

## LEADING CHANGE OF A SCHOOL DISTRICT REORGANIZATION

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**ABSTRACT:** *Using Kotter's (1995, 1996; Kotter & Cohen 2002) eight-step change framework, we assess the leadership of the 2005–07 Little Rock School District reorganization. Following the new public management (NPM) reform approach, the reorganization sought to (a) establish a clear line of authority and (b) streamline the organization by eliminating central office positions and redistributing resources to schools. In-depth interviews were conducted with the superintendent, his executive staff, and members of the school board; 44 school principals completed in-depth written surveys; and more than 500 telephone surveys of teachers and school staff were conducted. We conclude that the change process began to break down during Kotter's fourth step. The vision was not communicated throughout the district, and teachers and staff did not understand the goals of the reorganization, nor how to reach them. The change process completely broke down during Kotter's fifth step. School personnel were not empowered to act on the change vision. The district's leadership did not provide effective training to staff, teachers, and, most critically, principals. Without effective training, principals did not know how to communicate the change vision to their school staffs. We suggest that leaders of NPM reform efforts must focus attention and resources to training on-the-ground supervisors, such as principals, how to effectively communicate the vision to their staffs and empower them to act.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Kotter, leadership, new public management, reorganization, school district*

New school superintendents often bring sweeping reform initiatives with them when taking office (Hess, 1999). A popular class of reforms installed by new superintendents addresses perceived problems with district governance and management structures. These reforms are part of the new public management (NPM) approach, which has three broad themes: decentralized management, performance accountability, and competition (Hood, 1991). In the NPM reform approach, central offices should not focus on service provision (“rowing”), but on regulating service quality (“steering”). International organizations such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 1993) have legitimized the NPM approach, and NPM reforms have been enacted throughout the industrialized world in issue areas from health care to economic development (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2000). Based on data from its Program for International Student Assessment project, the OECD (2004, p. 16) recently concluded that the NPM approach, particularly decentralized decision-making, is a common characteristic of countries with strong educational performance: “There is typically a division between a central state that defines broad objectives and monitors outcomes, and local control over school processes, particularly budgets.”

In March 2005, the Little Rock School District (LRSD) School Board adopted a plan to reorganize the entire district’s management structure consistent with the accepted application of NPM in educational settings. The immediate goals of this plan were to (a) establish a clear line of authority from the superintendent to principals and (b) streamline the organization by eliminating over 100 central office positions and redistributing resources to schools. Specific objectives included implementing accountability and performance measures for all employees, clarifying employee roles and responsibilities as they related to the district’s strategic plan, and “being responsive and caring to parents, students and the community they serve” (Smith, Klempen, & Newcomer, 2005).

While the LRSD leadership adopted a legitimate reorganization plan that was initially supported by important stakeholders in the school district and community, the reorganization’s primary goals were not realized. It is true that over 100 central office positions were eliminated or reclassified, resulting in a savings of approximately \$3.8 million. Some of this saving was used to provide a “soft landing” for those employees reclassified or eliminated, and the balance was redirected to schools in the form of textbooks, instructional materials, instructional coaches, and art teachers. The district leadership was also successful in decreasing the number of major divisions from five to three. The district’s organization chart was redrawn, and top managers were evaluated on the basis of their performance.

However, the reorganization had limited impact beyond the district’s top management. Teachers, staff, and principals perceived few changes in availability of resources, in standardized protocol, in personnel evaluation, or in issue resolu-

tion and decision-making (Eddings, Howard, Nitta, & Wrobel, 2008). In May 2007, the superintendent was bought out of his contract for an estimated cost of \$635,000, and his efforts to reorganize the district were a key part of the decision to remove him.

In this study, we explore the superintendent's attempt to lead the transformation of the school district's organization. Applying Kotter's (1995) eight-step framework of organizational change, we examine data from stakeholders both inside and outside of the district's central office to explain the superintendent's attempt to transform the school district.

### **Leadership and Change**

For many scholars, change is the essence of leadership. Yukl (2002) argues that leading change is one of the most important and difficult leadership responsibilities. Kotter (1990) argued that what sets leadership apart from management is its focus on change. While management is primarily about producing consistency and order, leadership seeks change and renewal (Kotter, 1990, pp. 4–5).

In a comprehensive review of the organizational-change literature, Fernandez and Rainey (2006) concluded that contrary to claims made by institutional, life cycle, and ecological theories, leaders can and do make change happen in their organizations. March and Olsen provided a typical institutional argument: "Change rarely satisfies the prior intentions of those who initiate it. Change cannot be controlled precisely" (1989, p. 65). Fernandez and Rainey, however, cited several studies that offer evidence of the critical role played by public managers in bringing about organizational change, including Abramson and Lawrence (2001), Borins (2000), Doig and Hargrove (1990), and Hennessey (1998).

With regard to a practical framework for leading change, Fernandez and Rainey (2006) identified eight factors that contribute to successful organizational change. However, they generated these factors from their review of the organizational-change literature and never test them against empirical evidence.

