

“What happens when a traditionally siloed and bureaucratic organization decides to pay more than just lip service to democratic process and actually transforms itself to reflect a different paradigm of working? What kinds of shifts happen, both subtle and profound, when stakeholders take ownership of their own work and start moving towards a shared vision?”

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# Embracing the “Gift Story”

## Organizational Redesign in a Time of Crisis in Public Education

By Srikanth C. Gopalakrishnan

What would it look like if the structures we worked in truly allowed us to function in a way that brings our values to life? What happens when a traditionally siloed and bureaucratic organization decides to pay more than just lip service to democratic process and actually transforms itself to reflect a different paradigm of working? What kinds of shifts happen, both subtle and profound, when stakeholders take ownership of their own work and start moving towards a shared vision? The organizational redesign that Rowland Unified School District (RUSD) has been engaged in over the past few months with the support of the Ball Foundation provides some insight into these questions.

In March 2009, the executive leadership of RUSD approached the Ball Foundation with an unusual proposition. This mid-sized urban school district, like most others in California and the nation, was struggling with deep financial cuts. Recognizing that they needed more than just a knee-jerk reaction to budget cuts, the district leaders asked Ball to help them think creatively and reframe this crisis as an opportunity for deep organizational change. The Ball Foundation, with its focus on whole systems change to improve literacy for all students, saw this request closely aligned with its commitment to build capacity in school districts for transformation and innovation.

Rather than a response to a crisis, this would be an effort to redesign the organization to be more nimble, flexible and generative in a time of economic and political uncertainty—all in service to better student

learning. Given the significance of the cuts, the school district leaders were inspired to use the opportunity to make a meaningful difference. They saw this as a way to actualize an ambitious strategic plan that had been recently adopted, which called for the creation of a “coherent, constantly emerging system” that would “transform teaching and learning.”

There still remained the challenge of communicating such an effort to stakeholders and the community at large. Taking a page out of Stephanie Pace Marshall’s work on transforming school, the leaders articulated that they could consciously choose one of two stories—the “gift story” of community and possibility or the “firestorm story” of division and fragmentation (Marshall, 2006); the story that they chose to live into would become their reality and drive all of their decisions. The district as a whole chose to embrace the gift story, and the direction that the redesign effort took emerged out of this conscious choice.

### The Redesign Process

The process began when district leaders asked Ball to facilitate a retreat for a diverse group of 14 stakeholders (subsequently named the “redesign think-tank”). This group was made up of three teachers, three principals, an assistant principal, a classified staff person, two central office directors, three deputy superintendents, and the superintendent. The think-tank’s purpose was to create innovative ways for the district to accomplish its goals more effectively with fewer financial resources. Ball was



the detailed redesign process, starting with the March '09 retreat. The sequence of events was not determined in advance; rather the process was adaptive and emergent. A graphic facilitator worked closely with the think-tank to document every step. The map represents an amalgamation of various meetings and decisions

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and was created as a way to communicate the story of the redesign to the district and community.

Early on in the process, the think-tank members agreed that the most effective way to engage stakeholders, yet stay true to a tight timeline would be to adopt an "accordion" model of functioning. The think-tank would cast a broad net and engage various large groups of stakeholders in the conversation; and after each engagement, the think-tank would meet to process the information, go deeper and generate more innovative ideas. This wasn't intended to make people "buy-in" to the think-tank's ideas; rather it was an attempt to sincerely gather diverse perspectives that included potential ideas as well as barriers.

The following sequence of events (shown in *Figure 2*) illustrates how the "accordion" model worked in practice:

- » On April 8, right after the meetings with Principals and Directors, the think-tank convened to create a calendar for large group engagements over the next several months.
- » On May 4, a group of about 90 stakeholders that included a principal and 2-3 teachers along with a classified staff member from each school came

together in a facilitated all-day meeting. The focus was on the "values" that were identified and the group generated a list of potential "functions" based on the values.

- » On May 11, the think-tank met to process the questions, ideas and concerns that came from the May 4 large group meeting. They specifically focused on getting clear on the "functions."
- » On May 20, the same large group (from May 4) returned for deeper inquiry, reflection, and conversation on the redesign, in a process termed "talk to your think-tank." Several more ideas and questions were generated.
- » On June 2, the think-tank members engaged the school district's board of directors in conversation and meaning-making around the redesign.
- » On June 23 and August 11, the think-tank came together to continue working on the details of the redesign, specifically regarding changes in "structures."
- » On August 17, as the new school year was about to kick-off, the think-tank engaged the District Leadership Team (DLT) of about 70 people in conversation. Their input and feedback was sought around specific structural changes.

