

CHAPTER 9

IDENTIFYING SOLUTIONS AND ACTION PLANNING FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Readers who grasp the most important ideas from this chapter will be able to

- select a promising solution (or set of solutions) that addresses root causes of the problem, challenge, or gap they have identified and
- create a step-by-step action plan to implement and evaluate the identified solution.

All the hard work you and your collaborative team have done to think about the instructional gap you wish to address is brought together in this chapter as you consider planning a course of action. You have been working on a logic of action that goes something like this: “Our primary instructional challenge is [] that affects [] students in a number of ways. The most critical root causes of this problem that we can influence at school are [].” Having done all the previous work, now is the time to review the proposed solutions you found in literature, through investigations in your school, and with your collaborative team to choose a course of action that you believe will reduce the root causes of your problem and thus promote improvement in your target area. This chapter is about selecting a solution or course of action and about the processes that go into creating an action plan that defines how you will successfully implement your strategy.

FINDING THE PREFERRED SOLUTION

Throughout the previous chapters, we have suggested that it is best to stay away from locking into a solution until you and those on your collaborative team thoroughly understand the problem you are addressing. Despite these warnings, unless you are exceptionally rare, you have been tempted by several “obvious” courses of action, either because you have networked with leaders in other schools or in your school system office who have recommended actions they know to be successful or because you have run across literature touting a program that works, or both. Even as you were building your knowledge about the nature of the problem and its likely causes, you have no doubt been tempted to lock onto a course of action. After all, you’re human.

You and your collaborative team may indeed find that choosing a solution is obvious because of the natural course of your discussions about the problem, the target student group, the literature that informs the problem, and the root causes you have identified. Our research suggests that a well-functioning team is able to arrive at a solution relatively easily and quickly when they focus first on the problem and when a common perspective has been developed over time (Brazier, Rich, & Ross, 2010). The more difficult task is being persuasive that the solution you have chosen will actually reduce or eliminate root causes—a task often neglected by teams pleased with their agreement about a solution.

Just as some teams arrive at solutions easily, others struggle to agree. Settling on a particular solution is a big commitment. The team is stating that this is the way to make a potentially long-standing problem better and to improve student achievement. Very strong implications about change are embedded in the proposed solution. As we learned in Chapter 2, making change is difficult because people get frozen into a specific way of doing things. For a leader to help others change how they do things, she or he must find ways for them to “unfreeze” from their current thinking (Lewin, 1947). You may be feeling good about the extent to which your team has become unfrozen during the processes you have gone through up to this point. Do not be surprised, however, if some refreezing occurs before the group actually moves to a solution. Making changes in the ways in which instruction is carried out will make teachers nervous because it may undercut their influence as their old ways of teaching go into decline and because moving to a new teaching strategy or means of delivering a portion of the curriculum carries teachers into an untried and unknown professional reality. Some resistance under these circumstances is natural.

Your search for a solution is complicated, as well, by the broader policy environment. As we discussed earlier, federal policy stresses the adoption of evidence-informed change strategies based on scientifically based research. Although there has been a fair degree of debate over what kinds of research are credentialed

under this definition, as we discussed in Chapter 8, experimental research is touted as the “gold standard” for supporting cause-and-effect claims (i.e., instituting this program for these groups will produce the following improvements in student learning). The What Works Clearinghouse is available as a repository of information about the evidence supporting various change strategies.

ACTIVITY 9.1 Exploring the What Works Clearinghouse

In the initial Reading Research activities, we suggested that you first access secondary research sources that would typically be available in easily read journals such as *Phi Delta Kappan* and next identify and read primary sources from academic, peer-reviewed journals. For the most part, these initial activities were directed at developing a deep understanding of the causes of your instructional target area.

As we turn our attention to solutions, we suggest you familiarize yourself with one of the websites designed by the U.S. Department of Education to provide broad access to research knowledge about “what works” (i.e., potential research-based solutions of educational problems). To complete this activity, access the What Works Clearinghouse at <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc> and peruse the site. (Start by locating *Using the WWC: A Practitioner’s Guide* to gain basic familiarity with the site.) Next, search the Clearinghouse for programs that appear to connect well to your identified problem and its causes. Select one such program, and review material available on the site concerning the efficacy of the program.

Using Worksheet 9.1, summarize the evidence you glean from the What Works Clearinghouse entry for this program. With one or two partners, exchange your bibliographic entries and provide some constructive criticism of each other’s work.

- What did each of you think of the program and its applicability to your school improvement work? What criteria did you use to assess this?
- What did you find useful about the site?
- How useful is the material you accessed for researchers and practitioners seeking to find ways to improve schools?

To debrief, discuss your collective reactions to the material you found and to the Clearinghouse. Also discuss how members of your group decided what was important to access, what was important to share, and what conclusions (if any) you were able to make based on examination of these materials. What did you learn? How, or in what ways, might you consider the material to be trustworthy? Why? What questions do you have about the Clearinghouse itself?