Rather than employing a framework developed from secondary sources, we draw on a widely cited eight-step framework developed inductively by John Kotter, as outlined in Table 1. Kotter developed his change framework by observing transformation efforts in over a hundred businesses. These included large businesses (Ford Motor), small ones (Landmark Communications), non-U.S. companies (British Airways), those in crisis (Eastern Airlines), and those performing well (Bristol-Myers Squibb). Leaders in these companies attempted restructuring, reengineering, and right-sizing (Kotter, 1995, p. 59).

Kotter argued that "successful change of any magnitude goes through all eight steps, usually in sequence" (1996, p. 23). He asserted, "Skipping steps creates only the illusion of speed and never produces a satisfying result. . . . Critical mistakes

**Table 1. Kotter's (1995) Eight Steps to Transforming an Organization**

<i>Step</i>
1. Establishing a sense of urgency <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Examining market and competitive realities</li> <li>• Identifying and discussing crises, potential crises, or major opportunities</li> </ul>
2. Forming a powerful guiding coalition <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assembling a group with enough power to lead the change effort</li> <li>• Encouraging the group to work together as a team</li> </ul>
3. Creating a vision <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creating a vision to help direct the change effort</li> <li>• Developing strategies for achieving that vision</li> </ul>
4. Communicating the vision <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Using every vehicle possible to communicate the new vision and strategies</li> <li>• Teaching new behaviors by the example of the guiding coalition</li> </ul>
5. Empowering others to act on the vision <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Getting rid of obstacles to change</li> <li>• Changing systems or structures that seriously undermine the vision</li> <li>• Encouraging risk taking and nontraditional ideas, activities, and actions</li> </ul>
6. Planning for and creating short-term wins <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Planning for visible performance improvements</li> <li>• Creating those improvements</li> <li>• Recognizing and rewarding employees involved in the improvements</li> </ul>
7. Consolidating improvements and producing still more change <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Using increased credibility to change systems, structures, and policies that don't fit the vision</li> <li>• Hiring, promoting, and developing new employees who can implement the vision</li> <li>• Reinvigorating the process with new projects, themes, and change agents</li> </ul>
8. Institutionalizing new approaches <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Articulating connections between the new behaviors and organizational success</li> <li>• Developing the means to ensure leadership development and succession</li> </ul>

in any of these phases can have a devastating impact, slowing momentum and negating hard-won gains" (Kotter, 1995, p. 59).

Although it was developed by observing only for-profit businesses, Kotter's eight-step framework has been widely praised and applied in fields as diverse as education (Bencivenga, 2002; Newcomb, 2008), the military (Jeffress, 2003; Lester, 2007), public relations (Haynes, 1997), and personnel management (Joshi, 1998). Reviewing Kotter's 1996 book in an armed forces journal, Lester argued it is "a must read for anyone in a leadership position who is engaged in transformation. . . . Quite simply, *Leading Change* is the best book on this subject published to date" (2007, p. 112). In the field of public education, the American Association of School Administrators offered a certification workshop, "Leading Bold Change," based on Kotter's eight-step framework that promised to empower school administrators as change agents.

Critics of Kotter's eight-step framework recognize it as one of the most important prescriptive frameworks on organizational change but dismiss it as "guru management" that is not rigorous social science. *Leading Change* has been criticized for its reliance on anecdotal evidence as well as its scarcity of academic references. For example, Steven Kelman argued, "Standards of evidence undergo a dramatic shift [and] multiple regressions give way to multiple assertions" (2005, p. 32).

Kelman (2005) offered a competing framework to Kotter's eight-step framework. Drawing on his experience changing the federal procurement system under the Clinton administration's Reinventing Government Initiative, Kelman argued that like other mainstream approaches, Kotter's framework suffers from an often unfounded assumption that people will resist change. In fact, "when leaders at the top proclaim change, supporters at the bottom are given an opportunity to initiate change they already seek" (Kelman, 2005, p. 7). Several powerful positive feedback mechanisms create momentum toward change. Accordingly, the best way to lead change is to allow change to feed on itself. Kelman concluded, "Often, change need not be cajoled or coerced. Instead, it can be unleashed" (p. 6).

It is important to recognize that these critiques and revisions begin with Kotter's framework as the mainstream wisdom in leading organizational change. The critiques are sharpest with regard to Kotter's method and his style, not in the accuracy of the framework. When others have tested Kotter's framework with regard to educational transformations (Lindahl, 1998) or military transformations (Jeffress, 2003), they have found evidence that reinforces the framework's key points. The case of the LRSD reorganization similarly reinforces Kotter's key insights. In particular, we found evidence supporting Kotter's assumptions and not Kelman's (2005). We observed that change did not feed on itself and positive feedback mechanisms were swamped by negative ones without consistent and proactive leadership from the district superintendent. Despite initial support and early successes, after a break in communication and a lack of effective training, the reorganization stalled. Change was not unleashed but had to be led through all eight steps.

