

## CREATING A COMMUNITY OF EDUCATORS

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Imagine how your school district would look if every single person at every level really understood how schools operated.

- What if every person in your organization really understood the big picture, including the economic, technological, competitive, and community realities of your school district?  
What if all of your people had an understanding of your strategy that was far more focused and meaningful than murky visions and missions?
- What if they understood your organization's core competencies, knowing exactly what skills would be required to achieve your strategic goals?  
What if they understood where you got your operating revenues from, how difficult it is to acquire, and what is really involved in running your schools?  
What if your people discovered that all community stakeholders are not alike?  
What if your organization went beyond today's "blue sky" rhetoric on reengineering and developed initiatives that really got results?

Many leaders would argue that lack of communication is one of the greatest obstacles to achieving change. We believe the real problem runs deeper. In many organizations, mistrust and fear are the real culprits, the biggest impediments to moving forward. The antidote, we believe, is knowledge—knowledge about the core organizational realities that shape an organization's future.

As former strategic planners, we spent a great deal of time with senior leaders of companies attempting to identify major environmental shifts that radically affected their business landscapes. We pointed out the threats and opportunities within specific industries. We crafted masterful strategic plans in multicolored, three-ring binders. Then, when we returned a year later, we found that our binders were invariably on shelves, collecting dust. The strategic plans were not implemented after all, and precious opportunities were lost. The same is true in many school districts that we encounter.

What began to emerge was a "Grand Canyon" between the *leaders* who could see what needed to be done, but who didn't have their hands on the levers of change, and the *doers* who had their hands on the levers of change, but who simply couldn't see the big picture. Leaders said, "This is our vision." Doers replied, "What does this mean for me and my people?" We began to understand that the only way to bridge that canyon was to provide everyone with a comprehensive, senior leader-level understanding of the most strategic organizational issues.

It became clear that competitive advantage was not determined by new textbooks, new buildings or even strategic thought, but by "change speed,"

“adaptation speed,” and “learning speed.” And organizational learning speed is not determined by the speed of the brightest individuals, but by the average learning speed of the entire organization.

We came to our first conclusion: ***People will tolerate the directives of leadership, but they will ultimately act on their own.*** This is a chilling statement for any organization undergoing change. This means that no leader can dictate, sell, or cajole people across the Grand Canyon. They must set the stage for people to *build* a bridge and cross it, to allow people to go on a journey of discovery and draw their own conclusions about the critical issues facing education today. Only when people change their conclusions will they then change their actions.

Our second pivotal conclusion evolved: ***Everyone in the organization must see and understand the big picture.*** They must be allowed to understand the whys, not just the day-to-day whats. Have you ever put a puzzle together without first looking at the completed picture on the cover of the box? Virtually impossible! Nevertheless, too often in most organizations, leaders spend weeks reviewing data and input about the realities of their organization so that they can put together their strategy or vision of the future – then, they tear the vision or strategy up into little bite size chunks and distribute them to various teams and people in the organization and tell them to make it happen. The part they left out is letting everyone else in the organization see the data and information about the realities facing schools today so that they can come to the same conclusion that moving in this direction makes sense.

When we started developing a organizational learning tool called **RootMap™** visuals, we asked two basic questions: (1) How do people learn, and (2) how can large numbers of people quickly understand the most complex issues facing our organization? First, in our research we determined that people learn visually. Aristotle said, “The soul never thinks without a picture.” Alan Kay of Apple Computers took it one step further: “If a picture is worth a thousand words, a metaphor is worth a thousand pictures.”

We have learned that visualization is an accelerant tool. As learners absorb new information, it forms a picture in their minds. This picture emerges only when people can create links between their existing knowledge and new information. Visualizing critical business issues allows individuals, teams, and organizations to think systematically. It also creates focused thinking, allowing everyone to build a shared understanding of the larger systems that determine the effectiveness of their individual actions.

If visualization is the first tenet of **RootMap™** visuals, our second is dialogue—specifically, strategic-directed Socratic dialogue. Socrates knew that learning is less about giving the right answers and more about asking the right questions. The great philosopher developed a system of asking his students questions to get to core truths. He avoided presenting his own conclusions; instead, he sought to immerse learners in their own self-exploration and inquiry.

Like Socrates, we believe there are few sustainable right or wrong answers; there are simply better questions, and the better the question, the more people will participate in engaged thinking. Dialogue demands that cherished assumptions be challenged, that long-held beliefs be explored. The **RootMap™** tools use strategic-directed dialogue to address critical organizational issues. This may sound like a simple exercise, but it is very hard to master. Most leaders lecture; most teachers preach. True dialogue seeks to minimize the leader/teacher talk and maximize the learner search.

The third tenet of **RootMap™** tools is that people learn best in small groups, guided by “questioner” or **facilitator** who nurtures a process of discovery. Not necessarily an educational expert or leader, the facilitator encourages understanding through thought-provoking questions and what-if scenarios.

Successful leaders know that their first responsibility is to define the reality of the organization. Therefore, the process of executing major improvements rests on a widespread employee understanding of the competitive, economic, technological, customer/stakeholder, market, and environmental realities that drive your organization.

A person *without* such an understanding may not accept responsibility for the future of the organization. A person *with* this information cannot help but accept responsibility. By appealing to the highest level of thinking in people, leaders ensure the highest level of actions, commitment, and organizational “alignment.” Organizational and financial literacy are essential to make people and all community members effective players in this effort and know how to keep score on the results. People must have a basic understanding of how the organization operates and what it takes to win if they are to successfully participate in improving it. The **RootMap™** tool presents a method for allowing everyone in your school, your school district and your community to gain this understanding and align their efforts accordingly.