

Creative Disruption: A New Transformational Role

School business officials are in a prime position to help transform public education.

By Carl H. Gruenler



The title of a May 18, 2010 *Bloomberg Businessweek* article grabbed my attention: “What Chief Executives Really Want.” The article reports on a survey of 1,500 CEOs conducted by the IBM Institute for Business Value and makes the case that the leadership competence valued above all others is “creative disruption.”

CEOs agree that creative leaders disrupt the status quo, existing business models, and organizational

paralysis. In a world of increasing complexity, a new generation of leaders is breaking free of existing assumptions, advocating for rapid-fire shifts in how things are done, and resisting the urge to wait for full clarity before acting. Those new leaders will change the culture and design the future of their organizations.

Bold new leadership is needed in public education as well. Collectively, we are failing far too many children. We need creative disruption, and what better catalysts

for that new energy than those who have the responsibility for the effective deployment of resources. Consider the following points.

1. True Value Lies in Supporting the Mission

Not understanding the mission, not having a collective commitment to the mission, or being distracted from the mission may be our most common and debilitating challenges. However, a debilitating challenge may inspire an empowering opportunity for business leaders to create great organizations that are focused and effective.

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Before joining public education six years ago, my career—which included working for Fortune 100 and development stage tech companies—was strongly influenced by 28 years of active and reserve service in the U.S. Navy. My leadership training was grounded in the principles “focus on the mission” and “take care of your people.” Understanding the mission intellectually and emotionally was a constant practice, building the depth of commitment to what we were there to do and building the depth of commitment to one another.

When I joined Santa Fe Public Schools, I did not see a commitment to the mission and the people. Yet Joel Boyd, Ed.D., our transformation-driven and dynamic new superintendent, wisely set aside unremarkable vision and mission statements in favor of core beliefs and a theory of action that most can understand.

Those core beliefs were as follows:

- A high-quality education is the fundamental civil right of every child in our schools.
- Teaching and learning are at the core of our work.
- Parents are our partners.
- There is no silver bullet for improving our schools.
- Every adult in the system is responsible for the academic success of our children.

The theory of action stated:

If we improve the quality of teaching and learning at every school, heighten expectations for every adult and student in the system, and increase the levels of family and community engagement throughout the City, then classroom experiences will become more relevant and rigorous, and every student will graduate from high school on a path to college and career success.

Those components combined represent a clarity and focus that had long been missing, and they are effectively guiding our work. But I see conflicts in far too many

people that get in the way of developing deep purpose and commitment. It seems we don't share a common belief that every child (except those with limiting disabilities) has the capacity to perform at advanced levels and that we are capable of performing to that expectation.

In August 2013, I had the pleasure of attending the Urban School Leaders Institute at Harvard University. I was particularly inspired by Jeff Howard, a professor and president of the Efficacy Institute. Howard shared several memorable ideas from his Fall 1995 *Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* article, “You Can't Get There from Here: The Need for a New Logic in Education Reform”:

- “The failures we deplore are directly attributable to the instructional practices we support.”
- “Six year olds can't get there unless teachers tell them they can . . . teachers can't get there if principals don't give them support . . . principals can't get there if the district isn't behind them . . . and no one gets anywhere if the framework isn't constantly maintained.”
- “We hold *ourselves* to the same standards we require of teachers and kids . . . *if we don't get results, we're not proficient*, no matter how well intentioned we are.”

So are we “proficient” as business leaders if we don't get results in our schools? Do we advocate for every possible synergy in our districts to support—even initiate—improvements in teaching and learning?

For me, it all comes back to how I see my personal mission and view my role. I never saw myself as a surface warfare officer first . . . but *always* as a naval officer. So, how do I view myself now—as a business professional working in public education or as an education professional working in a lead business role?

So are we “proficient” as business leaders if we don't get results in our schools?

That question drew spirited discussion at the ASBO International Annual Meeting & Expo in Boston last fall. I had the revelation that I am really the latter: an education professional first. Knowing that truth deep down makes a significant difference. It means that I measure my proficiency not just in how well I manage my functional responsibilities but in how well the organization I'm privileged to lead supports improved classroom results, and how well we collectively as a district leadership team improve student outcomes. That's the bottom line. That's the mission.

But again, how does one articulate that mission? Being so mission-oriented, I needed a personal mission statement. So, inspired by the mission statement of the Efficacy Institute, I wrote my personal mission, which hangs in my office:

The mission is to develop character and release the inherent intellectual capacity in every child so that they graduate with the freedom of choice to build quality lives and become contributing members of their community.

That statement is simple; I know what I am here to do. I know how to guide my passion. I know where to focus my innovative energy. I know how to lead my organization. And that knowledge is powerful.

