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NOT-SO-SKINNY CHANGE PROBLEMS

Change challenges abound in the educational world and seem as different as chalk and cheese. But they all have one thing in common: How do you move the seemingly unmovable, and how do you do this on a large scale? We are well beyond accepting that ad hoc successes constitute progress. Small wins don't last.

In many countries, certainly the United States, students are at best increasingly bored as they move through the grades, and teachers are increasingly alienated as they move through their careers. As we say, there is only one thing worse than being bored, and that is having to teach the bored! Even the high-flying countries—Singapore, Korea, Finland—are not doing as well as commonly thought. The now famous PISA assessments of the performance of 15-year-olds in literacy, math, and sciences conducted every second year since 2000 show no absolute gains over the decade since its inception (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2010). All systems seem to be running out of gas.

Consequently, leaders are in an action mode. But what should they do? Consider the following range of situations, all of which I know and most of which I have been or am involved in.

What would you do if you were sitting on the newly formed New York City Excellence Commission (2012), whose job it is to influence the change agenda (policies and strategies alike) of the next mayor of New York, to be elected in 2013? You know that New York has gone through almost a decade of tumultuous, highly contested reforms under Chancellor Joel Klein and Mayor Bloomberg. Despite enormous effort, you know that the results have been meager in the big scheme of things. Of the current ninth graders (who were in kindergarten when the current reforms were enacted), only one-third can read, write, and do math on grade level. Half of White and Asian students graduate ready for college (itself a very low figure), compared to just 13% of African American and Latino students, and only 7% of English language learners. You know that the whole affair has been "savaged by Ravitch" and other high-profile researchers with some very strong arguments and precise data, but alas with very few ideas about what to do (see Ravitch, 2010).

As you examine what has happened, you realize that most of the administration's political energy has focused on structural reforms and accountability measures. What's missing is capacity building for all teachers and school leaders and ownership of the reform strategy. But what do you do? The skinny change leader knows that *being right is not a change strategy.* You know that a big price has been paid over the past decade; many New Yorkers—teachers, principals, parents, students, and communities—have become alienated and even hostile to the school system. There have been pockets of great success, but you want all 1,600 schools

to be part of a whole system on the move. You are determined that history will not repeat itself. You have only a year to try to shape the next period and influence the next mayor and his or her team. How do you and your fellow commissioners tackle this assignment?

Well, you might start by having a group of leaders, including some of the most likely mayoral candidates, do a study visit to Ontario to examine what education officials did to get successful whole-system reform, province-wide and in the large, diverse urban districts of the city of Toronto and the York Region. But how will you translate these lessons to New York City? How can you adapt and use the now considerable research and evidence on what we call whole-system reform (Fullan, 2010; Levin, 2012b)?

Let's go to London, where we have both great news and challenging news in the borough of Hackney, one of 12 inner-London local authorities. In the year 2000 Hackney was in chaos—a failing, bankrupt system of some 220,000 ethnically diverse people, and just under 100 schools of various types. Hackney's own council advertised for a new chief executive with the following words: "The person appointed would face 'an absence of coherent political leadership, a disconnection between strategy and operation, poor financial management and a lack of focus on basic services" (Boyle & Humphreys, 2012, p. 1). Only the English could make such an offer sound attractive! Even the famed stiff upper lip would be useless in this situation. But Hackney did move, in one decade, to be a highly successful school system, surpassing the national average on student performance and better than many of the richer English school authorities.

We will see in Chapter 2 how Hackney performed this magnificent feat (with many lessons for our motion leader). But we have a new change challenge. The person on the hot seat is Trish

Okoruwa. Trish was a key leader at the school level during the decade of rising success. She was the executive head of a cluster of five schools that helped each other move from "special measures" (England's term for failing schools) to high performance. She then became deputy director of the system.

