epiphany for me as a leader. Despite my awareness of the power of story to influence behavior, I had never experienced the story as it was unfolding. I had never been able to name its patterns as they were taking shape. I had never been able to create conditions that would enable the community to access its emergent stories and intervene in their manifestation by consciously choosing the story they wished to evoke and live into" (p. 4). Marshall challenged staff members to create their own ending to the story by "living into" the vision of a positive challenge and opportunity. The outcome of this experience was a revelation of sorts, and no observation goes unnoticed. All comments and dialogue serve to build the future vision and reality. Organizations become what they portray themselves to be, so change becomes the dialogue shared by the participants in the process.

A school or education system is constantly in receipt of "stories" or visions about who they are and what they are becoming; but only the stories deemed meaningful, useful or truthful are adopted by the organization. A school may receive a story that is meaningful but incongruous with its current character. This fork in the road can lead to change. It is the point of greatest instability in the organization, but also the point of greatest possibility. At this point, even small mishaps or ill-considered comments can upset the system and have a disproportionate effect on the organization. "This is why," according to Marshall, "critical connections, not critical mass, are the essential conditions for change in a living system. The force of the disturbance can be disproportionate to the magnitude of the change" (p. 33).

By Marshall's definition, these change processes are a form of organizational learning: "The American Psychological Association (APA) offers a definition of learning

in which the generative new story of learning and schooling is rooted: 'Learning is a *natural process* of pursuing personally meaningful goals, and it is active, volitional, and internally-mediated; it is a process of discovering and constructing meaning from information and experience, filtered through the learner's unique perceptions thoughts and feelings'" (p. 39).

Marshall calls this process of living into a story a "generative system," one that continuously reviews, creates, designs, and generates strategies, objectives, and practices. Such a system rewards its members for experimenting with new ideas without punishing them for failed trials. The generative system recognizes the potential for contribution and learning from all of its members including both teachers and students.

After characterizing a generative system, Marshall challenges the status quo by calling for connections within learning communities. These connections should be between people, teachers, students, and the real world. Particularly, there is a need to reinvent learning for students. Status quo definitions of learning, still pervasively part of our schools, would have students passively sit and act as receivers of information. A generative system would have students actively create knowledge through their natural curiosity. Generative learning engages students in their world much like small children engage naturally with the world around them. Through schooling defined by generative learning, students connect to the school and come to see meaning in their learning experiences.

In Chapter Five, Marshall writes of the role of a generative system in student learning. "Generative and life-affirming schooling links the identity of each learner (child and adult) to the identity of the whole system. This synergy of identities creates a confluence of shared meaning that enables the system and each learner to continually create and learn. Our children's resonance with their school's learning purpose comes from its congruence with their own purpose. They can see themselves in the system. It is this clear connection to the whole that invites them to fully engage and feel they belong. There is astonishing power in simple rules of belonging" (p. 93). A generative school looks at the learning experience as an opportunity to help students achieve. This learning community asks how to make learning happen rather than asking who is at fault for students who do not learn.

The health of a generative learning system depends on continual feedback loops. Under a system that only employs annual assessments, generative learning is not possible. The healthy learning system employs internally created measures of progress and direction that are continuously applied and monitored. Yet, caution is advised in the assessment process. It is tempting to value only that which is assessed, but as Marshall quotes Albert Einstein, "Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts" (p. 10). Marshall believes a generative system of education is necessary. The development of such a system will require the collective effort of our

learning communities as they work to achieve a shared vision. Leaders must bring this vision to the community and through synergistic efforts create it, hone it, and achieve it.

The Case for District-Based Reform

Exceptional schools have exceptional leaders with a clear vision. These leaders continually call upon their vision to direct change that will lead to school improvement. In his book chronicling change at a district level, Jonathan A. Supovitz contends that district leaders must provide this vision. To be powerful, a vision must be shared and not contradictory or fragmented. District leaders must develop and communicate a vision for instructional improvement or suffer the consequences of mediocrity. When the leader does not lead with vision, the void will likely be filled with mediocre, multiple, competing visions projected by subordinate leaders, either formal or informal, at lower levels on the organization chart (p. 27). Visions can be communicated, but they must also be shared to be effective. This process of shared vision can take several years because the introduction of a new vision in an organization will necessarily challenge the status quo, thus leading to both passive and active opposition. Individuals tend to advocate for their own practices and resist change.

The Duval County Public Schools in Florida is the focus of this book on leading successful change for student achievement. Supovitz examines a new superintendent and his efforts to implement a district-wide vision based on a growing commitment of individual schools and staff members to his vision. However, Supovitz stresses that his is not a hagiographic study of a crusading educational reformer, but an analytic study of someone who put together a structure of systemic reform and improvement without taking egoistic credit for it. For Supovitz, this less charismatic achievement is more valuable than any discrete accomplishments of the person at the top.

Toward this end of systemic rather than charismatic leadership, Supovitz notes that the new superintendent promoted his vision of instruction without mandating it. He communicated his preference but left the choice of instructional strategies to the individual schools. The superintendent explained that in order for a vision of instructional strategy to produce results, individuals at different levels of the organization needed to be passionate about those chosen strategies (p. 53). If the superintendent had mandated instructional strategies there would have been more resistance; but more importantly, this vision would not have been "owned" by the participants or translated into best practice at the appropriate level.

