



Challenging and Changing Malfunctioning Groups

If effective adult collaboration magnifies children's opportunities to learn and enables overall improvement on a far greater scale than one teacher acting alone can achieve, then establishing the essential conditions for that collaboration is a critical part of a skillful leader's work. In the real world, however, leaders bent on transforming their institutions rarely get the time or opportunity to design the perfect backdrop for action-in-common before the players appear. Unless they are taking over and clearing out a failing school, opening a new building, or regrouping after school closures or redistricting have radically changed faculty make-up, they are likely to inherit at least some existing communities who do not yet function the way they need to in order to help all of their students learn. They are likely to face groups whose interactions are regressive, i.e., they push organizational problem solving backward, and they push people apart. Anyone attempting to improve school performance usually faces a drama that is underway and characters that have already adopted roles. The challenge becomes how to redirect action that is going nowhere or accomplishing little.

In *The Skillful Leader: Confronting Mediocre Teaching* (2000), we focused on strategies for describing and intervening in *individual* cases of mediocre performance so that every child could be guaranteed an expert instructor. We still believe in confronting mediocre instruction through supervision and evaluation when the case warrants, and Chapter 9 focuses on dealing with individuals who undermine group efforts. However, watching hard-working colleagues' efforts over the last five years, we have also come to appreciate the stalling power of a negative culture and nonperforming groups. When the education of hundreds of students is at stake, intervening with individuals through the cumbersome stages of formal evaluation is insufficient. To improve core practices in many classrooms as quickly as possible, skillful leaders must do something beyond setting the stage. They need to confront and change groups that are malfunctioning.

Educators are optimistic people in general: we assume that good people will rise to the challenges in front of them, work hard, and uphold the efforts

of their team, department, or school—in short, carry their load with skill and good will. But what happens when: 8 Gold decides it doesn't want to reach out to failing students, when only the English department at Mid-Balkans keeps its promise to do “whatever it takes,” or when feuds between principals and Central Office staff divert important resources away from students who need them? What happens when a group starts well and then stalls in splendid complacency? The literature on professional learning communities presents many ideas for developing healthy school communities but only limited intervention strategies for dealing with those that are not meeting expectations (Dufour 1998, 2004).

In this chapter, we consider a series of short case examples of groups whose current performance is either undermining organizational improvement or moving the institution backwards. These are stories of work in progress; some are drawn almost entirely from one location, and others combine several similar examples. They are intended to capture the messy, taxing challenges leaders face as they attempt to transform regressive or nonproductive interactions into progressive ones. Because such work is relatively new, we offer the cases primarily as prompts for reflection and discussion rather than as exemplars for action. Real-world situations rarely match prototypes in every detail. However, for purposes of discussion, we have sorted the examples that follow according to their predominant resemblance to the three specific kinds of malfunctioning communities that we discussed in Chapter 3.

Group I: The Toxic Communities

Hazardous High
Expect Little Elementary
Misery Magnet

Group II: The Laissez-Faire Communities

Freewheeling High
Grade 8 at Miraculous Middle School
Autonomous Unified School District

Group III: The Congenial Communities

Muddy River's Math Department
Edgeland Elementary

We'll consider what challenges each case poses and identify potential ineffective responses versus skillful responses.

Finally, legal notes intended to help readers working in districts subject to collective bargaining appear where they are appropriate throughout the cases. The notes have an overall theme: to make decisions and take actions that will improve student learning, skillful leaders must know their school or district contract thoroughly, be clear about the roles and responsibilities

of unions, and have a sense of ownership and responsibility for the process and outcomes of the collective bargaining.

Facing Toxic Groups

Some leaders face entire schools they would describe as toxic; others find themselves doing battle with a part of a school—a grade level team, a department, a group of old allies or new prima donnas—whose anger and seeming resistance can be confounding and exhausting. Understanding the forces behind the behavior becomes essential. As we noted in Chapter 3, toxicity may be fueled by any number of factors ranging from a history of gross district neglect, broken promises, untrustworthy leadership, or bitter union-management battles to the unchecked dominance of a few ringleaders skilled in negativity. It can also be generated by dangerous institutional conditions. Although the reasons for toxic behavior may differ, the public profiles of different malfunctioning groups are likely to be quite similar. Because Toxic Communities are focused on protecting members and others from perceived threats, anticipated disappointments, and “unfair” demands, they most often present a hostile or resistant stance to outsiders. Establishing or re-establishing trusting relationships through integrity, consistency, and clear, frequent communication about important ideas and shared goals is essential. Members of toxic groups often perceive that have been used and bruised; they will not “roll over and play nice” just because another potentially ineffective leader asks them to do so.

