Mastering Deliberate Intention: The Second Key to Effective Leadership for Transforming School Systems

By

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Dedication

Russell Ackoff’s principles of idealized design and interactive planning are highlighted in this edition of the Reports. Professor Ackoff’s views on the nature of systemic change also have significantly influenced my thinking, teaching, and writing. Russ also wrote a chapter for one of my earlier books, a “gift” for which I was very grateful.

Russ died unexpectedly last week (the week of October 26th) at the age of 90.

I am dedicating this edition of the Reports to this man who has made such significant contributions to what we know and believe about organizations as systems and how to transform them.

Introduction

In the July, 2009, edition of these Reports you read about what I believe is the first of three keys to effective leadership for transforming school systems—Mastering Awareness. In this report you are introduced to the second key to effective leadership for transformational change—Mastering Deliberate Intention.

Deliberate intention is a powerful force for change. It is created using principles of idealized design (Ackoff, 1981; Banathy, 1991) that yield a powerful, compelling, yet feasible vision for the future of a school system.

Deliberate Intention as a Reinforcing Loop

In the world of systems dynamics, there is a driving force called a reinforcing loop (Kim & Anderson, 1998). Reinforcing loops are neutral in their disposition toward the direction of change. Depending on the intentions of people or their disregard for establishing intentions, reinforcing loops can propel a system toward chaos and dissolution or toward order and high performance.

Deliberate intention can create a reinforcing loop that moves a system toward order and high performance. Attempting to transform a school system without a deliberate intention to create an idealized future for that system can create a reinforcing loop that drags a system’s performance down, even to the point of having schools within the system seized by state departments of education.
What is your school district’s deliberate intention? Is it driving all of you toward a transformed school district marked by high quality teaching and learning, a motivating and satisfying work life for faculty and staff, and positive relationships with individuals and groups outside of your district? Or, in the absence of a deliberate intention in the form of an idealized vision for the future of your system are you experiencing desperation, futility, and failure? Further, transforming a school district doesn’t happen automatically without effort. It takes deliberate intention to do what’s necessary. You must want to transform, decide to transform, make an effort to transform, and persist in transforming.

Flying on Autopilot

In many ways, your district’s “way of doing things” (aka, the status quo) is like the autopilot on an airplane. Imagine that a plane you are piloting is stuck on autopilot and you want to change direction. You and your co-pilot can wrench the steering yoke toward the direction you want to go, but eventually you will both tire and release your grip. The autopilot will then re-take control of the plane and move it back to its original flight path—the one that was internally programmed into the computer.

This is what happens when you try to transform your school district without reframing your district’s deliberate intention—it’s idealized future. Your system’s status quo is its “autopilot.” You can wrestle with change until you tire and when you surrender to your fatigue, the district will move back to its original flight path—the one programmed into your district’s culture.

There is a more effective way to transform a district—turn-off your district’s autopilot that is moving it forward (or backward) in undesirable directions. The first action, I believe, that is needed to turn-off the autopilot is to imagine a substantially different future for your system and then you engage your system in transformational change to move your system toward that future (other subsequent actions are required, but this is the first one).

Idealized Design

Ackoff (1981) proposed a methodology for creating an idealized design for the future of organizations. Banathy (1991) built on the work of Ackoff, Checkland (1981) and Nadler (1967) to create a methodology for helping educators create an idealized design for school systems. In this section of the report, I provide highlights of both Ackoff and Banathy’s idealized design methodologies.

Ackoff’s Idealized Design Methodology

Russell Ackoff (1993) astutely observed that corporate visions are frequently illusions or delusions. Effective visions, according to Ackoff, must be constructed to provide practitioners with an...
actionable description of the organization design they would want if they could select from any organization design in the world; in other words, if you could create the school system of your dreams, without any constraints on your desires, what it would look like and how would it function?

