

Advisory Team Opening - Three stories from interviews September 21, 2016

When this work began on April 25, 2015, certain things were top-of-mind.

Everything is understood in context.

There are 3 kinds of wins (“insight wins” lead to “process wins” that translate into the “result wins” we care about most).

So we started by listening to those close to the action. Three stories we heard are relevant to this work and this meeting.

The first comes from someone who completed the program, became a standout leader, and taught in several programs

Three kinds of individuals emerge from programs that lead to school building leader certification in NYS.

- Those in one group earn certificate but never will or should become a school principal (these individuals think that checking that box is what matters; in their minds, acquiring what it takes to be a successful school leader begins and ends with attending some classes and collecting some credits).
- Those in a second group earn and hold the certificate and become principals but struggle to perform. For these individuals, stuff they learned falls into different buckets (say budget and finance is one bucket and say curriculum and instruction in another bucket) but stuff in one bucket is disconnected from stuff from another bucket. All the stuff remained stuff. This was the absence of gestalt and any deep understanding of the relationship among these elements or of how everything connects to advance a larger purpose.
- Those in the last group earn certification and go on to become school principals. The staff and students at the schools they lead thrive under the leadership of these individuals. What differentiates these individuals from those in the previous two groups? They connect elements to each other and to a larger purpose. They get that knowledge matters when it advances people and organizations toward an aim. Most importantly, they not only understand the tools and how they relate but they use them to improve schools.

The second story comes from a school board member who worked in public education and successfully completed the school building leader certification program. This individual saw first-hand how some colleagues in the program leading to certification were simply there to punch a ticket. In the view of this board member, more than one or two participants in the program leading to certification was either not about becoming a school leader or simply viewed the experience of the program as a kind of “pay to play” proposition. Those who pay for the program get to vie for the jobs.

The third story is from a first-year Assistant Principal who is poised this summer to move up this fall to become Principal at the school. This individual didn’t apply for this promotion and wonders whether he has what is needed to rise to the challenge. But this individual understands how these things work. The unspoken rules-of-the-road are that hiring managers (the decision-makers) huddle and hand-pick successors. This sounds a little like “Three Men in a Room” but in the view of this individual this is just how it works in districts that have one high school and a couple stoplights in town. This individual finds it intriguing that a data system could be created that would pool all the information about principals (both aspiring and current principals) so hiring managers can have a one-stop shopping place to identify viable applicants. This individual wonders what it would take for such a system to ever compete with or replace the word-of-mouth system that seems so prevalent once you get out of the shadow of cities in our state.

All three of these stories illustrate what economists call signaling versus human capital. Signaling is the idea that a piece of paper is presumed to be a symbol of accomplishment. In the case of SBL certification, it is a proxy for a set of skills. On the other hand, human capital means that pieces of paper matter little. What really matters is whether people have what it takes. I’m from Missouri (not really) so show me. Demonstrate that you have what it takes.

The map is not the place. The sign is not the territory. The finger pointing at the moon is not the moon. (Korzypski)