Exchanges in toxic groups have been sometimes been called “NBC talk” (nagging, bitching, and complaining) or BMW (bitching, moaning, and whining) (Kegan and Lahey 18). To stay centered, skillful leaders need to recognize that cynicism and sarcastic humor may be habitual responses to mask fear or pain rather than part of a calculated strategy of personal attacks. Being open to the former interpretation allows the leader to acknowledge the discouraging effects of past negative history while at the same time checking on a speaker’s actual intent re the present request. When dealing with toxic behavior, skillful leaders need patience, significant self-discipline, and self-awareness in order to resist being diverted into heated exchanges, retaliation, or futile attempts to gain a naysayer’s approval through concessions. They expect the turnaround process to be both slow and pockmarked with minor setbacks, and they report that they work hard to keep a brave positive face in public even when they feel discouraged in private. Consistently, those who have successfully worked with toxic groups talk about changing the focus of the discussion from adult rights, accusations and recriminations, or exhortations to a relentless, respectful focus on “pooling what we know in order to help those students who most need our expertise.” When these leaders confront toxic behavior, they do not do so by attacking individuals or by labeling and punishing the group. Instead they name the consequences to students that result from the unproductive inter-

actions: the lost opportunities to share knowledge with colleagues, the broken relationships with parents, the resulting alienation from other parts of the organization that might help. Skillful leaders make those consequences evident and at the center of all discussions in a calm and compelling way; then they state that the behavior producing such consequences must change.

In addition to getting help on defining the problem, leaders need an outside support system that helps them stay centered after daily immersion in acid and innuendo. Hostility, disapproval, and negativity are catching. Support systems provide a counterbalance to our tendency to tell ugly stories about the people who are frustrating our efforts to change. Once a leader has fallen into the trap of characterizing most of the members of his or her department, school, or district as villains, it is hard to come to work and interact productively.

Finally, leaders need data that will pinpoint a student product or performance that needs attention and that is likely to improve significantly if instruction improves. Leaders also need good process skills for getting the effort underway. Toxic Communities often have little real experience of effective collaboration or of making a difference in learning; they need immersion in a productive, objective process that shows doubters what an alternate kind of interaction might be like. Without something positive to work on, such communities will fall back on old patterns of behavior. They cannot be left alone to undertake work without skilled facilitation and a relentless, positive assurance that they do not have to do business the same way they have always done it.

We begin with a case of a failing urban school—one of the most difficult places to enact change. Schools that feel unsafe are frequently failing schools, and the larger school community often presents itself as toxic. Once leaders have tackled the conditions most immediately responsible for undermining learning in dangerous schools, they face new barriers and new difficulties. Consider the following work in progress:

CASE 5.1 Hazardous High School

Ms. Devins is a high school principal in a medium-sized urban district. She entered a school with 30 percent annual turnover in staff, high dropout rates, and gangs with guns who operated within the school. Teachers had essentially given up; virtually no instruction was taking place. An assistant principal handled all the discipline, even for minor issues that other faculties might have dealt with themselves. “Kids were sent to the assistant principal for things like sleeping in class,” Ms. Devins reports. In her first year, therefore, she focused on making the school safe and on creating a climate where students could have more intimate contacts with adults and where teachers would assume responsibilities for minor infractions. She created what she called “clear corridors.” With the number of major disruptions significantly reduced, the school became safer, and both faculty and students felt more secure. She also formed small learning

communities (SLC) that gave teachers a structure for working together and pooling their knowledge.

