

Principalship: Leading Change in Schools

by: Dr. Alvin Chan -The L.E.A.D.E.R. Way

INTRODUCTION In June 1997, the Prime Minister of Singapore unveiled the Government's vision of 'Thinking Schools, Learning Nation' (TSLN). This vision was forged to improve Singapore's education system in the light of the rapid changes around the world. The Government foresees that Singapore, with its limited natural resources, can only continue to progress by nurturing a knowledgeable workforce that is adaptable to the changes in the world economy. More importantly, the Government realized that it had to start preparing the nation for these inevitable changes by revamping the education system in accordance with the vision of TSLN. The Ministry of Education (MOE) in Singapore, the state agency responsible for the undertaking of this vision, states the goals of TSLN as follows: Thinking Schools ensure that we equip students with skills and knowledge and values and instincts to face future challenges, while Learning Nation aims to promote a culture of continual learning beyond the school environment. (MOE, 1998, p.16) In order to realize the vision, the MOE has introduced changes to the curriculum, the training of teachers, assessment modes and the development of resource packages. Furthermore, all schools will have students spending at least 30% of their curriculum time accessing electronic resources and working on computers. (MOE, 1998, p.17) The changes in the curriculum include the infusion of thinking skills and the reduction in the contents of the curriculum. Schools are strongly encouraged to set up their own thinking programs and teachers are to enroll in courses to learn how to infuse thinking skills in their teaching. With the restructuring taking place to realize the vision, most teachers fear that the changes will burden them by increasing their already-heavy workload and tight time schedule due to increased training hours. The principal, being the main disseminator of the MOE's mission of TSLN in the school, has the unenviable task to articulate this vision to overcome the resistance to the changes especially from the school's teachers. The main objective of the paper is to explore the perceptions of teachers as to the effectiveness of principals in leading a change programs (in this case, a Thinking Programs). Since teachers are directly responsible for the learning outcomes of the students, their perceptions of their principals' effectiveness and concomitant actions are vital to the success of the vision of TSLN. As part of the paper, a case study of a primary school, which has embarked on a Thinking Programs, has been carried out.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE In the hope of improving the existing system, schools face many problems when introducing well-meaning changes. Restructuring would, inevitably, involve people within the organisation to absorb new ideas and ideals that usually result in many uncertainties (Heckman, 1990). A school's principal, thus, has the uphill task to manage the level of resistance to change and align the staff to work towards a common vision, amidst the turbulence. To reiterate, the author is focussing on teachers' perceptions of their principal in leading change, more specifically, the process of creating a Thinking Programme for the school. The importance of teachers' perception of their leaders in the success of a school has been documented in various researches. Researchers (such as Bhella, 1992) suggested that teachers' morale is related to student achievement. And, in turn, the principal has the strongest influence on teachers' satisfaction in the workplace. (Vanderstoep et al, 1994) From that perspective, the teachers' satisfaction and perceptions of the principal in leading the change process would directly have an impact on the success rate of the new programme of boosting students' achievement. In the process of writing, the author discussed with many teachers on what they expect their leaders to do when introducing a new programs to their schools. The author has summarized the teachers' opinions for inclusion in this paper. Previous research and literature would be used to illuminate the factors that are critical to the success of a principal in leading a change programs. To further enhance clarity of exposition, I have presented systematically the ideas encapsulated in previous research by using the acronym of L.E.A.D.E.R as a model to elucidate the steps in leading a successful change programs in a school. The acronym of L.E.A.D.E.R stands for: Leading by example Empowering vision Adaptive change Developing people Evaluating the system Recharge

The above model does not try to be prescriptive or attempt to imply that it will cover all the salient factors of an effective change programme. Due to the prescribed length of the paper, the author hopes that the model will shed more light in the topic of research in a more methodical manner.

Leading by Example In most organisations that have embarked on a change programme, one of the more common complaints by the employees is that the leader does not 'walk the talk'. In a school, if a principal is not willing to learn and adapt to changes, there are no compelling reasons for the staff to do so. The Scout's motto, 'Lead by Example', is a major criteria of what a principal must do to succeed in leading change. In order to create a thinking and learning organisation, principal will become researchers and designers rather than controllers and overseers. They should also be a model of learning to the rest of the organisation and encourage the staff to be life-long learners. (Senge, 1990) More importantly, a principal must not merely communicate in words, but by deeds to convince the staff that the change is happening at all levels. These build a sense of esprit de corp in the school that will help in lessening the pressures that change brings to organisations. In short, a principal has to be perceived to be capable in leading school educational development by his or her own example. (Dunning, 1993; McHugh & McMullan, 1995) Unless the staffs are convinced, they will not work co-operatively towards the success of the change programme.

Empowering Vision A change programme requires a change of vision. According to Kotter (1995, p.10), "A vision says something that clarifies the direction in which an organisation needs to move." The Ministry of Education developed the vision of TSLN in the middle of 1997. In the schools, banners are put up to herald the vision of TSLN and school principals were expected to align the teachers towards this shared vision for the betterment of the schools. The principals are expected to modify culture through skill in communication of the necessary shared values for a changed vision. (Campbell-Evans, 1993).

