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The Missing Essential Connections to Educational Excellence

The past has never been a good guide to those futures, but without conceptual skills we seldom had any choice but to go on doing what we did. Now we can, and must, take better charge of our own destinies—and learn the skills that allow us to do it.

—Charles Handy (1996)

UNCONNECTED SYSTEMS

Today there exists a disconnect in public education between governance, strategic planning, public engagement, standards of excellence, leadership, and daily operations. It appears to occur without any thought given to these ultimately important ties essential to the accomplishment of the school or school district mission. Maximizing and realizing the potential for student achievement demands that educators understand and implement, both operationally and strategically, the Five Essentials for transforming a school, some of which are taken from private sector management practices. Nowhere is it more important that these essential skills be evident than at the school building level. Moreover, at the building

level, nowhere is it more important that these skills be evident than in the position of school principal. What may seem to be a rather random and at times chaotic interaction or lack of interaction among and between the Five Essentials can be harnessed to work in concert so as to create a stronger sense of meaning, commitment, and common purpose for the stakeholders of a school or school district. We have seen, over the past decade, school district after school district and the schools within those school districts engage in the process and discipline of strategic planning or public engagement only to become frustrated because of the disconnection between the school board and various groups, such as teachers or parents, when the process is "complete." The point is that both the development and implementation of these processes is never complete. Rather, they become a system with which to govern and manage a school or school district.

The Five Essentials incorporate the following components to achieving educational excellence as well as the delineation of the connections among and between them:

- Plan strategically
- Benchmark for excellence
- Lead collaboratively
- Engage the public
- Govern by standards

The Five Essentials examine how school goals can best be established and who should establish them. They analyze the relationships among and between the stakeholders of public education and what defines excellence within these relationships. The establishment of benchmarks of excellence for both basic and advanced educational programs is also analyzed. Using excellence as the standard, the Five Essentials incorporate conclusions regarding who are the customers and how we can best serve them. It is also important to consider how we can best approach local determinants within individual schools or school districts. Most important, the Five Essentials focus upon how all the components of excellence integrate to maximize learning opportunities for students.

THINKING AND PLANNING STRATEGICALLY

The impact of semantics in conversation among the stakeholders of a school or school district is a major factor, which threads its way through all of the essentials of excellence. People talk about what they think about and they act on what they talk about. Without thought, there can be no conversation. Without conversation, there should be no action. The quality of these thoughts and conversations determines the quality of decisions put into action.

At the school building level, cross-functional teams of teachers, administrators, and parents can use their combined wisdom to quickly flush out a solution to many problems that are never solved otherwise. Building principals must be possessed with the skills to facilitate this process, for it most appropriately falls to them to accept this responsibility.

Thinking and planning strategically begins with conversation. These conversations must be rich with the initiation and development of ideas. "Conjoining conversation" techniques are helpful to engage the best thinking for any problem facing the organization. These techniques serve as a precursor to collaboration and the development of collaborative leadership skills. Indeed, the beginnings of the development of collaboration skills are at the heart of conjoining conversation. While the application of conjoining conversation skills represents a good beginning of the process of productively combining the wisdom of organizational stakeholders, it is the contribution of conjoining conversation to the development of collaborative leadership skills that, in turn, helps produce an ongoing collaborative process that is most notable. Collaborative leadership skills contribute to the process most capable of producing the combined wisdom of the participants on a continuous basis.

Defining directions for engaging in productive conversation is important in order for the group to stay on task. The objective is to develop the environment in which a proactive conversation incorporating the combined wisdom of the group can be accomplished. The following list suggests the first steps of conjoining conversation. In almost every instance, one of the following will be most appropriate for the task at hand:

1. Define the problem that needs to be solved, then solve it.

2. Describe the challenge that needs to be met, then meet it.

3. Share the ideas that need to be developed, then develop them.

Once the problem is defined, the challenge described, or the ideas shared, the following suggested directions for establishing conjoining conversation should be applied:

1. Name a member of the group to be the group facilitator. The facilitator should be the group member most respected for his or her objectivity and fair mindedness.

2. Open discussion regarding possible solutions to problems, ways to meet challenges, or the development of ideas previously discussed into workable organizational improvements. The facilitator should encourage the sharing of "partial ideas." It is not necessary to have a well thought out idea before a participant shares it. One idea from one person often triggers another idea from another. This represents the beginning of producing combined wisdom.

