

Task 3: Reflective Thinking and Generative Conversation

Culture

In his text, The Human Side of School Change: Reform, Resistance, and the Real-Life Problems of Innovation, Robert Evans (1996) describes the first level of culture, artifacts and creations, as,

... a school's physical space, its language, its style of dress, its climate, its norms of behavior and mores concerning the display of emotion, its myths and stories, its customs, rituals, and ceremonies. One has only to walk into a school to begin noticing these characteristics (p. 42).

In the morning, administrators as well as three to four teachers are outside (rain, snow, sleet, or hail, but not lightning) opening doors, welcoming students to school, and telling parents to have a great day. As you walk in the front doors, a line of teachers stretches down the hallway welcoming students by name to class. The walls are bright and covered with art and class work. The lobby has fresh Starbucks coffee brewed each morning for teachers, teacher assistants, and any parents that wish to come in and fix themselves a cup. The halls are buzzing with a diverse mix of smiling students and adults greeting each other. It is a very warm and welcoming environment. Throughout the day, the halls remain busy, filled with music every 38 minutes to signal the end of a period. The music changes each month with a different theme, an additional way to celebrate the diversity of our school.

The second layer of culture is values. Evans (1996) asserts that, values,

...develop as problems are solved. When a solution to a problem works reliably, it becomes invested with special significance. It comes to be seen as 'the way to do it'. It begins as

a hypothesis, but ultimately it becomes accepted as a reality...” (pp. 42-43). Many of these values, were once new initiatives in the systems diagram. There is a teacher and teacher assistant in each classroom of 14-17 students to enable smaller groups for differentiated learning. You will see the various, leveled phonics groups with teachers using the Orton Gillingham method. Small guided reading groups and whole group Junior Great Books discussions can be seen throughout the day. There is workshop model writing and mathematics instruction. We believe wholeheartedly in educating the whole child and balance the schedule as such. There is a 38-minute P.E. period in addition to a half hour of recess each day for every grade level (recess twice a day for prekindergarten and kindergarten). Students experience collaboratory (a combination of maker space, technology class, and library skills), science, art, music, and dance twice a six day cycle and Spanish once per six day cycle. We are a Responsive Classroom school committed to the significance of social emotional learning for young students therefore each day begins with a morning meeting and ends with a closing circle.

The final level of culture, assumptions, can be described as, “...fundamental, underlying shared convictions that guide behavior and shape the way group members perceive, think, and feel” (Evans, 1996, p. 43). Due to the variance in mental models, I had difficulty with this section. Here is an example. Due to our reputation in the area, many people feel that we do not need to change. Conversely, it is my belief that we have that reputation because we are open to change and do so often. I actually arrived at the assumptions listed below by completing the mental model process described in the next section. The assumptions include:

- Change is good
- Flexibility makes us better
- We won’t know until we try

- We are always trying to improve
- We always strive to meet the needs of all students
- “Can do” attitude

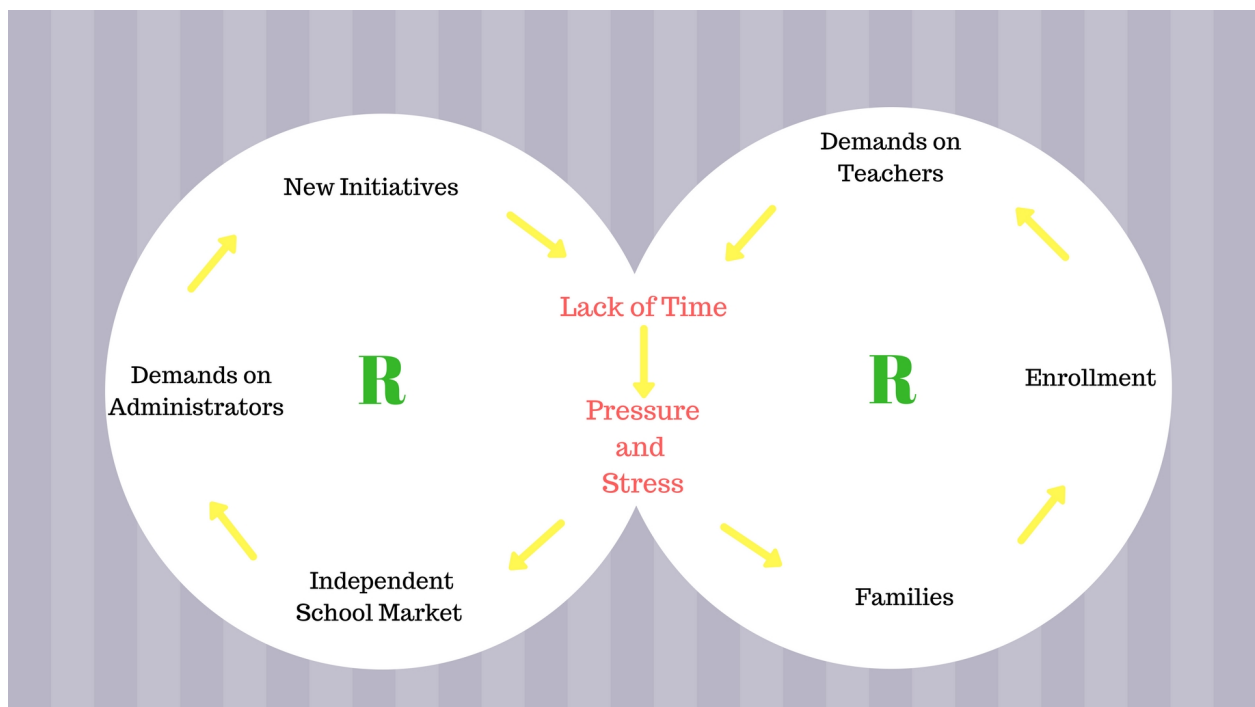
Mental Models

Senge (2012) describes mental models as,

“...the images, assumptions, and stories that we carry in our minds of ourselves, other people, institutions and every aspect of the world. Because mental models are usually tacit, existing below the level of awareness, they are often untested and unexamined.