In year one, administrators and teachers made considerable progress toward the goal of a safe school. SLC's were successful in creating a first line of discipline and better relationships with students. Guns and gangs were a phenomenon of the past. Ms. Devins also attempted to impact instruction by returning the schedule to 45-minute classes in place of the 90-minute blocks she had inherited. Teachers, she noted, were not skilled in planning for long blocks and seemed to have difficulty using the time productively, as evidenced by the common direction to "Take the last 15 minutes and begin your homework." Even with the schedule change, however, students still slept in class and were either disengaged or constantly engaged in low-level disruption rather than in learning. Reflecting on year 1, Ms. Devins said, "After that first year, I was so sure that we would move up [the student performance] but it just was not happening in the classrooms.... Just because we had cleared out the halls and created SLC's did not mean there was much time on task in the classrooms." Although chaos had been eliminated, students were still off task, instruction had not changed, and neither had achievement results.

In year 2 Principal Devins made some changes in the school administration to build a competent team that could share the vision and leadership work. To tighten classroom discipline in year 2, she established an escalated discipline policy clearly specifying what infractions were the teacher's responsibility, how the SLC could support individual teachers, which problems were really counseling issues, and which problems should be dealt with by the assistant principal. Finally, she established common planning time, which was used mainly for discipline support. The procedures worked well, and classrooms became more focused and under control. But instruction and achievement still did not improve. Unlike some of the veteran teachers who equated real changes in climate and order with school improvement, Ms. Devins was not happy. She began to realize that order might be a necessary prerequisite to turning a school around, but it did not ensure improved instruction.

Even during her first year, Ms. Devins had confronted poor performers; she worked to counsel them to move on and tried to replace them with more enthusiastic teachers. Forty percent of her faculty turned over in the first two years. Year 3 was the year to begin to move on instruction, "Year 2 we had a literacy support class; it did not really impact the gap. So we volunteered as a pilot for implementing the Reach program (in year 3); a teacher coach was given a period for coaching. The next year we had a coach in four disciplines to work with teachers on teaching reading and writing across the curriculum—which remains a priority five years later!"

Ms. Devins anchored this work in school-wide agreements. One of the priorities was to adopt Lorraine Monroe's "Bulletin Board Configuration (BBC)" a format for communicating objectives and

agendas. However, here she ran into another block to instructional improvement: “We established Lorraine Monroe’s Bulletin Board Configuration (BBC), but we did not follow up, and teachers did not follow the agreements. So we instituted BBC checks with three administrators rotating through every classroom. We gave feedback to the entire staff. They complained, but they did it.”

Ms. Devins also began to use data to report results and to make the natural consequences of teachers’ inaction clearer. After manipulating data by hand for a few years, she noted “I attended PD–Data Works; it helped me to be an instructional leader by providing strategies for monitoring reform.” When teachers claimed that students knew how to read, she confronted them with the “brutal” data that 60 percent of the students had not passed the state reading test. Slowly they became convinced of the problem. Ms. Devins was driven by a sense of urgency that gradually infected others: “I was at war with underachievement and anyone who did not see the sense of urgency. There were written policies placed in the Principal’s Expectations and in evaluations that reflected the teacher’s willingness to adhere to policies. I had a critical mass of staff who agreed with the data and did not blame the students; so we moved forward and devoured those who showed movies, had parties, and gave students days off.”

Challenges for Leaders

Unsafe schools present the leader with no choice about starting points; before communities can focus on instruction, leaders must attend to what Maslow might call second level needs, real or perceived security and safety concerns that interfere with teachers’ ability to think about their practice or the goals of the school (1987). Leaders who enter dangerous schools must start reform by making the environment safe for teaching and learning. This includes building effective discipline systems while simultaneously establishing more intimate staff-student connections, often through structures such as small learning communities, special interest groups, or advisory programs. Building these human connections, especially between students and teachers, forms the trust so important to establishing a healthy learning environment. Although structures and strategies that lead to safer, more secure schools may provide a foundation for improved instruction, they do not automatically translate into better teaching and learning. As we see in this case, instruction remained largely untouched despite structural changes—changing the bell schedule, setting up small learning communities, or establishing common meeting times. The mission of improving the quality of teaching required two additional leadership interventions. From the beginning, the principal worked to counsel out the worst performers and also began a directed focus on school-wide agreements that would raise the quality of instruction.