Supovitz believes change should happen slowly. Rapid change will challenge vested interests and often anger constituents as they struggle with these alterations in their work habits and values. Rapid change can become dysfunctional in a hurry. Supovitz notes the number of promising school reforms implemented around the country that foundered because change occurred too quickly or without the careful spadework of preparation. In Chapter Three, he addresses how to lead change and gain cooperation and

commitment. To address this crucial issue, he introduces the concerns-based adoption model (CBAM) that examines the process of change from the individual's perspective using a series of stages (p. 66).

Two areas are monitored by CBAM, each with additional sub-areas. The area of concern includes *affect*, or how people feel about doing something new and different. The area of *use* includes behavior, or how people act as they move from doing something one way to doing it another way. The model assumes people go through four general stages of concern with change. Initially, people are either unaware of or uninterested in the proposed change. Second, people begin to ask questions and wonder how it might affect them. Third, a range of concerns emerges as people engage in new skills. Fourth, people describe their thoughts about how to make a reform work better, collaborate with colleagues to do so, and seek ways to build on reform.

On page 67, Supovitz cites R. Evans's 2002 book, *The Human Side of School Change: Reform, Resistance, and the Real-Life Problems of Innovation*, for a different view of the change process. Evans believes that any change is threatening, making people feel that their competence has been challenged. Individuals actually go through a type of grief or loss process as they are expected to abandon their past practices. Evans stresses that change leaders need to address this state of conflict and sense of loss by helping individuals to acquire commitment to and competence in the newly introduced practice. People and culture must be the primary focus in a change process rather than a focus on organizational structure and practice.

Supovitz also addresses the transmission of new ideas and practices. Many adults will remember playing the childhood game "party line." Children sit in a circle and the first person turns to her right and whispers a simple sentence in her neighbor's ear. In turn each child whispers what is heard to the next child in the circle. When the sentence comes full circle, the last child to receive it states the sentence he heard out loud for all to hear. The first child then tells the group the original sentence. Usually the two sentences are so different that it is obvious the original sentence has been distorted. Similarly, it is difficult for change leaders to maintain the meaning of new ideas and practices as they spread across the organization.

Change leaders must monitor practices to ensure integrity throughout the system. Leaders and participants have a responsibility to each other in this process. Supovitz quotes Harvard professor Richard Elmore in describing this responsibility: "For every increment of performance I demand from you, I have the equal responsibility to provide you with the capacity to meet that expectation. Likewise, for every investment you make in my skill and knowledge, I have a reciprocal responsibility to demonstrate some new increment in performance" (cited on p. 232).

Lessons Learned

All of these authors see vision, communication, and human relations as central to successful change. They agree that change occurs when there is a culture of learning in our schools. This learning is certainly not limited only to students, or even to students and teachers. All of these players must be part of viewing the department, the school, the district, as a learning organization. Scapp calls up Deleuze and Guattari's famous metaphor of a "rhizomatic" system that is generative and interconnected to describe the kind of leadership needed today (p. 12). Marshall sees this metaphor even more concretely in the Aspen Grove Center for Inquiry and Imagination:

> An aspen grove is a powerful symbol for the new learning and schooling story. Although an aspen grove looks like a forest of individual trees, it is actually a single organism connected at its roots. Within a grove of aspens, most, if not all, the trees are related. Like an aspen grove, the generative new story of learning and schooling supports a wide variety of unique learning centers, but they remain connected at the roots, part of an intricate learning network and system. (p. 69)

Supovitz blends metaphors of nurturing and growing (gardening) with those of building and constructing (engineering) to form the apt neologism "gardineer" to describe the kind of leader needed in today's schools, one who advocates for change and improvement without mandating it, while also building capacity for change (pp. 63f).

Yet there is much work to do in this young century in transforming schools into learning organizations. Supovitz notes that "It is ironic that American public school systems, the central societal means for educating the next generation of our citizenry, should have such a thin conception of their own learning" (p. 186). For our schools to thrive and address the needs of all students and the society they will go out and build, a culture of continuous learning is essential. Nobody in the organization is exempt from a constant examination of actions. Learning is continuous and across all levels, and therefore must be supported as such.

Educational change begins and ends with people. Each of these books focuses on the importance of what people believe *and* do in an educational setting. These beliefs and actions may be noted in a muted, but insistent fashion, where we might least expect to see such evidence. That does not diminish the effectiveness of a single powerful idea. Supovitz notes the entrance to the office of the Duval County superintendent:

> Visitors entering the superintendent's office on the sixth floor of the Duval County School Board building could not fail to notice a large bronze plaque to the right of the doorway that read, "John C. Fryer, Jr. Superintendent of Schools, 'Chief Learner'." (p. 164)

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About the Authors

Linda Coleman is the Assistant Superintendent at North Gibson School Corporation in Princeton, Indiana. She received her PhD in Educational Leadership at Purdue University in May 2007, and wrote her dissertation on the vision process in school improvement.

A. G. Rud is an associate professor of educational studies at Purdue University. He specializes in philosophy of education, and teaches and advises students in Purdue's doctoral cohort program in Educational Leadership. Rud edits the journal *Education and Culture* (http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/eandc/).