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Addendum

The U.S. Department of Education provides a companion site designed to assist educators to learn how to implement the kinds of strategies featured as effective in the WWC. The Doing What Works Clearinghouse can be accessed at <http://dww.ed.gov>.

Certain types of methodologies are obviously stronger than others and allow greater confidence in the inference that taking an action will produce a particular result. However, we have encouraged you throughout to concentrate on building a thorough understanding of the problem you are working on in your school and to triangulate the evidence you have about the problem and its possible causes. Similarly, your inquiry en route to selecting a preferred solution needs to be guided by amassing credible information from a variety of sources, systematically weighing the worth of available evidence, and incorporating your craft knowledge about your school, its staff, and your students to develop a defensible rationale for what will work for you.

Goldring and Berends (2009) provide an excellent discussion of the kinds of criteria you might bring to bear on this decision. In noting that many educators consider “promising practices” that they learn about from observation and discussion with colleagues at other schools, they write,

It is important to articulate specifically what the purpose, goal, and outcomes of the practices are. Not all fads should be considered promising practices. What makes this practice promising? How widespread is the evidence about the effect of the practice under consideration, in the absence of high-quality scientific research? (p. 175)

They go on to suggest that additional considerations might include whether the setting and circumstances existing in other schools are similar to your own, whether the staff and other participants are similar (e.g., do they have similar skills and abilities?), whether existing programs and practices in other settings “fit” with the proposed practice in a fashion that would be similar in your school, and whether the level of support in other settings would be similar in your own school.

You and your team should consider the strength of the evidence that a promising practice is indeed promising, whether it is appropriate for your school, and if adoption of the strategy has a high probability of success. Worksheet 9.1 provides a tool for synthesizing this information using a format that is similar to the one you used as you examined the literature to learn about causes (found in Worksheet 6.1).

Assembling your evidence systematically using this tool will help foster comparison and promote dialogue among members of your collaborative team.

Matching Proposed Solutions to Root Causes

Using the data you have amassed about potential solutions, the team can now turn to the process of selecting what they perceive to be the best solution, or set of solutions, to address the specific learning problem, challenge, or gap on which the team has agreed. Criteria for selection must be understood by everyone on the team in order for the process to work well and for the ultimate solution to be as effective as possible. In the process of attaching potential solutions as the last link in the chain that is the logic of action of your school improvement project, your team will test how well the solutions fit by applying the agreed-on criteria. In short, you and your team will be asking, “Can we persuade others that our solution will achieve the outcomes we seek?” Answering this question provides the core of the rationale that will become a critical element in your School Improvement Project Proposal.

Worksheet 9.2 provides a format for the initial team discussion of potential solutions. Essentially, we recommend that team members share their analysis of potential solutions and that the group outline on butcher paper your analysis of these solutions in terms of the cause(s) they may eliminate, the outcomes you would expect, and the strength of the evidence you have amassed suggesting that implementing the solution(s) will work in schools like yours. The goal of this discussion is to work toward a consensus decision on a solution, which will yield a coherent logic of action connecting all your work to a proposal for change.

We have used the term *logic of action* throughout the book as a fancy way of explaining why a particular solution makes sense. Essentially, your goal all along has been the formulation of a coherent and persuasive logic of action that explains your proposal for change. The general pattern of a logic of action statement follows:

Problem A exists for Student Population B because of Root Causes X, Y, and Z that we control or influence. The best way to reduce or eliminate the root causes is through Action(s) D (E and F).

Clearly articulating the logic of action of your school improvement effort in this manner allows you and your team to consider specific solutions in terms of their effectiveness in addressing root causes, rather than on the basis of internal politics, power, or personal influence. The problem, the student population, and the root causes become important criteria for considering proposed solutions. Consider the example in the following box.

LINKING ROOT CAUSES AND SOLUTIONS

Natalie and her team determined that they wanted to improve math achievement for sixth-grade limited-English-proficient (LEP) students. They started to develop their logic of action based on the following:

- Sixth-grade LEP students are achieving substantially below state standards because . . .
- They lack vocabulary necessary to understand instruction and solve word problems.
- Additional root causes identified by Natalie's team include poor attendance, instruction that does not accommodate second-language learners, and inadequate understanding of basic math facts.