Adaptive Change In most organisations' change programme, the appropriate pace of change is often ignored. Most leaders are impatient to see results and thus apply unwarranted pressures on those involved in the process. In Singapore schools; such a situation is a commonplace. With the MOE's intention of creating a world-class educational system in Singapore, many new initiatives are introduced within a short period of time. Most of the initiatives will require much time and effort of the teachers, on top of their already-heavy load. Such a situation often causes distress and the principal has to address the issues. A good leader, therefore, must be capable of regulating the distress by sequencing and pacing the work required of the change process. Unfortunately, this is not the case in most change programme. Most leaders start new initiatives

without stopping other activities or they start too many initiatives at the same time. They overwhelm and disorient the very people who need to take responsibility for the work. (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997,p.180) Developing People The people who are directly involved in a change programme have to be suitably trained to meet the challenges. A good principal would ensure that the staff's potential is developed for many reasons. Firstly, if the staffs are not trained well to undertake the new responsibilities of the initiative, the programme will not be a success. Secondly, a principal who develops and empowers the staff in the concerned change programme will be more able to convince them to commit to it. By doing so, a principal can demonstrate leadership by sharing leadership with the staff in the school. Through empowering others, the principal can also elevate his/her status and power. (Blasé, 1987) A principal can also develop the staff potential by opening up channels of communication within the school. Setting up committees and encouraging peer learning could do this. External agencies with expertise in the areas of change can also be consulted to help smoothen the process of change. A principal who is a people developer would benefit as " solutions to adaptive challenges reside not in the executive suite but in the collective intelligence of employees at all levels."(Heifetz & Laurie, 1997,p.173) Thus, by doing so, the principal would have increased the level of success of the new initiative and also the hearts of his/her followers. Evaluating the System The principal must constantly monitor the process of a new school initiative. The initial enthusiasm that has been built up the principal may wane due to the lack of a good evaluation system .An effective evaluation system would allow the principal to see the flaws and to refine the programme due to changing circumstances. A good evaluation system for a thinking programme would consist of classroom observations on the teaching of the thinking tools and feedback from those who are involved in the change process. This includes the teachers, pupils and their parents. This is important as constant feedback allows the principal to refine the programme due to changing circumstances. (Hargreaves, 1995) To further enhance the evaluative aspect of the programme, the principal could brainstorm with the staff on the criteria of what are considered to be desired outcomes of the new initiatives. To be more specific, an effective change leader would spell out what are the short and long-term desired results of the programme and base the evaluations on such targets. The evaluative process must be realistic and fair by including appropriate time frames for achieving them. This would calm down the fears of the teachers and to ensure that they would not resort to cosmetic measures in the process of change. A principal must also be self-reflective and be able to take criticism if the programme is not moving according to plan. He or she must rely on the teachers who are directly involved with the pupils to give honest feedback. Though, this may raise questions of the credibility of the principal's initial plans, a good head would allow the subordinates to point them for further improvements to a new initiative. This is especially so if the head is seeking to create a thinking and learning organisation. Recharge An effective evaluation system would also be used to ensure the continuing momentum of a change programme. Most change programmes may start out enthusiastically but they usually lose steam at the end. The ability to maintain the initial enthusiasm and commitment to the vision is, thus, an important criterion of an effective principal. He or she must be able to recharge the interest of the teachers by constantly reminding them and encouraging them to achieve desired outcomes. In a thinking programme, a principal could hold monthly meetings to talk about the progress and to share success stories of the programme to maintain the interest of the teachers. If the interest and enthusiasm of the staff to the initiatives can be maintained throughout, more change programmes will be successful in schools. CONCLUSION During the process of writing this paper, the author felt that certain issues should be addressed. One of the main problems seems to lie in the pacing of new initiatives introduced by the Ministry of Education. Due to this, a principal is stretched for time and effort in juggling with the new initiatives. This, as shown in the case study, usually leads to other good school programmes going through a roller-coaster ride of enthusiasm. The principal would then resort to cosmetic efforts to convince the parents, visitors and the Ministry that a programme is in place as in this case study. The author hopes that this is just an isolated case but feels the Ministry should really look into the issue of whether principals are overloaded with the projects in progress before launching into another initiative. Another issue connected to the above is the need to improve the evaluation and appraisal methods of the principals by the Ministry. At present, the evaluation tends to be inaccurate, as the Ministry does not really know the inner workings of the school. There should be a 360 degrees Feedback Survey whereby the staff (especially the teachers); pupils and parents are to evaluate the effectiveness of the principal in leading a programme. It may be considered time-consuming but it will ensure that principals do not adopt cosmetic measures to hide weaknesses of any new programmes. This also allows schools to be opened to ideas and suggestions for further refinements of the programme. In this way, the Ministry will have a more accurate picture whether the initiatives that had been introduced are articulated in a proper manner. The author reiterates that the success of leading a change programme in schools is largely dependent on the principal's ability to influence the perceptions of the teachers. Trust, thus, is an important ingredient that has to be built up by the principal, as the principal-teachers relationship will have an impact on other future initiatives. The paper has also included a self-evaluation questionnaire (Appendix 3) for principals who are in the process of leading a change programme in their schools. In closing, the author wants to emphasise that in order to reap the full benefits, a change programme should be nurtured and not enforced.

About the Author

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