As large groups of diverse stakeholders were brought into the process, reflective questions were posed at each step to make meaning and build ownership. Examples of reflective questions include:

- » What are you hearing that resonates

with what you know and believe to be true?

- » What are you hearing that surprises you or raises some concerns?
- » How do you see the impact of this redesign on your students?
- » What additional questions do you want the think-tank to consider?
- » How has this experience been for you individually? What have you learned?

With support and guidance from Ball, district leaders endeavored to make the process democratic and dialogical at every step. Their efforts showed a growing understanding of Weisbord's (2004) task-process relationship: the belief that how you set an initiative in motion determines how successful it eventually becomes. The following quote from a participant at one of the large group meetings illustrates how the democratic nature of the process created a sense of safety and candor for all voices to be heard.

Because the district is going through this huge restructuring, we were talking about ourselves as a system and the great changes that will have to be made due to budget cuts. We were given a question to discuss with our small groups and then we were to share out. Now, when I'm surrounded by a lot of people, I can be shy by nature. I usually sit back and listen to what other people have to say before I make comments or share my ideas and thoughts. But I did something I have never done before. When the question, "Who has something to say?" was asked, no one raised their hand. No one raised their hand. And then I did.

I got up, and I talked about how if there's danger within a system, in order to survive, systems have to be able to change, adapt, and modify themselves so that they can renew themselves. I felt that it was important to express that we're in the emerging phase, and we have to change and adapt so that we can renew ourselves. It was the first time

I had ever done that, and I did it for possibly two reasons: 1) I had made a personal connection, and 2) I have been doing reading that my Ball mentors recommended. So I wasn't just thinking out of the box anymore—I was acting out of the box.

### Outcome of Redesign: Values, Functions and Structures

By the end of the retreat in March, the district adopted a list of *valued qualities* that they wanted to bring to life. The new system, they proclaimed, would be characterized by the following:

- » A strong focus on students
- » Collaborative working environment
- » Rigorous practice of inquiry and reflection
- » An underlying philosophy that “how we do the work is as important as what we do”

Over the course of several meetings, six essential functions were identified that

would bring the valued qualities to life. These were:

- » Take personal responsibility and shared ownership for student success pre K–12
- » Ensure learning through quality instruction
- » Establish open and accessible information and communication
- » Build relationships among staff, students, families, and communities
- » Build professional capacity to support student learning and teaching
- » Create processes and conditions that support an emerging system

Once the values and functions had been established, the district could now think deeply about what *structural changes* would be necessary in order for stakeholders to function in these ways and hold true to the values. Various structural concepts were proposed, debated, modified, shaped, and reshaped. In the end, the district decided on three main structural changes.

The first was the creation of an *Instructional Cabinet*, a cross-functional

body of stakeholders (teachers, principals, classified staff, and district administrators) that would be responsible for creating strategic direction and priorities around instruction as well as tackling systemic issues such as the achievement gap. The Instructional Cabinet would form work groups to delve into specific issues while engaging in ongoing communication with the rest of the district. A rough illustration is shown in *Figure 3*.