The team considered the following solutions derived from their reading of published literature and their discussions about their local situation:

1. An after-school tutorial program to help build LEP students' vocabulary
2. Collaboration among math and language arts teachers and those who teach English to speakers of other languages to help build math vocabulary in multiple settings
3. Professional development for math teachers focused on creating culturally responsive classrooms that help meet the needs of LEP students
4. Working with feeder elementary schools to learn how LEP students are responding to math instruction and what happens when basic math facts are not mastered
5. Enlisting the help of a central office math specialist to work with feeder elementary schools and the middle school to create common assessments for LEP students that help track their progress over time
6. Engaging parents in a culturally appropriate parent education program intended to help parents support their children more effectively at home, including requiring them to attend school unless they are ill

Each of the listed solutions can be considered based on the root-cause criteria. We would reject Solution 1 immediately, because the idea of after-school tutoring contradicts the poor-attendance root cause. If these students are having difficulty attending school at all, they are not likely to participate in after-school tutoring, and there are logistical problems with this alternative. Solution 2 seems attractive

because it directly addresses the root cause of weak math vocabulary. It has the added benefit of tapping into school-site expertise—both about vocabulary and about the children involved—to help reduce or eliminate the root cause. Similar to Solution 2, Solution 3 could be implemented and have an effect in the current school year. More important, it is a clear response to the root cause of instruction not accommodating the needs of LEP students. More culturally responsive classrooms might also mitigate the attendance problem, but this outcome seems less assured. Solutions 4 and 5 are potentially helpful, but they appear to be longer term efforts that would not bear fruit for a few years. These might be put aside to be considered later in favor of implementing solutions that will have a more immediate effect on student achievement. Solution 6 might be appealing to the team, because enlisting parent support would reinforce efforts made from within the school and because it could address the attendance root cause.

Specific Objectives

Note from the box that an overall goal is heavily implied by articulation of the challenge area and its root causes. The goal in this case would be to improve LEP students' math achievement. Specific objectives are implied in the proposed solutions. Solution 2 suggests the objective of enhancing math vocabulary through specific activities taking place in English for speakers of other languages and language arts instruction. The objective associated with Solution 3 is to enhance math teacher effectiveness by improving the cultural responsiveness of their classrooms and teaching. Solution 6 carries with it the objective of helping parents become closer partners in the schooling process of their children. All these objectives could be more specifically stated in terms of benchmarks or standards, such as 40% of LEP parents will attend at least one parent education event. The point we wish to emphasize is that goals and objectives that are implicit in our development of a logic of action should be made explicit in the School Improvement Project Proposal so that others who have not been on the collaborative team can understand the team's intentions.

Solutions 2, 3, and 6 might appear the most attractive to Natalie's team because of their logical links to the identified root causes and because of their potential for near-term impact (a criterion we added as we considered the example). These are merely our perceptions, however. Natalie's hypothetical team would be far more informed than we are about the problem, the student population, and the school context. Nevertheless, the exercise we have engaged in demonstrates how each of the major pieces of problem identification and solution searching might contribute to the creation of a clear logic of action that would support an action plan. We encourage you to use Worksheet 9.3 to engage your own team in the creation of a logic of action for your School Improvement Project Proposal.

Additional Criteria

Up to this point in our discussion, we have been considering the logic of action of your proposal within the very narrow perspective of your collaborative team. To make your ultimate action plan truly persuasive to your administrative team and others, you need to use a broader point of view. Place yourself in your principal's chair for a few minutes. Every proposal for change that is brought to you for approval carries with it consequences, even if the rosy predictions of the proposer come true. Teachers, parents, students, central office administrators, and school board members individually and collectively could be upset by the proposed change for a wide variety of reasons. Every change represents an exponential increase for you (the principal) in time and effort spent on your job because of the multiple constituencies that must be communicated with and placated. Then there are practical considerations such as whether or not the school can tolerate one more initiative, whether the proposal is consistent with board policy and procedures, and whether the necessary resources are available.

Moving back to your own chair, it is your job to lead your team through a process of matching preferred solutions to criteria beyond the root causes of the problem you have identified. The best solution in the world cannot succeed in the face of a principal's reluctance. You and your team will need to articulate persuasive arguments that use multiple criteria as their foundation. Consider the questions presented in Figure 9.1 as guidelines for your thinking; these were constructed to span the four analytic frames derived from Bolman and Deal (2008) introduced in Chapter 2 and, thus, to promote consideration of a variety of perspectives.

No single solution is likely to satisfy all the above criteria equally well, but at least some will need to be met in order for your proposal to have a good chance of being accepted. For example, a principal who agrees that the solution will make him or her look good in the eyes of the central office and the community is more likely to work hard to find resources to support the proposal.