### **Leading Change in School Districts**

Applying Kotter's eight-step change framework to public education adds to knowledge in the fields of both education and public management. Jeffrey Raffel (2007) observed that public administration scholars have neglected public education to the detriment of both fields, even though education accounts for one-quarter of U.S. state and local government spending and school districts employ more than a third of all workers across all levels of government. This study is one corrective to this gap.

From the education perspective, as for-profit business approaches in manage-

ment have become popular in public education, it is typically argued that schools are not like businesses. Even authors publishing in the *Harvard Business Review* have argued:

Public school districts, however, are not businesses. The differences between the two are greater than their similarities. Public schools have a mandate to serve all customers (students) regardless of their interest or prior academic achievement. Educational systems receive capital from government (local, state, and federal) on the basis of formulas that are disconnected from school or district performance. (Childress, Elmore, & Grossman, 2006, p. 56)

In contrast to this view, we argue that although Kotter developed his eight-step change framework by observing for-profit businesses, it is applicable and useful to understand change leadership in public schools, as it offers broader lessons for public organizations and management. Kotter himself noted that school superintendents have used his framework as a road map and argues that it can be used across sectors, including in public schools (Newcomb, 2008).

In fact, the educational leadership literature identifies change leadership strategies similar to those identified by Kotter. Roberts (1985) analyzed a school superintendent's transformational leadership and found six key elements: (a) a crisis, (b) clear district mission, (c) clear vision, (d) ad hoc structure, (e) participative process, and (f) skillful change agent. Roberts's six elements roughly match Kotter's eight steps, particularly the first three: urgency/crisis, mission, and vision. Additionally, the superintendent whom Roberts described undertook many of the other change steps described by Kotter. For example, the superintendent recognized the necessity of a strong guiding coalition, saying: "You have to find where the power was and those are the ones you have to court first" (Roberts, 1985, p. 1039). Finally, the absence of a crisis or sense of urgency stalled change, even for the same leader. Upon becoming state superintendent, the leader lacked a clear crisis, and the same change initiatives and strategies never gained momentum (Van Wart, 2005, p. 267).

Goldring, Crowson, Laird, and Berk (2003) also described the leadership tasks required to transform school districts in terms similar to Kotter's. Particularly in the initial stages, they argue that a school district transformation requires a particular type of "transition leadership." Like Kotter's change agents, the transitional leaders described by Goldring et al. (2003, pp. 484–485) must focus on sustaining change across many fronts: changing conceptual boundaries, changing real procedures, and, most challenging, simultaneously changing and adapting.

### **Superintendent Roy Brooks and the Reorganization of a School District**

On June 11, 2004, the Little Rock School Board completed a contentious national search for a new superintendent by hiring Dr. Roy Brooks on a 5-to-1 vote with 1

abstention. The five white board members voted for Brooks and the two African-American board members were opposed. The board majority was supported by many members of the Little Rock business community, including the Little Rock Chamber of Commerce and the publisher of the state's daily newspaper. Brooks had helped to lead a successful reorganization of Orange County (Florida) Public Schools as an area superintendent. He had a track record for raising student performance in the county's lowest achieving schools.

Brooks stepped into a challenging situation. Many teachers, including the Little Rock Classroom Teachers Association, had supported making interim superintendent Dr. Morris Holmes the permanent superintendent. Teachers union president Katherine Wright Knight was blunt in her opposition to the Brooks hiring:

I think the board made a mistake. If I were Dr. Brooks, I wouldn't come here. I don't think he has any chance for success. I don't see him getting the cooperation that someone would get in a different environment. He was the weakest of the candidates. He was afraid to talk to us. (Dishaugh & Howell, 2004)

Additionally, a community organization called Concerned Citizens United had pushed for the selection of Holmes. Even after Brooks had become the favorite, the group held a series of events including news conferences and community forums to garner support for Holmes. Before the board hired Brooks, a proposal to hire Dr. Holmes as the permanent superintendent was defeated by a 2-to-5 vote.

After taking office, Superintendent Brooks immediately set about transforming the administration of the LRSD. He hired outside consultants to conduct an organizational audit of the LRSD and to make recommendations. In March 2005, the consultants concluded that the district's central office was bloated and recommended eliminating 101 central office positions, with an estimated annual savings of \$5.1 million. The consultants also recommended reorganizing the district's central office bureaucracy to create a clear line of authority from the superintendent to school principals. The consultants' proposed reorganization plan used a decentralized, "steering, not rowing" logic characteristic of the NPM: "This reorganization transforms the district from a 'top down' district where administrators issue directives and give orders, to a 'bottoms up' district where administrators support and respond to the needs of principals and teachers who teach the students" (Smith, Klempen, & Newcomer, 2005, p. 7). The school board voted 6 to 1 to authorize Superintendent Brooks to carry out the reorganization plan proposed by the consultants.

In this study, we examine what Superintendent Brooks did to lead this transformation of the LRSD. The results from the analyses are discussed in the context of Kotter's eight steps to transforming an organization and are used to answer our research question: How can Kotter's eight-step change framework help to explain Superintendent Brooks's attempt to lead the transformation of the LRSD?