3. Constructively criticize ideas but be careful not to criticize the originator. The purpose of conjoining conversation is to explore all possibilities, and the participants need to feel free to make suggestions without fear of potentially embarrassing criticism from others. Participants need to feel comfortable to share their thoughts without concern that these thoughts may not be among the best offered. The "building power" of one idea on top of another is crucial to the development of combined wisdom. A "bad idea" in isolation may become very helpful in tandem with another idea.

4. Once everyone has had the opportunity to contribute all their ideas on the problem or challenge, it is the responsibility of the facilitator to begin linking ideas together, based on similarity or potential for solving the problem or meeting the challenge.

5. When the conjoined conversation is complete, the facilitator should open discussion regarding which ideas offer the most promise. Deciding by consensus, a list of the most promising ideas is then compiled.

6. Next, the facilitator should initiate the development of action plans by guiding the group through a repeat of steps 2 through 5 above, focusing upon the development of the most promising ideas into action plans.

Conjoining conversation levels positional power. Everyone must be viewed as on "equal footing." The value of ideas should be decided on merit, not on the power of the position of the originator. Some ideas will be viewed positively by some and negatively by others. That is part of the process of establishing conjoining conversation. It is important to trust in the collaborative process and thereby allow the combined wisdom of the conjoining conversation to prevail. The whole effort is designed to not only bring the combined wisdom of the group to the generation of solutions to problems, or group-generated action plans to the implementation of strategies for improvement, but, more important in the long term, to develop a partnership of sharing and trust among the stakeholders. For employees, every effort must be made to provide a feeling of job security. For parents, efforts must be made to allay their fears that reprisals may be taken against their children because of the differing views of the parents. It can be surprising to learn the quiet fears and insecurities many of these stakeholders bring to the table regarding the school district. This important point is easy to miss, and can thereby subject the process to failure due to the silence these fears generate. Building principals must learn the skills of active engagement and mutual trust development.

Trust must be generated in order for the conversations of those involved in the strategic process to be effective. Strategic planning produces both a process and a product. The process defines the rules for engagement of the stakeholders, including decision making, selection of representatives, and relationships between the various strategic planning teams and other school-related committees such as the school board. The

governing body must be committed to the process. The important commitment on the part of the school board is the sharing of the power of decision making with the stakeholders of the school district. By so doing, they are empowered, in the final analysis, to make more effective decisions. This does not represent a relinquishing of school board decision-making responsibilities. Rather, it represents capitalizing on the opportunity to make better decisions based upon the combined wisdom derived from stakeholders collaboratively involved in the process. Support and commitment of the stakeholders follows. Ultimately, the school board is empowered by the reflection in their decisions of the combined wisdom of the school district stakeholders. Local school districts represent one of the last vestiges of local decision making, and therefore local control, in our nation. The question of who represents a cross section of the school and community is important to the final acceptance of the group decision-making in the process of strategic planning. As much as possible, a planning team should be composed of individual school and community members whose background, experience, and interests reflect a microcosm of the broader school district community in order that the various backgrounds, experiences, and interests of all segments of the school community are represented. School district stakeholders will be committed to final decisions and a decision-making process that they have contributed to developing, either directly or indirectly, through representation.

As the planning team works to develop an analysis of the politics, demographics, mission, objectives, strategies, and strengths and weaknesses of the school district, it is important to communicate its progress on a regular basis to the school community. The written word alone is insufficient to accomplish this important communication task. Gatherings of school community members should be regularly scheduled to afford everybody the opportunity for conversation regarding these matters. These gatherings should be held at the school building level, as building principals are in the best position to communicate with members of their local school community and facilitate the group conversation. The public should be fully and regularly involved. Open conversation regarding the unfolding strategic plan is crucial to the ultimate acceptance and support it will garnish.

BENCHMARKING FOR EXCELLENCE

For years, private sector corporations have recognized excellence by using criteria that reflect the highest performing organizations, in order to bestow upon those who meet these criteria the Baldrige Award for Excellence. In his book *The Baldrige Quality System: The Do-It-Yourself Way to Transform Your Business*, Stephen George delineates these criteria as follows:

Every quality system in every organization—manufacturing, service, nonprofit, government, or education—includes six areas, six of the seven categories in the Baldrige criteria:

1. Leadership

2. Information and Analysis

3. Strategic Quality Planning

4. Human Resource Development and Management

5. Management of Process Quality

6. Customer Focus and Satisfaction

The final category in the Baldrige criteria is 7, Quality and Operational Results, the focus and purpose of all quality system actions (1992, p. 20).