Today, Trish has a new double whammy. Since 2002 the borough has been run by a so-called Learning Trust that the borough council set up to run the system. In August 2012, by initial agreement the schools returned to the borough to be once again overseen by the council. They have appointed Trish to be the director (superintendent) of the new entity, which has been named Hackney Learning Trust. We will learn later what Hackney did to get such inner-city reform success. Even more interestingly, we will examine how Trish is approaching the new challenge of sustaining and building on a high-profile success.

Back to the United States, in California: At the state level the system lacks focus, money, and any strategy to work with its 1,000 school districts. A few districts, however, have been very successful and want to both sustain what has been achieved and extend help to others. We will take as our example Marc Johnson, who took over Sanger School District in central California a decade ago. His welcome present, so to speak, was the state Department of Education sending him a letter shortly after he started naming Sanger as a failing district.

Sanger is currently an undeniable success as Marc heads for retirement. How did he and his colleagues change the culture and performance of Sanger? What should he do postretirement as a member of a group of eight potentially influential districts that have formed themselves into a group called CORE (California Office to Reform Education): Clovis, Fresno, Long Beach,

Los Angeles, Oakland, Sacramento, San Francisco, and Sanger. We will hear from Marc later.

Take another interesting reform example, Uruguay, a small South American country of 3.3 million people with Brazil to the north and Argentina to the west. Miguel Brechner is the head of a national project called Plan Ceibal that set out 4 years ago to infuse computers into the whole system—one computer per student, and one per teacher (Regional Bureau for Sciences in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2011). Some 450,000 laptops have been distributed since then. Our team in Toronto is at the early stages of describing and assessing the impact of the strategy. Miguel says he wanted to introduce computers throughout the whole system in a manner that "would not complicate the lives of teachers." Certainly sounds like a skinny strategy, but could it be an effective one?

How about down under with Jim Watterston? In 2008 Jim became director general of the state school system in Canberra (Australian Capital Territory). At the time it was a good but stagnant system of some 80 schools with little internal energy and flatlined scores. Our team worked with the territory from the beginning and recently filmed three of its schools and the system leadership. We found great energy and increased performance across the whole system. Jim and his school leaders used the skinny to get there. In Chapter 2 we will see how they did this.

But there is an interesting twist to the situation. Jim took a new position in early 2012 to be deputy secretary of the state of Victoria, a much bigger system, and one that has had a lot of development over the past decade but has not accomplished much focus and coherence on the ground. It shows in the state's performance, as it has not been able to move forward on literacy, numeracy, or other measures of achievement. What is interesting for Jim is that

the previous regime did a lot of what looks like the right things (leadership development, capacity building). But it didn't work! What will the new challenge be in Victoria? This is exactly the kind of complex challenge that skinny leaders are cut out to deal with. They know that success in one situation by no means guarantees success in the next one. In Chapter 4 we will see what Victoria is up to as it tries anew for whole-system reform.

Speaking of success in one situation not dictating what should be done in the next one, consider a case of going from New York to California. This lesson of nontransferability was learned the hard way when Tony Alvarado, an excellent change leader, moved in 1997 from New York City to become chancellor of education in the San Diego city school system. Alvarado was one of the very first leaders to bring about successful districtwide reform when he was superintendent of District 2 in New York. From 1987 to 1996 he helped lead the district from 10th and 4th (of 32 districts) in reading and math, respectively, to become 2nd in both subject areas. Alvarado was probably the first successful districtwide reform leader in the modern era.

He learned a lot about change in his first big success, perhaps too much. Because when he applied the ideas—focus on instruction, development and deployment of literacy and math coaches, relentless moral purpose, investment in and insistence on quality leadership at the school and district levels, monitoring of results—to a new culture and a new set of conditions, it backfired. There are many sides to the San Diego story, but it might be that Tony and his boss, Chief Superintendent Alan Bersin, pushed too hard (we will talk about the dynamic duo of push and pull in Chapter 3). They spent a frustrating 7 years (1997–2004) and left more or less together under a cloud of defeat.