## Data and Method

The research for this study was based on several different types of data collection, including document review, in-depth personal interviews, group-administered surveys, and telephone-administered surveys. All data were collected between May and October 2007.

First, all the actions taken by the district in response to the organizational audit produced by the consultants were documented. These documents included materials and agendas for training sessions, clinics, and presentations recommended by the audit report; changes in staff evaluation protocol; changes in personnel; and internal district communications.

Following the documentation phase, two groups were identified for in-depth personal interviews: the superintendent's executive staff and the LRSD School Board. All eleven executive staff members and all seven members of the school board were interviewed individually for approximately one hour at the district's administrative offices. Present at each interview was an interviewer, a recorder, and the respondent. Interviews were tape-recorded. Based on findings from the documentation and interview phases, a group-administered questionnaire was generated for principals, and telephone questionnaires were created for teachers and staff.

During a regular meeting of school principals, a group-administered survey was completed. The survey took approximately 30 minutes to complete, and respondents were anonymous. Forty-four principals returned completed surveys, representing 81.5 percent of all LRSD principals. Sample questions from the principal survey are included in the appendix.

For the telephone surveys of teachers and staff, the district provided telephone numbers, hire date, and position of all teachers and staff members. The selection process dropped any individual with a missing or invalid telephone number. Additionally, to ensure that the respondents were working in the district at the time of the reorganization, only those hired before January 1, 2005, were selected to participate in the survey. Of the 2,138 teachers listed, 1,227 teachers were eligible to participate. We completed 293 teacher surveys, yielding a response rate of 24 percent. The cooperation rate of successfully contacted teachers was 76.9 percent. From the original list of 1,837 staff members, 1,019 staff members were eligible respondents. A total of 287 staff surveys were completed, which represents a 28 percent response rate. The cooperation rate of successfully contacted staff members was 71.8 percent. Sample questions from the teacher and staff surveys are included in the Appendix.

The transcripts from the in-depth personal interviews as well as data from the group-administered surveys and telephone-administered surveys were coded and inputted for analysis.

## Results

Applying the case of Superintendent Brooks and the LRSD to Kotter's eight-step change framework, we find that the district's leadership did not complete step four—effectively communicating the vision throughout the organization—and completely failed to achieve step five—ensuring that others beyond the central office were empowered to act on the change vision.

Superintendent Brooks worked hard at Kotter's first three steps: (step 1) establishing a sense of urgency, (step 2) forming a powerful guiding coalition, and (step 3) creating a vision. The district leadership also acted to communicate the reorganization vision (step 4) through formal presentations and publications. However, there is clear evidence that while central office leaders and principals understood the reorganization vision, school teachers and staff never understood the vision, much less how to accomplish it. A breakdown in communication appears to have occurred between school principals and their school staffs with regard to the reorganization. We argue that the roots of this communication breakdown grew from the failure of the superintendent and his team to empower others to act on the change vision (step 5). There is clear evidence that principals found the training they received with regard to the reorganization to be ineffective. Without effective training, principals did not effectively communicate the change vision to their school staffs, and school teachers and staff were not empowered to act.

After the decisive breakdown in step 5, no further change steps were completed: few inside or outside the district perceived any (step 6) short-term wins, no (step 7) improvements were consolidated, and no (step 8) new approaches were institutionalized. In the following sections, we provide evidence to support these conclusions.

### STEP 1: ESTABLISH A SENSE OF URGENCY

Kotter argued:

Establishing a sense of urgency is crucial to gaining needed cooperation. With complacency high, transformations usually go nowhere because few people are even interested in working on the change problem. With urgency low, it's difficult to put together a group with enough power and credibility to guide the effort. (1996, p. 36)

He suggested several strategies to raise the urgency level, including recommending the use of consultants to force more relevant data and honest discussions (Kotter, 1996, p. 44).

According to the LRSD board president, like the superintendent described by Roberts (1985), Dr. Brooks was hired to make "rapid change" (LRSD, 2005a). Student achievement in many LRSD schools did not meet federally mandated adequate yearly progress requirements, largely because African-American and low-income students continued to struggle.

Consistent with the approach of Childress, Elmore, and Grossman (2006), Superintendent Brooks immediately identified the size and structure of the LRSD administration as a critical issue. He cited a 1999 MGT of America study that compared the LRSD central management structure, staffing pattern, and utilization of positions with similarly sized school districts in other states. The study concluded that the LRSD had the lowest number of students per administrator and recommended reducing the size of the central office staff (Arkansas Policy Foundation, 2005).

Immediately after taking office, Superintendent Brooks hired several consultants to conduct an “organizational audit” of the district in order to learn “details about the best practices used by successful school districts. . . . what they look like and how Little Rock looks in comparison” (2005). On September 23, 2004, the consultants described their proposed organizational audit to the LRSD Board, promising a “basis on which to analyze and streamline district operations using the six elements of effective schools” (LRSD, 2004a). The six elements identified by the consultants were (a) a defined organizational structure, (b) standardized protocols and procedures, (c) applied governance and management, (d) results-based strategic planning, (e) performance and accountability systems, and (f) issue resolution and decision making.