These seven criteria (discussed more fully in Chapter 3) call for a districtwide commitment to self-examination and reflection relative to the degree of quality operational performance in each area of the school district that, according to the Baldrige Criteria, determine excellence.

Benchmarking is tied to both the Five Essentials and the Baldrige Criteria as a means to achieve excellence. In his book *Competitive Intelligence: How to Gather, Analyze, and Use Information to Move Your Business*, Larry Kahaner explains the following: "Competitive intelligence is not just about collecting information. It's about analyzing this information, filtering it, learning what's useful and what's not—and then using it to our benefit" (1996, p. 29).

When we speak of benchmarking, we are referring to two separate but related basic activities: information gathering and the development of intelligence from that information. Public school organizations may take the time and effort to gather information regarding best practices in the field, but that effort alone is not enough. Once the information is gathered, it must be filtered and screened using criteria developed from local school organizational needs. Turning to such areas as represented by the Five Essentials and the Baldrige categories is key to the development of such criteria. The following list represents school district areas where unacceptable results point to topics to be included in the development of this criteria:

1. Governance Program—Standards of excellence are not met. (This is determined by a self-study of each service area of the school district in order to determine compliance with each related standard of excellence. See Chapter 6.)

2. Strategic Plan—Action plans are not complete.

3. Public Engagement—Public engagement programs are not implemented or are implemented unsuccessfully.

4. Baldrige Leadership—Quality improvement principles are not in evidence.

5. Baldrige Information and Analysis—Quality and performance-related data are not utilized in overall planning.

6. Baldrige Human Resources Development and Management—Overall human resource development plans are not aligned with the school district's performance goals.

7. Baldrige Process Management—Systematic processes targeting continual quality improvement and assessment are not in evidence.

8. Baldrige Performance Results—Performance levels and performance trends are not in compliance with standards of excellence.

9. Baldrige Customer Focus and Satisfaction—Requirements of various stakeholders are not being met.

Competitive intelligence within the field of public education should be implemented not because school districts seek to become more competitive within the industry, but rather because it facilitates cooperation and collaboration between school organizations to find, tailor to local needs, and implement a better way of doing business. That business is improving the effectiveness of teaching and the potential for learning.

School district administrative organizations too often are organized as departments or divisions in charge of specific operations of the school district. These divisions (curriculum, business, pupil personnel, etc.) frequently operate in such a way that they are isolated from one another. This generates among school personnel what has been referred to as "silo" thinking—people working in the same departments, meeting with others from the same department, working to accomplish operational targets that have little or nothing to do with the overall mission of the school district, and often subconsciously prioritizing their department's survival above the needs of the district as a whole. For public school sites, the same is true. Secondary schools are often organized by academic departments, and elementary schools are organized by grade levels. Again, like-minded people meet with like-minded people and thereby miss the opportunity to bring the combined wisdom to their discussions that the inclusion of teachers and others with varying backgrounds and areas of expertise would bring.

The same is true regarding faculty meetings where building principals run the meetings by the authority of their position. Most teachers are reluctant to suggest a solution or propose a course of action when to do so would pit their ideas in opposition to those of their boss. Those teachers who are bold enough to do so often have only criticism to offer, with no alternative course of action or solution to propose. The result is that little or no progress on important issues is made, or the principal makes unilateral decisions for which there is minimal faculty support and individual faculty investment.

Rather, in order to create an improved environment for the transformation of schools, we should organize around cross-functional teams that derive their membership from a cross section of academic departments in the secondary schools, and a cross section of grade levels in the elementary schools. In addition, in order to capitalize on this kind of reorganization of our public schools, school principals need to develop the skills of the Five Essentials to be able to facilitate the combined wisdom of all the stakeholders. For school organizations to become all they can be, we must first engage in some "unlearning" about silo thinking and other traditional practices that serve as barriers to the transformation of schools. We need to establish cross-functional teams that include the public, in order to address the problems we find in education today. We should replace the single-mindedness that those with identical expertise bring to the conversation with the combined wisdom of cross-functional teams composed of individuals with differing expertise. The composition of these cross-functional teams will, to some degree, be dictated by the nature of the problem or challenge facing the organization. It is the conversation of a team of individuals composed in this manner that will produce the solutions that reflect high performance of the organization. It is this notion of cross-functional teams that works best as the vehicle to implement a process of benchmarking in public schools.