Whatever criteria you use to assess the quality of your proposed solution—root causes and others—you must be able to provide clear evidence to support your arguments about how your solutions address the criteria. Doing so could be as simple as pulling out key language from the vision, mission, or goals; as direct as using a quotation from a board member that appeared in a local newspaper; or as subtle as tapping into one of the principal's core values. The more criteria that can be satisfied by the solutions you and your team select,

Figure 9.1 Evaluating Solutions Through Bolman and Deal's (2008) Four Frames

<p><i>Structural Frame</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Does the proposal support the stated mission and/or strategic goals of the school? 2. Does the proposal address a priority? (Do multiple constituencies agree that the problem addressed by the proposal is a priority?) 3. Do rules, roles, and relationships support the changes you intend? (Have you involved people with the roles and relationships that are most needed to support the proposal?) 	<p><i>Human Resource Frame</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What are participants' needs as they implement the proposal? 2. How will you motivate people before, during, and after implementation? 3. Do leaders and followers have the skills and knowledge they require to support proposal implementation?
<p><i>Political Frame</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How will implementers be involved in decision making? 2. Whose authority is needed in order to boost the likelihood of widespread implementation? 3. Have significant stakeholders who might be affected by the change been consulted? 4. What are the significant interest groups associated with proposal implementation? (What do they want? What power do they have to influence the change? Where does their power come from?) 	<p><i>Symbolic Frame</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Is the proposal consistent with "the way we do things around here"? 2. Does the proposal contradict or reinforce any cherished myths or stories? 3. What are the "sacred cows" the proposal challenges? (How are people likely to react?) 4. How will you help constituents interpret the meaning of the changes embedded in the proposal? 5. Does the proposal honor the past, anticipate the future, or both?

the more effective your choice is likely to be. The process of linking solutions to multiple effectiveness criteria leads to the creation of an overall rationale for implementing your school improvement project.

The rationale for your school improvement project can be stated by answering the question that may be on many people's minds but is likely not to be asked directly: "Why should we change what we are doing to do what you recommend?" You have come to the point in the planning process where

Common Questions Stakeholders Have About Proposed School Improvement Projects

1. What larger goal am I accomplishing by participating in this proposal?
2. How does the proposal benefit me directly? What problem is it solving for me?
3. How does the proposal benefit me indirectly?
4. In what ways will the proposal make my work more effective? How do you know?
5. In what ways will the proposal make my work easier to accomplish?
6. In what ways will the proposal make my work more gratifying to me?
7. How does the proposal give me a brighter future?
8. What benefits will the school community see as a result of implementing this proposal?

what you say is no longer just about your target population of students. Your school improvement project must be seen by those who are charged with implementing it as beneficial to them, or they are likely to ignore you—or worse. In the next chapter, we will discuss issues related to implementation, including the benefit of exploring potential barriers that may come up as you announce and begin to implement your work. For now, suffice it to say that as you arrive at your preferred solution, you are working to establish a rationale that incorporates the ideas and concerns of multiple stakeholders in your school and in the school's community, including students, teachers, parents, school and district administrators, and potentially members of the community at large. Exploring

their likely questions and interests (see sidebar) will help you and your team develop a rationale that speaks to their concerns.

A Case of Organizational Learning

Clearly articulating your logic of action and presenting a strong rationale to your school community are two processes that engage those who work and learn in your school in the process of organizational learning. However, organizational learning tends to be nonlinear, and much of it began long before you got to this stage. All the work you did with respect to problem identification and root-cause analysis is based on the concept of comparing espoused theories with theories in use. Depending on how public you have been in your work and how widespread your involvement of others has been, you are likely to have opened up many undiscussables, some of which are probably painful to members of the school community. To fully engage in organizational learning will require you to change the governing variables that have allowed the problem you have identified to persist for so long (Argyris, 1999). Taking action to eliminate root causes and

improve student and school performance will eliminate some governing variables and institute others. In short, action planning and ultimate implementation are, at the core, results of organizational learning.

In Chapter 2, we borrowed from Schlechty (2001) to explain that most changes in schools have little meaning, because they are too shallow. Part of the action planning process needs to address this question: “How can we plan and communicate in a manner such that this action plan will be in place long enough to see results?” Bringing the whole school along with you in the process of organizational learning goes a long way in changing perceptions of your project from trivial to vital.

Conclusion

We conclude our discussion of identifying and selecting solutions with two cautions. Much of decision theory—and by extension, much of our thinking about practical decision making—is dominated by the concept of optimization. Optimization defines the best solution as that which provides the greatest value at the least cost. Certainly, this is a fine criterion when all variables are known. It is difficult to apply in educational settings, however, because there are numerous variables impacting learning problems that we either do not understand or cannot influence. Think about the common challenge of different teachers handling the same curriculum and instructional strategies with very different outcomes. Under conditions of ambiguity and uncertainty—characteristics that are prevalent, if not dominant, in schools—decision makers are more likely to choose solutions that appear to be “good enough” to address specific needs. March and Simon (1993) call this process *satisficing*. It is no better or worse than optimizing. It may simply be the best we can do under certain circumstances. The concept of satisficing suggests that selecting the “best” solution is relative, among other things, to the opportunities you and your collaborative team have to implement what you select.