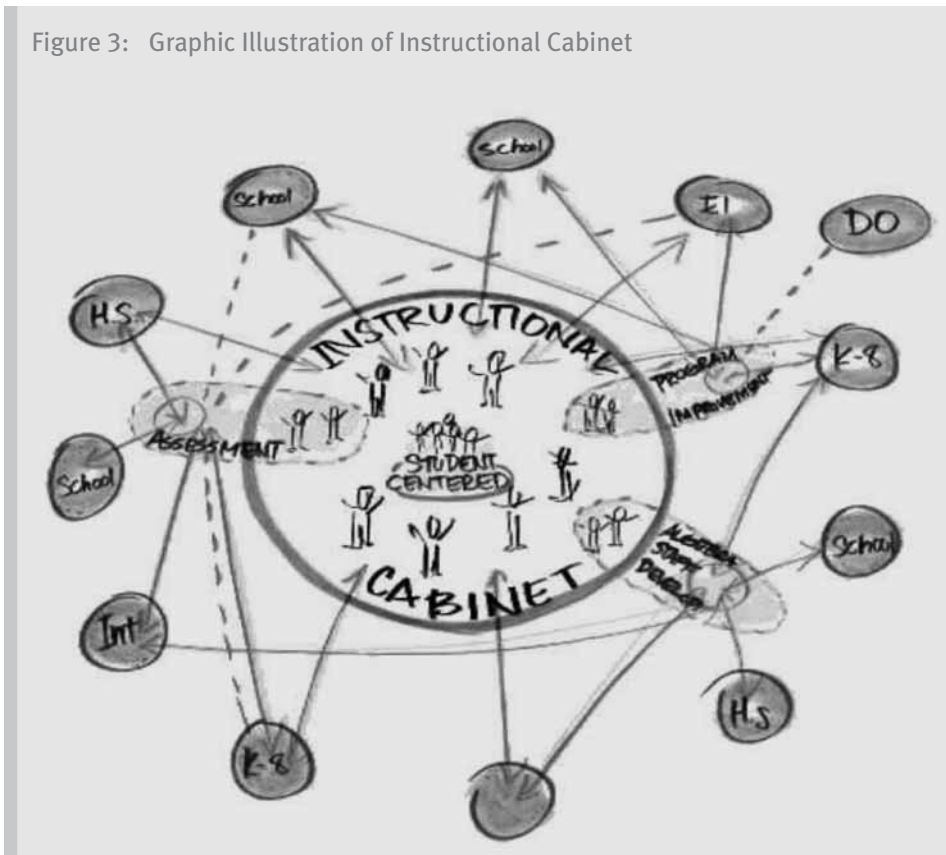
Second, the position of *Learning Director* was created. A total of fourteen learning directors, to be located in schools, would spend about a third of their time on district-level instructional and coherence-making issues, thus taking on part of the work of the defunct Instructional Services division.

Finally, a *K-12 structure of schools* was put in place, supervised by one deputy superintendent, replacing separate elementary and secondary divisions. This K-12 structure would promote cross-level articulation and collaboration and break down the traditional silos between elementary and secondary levels.

These structural changes were accompanied by personal changes in knowledge, skills, and dispositions. Ball staff provided consulting, facilitation, and professional learning to build competencies for systems change, such as tolerance for ambiguity, increased self-awareness and ability to engage in reflective practice. With Ball's support, the district created a safe space for people to embrace the change process.

In the spirit of experimentation that characterized the redesign, the district leaders called out 2009-10 as a trial year to fully set up and pilot the new structures. The instructional cabinet, the most resource and time-intensive of these new structures, was put in place in early October through an open application process. Ten teachers, two principals, one support staff member, three classified staff, three learning directors, four district-level directors, the deputy superintendent, and the superintendent comprised the instructional cabinet. At their first meeting, the instructional cabinet generated a set of guidelines for how they will work together, make decisions, and communicate with the rest of

Figure 3: Graphic Illustration of Instructional Cabinet



the district, continuing to emphasize that how they do their work is as important as what they do.

### Speed Bumps, Lessons and Future Directions

It is not easy for any large bureaucratic organization like a school district to move to a different paradigm during a deep financial crisis. There were challenges for people in every role. Principals demanded immediate and comprehensive answers to their questions about where support to

advocate for a different way. The gift and firestorm analogy was often cited in conversations and became a part of the vocabulary of the school district, demonstrating the power of story to unite and inspire.

New structures for communication and collaboration continued to emerge. Learning directors started meeting as a group to support each other in this new role. Principals' meetings were rethought to be less about dispensing information and more about collaborative and generative problem-solving. The union gave up its

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their schools would come from in light of service cuts, only to realize that there were no easy answers. Learning Directors struggled to grow into their newly created role of balancing school-level demands with district-level initiatives.

District-level administrators shouldered an increasing workload from state and federal mandates while making a commitment to send a positive message about the district's future. The teachers union, an important stakeholder, stayed away from many of the conversations about redesign, citing the lay-offs as the reason.

What was remarkable, however, was the widespread acknowledgement that something extraordinary was going on in the district that required people to simply "show up differently." Often in meetings, someone would call out a pattern that showed an "old way of working" and

initial reticence and started entering into the conversations. The union president applied to and was selected to be part of the instructional cabinet.

