

Fixer or Multiplier?

When selecting and assessing your superintendent, keep in mind the qualities that make someone a great leader. And remember: Quantity and quality both count.

In the past few weeks, I've watched school board members attend to the details of sprinkler systems, report cards, crossing guards, painting contracts, homework policies, and cafeteria menus. Most board members are, after all, elected officials and these concerns are just part of the territory, just as members of Congress occasionally deal with the wayward Social Security check or other personal grievances of constituents.

However, there can't be ambiguity about the most important job of school board members—selecting and assessing the superintendent. Two recent studies make important additions to the literature on what great leaders do differently. Both offer board members some powerful insights as they interview and assess current and prospective superintendents.

The Fixer

Senior administrators often come to their positions with a wealth of experience. As teachers, they were the person to whom their colleagues would go with a question. As assistant principals and principals, they were known as the person who got things done. As central office administrators, everyone knew that they took on the toughest challenges and emerged with a successful solution.

Today's superintendent, in brief,

probably has a couple of decades of unstinting reinforcement for being The Fixer, the person who does not need much deliberation or discussion to analyze problems, quickly considers several alternatives and selects the best, then implements it. Like a chess grandmaster, The Fixer always is several steps ahead of everyone in the room and has a bias for action.

"We don't need to engage in a whole lot of navel-gazing on this problem," the Fixer states emphatically. "Let's just get it done."

In the short term, organizations love The Fixer. In fact, schools and districts simply become habituated to Fixers, placing every challenge on the plate of the increasingly exhausted senior executive. While the superintendent careens toward burnout, the organization is failing to develop any other problem-solving capacity.

If a teacher, principal, or other administrators attempted a solution, it might take longer to implement and would not be as elegant and direct as what The Fixer could do immediately. The long-term implication for this is that the apparently heroic superintendent never builds leadership capacity, and the district is poorer for it.

The Multiplier

The alternative to The Fixer is The

Multiplier, the leader described in Liz Wiseman's excellent new book, *Multipliers: How the Best Leaders Make Everyone Smarter* (Harper Business, 2010). Based on an international study of more than 150 exceptional executives, Wiseman's conclusions are stunning, with leaders who are "multipliers" getting at least twice as much work quality and quantity from their colleagues.

The multiplier effect is particularly relevant in education, where the tone for the classroom can be set in the boardroom. Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck's groundbreaking work demonstrates that, when children have the challenge and opportunity to solve difficult problems, their intelligence, work ethic, and persistence grow. The opposite is true when The Fixer, whether a well-intentioned parent or teacher, fails to give students the opportunity to struggle with challenging problems.

Similarly, teachers and administrators who have every challenge solved for them by a well-intentioned superintendent never will learn to develop their own problem-solving and analytical skills. When you hear teachers say with an air of resignation in their voices, "Just tell us what to do and we'll do it," then you know that a Fixer is at work.

By contrast, The Multiplier superintendent is willing to share intellectual and emotional ownership of new strate-

gies with teachers and administrators. This allows the process to proceed, perhaps not with lightning speed, but in a manner that is far more likely to endure.

The power of feedback

In their *Harvard Business Review* article, “What Really Motivates Workers” (January-February 2010), professor Theresa Amabile and writer/researcher Steven Kramer found that the best days at work for employees are characterized by the opportunity to receive meaningful feedback that helps them improve their performance.

Taking into account their findings, here are some questions that board members may wish to ask:

■ Of the challenges we have faced in the past year, what percentage of solutions were created by a single leader? What percentage were jointly owned by

other administrators, teachers, parents, and other stakeholders?

■ What evidence do we have that our district’s problem-solving abilities are growing? Does the superintendent regularly bring in others, and share credit liberally, to address the district’s most complex and difficult challenges?

■ How frequently do we provide feedback to our current and prospective leaders? Are we stuck in a system of end-of-year feedback, or are we providing opportunities for meaningful feedback every day that will let them experience their best days at work?

■ How would the board react if a superintendent said in response to a challenging question, “I just don’t know about that—I’m going to have to spend some time using the best brains we have in this system, including teachers, administrators, parents, and students, and then

we’ll come back to you with some ideas.” Would the board appreciate this slower, thoughtful, and deliberate approach of a Multiplier, or insist on the decisive and immediate actions of a Fixer?

Of course, deliberation is not helpful at times. When the building is on fire, the command and control style of leadership is appropriate. But when a school system is attempting to engage in long-term sustainable change, then it needs a Multiplier, not a Fixer. ■

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