Just five months into Superintendent Brooks’s tenure, the consultants provided the LRSD Board with the preliminary findings of their organizational audit. In March 2005, they presented their conclusions and recommendations in a written report. The audit report identified several organizational problems in the LRSD: “administrative gridlock,” multiple layers of bureaucracy, and a lack of understanding regarding lines of communication and authority (LRSD, 2004b).

The consultants’ audit report initiated honest discussions among the LRSD leadership about the district’s organization and raised the level of urgency for change. Just a few days after the audit report was submitted, the Little Rock School Board voted to carry out the consultants’ plan to reorganize the district’s administration (LRSD, 2005a). Six board members voted to authorize the reorganization plan and one voted against it, a larger majority than the 5-to-1 vote to hire Superintendent Brooks eight months earlier.

## **STEP 2: FORM A POWERFUL GUIDING COALITION**

Kotter warned against two common mistakes in a transformation process. First, the leader goes it alone and fails. Second, those leading the change have low credibility. Accordingly, Kotter (1996, p. 57) recommended creating a guiding coalition with four key properties: (a) position power, (b) expertise, (c) credibility, and (d) leadership.

Superintendent Brooks identified a transition team of district staff to guide the reorganization from within the district. The transition team included the top-level

district administrators from the superintendent's executive staff: the director of human resources, the associate superintendent for school services, the director of planning, research, and evaluation, the associate superintendent of curriculum and instruction, the director of communications, and the manager of financial services. It included 21-year and 24-year veterans of the LRSD, as well as new personnel experts in the type of reorganization Brooks proposed.

In addition to support at the top of the school district administration, the school board continued to support Superintendent Brooks and his reorganization. The reorganization consultants made at least five formal presentations to the Little Rock School Board between September 2004 and May 2005. At these presentations, board members appeared supportive and engaged with the reorganization. For example, in November 2004, one board member asked for specific recommendations to keep good principals in schools (LRSD, 2004a). When interviewed later, board members recalled feeling generally positive about the reorganization when it was first initiated. One board member remembered, "I was appreciative of it. It was long overdue."<sup>1</sup> Others remembered being more cautious but still supportive: "I was generally positive. We just had to be careful to ensure equity and make sure schools continued running efficiently." Another recalled, "It was a step in the right direction, but a challenge." Even board members who later became disenchanted with the reorganization were positive at the outset: "I was enthusiastic. Streamlining resources would make things better."

### **STEP 3: CREATE A VISION**

Kotter stated:

In the change process, a good vision serves three important purposes. First . . . it simplifies hundreds or thousands of more detailed decisions. Second, it motivates people to take action in the right direction, even if the initial steps are personally painful. Third, it helps coordinate the actions of different people, even thousands and thousands of individuals, in a remarkably fast and efficient way. (1996, pp. 68–69)

To succeed in these purposes, Kotter (1996, p. 72) identified six characteristics of an effective vision: imaginable, desirable, feasible, focused, flexible, and communicable.

In their March 2005 organizational audit, the consultants found the objectives of the 2003 LRSD Strategic Plan to be laudable but found "little evidence of an accountability system tied to the strategic plan" and "little influence on the day-to-day actions of administrators or their decision making" (Smith, Klempen, & Newcomer, 2005, p. 4). The consultants therefore recommended that the LRSD revamp the strategic plan to clearly identify the highest priorities. In July 2005, Superintendent Brooks asked the members of the school board to "identify the district's most important goals and to determine the evidence that will be used to

evaluate whether those goals are being met” (LRSD, 2005b).

On July 28, 2005, the school board met with the superintendent’s executive staff and the consultants to determine district priorities. At the meeting, the group produced a list of Guiding Principles and specific goals. These were eventually adopted by the school board on December 15, 2005 in the document “On the Path of Progress, Guiding Principles and Goals, 2005–2006.”

The Path of Progress document opened with the LRSD Vision Statement: “The Little Rock School District will become the highest achieving urban school district in the nation.” Superintendent Brooks repeated the vision at every opportunity. He had a sign hung with the vision statement on the wall of the superintendent’s office. Brooks’s vision statement met at least five of the six characteristics of an effective vision identify by Kotter. It was imaginable, desirable, focused, flexible, and communicable.

The 11 LRSD executive staff members and seven board members agreed on how the reorganization should move the district toward achieving this vision. During in-depth interviews, we asked each executive staff and board member, “What were the goals of the reorganization plan for the Little Rock School District?” In response to this open-ended question, the 18 district leaders provided the same top two goals: streamlining the organization and redistributing resources. The degree of consensus was striking and provides strong evidence that after moving through a collective visioning process, the top leadership of the LRSD agreed on the way the district reorganization should contribute to a shared vision.