They are generally invisible to us – until we look for them” (p. 99).

I chose to analyze the mental models in my system with the process developed by Chris Argyris and Donald Schon, described by Steven Zuieback in a YouTube video (Zuieback, 2014). First, I should include my updated system:



In the video, Zuieback discusses the important of completing this process with others; he stresses the significance of having a various stakeholder representatives present (Zuieback, 2014).

Initially, I completed the mental models process on my own, using our lack of time as the current event/negative result at the bottom of the model. After completing it on my own, I was curious about how someone else would view this issue and what this process was like with more people.

As I was sitting in the office waiting for a meeting to begin, I asked one of our technology specialists and a third grade teacher if they would be willing to try an exercise with me. They agreed and went I through Zuieback's exercise with them. I was pleasantly surprised with the outcome. I would have felt completely "out of touch" if there were no similarities, but luckily, there were many. While the two teachers definitely added depth with their descriptions of the various behaviors attributed to our lack of time, our mental models are analogous. See the results in the table below:

Mental Model Process	Me	Technology Specialist and Third Grade Teacher
Perspectives, Beliefs, Values of the original architects	• Change is good • Flexibility makes us better • We won't know until we try	• Always trying to improve • Always trying to meet the needs of everyone • "Can do" attitude
Structures, Strategies, Processes (or lack thereof) that cause people to behave this way	• Heavy Workload • Minimal Training on new initiatives	• Adding to what we do without taking anything away
Behavior Patterns that Cause Negative Result/Current Event	• Easily Irritated • Forgetful	• Misunderstandings • Stress on Face • Hurrying students along to the next activity • Change in teachers'

		tone • Go, go, go! • Feeling rushed
Negative Result/Current Event	Lack of Time	Lack of Time

Completing this mental model alone and then with others helped me fully comprehend its power.

The questions listed in the video were very helpful. The only potential issue I see with our mental model process was the “measurability” of our current event/negative result, lack of time. I understand that ideally this would be measurable so you can easily assess progress, but what about in this case?

Advocacy and Inquiry

I found Senge’s “Protocols for Improved Advocacy” extremely helpful when planning how a collaborative conversation might go. I put the statements from the table in italics with what I would say in regular text:

Here’s what I think and here’s how I got there. I think that we ought to have more time for reflection, training, and collaboration. There is so much on your plates, with more being added each year, that you really do not have time for these important practices that we advocate. *I came to this conclusion because* there is stress, frustration, and confusion in the building. *Imagine that you are coming back from summer break, refreshed and ready to start a new year, when you open the school calendar. Inside you find the following:* thorough training time set aside to ensure understanding before a new initiative is implemented and uninterrupted work time built in to the school year to help alleviate the stress around progress report time. *I am proposing this because,* your questions and concerns during faculty and grade level meetings *have led me to believe that* the training for our past few initiatives has not been ideal and extra time would be

extremely beneficial during progress report time. *What are your thoughts about what I just said? Here's one aspect which you might help me think through*, if we had more time, let's say five days of it, how would you want to use it? (Senge, 2012, p. 105)

Next, I would insert one of the practices we often use during meetings at school, brainstorming. In our version of brainstorming there is no judgment, no questions can be asked and no opinions given, it is simply a time to record all ideas from the group. We often do this with post-it note pads, allowing each person to contribute as much as they would like to. I would use these ideas for the next step in the process, team learning.

Team Learning

I would like to try the World Cafe model of team learning as described by Nelda Cambron-McCabe mixed with a process we call, "the dots". We often use "the dots" to narrow down choices and it works well for us. Each person receives a certain number of dot stickers. They put their dots beside their top choices. If they feel really strongly about something, they can put more than one dot sticker next to that idea. The dots can be used however the person chooses.

The purpose of our World Café would be to determine the best way to utilize the extra time. My colleagues love to talk (and eat, but the text suggests no food, just ambiance). Accordingly, I think this would be an ideal way for us to have meaningful dialogue. We would have ten tables with six chairs at each. Each table will designate a timekeeper to keep everyone on track. During the World Café session, each person would get one minute to explain how he or she would like to spend the extra time. Once eight minutes ends, each person must leave the current table and go to a different one to repeat the process. During this time I hope to be "watching the evolving dialogue and collective intelligence build..." (Cambron-McCabe, 2012,

p. 123). Once time has ended, each person would receive five stickers to complete “the dots” before leaving. It would be my hope, that after an hour of discourse with teammates, these choices would consider the mental models of others.

References

Evans, R. (1996). *The human side of school change: Reform, resistance, and the real-life problems of innovation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, Inc.

Senge, P., Cambron-McCabe, N., Lucas, T., Smith, B., Dutton, J. & Kleiner, A. (2012). *Schools that learn: A fifth discipline fieldbook for educators, parents, and everyone who cares about education*. New York, NY: Crown Business.

Zuieback, Steven. (2014, November 9). mental models [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=81mJnpKJlc4>