Ineffective Leader Responses

- **Assume that improving safety and discipline will improve instruction.** Establishing sound discipline policies may lead to a more organized environment but does not create high-quality, standards-based instruction.
- **Rely on the activity of restructuring faculty and students into smaller groups to fix instructional deficiencies.** Implementing small learning communities (SLC) definitely sets up a support system and creates more intimate student-teacher interactions. However, without a skillful leader's intervention, common planning time agendas often default to discipline issues and other concrete, easily addressed organizational matters. Hard questions and worries about how to help students perform successfully are then left to the individual teacher or not addressed at all.
- **Subscribe to the idea that change happens incrementally and therefore requires "rest periods" and times when leaders should expect less.** Students have only a limited time in which to meet performance standards and to learn what they need to learn in order to be productive citizens. Changing student performance requires a strong sense of urgency, constant fine-tuning, and a relentless quest for the next solution to pressing problems.
- **Assume that individual teachers who are very low-performing will spontaneously improve their practice because of a new structure.** Underlying such a false assumption is the idea that teachers were low-performing because of structural problems. In most instances, low performers lack either the requisite knowledge and skills to get the job done or the will to persist when the work is hard and the rewards are uncertain. Putting poor performers into a group without providing them with focused feedback and training means that the leader runs the risk of dragging down the energy and performance of other members who must pick up a bigger share of the instructional load.
- **Assume that current staff have the skill to make the instructional changes needed and that supervisors can provide the necessary support.** Taking this tack means the leader believes that people are not getting the job done because they are willfully withholding their skills and capacities. In fact, current staff may have been under-trained for the complexity of the tasks they face and may need far more coaching than an overworked supervisor can provide through sporadic observations.
- **Assume that adopting outside programs will automatically improve instruction and close achievement gaps.** Even the best-designed programs are useless if they are not implemented or are improperly implemented by people who neither understand nor believe in them.
- **Subscribe to the idea that accepting a one-year position is a good**

strategy when the goal is to “clean up” the place. Many toxic schools feed on their principals. A minimum of three years is necessary in order to build the necessary structures and hire the right people for the work. Superintendents should offer no job and principals should accept no job involving confronting toxicity with less than a three-year commitment.

- **Become an autocratic, authoritarian leader; decide to ignore the contract, get the job done, and let the grievances fall where they may.** The tough, counterpunching, drill sergeant leadership style is often an appealing match for a toxic and failing school, especially when the charge is to take back power for the administration. Even with a clear mandate from the school board and superintendent to wave a big stick, leaders make a mistake if they can think they can ignore the teacher contract or refuse to deal with union representatives.

Skillful Leader Responses

- **Solve problems of school-wide safety and discipline and provide support and training in classroom management to provide the strong base for instruction.** This principal found that school-wide discipline did not even ensure good classroom management and time on task. Major problems threatening safety were substantially reduced, but established classroom habits did not change correspondingly. In addition to establishing clear classroom discipline policies backed by the administration, the leader needs to raise issues of quality instruction.
- **Establish clear student learning goals as the focus for restructuring of schedules, space, etc.** Restructuring schedules to create common planning time is important; however, it is very easy for such time to be consumed in the discussion of low-level administrative or student behavior problems. Consider differentiating meeting time so that student issues do not consume every agenda.
- **Communicate “I am here to stay for awhile” and stay for awhile.** Ms. Devins stayed eight years. As a way of filling openings in unpopular, toxic schools, many districts cultivate short-term, “quick fix leaders” and promise them they will be able to move on quickly. As a leader entering a failing/toxic school, consider that you will need a minimum of three years to turn it around. All of the leaders whom we have studied stayed a minimum of three years, and several stayed seven or more.
- **Build a leadership team.** Much less has been written about leader isolation than teacher isolation. With the support of Central Office, this principal brought in a powerful administrative team to help with strategic planning.
- **Adopt common, school-wide instructional agreements, but don’t trust implementation to happen.** This principal found that verification and feedback was needed to establish the shared practice of posting the

BBC. Initially, as the skillful leader builds group competence, it is important not to prematurely release responsibility for implementation. Over time, the leader can turn accountability over to teams who are developing the capacity to self-monitor and to direct their own learning.