#### **STEP 4: COMMUNICATE THE VISION**

The next step in the transformation process is to communicate the vision throughout the organization. Kotter (1995, p. 23) presented two basic tenets for effective communication: “Using every vehicle possible to communicate the new vision and strategies” and “teaching new behaviors by the example of the guiding coalition.” He contended that “the real power of a vision is unleashed only when most of those involved in an enterprise or activity have a common understanding of its goals and directions” (Kotter, 1996, p. 85). This is a difficult task, even among the most gifted leaders. Often the first three steps of organizational change are implemented effectively, yet the process falters due to under-communication of the vision and goals (Kotter, 1996). This is exactly what happened in the case of Superintendent Brooks and the LRSD reorganization, and it is during this step that the transformation effort began to falter.

To determine how effectively Superintendent Brooks and his team communicated the change vision, we first examined employee understanding of the reorganization goals. We asked principals, teachers, and staff, “In your opinion, what is the most important goal of the reorganization of the Little Rock School District?” As with board members and executive staff, this question was open-

**Table 2. Principal, Staff, and Teacher Perceptions of Reorganization Goals**

<i>Response</i>	<i>Principals (%)</i>	<i>Staff (%)</i>	<i>Teachers (%)</i>
Streamline organization	27.3	6.27	4.40
Resources for schools	20.5	5.57	8.53
Chain of command	9.1	0.70	4.10
Authority for principals	18.2	0.35	1.37
Other	13.6	64.11	66.21
Don't know/refused	11.4	23.00	15.36
Percentage total	100.0	100.0	100.00
Total responses	44	287	293

ended, so as not to lead respondents. Principals' responses were similar to those of the executive staff and board, indicating that they did understand what the goals of the reorganization were. Among teachers and staff, however, there was far less understanding. Very few respondents from either group were able to identify the goals established in the reorganization plan and confirmed by the executive staff and school board (see Table 2). For both teachers and staff, *other* was by far the most common response. Common other responses included education, No Child Left Behind, discipline, racial inequality, morale, and parental involvement. However, confusion regarding the goals of the reorganization was not only apparent in the wide variety of other responses. A staff member responded that he or she was "too confused about it all to know" what the goals were, and a teacher stated that the goal was to "confuse everyone about the purpose of the reorganization." Also common was the belief that the reorganization was designed to satisfy Superintendent Brooks's personal agenda. Several staff members indicated that they felt the goal of the reorganization was to "bring Brooks's people in and get rid of people in the district" or "to get rid of certain people." Based on these responses, it is clear that frontline employees did not have a clear understanding of the goals of the reorganization. In some cases, this lack of understanding caused employees to be suspicious of the district leadership's motives.

While it is important to know what employees felt the goals of the reorganization were, it is also important to know how well they believed they understood those goals. McDermott (2000) explained how understanding is particularly important for educational reform. Educational professionals operate with a certain level of autonomy, yet significant reform can only be realized if they are able to work cooperatively. Therefore "their understanding of a particular reform and how they translate that understanding into practice determine how the reform program will actually operate" (McDermott, 2000, p. 83).

To determine the perceived level of understanding, principals, teachers and staff were asked: "On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being completely misunderstood

**Table 3. Understanding of the Goals and Purposes of the Reorganization Plan**

<i>Response</i>	<i>Principals (%)</i>	<i>Staff (%)</i>	<i>Teachers (%)</i>
Completely misunderstood	4.55	11.85	13.99
2	4.55	5.92	7.85
3	4.55	4.53	5.46
4	13.64	5.57	7.85
5	6.82	17.77	18.43
6	4.55	8.01	10.58
7	18.18	11.15	11.95
8	15.91	14.63	12.29
9	15.91	4.88	4.78
Completely understood	6.82	10.45	4.44
Refused	4.55	4.88	2.39
% total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Response Total	44	287	293
Mean	6.38	5.69	3.47

and 10 being completely understood, how well do you understand the goals and purposes of the reorganization plan?" Table 3 summarizes the responses of principals, staff, and teachers.

Self-reported understanding of the reorganization differed among principals, staff, and teachers. Teachers reported the lowest level of understanding the reorganization goals, with an average rating of just 3.5 out of 10. Teachers also had the highest percentage of respondents reporting that they *completely misunderstood* reorganization goals, with 14 percent selecting 1. The most frequent teacher response was 5, and 35 percent rated their understanding as 4 or lower. Approximately 14 percent of teachers responded *completely misunderstood* while only 4.4 percent said they *completely understood*.

Staff reported an average level of perceived understanding of 5.7 out of 10. Nearly 28 percent of staff rated their understanding as 4 or lower, and 11.9 percent reported that they *completely misunderstood*. Principals reported the highest level of perceived understanding with an average rating of 6.4 out of 10. Moreover, nearly 62 percent of principals rated their understanding as 6 or higher. Only 4.6 percent reported that they *completely misunderstood*.

While it is important to aggressively repeat the vision, Kotter also noted that "communication comes in both words and deeds, and the latter are often the most powerful form" (1995, p. 64). To get at this second dimension of communication, we asked teachers and staff to rate their supervisor's level of commitment. This allowed us to test Kotter's assumption that supervisors lead by example. If this assumption is correct, employee commitment should closely track that of their direct supervisor.