In order to recruit the right people to be on work groups, the newly-formed Instructional Cabinet started consciously asking the question "Who needs to be in this conversation?" as they took on systemic instructional issues. As a result of the redesign, long overdue conversations between line authority and support staff finally started taking place.

Systems change is a long, sometimes arduous, and often ambiguous process. The staff of RUSD, however, is guided by a steady compass: the needs of its diverse student body, especially struggling subgroups such as special education students and English-language learners. Rowland's educators recognize that a different outcome for students will be possible only

when the adults relate to each other differently. The following quote from a district administrator best captures the can-do spirit:

At this point, we're in the process of rebuilding, and part of that rebuilding is creating a strong foundation on which to build. The new way we are working is more organic. We're more relaxed. We're more concerned now with the content and the quality of the conversations, and we have allowed ourselves the time to think, to share, to question; whereas in the past, that wasn't really the practice.

A third-grade teacher adds to this sentiment,

I have a lot of confidence that we can withstand this restructuring trajectory. I would like to think that every school site will tap into their teacher experts. There is now this sense of respect of each other as colleagues, along with the respect to listen to each other.

There were several lessons for the Ball staff as organizational development consultants in this redesign. These lessons are critical for anyone attempting to implement organizational development principles and practices in public education, or the social sector in general.

- 1) **Find the right balance between being an "expert" and a "facilitator."** At times, the process called for Ball to be an expert, sharing models, examples and case studies. At other times, Ball was in a pure facilitation role, letting stakeholders name the conversation and engage with each other in the conversation. Either way, it was important for Ball staff to clarify what role they were playing at any time. This was especially critical given the norm in public education of deferring to experts, often at the expense of overlooking internal perspectives.
- 2) **Encourage district stakeholders to take responsibility for their own successes and failures.** Public education has long been characterized by outsiders coming

in, setting the agenda for change and doing something to, not with, educators. Ball learned early on that this has created a deep sense of cynicism and a “this-too-shall-pass” attitude. Hence, it was important to structure the process in a way that encouraged stakeholders to claim their own successes and failures and truly start owning the agenda for change.

- 3) **Be idealistic, but stay realistic.** The context of public schooling provides a sober reality check for any high-minded ideals that Ball or any other OD practitioners may bring in. Like colleagues in many organizations, educators (especially teachers) rarely have enough time in their day for the kinds of deep reflective processes that accompany a systems change effort. In addition, there are several mandates and constraints outside the educators’ control. Consequently any large-scale change process in schools will feel more like a marathon than a sprint.

As the school year progresses, Ball will work with RUSD to track the changes in patterns among adults and look for the impact of these changes on students. The biggest challenge, as with any OD intervention, is sustainability. Will this shift in patterns endure long after Ball is gone, and long after the current leaders are gone? Or will it fade away and die, becoming another fad in public education that does indeed pass?

Given the grass-roots and participatory nature of this intervention, the early indicators seem positive. There is evidence that

even those who were not directly involved in the redesign process are internalizing this new way of being, which is an encouraging sign for anyone who strives to bring an OD orientation to public education. One of the points working in OD’s favor is that the principles of good teaching, at their core, are not very different from the principles of OD. As the following quote from a seventh-grade teacher illustrates, OD may well be the best hope for public education renewal.

A lot of times, as teachers we go, go, go, and we don’t have time to reflect. That can do more harm to the students than just taking five minutes to reflect. You have to know your students and realize: from where we are, I need to stop and redo this so that it will be better later. I look at this restructuring of the district in the same way. We’re getting to the point where we’re saying, “Okay, this is where we are, we need to back up—which will take time—but when we go forward, we’ll be so much more empowered as teachers and eventually our students will be empowered.”

I’ve also noticed that my teaching and interaction with students has changed as a result of this process. I sometimes forget that we may be the one adult that ends up reaching that kid. I hope that no kids get past me that I don’t have some kind of influence on their lives. Ball reminds us that there’s a gift in every kid—there’s a diamond in the rough. Sometimes we forget this, especially with the

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ones that challenge us the most—and they’re the ones that need us the most. We have this saying in the restructuring, “There’s a fire and then there’s a gift.” I don’t want to focus on the fire. I want to look at each student and think, “This is you.” It’s the core of teaching.

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