- **Decide what you need to learn to become more skillful and astute in using data.** Almost all schools that have had positive student achievement results get smart about using data. Leaders lead the way.
- **Present the data on learning.** In this case the SLC's role of focusing on discipline did not lead to better learning. The second year the principal found that "60 percent of the students were passing their classes but could not read as measured by district tests." Even though the school was safe, instruction was still weak. The principal presented test data and asked the SLC to analyze them, identify likely causes for the poor performance, and report back to the leadership team.
- **Hire expert coaches.** Because of time limitations, their role as a primary evaluator, and limited expertise, principals need to enlist experienced teachers as coaches. Although conventional thinking holds that coaches should not evaluate, they do in fact need to identify gaps between the necessary standard of performance and current reality. They also need to be able to give meaningful feedback to teachers about these gaps. They do not write teacher performance evaluation, but they do evaluate the quality of instruction.
- **Get the right teachers (Collins 2001) and get rid of the wrong teachers by creating a sense of urgency.** In this case, 30 percent of the teachers left after the first year, and 25 percent of the teachers left in year 2. Of that number, about 75 percent left because of pressure from negative evaluations and 25 percent because of counseling out. All of our turnaround leaders spoke of the tricky balance between putting pressure on individual mediocre performers through the evaluation process and developing positive, learner-focused communities. These leaders all spoke about the need to do both but to resist jumping to individual evaluation until the mid-year point.
- **Expect an initial outburst of resistance, complaining, and criticism.** Reforming schools requires asking people to change their comfort zone. Leaders who overly personalize the reactions of staff under stress tend to burn out. Keep firm, be clear, and don't take the reactions personally. Use the "free speech" mantra that people have a right to their opinions and can express them in appropriate forums.

Some schools are physically safe and orderly places with clear discipline policies and good management in the classrooms. Teachers may have reasonably good relationships with students and are committed to traditional forms of instruction that keep students busy and occupied without producing significant learning. The school community does not appear to be toxic until it is galvanized by a demand for change in response to poor performance. We see this kind of toxicity when a new principal follows a long-

LEGAL NOTE 5.1

**Teacher Rights to Free Speech**

School leaders can sometimes be disturbed when teachers make statements to students and parents that are critical of proposed changes and new directions the leader may be advocating. Because public schools are staffed by public employees, leaders must be knowledgeable about a public employee's free speech rights under the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Although a public employee's free speech rights would protect them in some contexts, even when they are critical of their own employer's actions, their free speech rights are not absolute. For a discussion of relevant case law regarding a public employee's free speech rights, see *Garcetti et al. v. Ceballos* (May 20, 2006) at <http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/scripts/getcase.pl?court=us&vol=000&invol=04-473>

term mediocre principal who has protected poor teaching in exchange for cooperation around noninstructional matters. Here is such a case.

CASE 5.2 Expect Little Elementary School

For 18 years the male principal of Expect Little Elementary, a small school tucked away at the edge of a large city, ran a well-managed, smoothly functioning building. He described himself as a leader “in partnership” with his faculty, whom he praised lavishly and supported against all comers. He often told outsiders that his teachers were so good the “building could run itself.” In fact, with full knowledge of the staff, he would nap (undisturbed) in his little office in the center of the building for 40 minutes or so after lunch each day. The school culture was a cozy if unrecognized collusion to support mediocrity. Teachers were never evaluated. Classroom instruction focused on low-level memorization and “make-work” that was justified, staff often said, by the socioeconomics of the school. As accountability measures increased, data about school performance became public, and achievement gaps between subgroups within the school and between Expect Little Elementary and other comparable schools widened, the teachers evinced little sense of discomfort or urgency. They felt that they were doing “the best they could in light of student demographics.” As he retired, the principal agreed heartily.

The new principal, a young woman freshly certified, was charged with raising the achievement scores of Expect Little Elementary's students. Wanting to establish a culture for improvement in student learning and knowing that the transition would be a challenge, she decided that the community-building activities she had learned during principal training would be essential in the first year. Thus armed with strategies to help people feel motivated to change and willing to collaborate, she commenced her culture-building project. Unfortunately, her activities were unappreciated. “Compliment