Second, organizational theory teaches us that organizations such as schools are subject to a great deal of pressure from the environment to adopt change strategies that are popular at the time. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) talk about these forces as an “iron cage,” powerful because they reward adoption of practices more because they are readily accepted and associated with “effective schools” than because they produce lasting results. We are all subject to such forces; they come in the form of central offices supporting favored programs with resources, the popular and trade press touting certain solutions as preferred, and so on. (Of course, to borrow wisdom from a different context, just because a strategy is heavily touted doesn’t mean it won’t be effective in your school, for your issue.) At this point, you and your team have built an evidence-based argument and articulated a logic of action that spells

out quite clearly why you believe the action you endorse will work, and in endorsing this course of action, you have also expressed willingness to be leaders in implementation and accountable for assessing the efficacy of your actions. Now, it is time to plan how you will enact this project.

ACTIVITY 9.2 Some Questions to Ask About Solutions

At this juncture, you and members of your collaborative team are likely convinced that the actions you are proposing are compelling. In preparation for moving from concept to action plan and in preparation for the need to “sell” your idea to colleagues, spend some time with one or more critical friends discussing the following:

- What evidence suggests that taking this action will help us achieve our goal?
- What more do we need to know about this course of action—about the efficacy of the strategy, the resources needed to successfully implement it, the connection between this strategy and other things we are doing at school and so on?
- What *evidence* do we have that suggests that this strategy is “high leverage”—that is, that it will *affect student learning and/or alter teacher behavior*? How do we know that it is the most effective and efficient means to reach our goal?

CREATING YOUR ACTION PLAN

As important as it is to develop the arguments that link your team’s proposed solutions to addressing the larger goal of your project and specific root causes of the problem, you will need to take specific steps to move from choosing a solution into implementation. Quite literally, you will need to create an action plan that spells out how you and your team will lead others to make your change project a reality and how you will determine if the project was a success. You will be formulating a work plan that you can use to communicate to others and to track the fidelity of implementation at each stage of the project. Creating the action plan will also help you clarify whose support you need, including whose permission or authority you will need to procure to enact the project and the resources you will need to amass to be successful.

Virtually everyone in the education business has experience as an action planner. A lesson plan, for instance, is a type of action plan: It specifies clearly and simply how a teacher intends to facilitate learning to meet well-defined

learning objectives, a timeline for implementation, and a means for assessing learning. In a similar fashion, the action plan you and your team will create will communicate clearly the tasks that need to take place to enact your plan, who will be responsible and accountable for leading each task, the resources you will need, a timeline for completing various tasks, and success signals that will allow you and your team to conduct an ongoing, formative evaluation of your implementation and adjust your actions along the way.

Before laying out the steps to create your action plan, we want to emphasize that an action plan is truly a living document. The plan you create now is a hypothesis about what you will need to do to implement your project successfully. However, in the real-world context in which you will work, an awful lot can happen to require adjustment to your plan along the way. As some examples, staff included in your plan may be reassigned, resources you believed to be available might not be as plentiful as you had hoped, or the district might announce adoption of a new program that affects how your work will proceed. Along the way, you might learn based on your ongoing assessment of the action plan that some assumptions you had at the outset need to be reconsidered.

The point here is exceedingly important. A well-developed and thought-through action plan is like the blueprint of a building: It provides you guidance and a “big-picture” view of your work. But just as an architect needs to revise the blueprint when the building code changes or it is discovered that the ground under one wing is ill suited to bear the weight of the building or needed material is in short supply, so too will you need to adjust your action plan as you implement your project to adjust for events and circumstances you could not predict beforehand. We recall an instance when we were working with a high school principal who had major parts of his building unexpectedly shut down during the school year and who commented that the only thing that kept him sane during that time was a comprehensive action plan guiding his school’s improvement activity. Even amid a great deal of chaos and even though the action plan required substantial revision at the time as a result of this chaos, it also provided a touchstone that showed where the school was and what still needed to be done. Perhaps more important, it was also shared by the entire school community, who then also had a common point of conversation.

You cannot plan for all eventualities; indeed, to attempt to do so would be paralyzing. So you do the very best you can ahead of time creating your plan; you communicate the plan widely as a means of gaining consensus on your goal and course of action; and you understand up front that while enacting the project, you will also be assessing your plan and revising it as needed based on evidence you collect as you work.

Formulating Your Plan

Just as there are many different formats for creating a lesson plan, there are many different formats for action planning; no doubt, your school system or state education agency has endorsed a preferred format. These plans typically require context-specific information such as a reference linking the proposed action to state or district instructional standards or school board goals, may require the inclusion of district-specific budget categories for the expenditure of funds or purchase of equipment, and so on. The core of an effective action plan includes a very well-defined set of information, though, and the simplified format, presented in Figure 9.2, requires you to think through enactment of your project quite thoroughly.