Although benchmarking in public schools is a system rarely used, it holds much promise as one of the Five Essentials for transforming schools. The merits of benchmarking in the private sector hold true for most of the operations of public schools. In their book, *High Performance Benchmarking: Twenty Steps to Success*, H. James Harrington and James S. Harrington describe, among others, the following benefits of benchmarking (1996, pp. 130–131):

- Integrates the best practices into the organization
- Develops effective measurement systems
- Identifies strengths that the organization can build upon as well as weaknesses that need to be improved
- Has a positive impact on employee pride and morale
- Is an important enabler that helps the organization compete for the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award

The transition from private sector application of benchmarking to the implementation of benchmarking in public schools is a relatively easy one. The merits for benchmarking in the public schools are as follows:

- Benchmarking forces the communication between school stakeholders regarding current problems that the Five Essentials can help solve. It provides a major opportunity in the ongoing professional development of teachers. Benchmarking for best teaching practices based upon well-defined student needs often reveals teaching skills and methodologies teachers may need to develop. It aligns staff development programs with student learning needs.

- Because it promotes cross-functional teams, when combined with consensus decision making, benchmarking promotes personal investment in the effort to improve the accomplishment of the school mission.
- In a school environment where change is difficult, benchmarking legitimizes the efforts of the building principal to improve the instructional program and thereby learning.
- It allows for the improvement of the delivery of services without the evaluation of personnel. Improvement is focused on the services produced by the school organization. If the personnel affected by changes implemented as a result of benchmarking are involved in the process, improvement of individual performance is more likely to be another positive outcome of benchmarking.

Throughout this integrated management system, nothing is more important than the quality of human relationships among employees charged with its implementation. Collaboration between the stakeholders of education weaves its way throughout all the essential elements of the transformation of a school.

LEADING COLLABORATIVELY

I recall my first year as a teacher during which I observed Miss Black, a sixth-grade Language Arts teacher. I was very impressed not only with her teaching skills, but also with her almost innate ability to automatically organize for a teaching-learning situation. She was very helpful both to me and to a friend of mine who was also in his first year of teaching. At the end of the school year, it was the practice of the principal to collect lesson plan books from each and every teacher. I remember walking into Miss Black's classroom at the end of the school year to find her using a magic marker to "black out" almost every lesson plan she had developed for the year. When I asked her why she was doing this, her reply was simply, "If I don't do this, others will steal my planning." When I spoke to other faculty members regarding their practice of sharing lesson plans and teaching methods with one another, I found that Miss Black's attitude was rather unanimously held. They viewed teaching within a professional context as competitive and certainly not collaborative. While I'm sure we've come a long way from those days in terms of how we prepare teachers, little is done to develop the requisite skills for team collaboration.

Within a school setting, collaboration is the means to establishing and sustaining a systematic effort that brings together all school stakeholders with the common interest of using their combined wisdom to both solve problems and advance school improvement initiatives using consensus decision making.

Certainly we can all agree that there are problems in public education today, and we all have a stake in them. Collaboration begins with conversation—a collective conversation. Individuals bring different perspectives

to a conversation that is enriched by diversity. This conversation should search for solutions. In this manner, we can go beyond individual visions of what is possible.

David Kolb of the Weatherhead School of Management at Case Western Reserve University has studied conversation for many years. He likes to tell the story of conversational practices of the American Indians contrasted with conversations in our civilized world today. One Native American tribe used a simple system of feathers to signal the need for a conversation within the tribe. The individual wishing to speak with his fellow tribesmen would walk to the center of the village carrying a large white feather, which signaled to his fellow tribesmen to gather around and listen to what he had to say. While he spoke, no other member of the tribe engaged in any conversation. Rather, they listened intently to what he had to say. When he had finished, he simply walked to the tribesman from whom he desired a response and handed him a smaller black feather to signal his desire for conversation with this individual. The black feather was passed in this manner from one member of the tribe to another until all conversation was completed (David Kolb, personal communication, Nov. 15, 1995). By contrast, much of our conversation in public institutions today can be best characterized as acrimonious and adversarial. School board meetings would be well served to borrow the simple system of "passing the feather" for engaging in civilized conversation.

