

Chapter 3

Uplifting Leadership to Support Strategic Plan Implementation

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ABSTRACT

This case study examines how uplifting leadership by the superintendent of one rural school district utilized various structures and processes to successfully implement the first year of their district strategic plan. The study is framed around the literature on change theory and the literature on uplifting leadership. Interviews with goal area team leaders, building principals, district leadership, and school board members yielded various leadership characteristics, structures, and processes that resulted in successful implementation of year one of the district's strategic plan. The interdependence of uplifting leadership with supportive structures and processes were examined as pivotal to the district's successful implementation.

PURPOSE

As schools strive to meet state and federal mandates, many districts embark on a district strategic planning process as an avenue for change. During times of large scale, second order change (Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003) leadership quality becomes second only to teacher quality (Bredeson & Kelley, 2014). As effective implementation relies more heavily upon supportive leadership that provides for physical, structural, and cultural conditions conducive to change (Huffman & Hipp, 2001). However, a shift in leadership style may be necessary to support district-wide change. This case study examines the role of a superintendent's leadership and how the leadership style promoted the necessary change to achieve the district's five-year strategic plan.

The research questions for the study are:

1. What characteristics in leadership were seen as “push” forces?
2. What characteristics in leadership were seen as “pull” forces?
3. What leadership structures and processes supported implementation of change?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Change Theory

According to Waters, Marzano, and McNulty (2003), there are two types of change: first order and second order. Change happens at the individual level (Hord & Hall, 2014), with each person responding differently to a new initiative. First order change is change that aligns with the current values, resources, and knowledge, whereas large scale or second order change requires individuals to learn new approaches and presents a conflict with prevailing values and norms (Waters et al., 2003). These new approaches and beliefs are often accompanied by a sort of “grieving period” as participants leave behind old ways of doing and thinking and move toward new learning and commitments (Hargreaves, Boyle, & Harris, 2014). Second order change innovations live or die by the quality of support that implementers receive during the change process (Hargreaves et al., 2014).

Second order change requires different leadership responsibilities than incremental or first order change (Waters et al., 2003). Leaders act as change agents when they are able to engage people in facing realities and then in changing the priorities, attitudes, and behaviors necessary to thrive during implementation (Heifetz, 2009). These leaders help implementers understand change from a larger perspective in part through their understanding of the what, why, and stakeholder roles (Zuckerman, Wilcox, Schiller, & Durand, 2018). Schools that are able to make changes, even in the face of overwhelming odds, address the personal emotional needs of teachers while also holding high expectations for everyone (Hargreaves et al., 2014). According to Fullan (2006), school leaders use a tight and loose leadership style to handle change, much like the push and pull forces of uplifting leadership.

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