Figure 9.2 Simplified Action Planning Format

Objective:				
Tasks	Who's Responsible	By When	Resources Needed	Success Signals

As an initial step, write a one-sentence statement that describes what you intend to do as an action objective. Ideally, your objective will state the circumstance you will reach, the time in which you will reach it, and the measure you will use to prove you have reached it. For instance, returning to the example presented earlier in this chapter, Natalie and her team might adopt the objective, *Increase the percentage of LEP students passing the 2009–2010 state-mandated, end-of-course assessment by 25% by engaging parents in a culturally appropriate parent education program intended to help them support their children more effectively at home.*

The heart of your action plan is the delineation of tasks necessary to complete the project. There is no magic we can offer to complete this step; it requires thinking through how the project needs to be implemented, engaging in conversation with your team and other stakeholders who may be affected or who have knowledge and expertise needed to complete the project, and learning about existing policies and procedures that may affect implementation. This is an iterative process, often initiated as a brainstorming exercise with your team and/or others whose expertise would contribute to the planning effort. First, make a list of the tasks that need to be completed to reach your objective. Try to strike a balance here by focusing on significant steps in enacting your plan, trying not to omit anything that represents an important component necessary to your success but also not getting bogged down with minutiae. Once you have identified these tasks, put them into a logical sequence—which tasks must come first, which follow, and so on. Once this is completed, go over the entire sequence again to see if there are missing pieces, and revise as necessary.

Once the various tasks are drafted, work across the table to fill in the specifics for each and every task: Who will be responsible for ensuring that the task is done? What is the target date for completion of the task? What material, financial, and human resources are needed to complete the task?

Most of the School Improvement Project Proposals we have reviewed over the years have had multiple components, and they often include some aspect of curriculum development for the targeted population and complementary professional development to help teachers adapt their instructional techniques to the identified problem. Each of those major strands may require some amount of research and articulation of what is intended. These major components can be approached as mini action plans, or plans within the overall plan; the task of completing drafts of these component plans may be effectively distributed to subteams. Each component may be quite involved. For example, professional development requires considerations of instructional strategies appropriate for working with adults who are teachers, timing of the professional development experience so that it is most useful to teachers, and follow-up to engage in

timely reflection and problem solving as teachers attempt to use what they learned in the professional development experience.

The work involved in your school improvement project will likely seem daunting at times. Nevertheless, figuring out the details involved in that work prior to committing to a specific course of action will help you understand the implications of your project more deeply and address the concerns of others. Figuring out the work ahead of time will also help you spread the work more evenly among team members and others, rather than taking on all the surprise tasks by yourself because everyone else is already too busy. Worksheet 9.4 may be used to help you and your team brainstorm necessary components of the action plan. The sections that follow explore some of the issues that often come up as teams complete various sections of their plans.

Assigning Tasks

Figuring out the tasks is likely to be a highly collaborative effort, because different members of your team with their varied perspectives will think about and emphasize different aspects of the work. You will also probably involve other stakeholders in your school, whose knowledge and skills will help you do a good job laying out tasks needed to complete your plan. Task assignment may not work the same way. It is difficult for a group to divide tasks in a manner that both is fair and matches skill and expertise to tasks well. This is where your “decision about how to decide” (refer back to Activity 3.3) becomes important, because you do not want your team to be bogged down in bickering or silence if no one volunteers for the apparently less desirable tasks.

You may prefer bringing a completed plan to your team for assigned tasks and taking feedback on your plan (i.e., a Type 2 decision, as discussed in Chapter 3). It might be desirable to use a table similar to that in Worksheet 9.4 to allow people to suggest their own roles, but you will need to be more specific about exactly what will be accomplished by whom. It would be best, to the extent possible, for you to give every team member a mixture of “grunt work” and more engaging tasks that require expertise and/or talent. It is often wise to give individuals responsibility for entire sections of the plan (e.g., all tasks associated with needed professional development or summative evaluation).

As you present the plan, you will explain your rationale behind task assignments so that others can understand your effort to be fair. Thinking back to the kinds of factors you considered when you selected your team (see Worksheet 3.2), when suggesting task assignments, it seems prudent to consider team members’ skills, motivations, and habits of mind. Who is best able to do various tasks? Who will be most motivated? Who is most likely to embrace the challenge, involve others, maintain good records, accept direction, and so on?

At the same time, it will be important for you to be open to group feedback so that others can have influence in the final outcome. It is important for you to listen for that kind of expression of multiple perspectives and help sort through it. The result of such a discussion may be that your plan is the “least bad” alternative on which the team can agree. On the other hand, team members may have ideas that are stronger than yours in certain ways and should be incorporated into the plan. Finally, we have found that it is usually best to receive the feedback in one session, consider it away from the group, and return at a later time with a response that demonstrates how you did and did not use feedback you received. Whatever your approach, remember that as team leader, you are modeling effective group process and setting a tone for your team.