To determine if a relationship existed between staff commitment and supervisor commitment, a contingency table was generated with these two categories. Commitment was rated as *highly committed*, *committed*, *somewhat committed*, and *not committed*.

There did appear to be a relationship between one's perception of the unit's commitment and that of the direct supervisor. Among staffers who indicated their unit was *highly committed* (27.3 percent of total respondents), more than 74 percent believed that their supervisor was also *highly committed*. Only one member of this group reported that their supervisor was *not committed*. Conversely, of those who indicated that their unit was *not committed* (10.9 percent of total respondents), nearly 43 percent said their supervisor was not committed, while only 7 respondents (25.6 percent) reported that their supervisor was *highly committed* or *committed*. To better illustrate the relationship between staff and supervisor commitment, Pearson's  $r$  was calculated for the two variables. This produced a correlation coefficient of .59, indicating a strong, positive relation between staff and supervisor commitment.

When comparing teacher commitment with their principal's commitment, we found that teachers perceive their principals' commitment as being somewhat higher than their own. While 61.3 percent of teachers reported that principals were more committed than teachers in their school, only 1.7 percent (three teachers) reported that principals were less committed than the teachers. Again, we tested this relationship by calculating Pearson's  $r$ . The correlation coefficient for teacher commitment and principal commitment is .55. Here, too, we find that relation is positive and strong. Thus, it may be inferred from these findings that employee commitment to the reorganization closely tracked that of their immediate supervisor.

Direct supervisors appear to have done an admirable job of leading by example. As Kotter noted, a significant part of communication is to "walk the walk" (1995, p. 64). Employees generally felt that their supervisors were as committed, if not more committed, to the reorganization as they were themselves. Thus, in the case of the LRSD reorganization, the problem was not supervisors' lack of commitment but their ineffectiveness in communicating necessary information to teachers and staff. As Kotter pointed out, ensuring that employees understand the vision and goals is a formidable task. The executive staff and the school board spent considerable time in meetings and clinics to discuss the vision and how the strategic plan was to further that vision. However, in order for the rest of the organization to fully understand the reorganization goals and how to achieve them, the district leadership needed to ensure that comprehensive and clear information had been received by everyone in the district. As we shall see, the district leadership failed to provide effective training to staff, teachers, and principals.

## STEP 5: EMPOWER OTHERS TO ACT ON THE VISION

The problems in effectively communicating the vision throughout the organization go hand in hand with the failure to empower others to act on the vision. Almost no one beyond the district's central office was empowered to act on the reorganization vision. Even though school principals were considered key line managers of the district reorganization, they reported receiving ineffective training with regard to the reorganization. Without receiving training in how to communicate the reorganization vision, much less how to help others work toward the vision, it should not be surprising that principals failed to empower their school teachers and staffs to act on the vision.

Kotter (1996) identifies three major obstacles to empowerment. The first refers to impediments in the organizational structure. He warned that "unaligned structures block needed action" and therefore the organization must "make structures compatible with the vision" (Kotter, 1996, p. 115). The second deals with disincentives in performance appraisal (Kotter, 1996). The third is a failure to recognize or provide the kind and amount of training that will be required to help people learn those new behaviors, skills, and attitudes necessary to undertake a major change (Kotter, 1996). To understand the district's attempts to remove these obstacles, we examined changes, school personnel coordination and protocols, performance and accountability, and employee training. We found that employees perceived few changes in coordination and protocols and found significant dissatisfaction with training with regard to the reorganization.

In the organizational audit, the consultants noted extensive uncertainty in responsibilities of school personnel. "One of the central issues is the confusion of 'line' authority versus 'staff' authority" (Smith, Klempen, & Newcomer, 2005, p. 6). In an effort to establish a clear line authority from superintendent to the school principals, the district established the positions of deputy superintendent and two associate superintendents while removing other management positions. The creation of these new positions was intended to improve coordination among the elementary and secondary school principals by eliminating structural barriers in the line authority and therefore facilitating progress toward the new district vision.

Principals were asked if they felt coordination among principals was *better*, *worse*, or *about the same* since the reorganization. In general, elementary and secondary principals did not perceive improved coordination among principals as a result of the reorganization (Table 4). The majority of elementary school principals, 62 percent, reported that the level of coordination did not change following the reorganization. The remaining elementary principals were evenly divided between *better* coordination and *worse* coordination. Thus, only 15.4 percent of elementary principals indicated that coordination had improved. At the secondary level, 38 percent of school principals indicated they did not know whether coordination had changed since the reorganization, 15.4 percent reported that coordination

**Table 4. Coordination Among Principals**

<i>Response</i>	<i>Elementary school principals (%)</i>	<i>Secondary school principals (%)</i>
Better (%)	15.38	15.38
About the same (%)	61.54	38.46
Worse (%)	15.38	7.69
Don't know (%)	7.69	38.46
Total (%)	100.0	100.0
Total responses ( <i>n</i> )	26	13

improved, and 8 percent reported that coordination was worse.