The objective of collaboration is to reach consensus regarding the educational solution or initiative that represents the "better thinking" that a combined wisdom approach alone can produce. In this manner, we are able to utilize the combined wisdom of the participants rather than establish singular thought that lacks the advantage of thought building between the participants.

There is a unique dynamic revealed in constructive collaboration. The stakeholders become committed to a common purpose. At the school building level, principals become responsible for facilitating the creation of an environment supportive of personal investment in the process by all the participants. Solutions are revealed through the constructive interaction between stakeholders with different points of view, backgrounds, and social persuasions. Throughout the process, personal investment in decisions emerges. As participants develop a sense of personally impacting decisions, their personal investment assures the assumption of responsibility for future decisions and subsequent actions.

ENGAGING THE PUBLIC

No organization can achieve levels of quality of their product higher than the level of quality reflected by the relationships among the employees

and other stakeholders of the organization. For school districts, there is no more important group of stakeholders than their constituents, including students and parents. With this consideration in mind, lessons from the past teach us that we must find a way to meaningfully engage the public in the decision-making process.

Mindless administration of rules and regulations has caused what many would call "public relations problems" for school districts. This manner of administrating a school district may produce consistency over time, but the primary consideration for the school district is whether the educational interests of the students are best being served. Why have schools been under such constant attack from the public? Certainly it is not difficult to see the adversarial relationship that can quickly develop between school administration and the public. A "we, they" mentality can quickly develop, and this mentality has been institutionalized in far too many school districts across our nation. Public engagement offers more than simply an exchange of information. It has the power to gather support and commitment. Public engagement focuses on the meaning and causes underlying problems and concerns. Conversation and dialogue that bring new and commonly understood meaning to old issues are the strengths of public engagement. In his book, *Synchronicity: The Inner Path of Leadership,* Joseph Jaworski (1996) indicates that,

> "The capacity to discover and participate in our unfolding future has more to do with our being—our total orientation of character and consciousness—than with what we do. Leadership is about creating, day by day, a domain in which we and those around us continually deepen our understanding of reality and are able to participate in shaping the future. This, then, is the deeper territory of leadership—collectively 'listening' to what is wanting to emerge in the world, and then having the courage to do what is required" (p. 182).

Strong listening skills are necessary in order to welcome differing views. The requirement for leadership is to become open to new meanings so discovered. The pursuit of such meaning is essential to the development of a collective wisdom on the issues. There is a collective meaning that emerges from sincere engagement that reflects the sum equaling more than its component parts.

STANDARDS-BASED GOVERNANCE AND QUALITY ASSURANCE

In order to be accountable for the quality of education offered in a school district, school boards must adopt and rely upon minimum standards of

excellence. These standards should address both the unique needs and the values of the school district. They should also at least reflect minimums required by state standards. In addition, staff and community members should be engaged in their development. As the school board evaluates whether or not the district is accomplishing its mission, compliance with these standards serves as a major determinant. The following school district general areas of service represent the major divisions for standards development:

1. School Board

2. Human Resources and Instructional Services

3. Curricular and Pupil Personnel Services

4. Educational Program Design and Special Education Services

A school district operates on a "governance by standards" basis when the everyday decisions of all the stakeholders, especially the school board, are based on the commitments reflected in the standards of excellence. In this way, collaborative decision making becomes aligned with the school district standards of excellence.

A quality assurance review, commonly used and accepted in both industry and healthcare, provides a school district with a tool for self-evaluation and comparison against internally developed standards. The Standards of Excellence developed for the specific purpose of self-evaluation serve as the objective base for review. The incorporation of quality assurance principles should provide for ongoing strategic planning, as well as restoration and improvement services. A quality assurance advisory committee should be composed of representatives from the community and the professional staff. This advisory committee should review the following issues:

1. The effective delivery of curricula/instructional services as measured against the Standards of Excellence

2. Comprehensive overview of compliance with the Standards of Excellence

3. Procedural revisions necessary for improvement of the Quality Improvement and Restoration Program

4. Annual revision of the Quality Assurance Program

The Quality Assurance Program offers the opportunity to respond to an identified need to bring a particular service area back into compliance with a particular standard. With the Quality Assurance Program, the school board is able to continuously monitor the status of compliance with

every district standard. Accordingly, district resources can be redeployed to service areas not in compliance with their standards of excellence. In this manner, district resources can be utilized more effectively where they are most needed. The Quality Assurance Program activates close scrutiny of resource allocation, effective deployment of staff, and meaningful collaboration with community members.

