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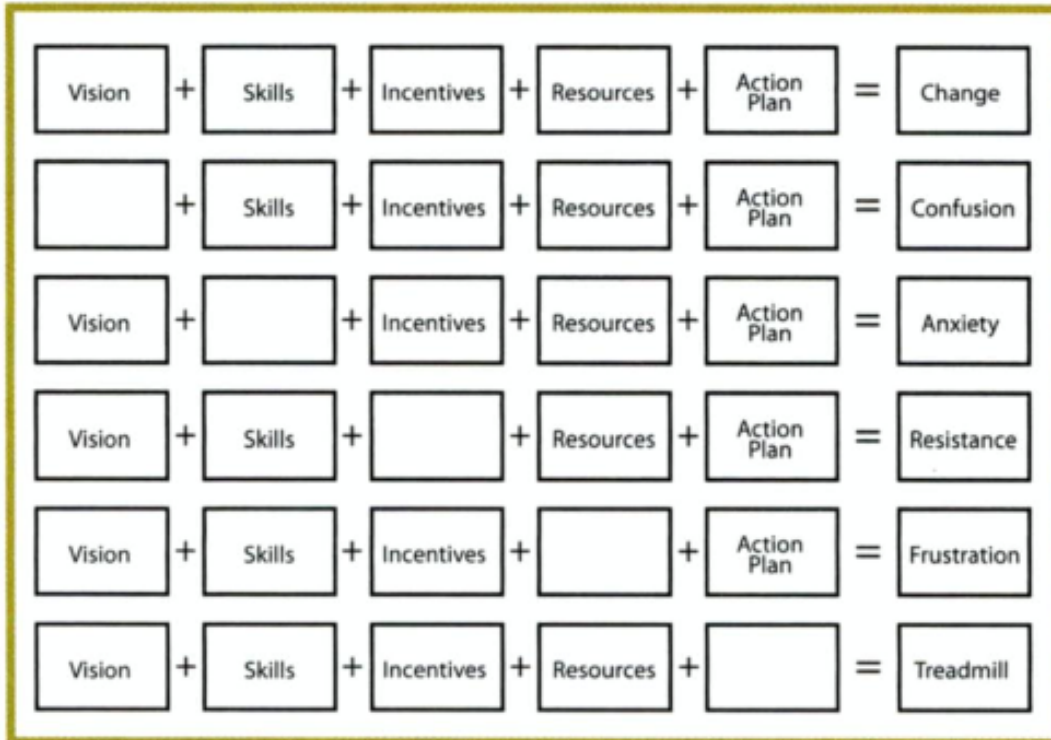
EA 748 School and Community

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Responding to Selected Readings: Student-Led, Teacher-Supported
Conferences: Improving Communication Across an Urban District

Part I: Summarize the salient points of the reading

No matter what change a certain district may be dreaming of for the betterment of their students, staff, or community, the lesson to be found in this article by Amy Goodman of the Anchorage Public Schools in Alaska is universal: with five key elements in place, anything is possible. The five elements that Goodman cites as having been present in her district include having a vision, developing the skills, providing incentives, consolidating resources, and implementing an action plan. The teams involved in bringing about the district-wide change to the way middle school parent-teacher conferences were conducted give credit to their success to a business-world model, going so far as to say “If any one of these elements had been missing, our results would not have been as positive” (Goodman 2008, p. 54). Included in her article was a fascinating table, the likes of which I have never seen. I will include it below for your convenience:

Figure 1 The elements of managing complex change

Source: Thousand & Villa, 1995

To me, this is one of the most noticeable or important points. It shows how missing any one of these critical links can undermine one's whole intent to change. This graphic from 1995 seems to be missing some of the other factors that we have discussed in our class regarding the four frames of organizations, and the things you should consider when mounting an effort to change something. This could include political motivation and the symbolic culture, but overall it seems to encompass the structural and human resource frames that one would need to consider.