Interactive Planning and Idealized Design

Ackoff also argued that an idealized vision must be created with input from key stakeholders or their representatives. This input is collected through a process he called “interactive planning”—a process that is at the core of Ackoff’s idealized design process. Interactive planning has two parts—Idealization and Realization and it is divided into six interrelated phases: 1) formulating the mess, 2) ends planning, 3) means planning, 4) resource planning, 5) design of implementation, and (6) design of controls. The interactive planning process, adapted for school systems, is highlighted below.

Part 1: Idealization

Phase 1: Formulating the mess (situational analysis). Every school system is confronted with a complex set of interacting threats and opportunities, a system of problems that Ackoff calls a mess. The outcome of this planning phase identifies how a school system would eventually destroy itself if it continued performing as it currently is; that is, if the system did not adapt to its changing external environment (see the previous edition of these Reports to read more about the external environment and its impact on school systems). Formulating the mess requires the following activities:

Activity 1: Complete a systems analysis. This analysis creates a detailed description of how the school system currently functions;

Activity 2: Complete an obstruction analysis. This analysis identifies obstacles that prevent the system from succeeding in its changing environment;

Activity 3: Create reference projections. These are projections of the school system’s future based on the assumptions that 1) there will be no change in how the system performs; and 2) a description of the external environment that the school system expects in the near or distant future. Following the creation of these projections, planners then create a reference scenario, which is a description of how and why the school system might destroy itself if both of the aforementioned assumptions were true.

Phase 2: Ends planning. This phase focuses on imagining an ideal design for the school system. The activities for this phase are:

Activity 1: Describe what the school system would ideally like to be right now if it could be whatever it wanted to be; and,

Activity 2: Identify the gaps between this idealized vision and the school system that was projected earlier in the reference scenario (during Phase 1, Activity 3).
Part 2: Realization

Phase 3: Means planning. During this phase, system designers determine how to remove or reduce the gaps identified in ends planning (see above, Part 1, Phase 2, Activity 2). Specifically, designers devise the means to pursue the idealized design that they envision for their school system. The identified gaps between the current system and the idealized system should be examined as if they are interconnected; that is, planners must avoid closing or removing discrete gaps without considering how each gap affects and is affected by other gaps. Treating these identified gaps in this way is an example of systems thinking-in-use.

Phase 4: Resource planning. Given the means needed to achieve the idealized design for their school system (determined during Phase 3, above), designers must now identify the resources needed to create and sustain the idealized design. Specifically, they determine:

1. What resources are needed?
2. How much of each type of resource will be required?
3. When, where, and how should resources be deployed to implement the means to achieve the idealized design; and,
4. How will resource shortages or excesses be identified and handled?

Phase 5: Design of implementation. This phase applies classic principles of transition management (e.g., Beckhard & Harris, 1987). Specifically, designers develop a transition plan (i.e., a plan to move the school system from its current state toward its idealized state) by determining who does what, when, where, and how.

Phase 6: Design of controls. Activities during this phase focus on managing the transition period. Specifically, designers make decisions about:

1. How to monitor change-related task assignments and schedules;
2. How to adjust for failures to meet transition timelines; and
3. How to evaluate the change process and its outcomes and to determine how to take corrective action if the change process and outcomes are not moving the school system in the direction of the idealized design.

Ackoff’s six phases of interactive planning are implemented simultaneously and interactively because they are interconnected. Further, Ackoff argues that interactive planning is continuous and therefore none of the six phases is ever totally completed and results for each phase are produced throughout the entire process.

Ackoff’s interactive planning methodology is an integral part of his principles of idealized design. These principles are summarized next.

Idealized Design Principles

Ackoff suggests that planners should assume that their school system was completely destroyed last night, but its external environment remains exactly as it was. Given this apocalyptic assumption, they then design an idealized school system that would immediately replace the one that was “destroyed.” The idealized design for the system would only be subjected to two constraints.
(technological feasibility and operational viability) and one requirement (an ability to learn and adapt rapidly and effectively).

Technological feasibility. This constraint requires planners to create an idealized design that excludes features and functions that are currently known to be unfeasible. This does not preclude new uses of innovative ideas for change as long as they are feasible; rather, according to Ackoff, the constraint is intended to prevent the design from becoming a work of science fiction.