THE INTEGRATED ESSENTIALS

The potential for successful development and implementation of each of the Five Essentials is greatly improved when they are developed in concert with one another. There is no greater opportunity for meaningful public engagement in decision making for a school district than during the strategic planning process. The use of benchmarking and the implementation of an integrated management system such as the Baldrige Management System go hand in hand.

By moving from a traditional decision-making process to a collaborative decision-making model, a school board inures itself to both better decisions, in the interest of students, which are more universally supported, and a decision-making process that incorporates the combined wisdom of the school stakeholders in their decisions. Therefore, as a school board lets go of traditional power decision making, it thereby empowers itself. Governing by standards empowers those involved by deriving those standards from the engagement of the public. Because the implementation of collaborative leadership creates trusting relationships among the stakeholders and because, by design, it solicits meaningful input from the stakeholders, it lends itself well to planning strategically. Planning strategically requires both of these elements to be successfully implemented.

Skill development necessary to acquire and implement the Five Essentials overlaps from one essential to the other (see Figure 1.1). The Five Essentials share a basis of relationship building, achieving excellence, establishing trust, and reaching common meaning and understanding. An organization can achieve a level of performance excellence and quality no greater than the composite quality of the relationships among and between its stakeholders. The Five Essentials facilitate the development of these quality relationships.

THE POWER OF CONSENSUS

Decision making within the organization, as I have described, should be accomplished by consensus that is defined as the absolute agreement of everyone involved in the process. Deciding by majority rule gives rise to lack of support of the decision by the disempowered minority. Working for

Figure 1.1   Integrated Essentials
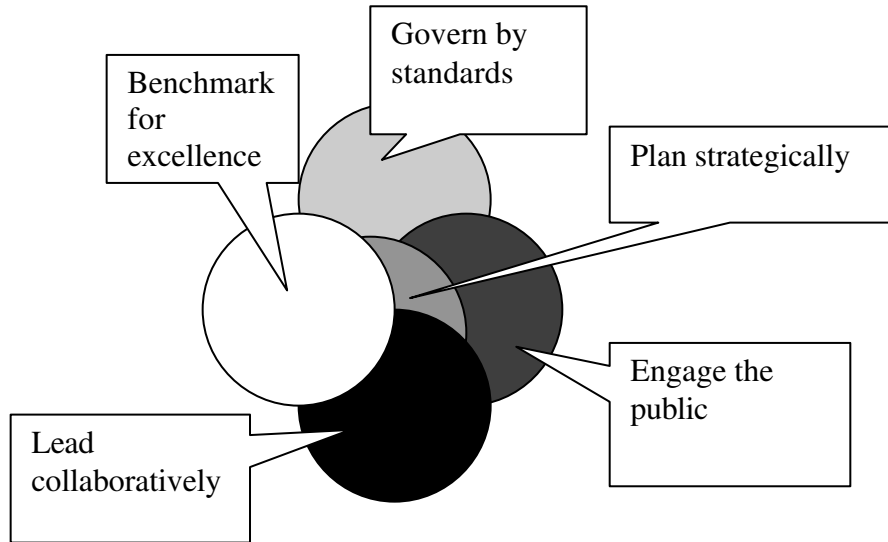
consensus so defined contributes to the development of a collaborative team. The combined wisdom of the entire group gives birth to better decision making. As the group works to reconcile differences, commitment to the ultimate decision is strengthened.

In their book *Primal Leadership: Realizing the Power of Emotional Intelligence,* Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis, and Annie McKee (2002) discuss the role of emotion in leadership as follows:

> In the modern organization, this primordial emotional task— though by now largely invisible—remains foremost among the many jobs of leadership: driving the collective emotions in a positive direction and clearing the smog created by toxic emotions. This task applies to leadership everywhere, from the boardroom to the shop floor. Quite simply, in any human group the leader has maximal power to sway everyone's emotions. If people's emotions are pushed toward the range of enthusiasm, performance can soar; if people are driven toward rancor and anxiety, they will be thrown off stride. (p. 5)

Again, it falls to the building principal to develop the facilitation skills necessary to drive the shared decision making of the collaborative team. The building principal must guide the collective emotion of the group of stakeholders toward enthusiasm for both the ultimate decision and the process employed to arrive at that decision by consensus. The building principal must be adroit in the use of collaborative leadership skills.