San Diego has had a series of superintendents in the last 8 years. The question is not that Alvarado failed, but whether he was influenced too much by his previous successful strategies and whether he could have approached the situation differently. Skinny leadership and context are intimately related. Each new situation calls for new nuanced actions. Skinny leaders have the capacity to be simultaneously humble and confident as they approach each new situation. They know it will be different in key aspects, but their change instincts, or *change stances* as I call them in Chapter 3, will help them figure things out. In other words, change leaders are adaptable in ways that make it more likely that they will be successful across settings.

In Ontario, Canada, what about principal James Bond? (Yes, that's his real name.) James became principal of a small Grade 6–8 school, Park Manor, in Elmira, just west of Toronto. He wanted to integrate pedagogy and technology in order to accelerate learning, but he could find no role models. He and his staff created their own model and strategy and are now rapidly moving to the future. We will look into how they did it.

While we are in Ontario, let's consider the whole province since its education premier, Dalton McGuinty, was first elected in October 2003. I have written about this elsewhere, and Ontario's success is a good example of motion leadership for what we call whole-system reform. Throughout McGuinty's two elected terms of 4 years each (and into his third term), Ontario has substantially improved literacy and numeracy across its 4,000 elementary schools, and graduation rates in its 900 secondary schools. At the big system level, there have been impressive gains—literacy, for example, has increased by over 15% in the elementary schools, and high school graduation has gone from 68% to 82%. Gaps have

also been reduced in terms of schools in poverty, English language learners (recent immigrants), and special education students. There are new developments, however. In the summer of 2012, labor issues emerged over a legislated wage freeze imposed on teachers, and McGuinty suddenly resigned on October 15, 2012. So we don't know what will happen to the positive momentum and achievements that have already been accomplished.

But let's look at what we can learn about motion leadership at the district level by examining Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board (HWDSB). John Malloy was an area superintendent in a high-profile, successful school district in Ontario when in 2009 he took the job of director (superintendent) of HWDSB. The district has 48,000 students and 125 schools.

The city of Hamilton, just west of Toronto, historically was the center of the steel industry in Canada. Prior to John's arrival the previous administration had set some of the key conditions for success by pushing for a strong student achievement focus, but the system had not yet established a coordinated effort. The persistent push for the student achievement agenda had been accompanied by increasingly strained management–union relations. School leaders were not clear about how they could achieve success. The central office was seen as hierarchical and bureaucratic. John had a sense of what had to be done, but he also knew that "being right" was not a strategy for change. How did he approach the situation to turn things around? More on this in Chapter 2.

I have just identified seven larger-than-life change problems from four continents. They are different, but they are also similar: They all involve the issue of how to motivate masses of people to put in the effort required to improve difficult situations in order to get major gains in student learning. This is what motion leadership

and the skinny are all about. The skinny is deceptive. It's hard, but not as hard as we think. This is what Oliver Wendell Holmes was getting at when he said, "I wouldn't give a fig about simplicity on this side of complexity, but I would give my life for simplicity on the other side of complexity." Skinny leaders come through complexity and land all the wiser. Then they are better, even calm for the next situation. They come to have wisdom, defined so aptly by Pfeffer and Sutton (2006) as "the ability to act with knowledge while doubting what you know" (p. 174).

Although I examine specific individuals and the success of their systems in this book, my goal is much bigger. My colleagues and I have been working on how to realize the moral imperative of educating all students regardless of the starting point. *Realizing* means literally what it says—actual results that raise the bar and close the gap for all subgroups as the overall performance of the system goes up. More than this: we do it on a large scale—*whole-system reform* is our phrase. Not just whole districts (although that, too), but whole regions, states, provinces, and countries.

The key to effective whole-system reform is the action of leaders—motion leaders who by definition mobilize the leadership of others and end up being part of a system that is palpably on the move. We will now take a close look at what these effective motion leaders do to move their organizations and systems forward (Chapter 2). And then we will be able to derive *more skinny* to add to our insights about change leadership (Chapter 3). This knowledge and skill base is increasingly clear, specific, and accessible. If you master it, and be humble knowing that you will need to be always learning, you will do good—on a large scale and for a long time. Jump in, and learn to be a better leader.