
How To Be a Manager of Change

Positioning the Schools To Earn Real, Lasting Public Support

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Let me be blunt. There *is* a way—direct, simple, devoid of educational sophistry—to put public education in sync with the public.

It does not depend on mandatory testing, altered curricula, teacher evaluation, merit raises, or any of the quick fixes. It comes from thinking bigger, which means strategically adopting a service philosophy, employing the most straightforward of public relations principles—in short, building relationships with people by serving them as customers.

No gimmicks are involved. Nothing revolutionary or unprecedented needs to be done. But it does require change for most school systems. Those who believe in the status quo may not like it.

Yet, it is difficult to favor *not* changing an institution when so many public perceptions about it are negative. Even if those public perceptions are false, the sociopolitical reality is that change must be considered to show willingness to abide by the democratic process. Such an approach is the beginning of strategy, abandoning the defensive “how-can-you-say-that-about-us” response to the strategic thinker’s view of the situation as an opportunity for change and improvement.

Think Strategically

Discussing change provides a legitimate reason for school leaders to communicate with key publics such as opinion leaders and senior citizen groups (see Figure One). It also gives those publics an opportunity to listen or seek information. While



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resulting changes may break old patterns of doing things, change is essential to progress and to achieving and maintaining excellence. Several studies, such as those conducted for *Psychology Today*, have shown that the American people expect changes in their institutions.

A school’s publics often fight change with the excuse that those seeking change have their facts wrong. This may or may not be true; however, facts are almost impossible to prove right or wrong. It is even harder to change people’s opinions once their perceptions are set.

Therefore, rather than argue about facts, agree that changes can be made and provide leadership by suggesting what these changes should be and how they will make education better. This capitalizes on and responds to public support for change and guides it in a positive fashion. The alternative is to be forced to make changes that someone else thinks would be beneficial.

To change the attitudes and behavior of others, we must make sure our own behavior reflects the changes we desire.

We must initiate ideas and action and not just spend our time responding defensively to criticism. Acting hurt, defensive, and angry is not likely to win support.

We need to view the current spotlight on schools as a fantastic opportunity. Not since the days of John Dewey has public education been a common subject of discussion whenever people gather. The stage is set to take advantage of this interest by taking the lead in proposing constructive change. In so doing,

administrators can become "managers of change," rather than "defenders of the faith."

Espouse a Service Philosophy

The schools belong to the public. They exist to serve the public, not to tell it what to do or dictate what is best for it. But if the public is not informed about education, its ignorance can destroy the schools. Therefore, the most important educational task facing school administrators is not in the classroom but outside it. While teachers are educating children in the classrooms, administrators must be educating the community about the schools.

The usual challenge is getting the public to listen; but with the current spotlight on schools, that hurdle is overcome, provided educators offer solutions to the widely heralded problems.

The public and its elected officials are like the executive who put a sign on his desk reading "DBMP/BMS." When baffled staff members asked about it, the boss explained that it means "Don't Bring Me Problems/Bring Me Solutions." How can the schools offer solutions? I suggest the following steps:

Step 1: Mount an ongoing campaign to sell the values of public education.

Boldly and unmistakably state the belief that education is the cornerstone of a free society. Trace it back to the Reformation, show how it made America different. Use all the warmly emotional, evocatively patriotic stories.

Stop taking for granted that people know and understand education's value. Even if some do, remind them regularly. Fight for a piece of their minds. This is the mission of our schools. Yet it is rarely mentioned. For example, there is no national campaign staking out this high moral ground.

Some administrators I've talked to think this is trite. They should study the political ideas that win—like our current president's—and see how very basic they are. They might also study the American public to learn how little people know about pedagogical concepts or political science. If people link public education with the strength and de-

fense of our country and with its historic precepts, the cause of education will be championed.

Step 2: Explain that this value system means the schools exist to serve society.

Any mandatory activity starts with resistance or at least being taken for granted. Therefore, we must remind people how the schools have served society. We should show that the schools—with some changes for the times—can serve future generations successfully. This seems obvious, but psychologically it is necessary to enunciate the point. Doing so shows that educators are not vil-

Figure One

Key Publics Schools Must Reach

Key publics schools must reach can be ranked in the following order based on ability to help or hinder the educational process:

1. opinion and power leaders (that segment of the public concerned with issues, approximately 10 percent)
2. leaders of senior citizens and "empty nester" groups
3. teachers
4. staff
5. parents and families of current students
6. other elected and appointed officials
7. other "alumni" of recent students and families
8. current students
9. PTA/PTO advisory bodies, support groups, and other members of the school family. (These groups are at the end of the list only because we have them on the team already.)

lanous, even if misguided occasionally. That should depersonalize the debate and point it toward constructive proposals rather than character assassination. The technique is known as "asking for a willing suspension of disbelief."