Timeline

One of the great struggles involved in making school improvements is that everyone is locked into a relentless schedule governed by bells or electronic tones, weekly and monthly standing meetings, quarterly grades, and holiday breaks. It is difficult to get everyone’s attention to a sufficient degree to complete the necessary work. We have found that one of the most effective ways to get work completed is to create a realistic set of deadlines and stick to them. The same is true for your collaborative team. You will want to create a timeline for task completion that accounts for three important factors: (a) task order (i.e., what comes first, second, and third), (b) when the work must be completed so that the project can move forward, and (c) roadblocks in the regular school calendar that are likely to delay your team’s task completion. Setting deadlines that are achievable and monitoring progress at regular intervals will reduce disappointment from periods of inactivity or low productivity.

Resources

One of the most common pieces of feedback we give our students on their School Improvement Project Proposals is that they have not fully considered the resources necessary to support their projects. This tendency is understandable because budgets are generally tight and teacher leaders are reluctant to ask for money. It would be better to consider three possibilities: (a) Resources can be allocated away from other uses, (b) outside funding sources (grants) can be helpful for getting a new project started, and (c) nonmonetary resources have high value.

One reason schools often have difficulty changing is that budget allocations become frozen. Taking money away from one use and giving it to another is a challenging leadership activity. It is quite natural for teachers who have worked in an area for a number of years to be devoted to it. They are bound to be unhappy

if their funding is reduced or cut, despite the fact that not all educational efforts are worthy of funding in perpetuity. Understand, therefore, that your principal is likely to weigh the political consequences of cutting someone else's funding in order to provide resources to your very worthwhile project. It is possible that you will be persuasive enough to get at least some reallocation, but do not be too disappointed if you discover that funding something new is more difficult than funding an established program. Other sources may be easier to obtain, and some are at your fingertips.

Many school districts have local foundations that provide small- to medium-sized grants to teachers and administrators. The application process for such grants is typically straightforward, and the foundations are often eager to fund innovative ideas intended to boost student learning. Check application guidelines and talk with your principal and/or central office staff about what the foundation is interested in funding to see if there is a match with your project. Even if the foundation is unable to give you everything you need for your project, it may get you started with money that can be combined with other sources.

Our students, with the exception of those working in special education, tend to be unaware of state and federal categorical funding that may be available to them, because this money is often allocated and monitored by central office administrators. If your project focuses on special education students, LEP students, students in poverty, or students in vocational or technical education, there may be categorical money that could be allocated toward your project. If you inform yourself about the funding rules for categorical money, you can work with district personnel to bring some of that money into your project. Check federal and state websites for specific information about the rules governing categorical funds.

The U.S. Department of Education (and very likely your state department of education) also offers competitive grants directly to schools and districts. Although federal websites can seem a bit intimidating, the Department of Education website lists numerous grants for efforts from advanced placement incentive programs to elementary and secondary school counseling to the Striving Readers program, intended to boost literacy for middle and high school students. Websites from both not-for-profit and private for-profit companies may also make grants available. Some vendors in the field provide funding information because they are hoping that you will use grant money to buy some of their published materials. For example, the website maintained by Pearson Education offers information about federal grants and how they work. Pearson also offers a free grant-reviewing process to enhance the quality of your grant before it is submitted. Although applying for a grant can seem like a great deal of work in a busy schedule, you need not do it alone. Your school district may have personnel who specialize in grant applications who can help you.

As helpful as a grant may be, not all resources come in the form of money. Larger school districts include central office personnel whose job it is to assist with curriculum development and/or professional development (recall the discussion from Chapter 3 about involving central office personnel). If you include such people in your project, they can provide expertise and learning opportunities to your faculty at no cost to your school site. They might also be aware of books and materials that could be purchased from budgets that they control or that are currently available in the school district. Productive partners at the central office can help you span all three types of resources for your project—budget reallocation, outside funding, and nonmonetary resources.

One last consideration about the “resource” column is worth highlighting: While many resource considerations reduce to asking for financial or material support, an entirely different resource question is, “Whose authority do we need to complete this project?” Principals we work with often have line authority to make the decisions needed to enact a project, but teacher leaders seldom have the authority needed and instead must seek permission of the person with legitimate authority to approve the project, an expenditure of funds, or even access to needed information. As you build your plan, it is worth asking whether the team has the authority to enact the task and, if not, whose authority is required. Part of the plan needs to include gaining this authority.

Success Signals

We will deal more with evaluation in the next chapter, but an important part of your action plan is defining success signals for each and every task. How will you know each task has been completed and you are ready to move on to the next portion of your plan? This column defines the formative evaluation of the plan, which enables you as a leader to monitor implementation fidelity. By being diligent conducting this formative assessment as you enact your plan, you will be amassing evidence you will need to fully explain your success and will be enabling the kind of organizational learning needed to fuel continuous improvement.