Basically, this urban school district redefined the way that parent-teacher conferences were run at the middle school level, as teachers led a grass roots movement away from the more "junior high" approach to an

elementary style of prescheduled conferences. It really provides a nice framework for outlining the thought process that the district took in implementing this change, and the forethought, planning, training that went into making it a smooth transition. The motto, “work smarter, not harder” was touted and the evidence shows that this really was the case. It’s nice to hear a successful story of a district-wide change for the better.

Part II: List the quotes that resonated most for you and include page numbers

- "I thought that the conferences were actually kind of cool. They let us explain our work and grades instead of just teachers explaining how they think we did." p.48
- "Having my son explain more than the final grade truly helped me understand just what areas I can help him with." p. 48
- “Student-led, teacher-supported conferences empower young adolescents to accept responsibility for their own learning.” p. 48
- “These agents of change eagerly learned from their elementary feeder schools and tried to offer an alternative to the secondary unscheduled parent-teacher conferences.” p. 49

- “Attendance on teams that held student-led conferences was extremely high, with teachers often reporting 90% or more of the parents attending.” p.49
- “Conference attendance at this school increased from 65% to 85%.” p. 50
- “Designing effective training was challenging because of the wide range in knowledge, skills, and experience in the district.” p. 50
- “Working smarter and not harder is always an important goal for overworked professionals.” p. 52
- “... the instructional support team collaborated with students to produce a nine minute video capturing a role-play of a weak conference vs. a strong conference.” p. 53

Figure 4
School-wide
conference
passport

Conference Passport

First Student Name _____ *Grade* _____ *Team* _____

Instructions:

1. Fill in student information neatly at the top of your passport.
2. Have all 4 core teachers, 3 elective teachers, and 1 other Wendler staff sign or stamp your passport.
3. Put completed passport in your grade level box in the Multipurpose Room on the day of your conference.
4. Drawings for prizes will be held the following week at lunch.

<i>Care Team Teacher</i>	<i>Care Team Teacher</i>
<i>Care Team Teacher</i>	<i>Care Team Teacher</i>
<i>Elective Team Teacher</i>	<i>Elective Team Teacher</i>
<i>Elective Team Teacher</i>	<i>Other Wendler Staff</i>

- “Change is not easy. To avoid common pitfalls of instilling change, we... viewed the process through the lens of the business world, making customer service for our families a top priority.” p. 53
- “We accomplished our district-wide change because we had five elements in place: vision, skills, incentives, resources, and an action plan.” p. 53

Part III: Relate the reading to leadership and how leaders may respond to this topic.

Managing complex change in a large district is no simple task. However, in the case of the Anchorage School District, it was proven that with a thoughtful approach change can happen. In this case, parent-communication as well as involvement was improved through student-led and teacher-supported conferences. The same lesson can be applied to any issue in which a school leader may find themselves embroiled. The answer seemed to lie in empowering teachers to lead the way in finding their own answers.

In the first place, this group of motivated middle school teacher leaders looked not only to what research showed was best practice, but also to what was already working in their own district: the elementary

school's model of conferences. This is a great lesson to be learned: look not outside your district, but within to find what's already working.

Furthermore, they also highlighted the tried and true method of teachers: NOT reinventing the wheel. They found what was already working and allowed other teachers to access it by centralizing the information on their Middle Link website. This prevented teachers from feeling like all the weight of creating something out of nothing was on their shoulders. They adapted, and took the best of what there was to offer and customized it to fit their needs. This is a genius move, and one that should often be repeated.

And finally, they looked at their own data to see if what they were doing was working. They didn't allow just the naysayers to have their voice heard, or the champions of this shift spin the outcomes of the program to make themselves look better for posterity, but rather this group took data from parents and students through surveys, and also looked at conference attendance records to compare results. They even went out of the way to do something that almost never is thought of: they went to the specials teachers, the special education teachers, the gifted and talented teachers, and got all of their input as well. They even incentivized going to see these teachers with a special passport/raffle ticket. The amount of thought that went into this paradigm shift was laudable, and well worth the read.