Consensus decision making eliminates the "post meeting parking lot meetings" that are inevitable when decisions are made by majority rule. These "parking lot meetings" occur between those of the minority opinion after a discussion has taken place which utilized a majority rule decision-making mentality. The "parking lot meetings" happen because those of the minority opinion have a need to discuss what the majority of the discussion participants were not receptive to considering. The consequences of majority decision making tend to be more political than substantive. Decisions made through a majority decision-making process are devoid of the wisdom that emerges within a consensus decision-making process, wherein those not in absolute agreement with the "majority" thoughts are encouraged to explain their differing notions. Rather than profiting from the inclusion of *all* thinking and allowing the free flow of combined wisdom to produce conclusions not predictable by any one participant, premature conclusions are accepted by a majority vote.

Majority rule in these settings also precludes the personal investment of all participants in the final decisions. Even though consensus thinking and decision making requires more patience and perseverance, the improved wisdom of the final decision as well as the support for both the decision and the process are well worth the effort. Consensus thinking eliminates the need for "parking lot meetings."

RANDOM ACTS OF IMPROVEMENT

In his book, *Insights to Performance Excellence 1999,* Mark L. Blazey (1999) comments,

> Without effective alignment, routine work and acts of improvement can be random and serve to suboptimize organizational performance. . . . Each person, each manager, and each work unit works diligently to achieve goals they believe are important. Each is pulling hard—but not necessarily in ways that ensure performance excellence. This encourages the creation of "fiefdoms" within organizations. With a clear, well communicated strategic plan, it is easier to know when daily work is out of alignment. . . . The strategic plan and accompanying measures make it possible to know when work is not aligned and help employees, including leaders, to know when adjustments are required. A well-deployed and understood strategic plan helps everyone in the organization distinguish between random acts of improvement and aligned improvement. (pp. 93–94)

Most school employees work on an everyday basis in a rather isolated fashion. They may at times work on committees whose purpose is either

vague or unstated. The highest performing employees, therefore, develop individual acts of improvement. When viewed in an organizational sense, they appear as random acts of improvement, often with little or no alignment with the organizational goals (see Figure 1.2).

A well-developed and communicated strategic plan facilitates the implementation of individual acts of improvement, which are aligned with the overall organizational plan. Blazey goes on to point out that, "Random acts of improvement give a false sense of accomplishment and rarely benefit the organization" (1999, p. 94). In school districts, there is evidence of this within departments as well as individual classrooms. Without alignment with the organizational goals, these individual initiatives often represent a misdeployment of human and material resources. The organizational effectiveness is not enhanced.

Conversely, when the stakeholders develop and work with processes that are consistent with the accomplishment of goals that are targeted in the strategic plan, the organization becomes much more effective. At the school district level, it is the responsibility of the superintendent to redirect random acts of improvement to align with the district objectives. At the school building level, it is the responsibility of the school principal to redirect random acts of improvement to align with the school objectives. Random acts of improvement must be handled carefully so as to not dampen the enthusiasm of the staff member involved. Principals with collaborative leadership skills are able to direct the energy of school transformation teams to align their decisions with school objectives.

A major goal of high-performing leadership is to create an environment within the organization that creates the possibility for employees to realize personal goals while in the process of attaining the organizational goals. Random acts of improvement can be and many times are counterproductive to the accomplishment of the organizational goals. The Five Essentials help create an aligned environment. With proper involvement, planning, governing, setting standards, engaging the public, and collaborating, we can develop a commitment to a mission which has been impacted on a personal level by the stakeholders of the school or school district. Just as Viktor Frankl in *Man's Search for Meaning* points out, our main concern "is not to gain pleasure to avoid pain but rather to see a meaning . . . in life" (1959, p. 115); so it is with learning organizations. The performance level of members of the organization is directly related to their shared understanding of the meaning of the organization (see Figure 1.3).

SUMMARY

Each of the Five Essentials discussed in this chapter makes its own unique contribution to organizational excellence. At the same time, each of the Five Essentials reinforces and supports the contributions of the others.