Operational viability. This constraint requires planners to create an idealized design that is fully capable of succeeding in the system’s current external environment. However, there may be constraints in the current external environment that could delay the implementation of the idealized design (see the previous edition of these Reports for information about impact of the external environment on school systems).

Learning and adaptation. This requirement focuses on creating a learning organization. To satisfy this requirement, the idealized school system should be designed to allow it to respond rapidly to changes in its external environment and to learn quickly from and adapt to its performance successes and failures. This requirement also suggests that the school system must remain open to ongoing periods of redesign.

Idealized Design vs. An Ideal System

Ackoff makes an important distinction between idealized design and an ideal system. He argues that the product of idealized design is not an ideal system. An ideal school system is not created because the system is always subject to ongoing improvement and it is neither perfect nor utopian. Instead, according to Ackoff, the new design for the school system should create an ideal-seeking system—the best system that designers can conceive of at this time.

Components of the Idealized Design Process

Ackoff’s idealized design process has three parts: 1) formulating a mission statement, 2) specifying the features of the idealized school system; and 3) designing the envisioned school system.

Mission. A school system’s mission statement is a brief a statement of its reasons for existence. It is most often constructed using two or three sentences. It should not be confused with a system’s vision statement which is an elaboration of the mission statement that contains the systems core values and beliefs and is written using powerful metaphors and images that communicate to people’s heads and hearts.

Specifying design features. Specifications describe the features that planners want the idealized school system to have. Specifications are aspirations.

Designing the new system. The design describes how those desired features are to be obtained. The design is a set of instructions about how to achieve that idealized design.

Making Design Decisions

It is important to remember that Ackoff’s idealized design methodology is based on a foundation of interactive planning. In practice, this requires the idealized design to be the product of participa-
tion and consensus. Consensus, however, does not mean total agreement about what is the “best thing to do,” but it does require total agreement on “what is worth doing.”

**Finalizing the Idealized Design**

Once an idealized design is finalized it should be shared with key stakeholders who have not been involved in its preparation of the design to seek their comment, criticism, and suggestions. Wherever possible their suggestions should be used to make adjustments to the design. When making adjustments based on suggestions is impossible or undesirable then an explanation as to why the suggestions could not be incorporated in the design should be provided to those who offered the suggestions.

Finally, it must be remembered that implementing the idealized design requires discontinuous (aka, transformational) change. After implementing the idealized design, improvement of the design over time should be on-going using principles of continuous improvement.

**Banathy’s Idealized Systems Design Methodology**


**Idealized Systems Design**

Banathy (1991) describes his methodology using a mapping metaphor. The first “map” he offers charts the idealized design journey in broad terms (Figure 1). The general features of the map of the design journey are described below.

**Mapping the Design Journey**

Banathy’s Idealized Systems Design methodology is portrayed as “map of the design journey.” That map is constructed using data, information, and knowledge derived from answers to eight diagnostic questions. The answers suggest key features of an idealized design that will emerge from this process. The diagnostic questions are:

1. What have we learned from previous educational reform efforts?
2. What new thinking and what new approaches are needed?
3. What are the characteristics of the emerging society?
4. What are the educational implications of those characteristics?
5. What should be the role of education in the current society?
6. What image of education is emerging within society and what values and ideas can guide the design of our system?
7. What approach and what strategies will enable us to design our new system of learning and human development?
8. What approach and what strategies can be used to develop, implement, and institutionalize the design?

The answers to these eight questions create a map of the design journey (Figure 1). The answers also contain new mental models, new core ideas for change, and unambiguous descriptions of the system’s core values.
3. What are the characteristic of the emerging society?

