Become a Martian anthropologist

Seymour Sarason, a Yale psychologist, brought to our attention years ago the role of school culture and the problem of change. Like a Martian anthropologist, he assumed a 5,000-foot vantage point and described the "regularities" of behaviors within a school. Among his conclusions — ignore organizational culture at your peril, for it is a potent force that can vanquish the best change initiatives (Sarason, 1971). While his work was conducted decades ago, it still rings true. Today's school principals need to become cultural architects and help to **create school cultures that support continuous improvement** (Roy & Hord, 2003, p. 65).

What actions can a principal take to create a culture conducive to change? First, the principal **expects and recognizes team members for their efforts to implement new instructional procedures and share student results**. Robert Marzano referred to this leadership behavior as *contingent rewards* and found that it was rare within the typical K-12 egalitarian culture, where everyone must be considered equal regardless of competence (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005, p. 45). To implement recognition of exemplars, the principal needs to understand instructional procedures and provide appropriate acknowledgment to staff members. In some schools, that might mean a shout-out during a staff meeting. At other schools, acknowledging staff involves placing a handwritten note in a teacher's mailbox.

Second, the principal **provides models in which teams review their students' achievement results, identify high-priority learning goals, and identify new instructional proce-**

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Leadership: Staff development that improves the learning of all students requires skillful school and district leaders who guide continuous instructional improvement.

dures that result in increased learning. Merely forming grade-level or content-area teams in the school is not enough. Collaborative work is still not routine within most schools. The principal needs to become familiar with numerous protocols that provide a structure for how teachers can work together to become expert professionals.

Third, the principal **models continuous improvement during staff meetings by discussing current schoolwide results and identifying new processes that result in improvements**. Continuous improvement is nourished through examining results and acting on those results as opposed to trying to place blame or ignore realities. Continuous improvement is an attitude or perspective as much as a process.

Fourth, the principal **assesses and diagnoses the current school culture to determine which aspects support continuous improvement**. The principal, like Sarason, must become the anthropologist within his or her own school. Do staff members invite or deflect the discussion of results? Listen to or refute schoolwide problems? Accept responsibility or lay blame for student learning? Encourage or discourage innovation and initiative? The work of Terry Deal and Kent Peterson can help principals search out and identify positive cultural components that need to be reinforced and negative aspects that need to be transformed (Deal & Peterson, 1999).

The principal can either accept the default culture that already exists in the school or proactively shape and influence a culture that promotes improvement and positive results. Effective leaders will tackle the difficult job of creating a culture that inspires growth and change.

Pat Roy is co-author of *Moving NSDC's Staff Development Standards Into Practice: Innovation Configurations* (NSDC, 2003).

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