Figure 1.2   Random Acts of Improvement and Aligned Acts of Improvement
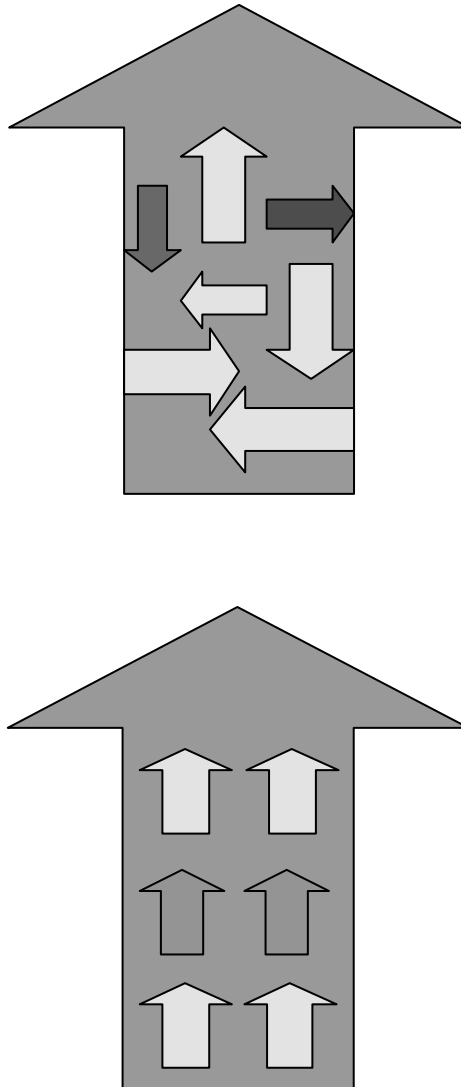
Adapted from Mark L. Blazey, *Insights to Performance Excellence, 1999: An Inside Look at the 1999 Baldrige Award Criteria.* Milwaukee, WI: ASQ Quality Press, 1999, p. 95.

They, by their very nature, are easily integrated into a management system in a natural and flexible manner. This is principally the case because the essence of each of the Five Essentials depends upon common roots in the quality of relationships among and between the stakeholders of the organization. In turn, it is conversation among the stakeholders that reflects the

beginnings of ultimate organizational excellence. Within a conversational context, the generation of trust among the stakeholders is the most important determinant of the ultimate effectiveness of the integration of the Five Essentials into organizational transformation.

Strategic planning provides a process for bringing the combined wisdom of the stakeholders to the development and implementation of action plans for the transformation of schools. Benchmarking is a process that brings "best practices" and the filtering of information into usable intelligence to the organization. Collaborative leadership is both the fuel and the lubricant that drives and smoothes the process of implementing the other four essentials. It provides for the formation of meaningful relationships and shared commitments to the meaning and goals of the transformed organization.

It is public engagement that offers the best conduit for school districts to authentically gather otherwise unattainable information from the public and by so doing, garnish commitment to and support for the organization. Governing by standards certainly parallels the process of benchmarking by setting the standards of excellence as the benchmark. Working to comply with locally developed standards of excellence sets the stage for further internal and external benchmarking. Once we locally determine the standards of excellence for the organization, we can institute a well-articulated quality assurance program, which, in concert with a strategic plan, insures that human and material resources are continuously aimed at the attainment of these standards.

Because of their related nature, the potential for successful development and implementation of the Five Essentials is enhanced by their simultaneous development. The skills required by one of the essential processes are related to the skills required by the others. In addition, greater integrity in the implementation process can be achieved when the Five Essentials are implemented in concert with one another.

The component parts of a strategic plan, such as arriving at a mission statement or producing strategies to accomplish the mission, are more effectively developed by applying the skills of the Five Essentials to the process of strategic planning. As part of the strategic planning process, the mission statement should address what is unique about that school organization. What purpose does the organization serve and what are the values and priorities of the school organization? The Five Essentials provide the stakeholders with the skills to more effectively answer these questions. Conversations among the school stakeholders who possess the skills of the Five Essentials produce more accurate answers to these questions and thereby enhance the strategic planning process. As important, the strategic thinking underscoring the mission statement should permeate all discussions and decisions of the school organization. Again, these discussions and decisions produce more effective results when the skills of the Five Essentials are shared by all the participants. The importance of these considerations is echoed in the next chapter.