Step 3: Lay claim to being the educators in your community, willing and able to assist the public with its educational needs.

Education is one of the most prevalent and popular activities today. Every church, business, and club is conducting educational activities.

Nearly everybody is studying or taking courses in something. Why aren't they all somehow linked to the schools?

Anything that involves education ought to involve the schools, center around them, use their facilities, or at least get advice and counsel from their professionals.

Build Relationships by Making People Become Customers

Most administrators now realize that public relations is at least as important as what goes on in the classroom. Unless positive relationships are built, classroom activities can be severely restricted by lack of funds, interference, and mistrust.

Most schools are using recognized public relations techniques and employing professional personnel to manage the effort. The National School Public Relations Association and the American Association of School Administrators have given valuable leadership. There is a growing body of illustrative case studies and "how to" literature.

However, there is not yet wholesale agreement on our understanding of the value of building relationships with people—rather than just communicating with them or begging for their support.

People evaluate institutions based on their perceptions of them, not on a rational, organized accounting of the "facts" about operations, success, or relevance. Such perceptions are formed primarily on the tone and quality of relationships built by the institution with its publics.

Step 4: Generate discussion by proposing a "big picture" of what total public education in your town can be.

Take the lead. Get people to respond to your ideas. Think big about all age groups. Dare to ask people to raise their sights, to envision real lifelong education that helps adults as well as children. Urge them to join you in making it happen. Schools need some bigger proposals everyone can rally around.

Step 5: Gradually, or as fast as possible, claim the territory by putting programs in place that allow the whole community to be your school's consumers.

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	the only way to
	make people
	customers. Why
	aren’t our school
	<i>the meeting places</i>
	in town?”

This positions schools as a service organization for the whole populace, not just a place K-12 students are forced by law to attend. It means deciding which groups in society we can serve and who needs education.

This allows us to target publics who often are not supportive, particularly senior citizens. This survey of educational needs also allows us to get people into the school buildings and into school-sponsored programs.

It may mean competing with other organizations. Competition is widely recognized as the way to get the best services to the public at the most reasonable cost.

Create a Full Service School System

What might a full service school system look like? Certainly it would include daycare, Headstart, and K-12 programs. It would also include adult education, vocational training

for all ages, senior citizens programs, recreational learning, and other programs and activities. Schools around the country have already developed literally thousands of such offerings. In addition, schools and libraries should start working together—since both exist to provide educational services to the tax paying public.

Hospitals can serve as role models. In the face of growing criticism about the quality and costs of healthcare, hospitals have spent the past decade claiming that laws, the medical necessities, and other problems made change impossible. Then, goaded by the threat of private, for-profit hospitals, suddenly ways to serve better and less expensively were found. Hospitals now include small units for bed patients, long-term care or nursing homes, one-day surgery units, prepaid health maintenance plans, exercise and fitness spas, and emergency or walk-in units.

These evolutionary changes occurred when hospitals started positioning themselves as the source of wellness and healthcare. They asked, “How can we serve people in ways that contribute to their health?”

Labor unions are now preparing to emulate hospitals. They see the need to position organized labor as the voice of all who work—not just union members. Of course, it’s a bit of a tightrope; unions need broader support to be effective, yet they must still attract enough members for dues to cover operating costs. Look for them to seek out new revenue sources, then become wide-ranging public interest organizations. Schools can do likewise.

Course offerings aren’t the only way to make people customers. Why aren’t our schools *the meeting places* in town? Every classroom ought to be available for the people who own the schools—the public—for meeting places. This must be done in an organized fashion, of course, with reservations required, agreed-to rules, and probably charges to cover services. However, it is worth the efforts necessary, since bringing people physically into the presence of schools and school personnel builds relationships.

When people ask, “What’s in the school system for me?”, taxes are often the only answer. Our goal should be to get every resident of every community inside the schools at least once each year—preferably for a personally rewarding purpose.

No new or revolutionary ideas are needed to get real support for our schools—just ideas whose time has come. □

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