Consider an example: Suppose at the end of the 2009–2010 school year, Natalie’s team learned that their plan did not achieve its stated objective. In fact, the percentage of LEP students passing the math exam increased by only about 6%, rather than the 25% they had hoped. Why? Assuming Natalie and her team had a well-specified action plan and had been diligently “working the plan,” including conducting a formative evaluation along the way, we might already know that parent involvement in the project was limited, and we may know something about the reasons for this. For instance, we might have learned along the way that there are serious problems with contact information for parents

who are new to the district, or we might know that two training sessions had to be cancelled because of funding issues. We might already know, also, that children whose parents participated in the program passed the exam. Armed with just the post hoc, summative data about efficacy of the program, we would be poorly equipped to advocate for continuing; with the more detailed, in-process evidence, we would be able to argue for the program's promise.

This may be the most difficult part of planning. We are eager to plan and develop ideas. We are reluctant to decide ahead of time how we will measure achievement. With all that you are putting into your school improvement project and considering the fact that you are leading a dedicated team of teachers and administrators, you will want to know if your project is succeeding as you engage in the action plan. If you have clearly stated goals and objectives, then achieving the processes and outcomes embedded in specific objectives can serve as important success signals. Measures of your success range from regular and productive meetings of your collaborative team (an important process goal documented through meeting minutes) to the development of new teaching strategies for the content at the core of your project to improved common assessments at a specific grade level. These benchmarks of success help you and your team understand whether or not your project is on track and which course corrections you may need to make. Identifying incremental success may also boost the morale of your team and others in your school community as they see your project beginning to bear fruit.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has helped you think through the logic of action for your school improvement project from start to finish. Understanding the logic of action behind your project helps make your work more systematic and transparent. Being explicit about how we move from Step A to Step B to Step C forces us to operate from evidence rather than a hunch or myth. Transparency is about explaining our choices and actions to others. The two characteristics combine to improve the likelihood that we will understand what we have done and be able to communicate it more articulately to others.

Action planning is fundamentally about visualizing, creating a road map for how you will improve students' performance and their academic and lifelong opportunities. The work may seem irritatingly detailed and mundane, but being meticulous is an important ingredient in your ultimate success. The action plan keeps you and your team honest. It lays out what you have committed to deliver

and how you will deliver it. You are far more likely to achieve your goal if you are clear in your own mind and publicly about how you intend to get there.

Our experience and research suggests that schools and districts often get only to the planning stage in their thinking. The tacit belief seems to be that if a plan for improvement is published, everyone will follow it and performance will improve. In contrast, we advocate for careful planning of implementation and evaluation so that the entire school improvement process is understood. We have known for a generation or more (Berman & McLaughlin, 1976; Tyack & Cuban, 1995) that implementation varies from what planners expect. Sometimes the variation improves the plan and sometimes it doesn't. We focus in the next chapter on implementation of your team's ideas and the specifics of evaluating the outcomes so that your school improvement project has a greater likelihood of achieving what you intend.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How will you know if your potential solutions have high potential to resolve the problem, challenge, or gap you identified?
2. What are some useful strategies for assigning duties in a manner that you are not required to carry the entire load of your project?
3. What is the logic of action for your school improvement project?

WORKSHEET 9.1 Format for Recording Information About Potential Solutions

Full bibliographic citation:

What is the proposed solution?

Why is it believed that this action will work? What causes of the problem will it eliminate?

What are the "boundary assumptions" (i.e., conditions under which the cause-effect relationship is thought to hold)?

What are your thoughts about the trustworthiness of this claim? Any limitations?

WORKSHEET 9.2 Format for Discussion of Solutions

Taking this action ...	will eliminate these causes ...	producing the following outcome(s):	Evidence to support this claim:

WORKSHEET 9.3 Articulating Your Logic of Action

In Activity 4.1, we asked you to reflect on past efforts to improve student achievement by asking a series of questions. In this worksheet, we ask you to work with your collaborative team to respond to similar prompts but with a twist toward creating your logic of action. Your responses to these prompts should be based on the work you did to create your Improvement Target Proposal and your Research Brief.

1. Our target student population is [be specific about which students you intend to help] . . .
2. Because [state the needs of this population that warrant being addressed] . . .
3. Evidence of these needs includes [explain how you know this particular student population requires an action plan] . . .
4. Root causes of the needs are [use your local knowledge and library research to explain] . . .
5. Our team believes the best way to address the root causes of this problem is [list your preferred solutions here] . . .
6. Because [complete the logic of action with your specific rationale for adopting *these* specific solutions] . . .

WORKSHEET 9.4 Figuring Out the Work and Appropriate Roles

Use or modify the table below to spell out the general work and specific roles you believe are required to take your school improvement project from a proposal into action. (Not all roles are required for each work strand, but some may require multiple roles.) After you and your team have figured out the nature of the work, determine who is likely to play which role and place those names in the appropriate cells. This last step brings you closer to assigning tasks.

Roles	Work Strands			
	Curriculum Development	Professional Development	Logistics/Support	Communications/PR
Design				
Staffing				
Scheduling				
Resource procurement				
Enlisting support				
Participant recruitment				
Follow-up				