

# *Making a Leadership Change*

How Organizations and Leaders Can Handle  
Leadership Transitions Successfully

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Transitions Successfully

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specialists, management information systems, and special education needed access to the line side—district superintendents, the principals, and the teachers—for orientation and training. The demand for their time exceeded its availability by several orders of magnitude.

Training time for teachers was in short supply and difficult to create. The union contract limited the uses to which allocated class-preparation hours could be put: shutting down school for training days would provoke outcries from the parents (as the latent custodial function of schools came to the surface) and overtime pay for 11,000 teachers was an impossibility. Even if the time could have been found, some schools were ill equipped to provide the training. Many principals who are excellent administrators do not have the skills to facilitate a curricular planning session on elementary science. Finally, people needed time to digest and assimilate the new initiatives. It is easy to comprehend intellectually that one will be teaching fifth-grade science (perhaps for the first time in ten years) and the rationale behind it. But to actually do it, one needs time to talk it through with colleagues, to get ready to implement.

### **Identifying and Reallocating Overload**

New leaders are often enveloped by a groupthink (Janis, 1982) that makes it difficult for people to question the scope of an agenda. Anyone who suggests that the task is too great or time too short risks being thought disloyal. Quips such as “when the going gets tough, the tough get going” or “the merely difficult we can do today, the impossible tomorrow” suggest this dynamic. The psychological climate is often a heroic culture in which all is regarded as possible. In such a climate, what Schon (1983) calls “undetectable error” may occur. Systems actively work to keep information so diffuse that people can avoid coming to terms with the threat it might contain. The leader keeps the information distributed by discussing different initiatives with different people. Those who set the agenda (the doers) may be unaware of the overload that is created in the followers (the done-bys).

In the work with the school system, we used a structured process that assisted the new leaders and their staffs in making sense of the load that resulted from the new initiatives. The strength of a

structured process is that it formats the information in such a way that the group is forced to deal with clearly evident patterns. The process is similar to responsibility charting. A group of managers lists the major initiatives down the left side of a flip chart and arrays the major roles and levels across the top. The task then is to fill in the matrix showing how each role and level will relate to each initiative. For example, some roles are involved only in the initial policy discussions, others in designing the system strategies, some in monitoring for compliance, others in implementing the new behaviors and systems, and so on. The discussion itself is valuable for it makes the group look systematically at all the different stakeholders in a change and assess how they will be affected, not by a single item but by the set.

Once the table is filled out, the group looks down each of the columns to review the impact of the changes on each level and assess the capacity of that level against the total load that falls on that group. For example, in the urban school case (see Table 12), two roles showed up as overloaded, the principals and the teachers. Many of the initiatives that had different champions at headquarters (recall there were twenty central staff units) funneled into the school through eight deputy superintendents to the principals. Each of the initiatives taken by itself made sense and appropriately had significant responsibilities for the principals. When taken together, however, they were not thoughtfully related, and no guidance was given the principals about their priorities. In the area of planning alone, this process uncovered five initiatives for which the principal was supposed to submit a separate plan (school security, truancy, relationships with local business, special education, and curriculum).

Eventually, it was decided to combine the different plans in a single document that made it much easier for the principals to develop an integrated school plan. The local authorities, rather than feeling pulled apart by the different staff interests that surrounded the superintendent, began to feel supported in the difficult work of integrating all the different initiatives in a single school. At the same time, the central planning staff began to develop consultation skills so that, as the new planning requirements created new demands from the field, they would be able to play supporting roles.

Table 12. Example of Change Load Matrix for an Urban School System.

<i>Initiatives</i>	<i>Roles</i>				
	<i>Superintendent</i>	<i>Central</i>	<i>District</i>	<i>Principals</i>	<i>Teachers</i>
1. Standardize curriculum	Initiate	Design and develop, do training	Monitor	Participate in planning, do training, oversee implementation	Learn new materials, implement a major new curriculum
2. Testing program	Initiate	Monitor contract with external		Administer	Prepare students; administer
3. Desegregation	Negotiate with courts, take lead	Develop school improvement strategy		Implement complex site improvement plan	Implement
4. Special education		Develop policy		Oversee referral process, develop a plan	Learn and use new procedures for referring students
5. Evaluations of teachers, principals	Set the policy	Develop system	Implement the evaluation of principals	Implement the evaluation of teachers	
6. Tuancy initiative				Develop the strategy, submit plan	New reporting requirements
7. Link with businesses	Set the policy			Implement the business-school link, develop a plan	
8. Planning		Develop format, process	Review	Develop plans	Participate in plan development
9. School security		Oversight		Develop and implement plan	

This analysis of the load distribution in the school case suggests several possible responses:

1. Integrate initiatives. Some initiatives may lend themselves to be linked in ways that will make them not only easier to implement but more meaningful as well.
2. Shift responsibilities. A closer inspection may make clear that entire initiatives would be better handled at a different level, one that has more resources available.
3. Beef up underloaded roles. Often people who are underused want to have more involvement in the change agendas.
4. Balance initiatives over time by deferring some and phasing others.
5. Support overloaded roles. For example, central staff can be assigned as consultants; peer groups can be developed or resources can be shared in some unique way.

#### **Leverage and Natural Entry Points**

Overload can cause erosion of the limited leverage for change at the top. People experience the inability of people at the top to follow through, and they begin to take the initiatives less seriously. One senior manager in the Califano administration at HEW was tired of working on various initiatives, often at the last minute and under unrealistic deadlines, only to see them go nowhere after an initial burst of enthusiasm. He developed a strategy for dealing with Califano's hyperactivity in suggesting new initiatives. He would ignore the first memorandum that requested some analysis or actions; a full third were never heard of again. When he received a reminder, he ignored that too, and another one third would disappear. When a third followup came, he would give a plausible excuse that someone else had failed to tell him and would promise to get on it right away, which he did.

This strategy was in no way evidence of resistance to Califano's leadership. It was rather a defense against his own disappointment from getting excited about many of these initiatives, putting work into them, only to see them come to nothing. The strategy had the effect of making the leader put some of his resources (persistent