

DOINGWHATWORKS



Video

FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

Signaling Change

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Topic: Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools

Practice: Improved Leadership

Highlights

- Turnaround leaders must personally analyze data to pinpoint the big problems.
- Successful leaders need to be willing to break norms, rules, and traditions.
- Leaders must make clear that change is mandatory.
- Turning a school around should start with high-visibility “quick wins” to show the staff and community that change is possible and to build momentum.

About the Interviewee

Bryan C. Hassel is Co-Director of Public Impact. He consults nationally with leading public agencies, nonprofit organizations, and foundations working for dramatic improvements in K-12 education. He is a recognized expert on charter schools, school turnarounds, education entrepreneurship, and human capital in education. On the topic of school turnarounds, he co-authored Public Impact’s *School Turnarounds: Cross-Sector Evidence on Dramatic Organizational Improvement*. He consults widely with school districts, states, and other organizations engaged in school turnarounds.

In addition to numerous other articles, monographs, and how-to guides for practitioners, he is the co-author of *Picky Parent Guide: Choose Your Child's School with Confidence* and author of *The Charter School Challenge: Avoiding the Pitfalls, Fulfilling the Promise*, published by the Brookings Institution Press in 1999. Dr. Hassel received his doctorate in public policy from Harvard University and his masters in politics from Oxford University, which he attended as a Rhodes Scholar. He earned his B.A. at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, which he attended as a Morehead Scholar.

Full Transcript

I am Bryan Hassel, Co-Director of Public Impact.

One of the most important components of turnarounds across all kinds of organizations is strong leadership. You almost always have a new leader who comes in, or the existing leader really steps up and exerts a new kind of leadership. You almost never see a turnaround where there isn't that strong leader driving the process forward. Now that doesn't mean you don't see a lot of other people involved in the turnaround. It's always a team effort. There is always a lot of involvement by—in the case of schools—teachers, parents, community members, partners of all types, but there is always that leader who is driving the process forward, and that's almost always present in every kind of turnaround that we've looked at.

One way that leaders can signal the need to change is to make clear that change is mandatory. Again, a lot of times we see schools work like this: There is a program that's announced, and everyone goes through professional development. But then when it comes down to it, when teachers go into their classrooms they can do, more or less, what they want to do. In a turnaround situation, if the principal is serious about driving change, the principal has to signal that change is mandatory. It's not optional. It's not something that people can do if they want to, but it's something that has to be done. And what does that mean in practice? Well, it means walking the halls, visiting classrooms, observing teachers in action. It means teachers observing each other in action and giving feedback, and it means getting teachers together to talk about what's going well and what's going badly so that everyone can participate in this process of implementing the change.

Another common action that we see in leadership of turnarounds is breaking norms and rules, even. A lot of the times in a failing organization, the way things have been done over the years is part of the problem, and they need to be changed. So, in a school, this could be the way time is used, the way schedules are set up, the way colleagues interact with each other. It could be the way transportation is used to get kids to and from the school on the schedule. And that's a way to signal to the school community this is different; this is serious. We're not business as usual. We're willing to set aside long-standing traditions in order to move things to the next level.

One of the things we see in almost every turnaround is the leaders rolling up their sleeves and analyzing

data because when they look at data they can see what are the big problems that this organization has. In the case of the school: What groups aren't performing well? What kinds of subjects and grades are really at the bottom of the heap that we need to focus on to get results? And by personally analyzing the data, they are able to signal change, the need for change, to the school community.

Turnaround leaders engage in a lot of actions that we see again and again in successful turnarounds. One of the most important is achieving quick wins that convince the organization that it can get better, and the quick wins are so important because they build momentum for change. They encourage people who have hope that they can do better, and so the leader needs to identify what are some ways—whether a specific subgroup of students, whether a specific grade level, a specific subject, whether it's a specific topic that we want to take on—that we can win, where we can show everyone that all the kids in the school can learn to high levels, and get that job done. Not in three years, not in two years, not even in one year but very quickly, within the first few months of the turnaround. That doesn't mean they have to solve every problem the school has in the first few months, but they have to get those wins because without that they're not going to get the support they need. But with that, they can have support, and that builds momentum to do the next bit of hard work.