2. Innovation Is a Core Requirement of the Job

How can many claim a desire to improve student outcomes in public education without grasping the concept that *innovation* needs to be at the core of *everyone's* work? If you believe that our organizations are perfectly structured to get the results we are seeing, then much needs to change!

In our district, we adopted a practice in which innovation in the form of strategic objectives is a quadrant in each of our performance compacts. Strategically aligned innovations are creating improvements throughout the organization because of expectation, encouragement, support, and accountability. The culture is changing, and the successes are building.

With our superintendent change in the summer of 2012, I was assigned the technology and operations departments in addition to finance. Creating synergy among the three departments presented the opportunity for much-needed improvements. In particular, the technology department was in total disarray, and it was clear the organization simply didn't know what to do.

In every turnaround challenge I've tackled, I've relied on the framework of "right strategy, right people, right tools." So we first worked to put an effective strategy in place. The idea of accepting the status quo was



discarded in the first five minutes, as was the archaic belief that outsourcing couldn't be trusted.

We developed a concept we soon called "1 i.T." and began assembling a portfolio of strong business partners aligned with a common purpose. During that summer, we proposed that the board of education replace the aging PCs in our high schools with iMacs, and we piloted 20 classrooms with a 1:1 technology suite for

vanguard teachers to generate enthusiasm about the possibilities. The district stood up and took notice. How did that happen?

We discovered a new fiber infrastructure pioneered at Sandia National Laboratories and began installations in our schools. Improvements quickened. An elementary school became our first 1:1 exploration, and the excitement and change in student engagement

are impressive. The leadership team and board joined together to adopt a comprehensive five-year digital learning plan and provided funding with a new \$55 million educational technology note.

The plan to diligently implement global best-practice infrastructure, to install new equipment, and to establish effective teacher supports has expanded community engagement about the possibilities in the classroom. The strategies are transcendent; the technology department is now feeling the energy of success, and interestingly, many of our teachers and principals are rising to the challenge of transforming instruction as if a ceiling of limits has lifted. Behavior is changing; successes are reinforcing; and beliefs are deepening.

In the fall of 2012, a full-length documentary, titled *The Greatest Story Problem*, that focused on the dismal state of middle school math proficiency in the United States was previewed in Santa Fe. I attended the preview. No one else from the district was there, which I found amazing, given that our middle grades' math proficiency was 36% and a primary contributor to high school dropouts.

Like a "call to arms," I encouraged an off-site professional development retreat with MidSchoolMath, the producers of the documentary, for our middle-grade math teachers. Those teachers grew increasingly excited and involved in developing an expanded pedagogy for effectively engaging their students, and the district supported their ongoing professional development.

That effort evolved into a national conference, "Stop the Drop," which was held in Santa Fe in March and attended by math teachers from all over New Mexico and around the country. The conference was sponsored by MidSchoolMath, our national labs, and the public education department. I offered the kickoff keynote, challenging teachers to be the "right people" by stepping up when the "right strategies and right tools" came along.

Those are our examples. I encourage you to reflect on yours. No one could ever convince me that business leaders can't create difference-making change in the classroom.

3. Seek Out Best Practices

Much has been said about best practice, so I'll add the following to the discussion.

In Santa Fe, we embraced a concept Joel Boyd calls "differentiated autonomy" as a way to better align resources on teaching and learning. Here is a summary:

- Design a "school zone" strategy for additional funding support according to current performance.
- Implement a tailor-made budget strategy for fair student funding to increase equity, transparency, and flexibility for school communities.
- Build capacity and agency of principals and school communities.

- Develop leadership compacts for aligned accountability to inform the work.
- Implement differentiated-compensation strategies from collaborative union and district competitive wage studies to inform collective bargaining.
- Establish responsibility for both academic and financial performance for all leaders.

4. Be Bold; Fear Creates Limits

Finally, work is a significant part of my own personal development and vice versa. I sign my emails with "no fear, no limits." I believe that in continually re-creating myself, I have far more to offer my life's work.

There is no substitute for focusing my full attention on the work at hand. There is no substitute for remaining emotionally detached and seeing complex situations and relationships clearly. There is no substitute for having all my energy "available." There is no substitute for knowing that my attitude and well-being represent conscious choice. There is no substitute for being fully aware of the opportunities that cross my path.

We are in unique and powerful positions to affect and support changes.

Call me crazy, but I believe the next performance breakthrough for my awesome team will be individual commitment to re-creating ourselves.

Public education has been isolated from the dynamic changes in other sectors of the economy for far too long, and we are failing to develop the character and intellect of too many kids. As business leaders in our districts, we are in unique and powerful positions to affect and support changes in those outcomes. Let's challenge ourselves in a deeper way to do just that!

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