2. What new thinking and what new approaches are needed?

1. What have we learned from the educational reform efforts?

4. What are the educational implications of those characteristics?

5. What should be the role of education in the current society?

6. What image of education is emerging and what values and ideas can guide the design?

7. What approach and what strategies will enable us to design the new system of learning and human development?

8. What approach and what strategies can be used to develop, implement, and institutionalize the design?

Figure 1: Banathy’s Map of the Design Journey
Banathy’s mapping metaphor continues by charting five maps of the terrain for his idealized design methodology (Figure 2). The maps are: 1) the terrain of departure, 2) the terrain of destination, 3) the journey between the start and the end, 4) the design solution, and, 5) the knowledge base. Each “mapping” activity is briefly summarized below.

**Figure 2: Banathy’s Idealized System Design “Maps”**

- **1. Describe Existing System and External Environment**
- **2. Describe Future System**
- **3. Develop Design Solution**
- **4. Organized Knowledge**
- **5. Evaluate Design Alternatives**

**Mapping the terrain of departure.** This map is identified as Map #1 in Figure 2. It describes the current functioning of a school system with a focus on its strengths and weaknesses. The essential characteristics of the district’s external environment are also assessed and described. Change leaders also prepare their system to engage in transformational change, which includes formulating ideas for what their system will look like and how it will function in the future.

**Mapping the terrain of destination.** This map is identified as Map #2 in Figure 2. Change leaders construct this map by engaging in visioning activities that create a model of the future system that they desire. They also assess environmental trends to predict threats and opportunities that could affect the design of their idealized system. Given the completion of the visioning and assessment activities, an implementation plan is devised.
Mapping the design solution space. This map is identified as Map #3 in Figure 2. It represents the most significant terrain for a transformation journey. The quality of this map is essential for the success of the transformation journey because most large-scale change efforts fail during the transition between the present and the desired future.

The first element of this map is the formulation of a definition of what the system’s purpose is (its mission). This definition of mission must consider key societal functions assigned to school systems. Given the definition of the system’s purpose, the next activities elaborate the core mission by asking questions such as “Who are our clients?,” “What educational services should we be providing?,” “How, when, and where should we be delivering those services?”

The next component of this map is to identify key functions that will be required to achieve the system’s core mission. These key functions include, for example, curriculum and instruction, administration, instructional management systems, and so on. The key functions are then organized on paper in a coherent inter-connected map to illustrate the key features of the desired idealized school system.

Given the key functions needed to create the desired idealized design for the school system, the next element of Map #3 is to create management sub-systems; for example, management information systems, instructional management systems, record-keeping systems, and strategic communication systems.

Mapping the space of the knowledge base. To envision an idealized school system educators need access to relevant data, information, and knowledge to guide their “envisioning” process. To create this map (shown as Map 4 in Figure 2), four knowledge domains are identified and charted. These are: 1) knowledge from the exploration of opportunities and threats in the school system’s external environment and the implications of those opportunities and threats for the continuing existence of the school system; 2) knowledge from the exploration of design options; 3) the school system’s core values and ideas, its vision, and the dominant mental model(s) guiding the idealized design process; and, 4) knowledge about the design process and how to manage it.

Mapping the design evaluation alternatives. Given several design options for an idealized school system, each option needs to be tested and evaluated (shown in Figure 2 as Map 5). A key element of the evaluation process is to make sure that the design alternatives being considered did not overlook important features that could affect the overall success of the “new” system. The outcome of this phase is the selection of the design option that is most likely to create the idealized school system about which educators are “dreaming.”

Conclusion

The idealized design process is powerful. It relies heavily on engaging key stakeholders in the design process. It assumes that the current system must be replaced with a new system and, importantly, that the new system must be substantially different from the current one (if the new system is not substantially different then transformation has not occurred).

While both Ackoff and Banathy have given us two similar methodologies for creating idealized designs, Banathy’s methodology was specifically created for school systems. The work of both
men has significantly influenced the design of the School System Transformation Protocol that has been described in previous editions of these Reports.

References


Thank you for your interest in these Reports.

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In the past, these reports often contained articles written by readers. If you would like to write an article for these reports on a topic related to whole-system change in school districts, please send a copy of it to me as an E-mail attachment to duffy@thefmduffygroup.com.

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