In the area of performance and accountability, the reorganization focused on two key actions: “clearly identified, results oriented objectives for staff” and a “staff performance and accountability system” (Smith, Klemmen, & Newcomer, 2005, p. 4). The creation of a school personnel evaluation system based on clear results-based objectives would allow for a direct connection between the goals and priorities established by the LRSD leadership and its employees.

A performance appraisal instrument (PAI) was established to evaluate managers and supervisors, and it did create a performance-based accountability system. According to the PAI, administrators' primary task was “to assist the Superintendent in the leadership and management of his/her division to achieve district priorities” (LRSD, 2005c). In addition to the PAI, according to the Superintendent's Monitoring Report, all school principals used the Professional Teacher Appraisal System (PTAS) for teacher evaluation. It is important to note that the creation of PTAS preceded the reorganization efforts.

While there is evidence that new performance evaluation systems were in place for senior administrative employees, it is not clear that this extended to the rest of the district personnel. Evaluation forms for paraprofessionals, custodial personnel, nurse personnel, administrative and supervisory personnel, clerical and non-certified employees, bus drivers, and security personnel all reflected a more generalized, task-based assessment. These forms made no reference to the district's priorities and goals, nor did they establish targets for the next year.

The final and perhaps most important obstacle to empowering others is identifying and providing necessary training. Kotter argued that “without the right skills and attitudes, people feel disempowered” (1996, p. 115). He noted that employees need the right kind of training to be able to change behaviors that have been built up for many years. In many cases, the training provided needs to go beyond technical aspects to address social and attitudinal skills as well.

The district did provide training to executive staff members and school principals to ensure they understood their new roles and responsibilities in the district

**Table 5. Effectiveness of Training in Preparing Principals**

<i>Response</i>	<i>Principals</i>
Highly effective (%)	3.45
Effective (%)	6.90
Somewhat effective (%)	20.69
Not effective (%)	13.79
Don't know (%)	55.17
Total (%)	100.00
Response total (n)	29

organization. Eight of the 11 executive staff members reported having been trained in their new roles as support staff, with two reporting they had not and one refusal. School principals also reported receiving training for their new roles as line managers, with 61 percent of principals indicating that they had received this training.

While a majority of the school principals reported receiving training about their new roles, the type of training provided is critical to empowering individuals to change their actions and behaviors. Kotter noted that “you can’t just say, ‘OK, now you’re empowered, go to it’” (1996, p. 109). The right kind of training is highly important to successful change of an organization.

To measure the efficiency of the training provided, we asked the school principals, “How effectively did this training prepare you to achieve the goals of the reorganization (e.g., clear lines of authority, school-based decisions)?” Table 5 presents data on this question. Only 10 percent of school principals found the training to be effective or highly effective. Moreover, more than half of the principals (55 percent) who received training were unable to state whether that training had been effective. In examining the open-ended responses to a general question about how the reorganization could have been improved, several principals noted that more information was needed about how the plan would improve district efficiency and communication. This type of information should have been provided during training about the reorganization to help with changing attitudes toward the transformation.

The inability of the superintendent and his team to achieve step 5 can be seen in several ways. First, most school principals did not perceive that coordination among principals was improved by the removal of structural barriers. Second, while the district had been successful in creating clearly identified, results-oriented objectives for managers, performance evaluation forms for other employees had not been revised to reinforce reorganization goals. Finally, and most important, while training was provided to the executive staff and school principals, the training was not considered effective by principals, who had the greatest change in roles and responsibilities as newly empowered site-based managers.

**Table 6. Teachers' Opinion on Quality and Availability of Resources**

<i>Response (%)</i>	<i>Instructional materials</i>	<i>Instructional assistants</i>	<i>Art teachers</i>	<i>VIPs</i>
Better (%)	31.06	27.65	37.54	17.41
About the same (%)	52.22	48.46	51.54	58.02
Worse (%)	16.72	21.16	4.44	18.09
Don't know (%)	0.00	2.39	5.12	5.80
Total (%)	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Total responses (n)	293	293	293	293

**STEPS 6-8**

With the failure to communicate the vision (step 4) and to empower district personnel (step 5), it should not be surprising that Superintendent Brooks failed to achieve the last three change steps: planning for and creating short-term wins (step 6), consolidating improvements and producing still more change (step 7), and institutionalizing new approaches (step 8). This last section discusses these steps together.

Short-term wins allow for the organization to clearly see the benefits of their efforts. Kotter stated that these wins must be visible, unambiguous, and directly connected to the change. In the case of the LRSD, these types of wins were absent, despite the fact that evidence for such wins existed. For instance, 101 positions were either eliminated or reclassified as a result of the reorganization. The net result was a savings of \$3,789,000 that was redirected to provide for more textbooks, materials, instructional coaches, art teachers. In an interview, the district's chief financial officer reported that the reorganization increased the district's per student allocation by \$5 a year. However, this statistic was not widely publicized, and we found no evidence that anyone outside the district office was aware of it. In fact, there is clear evidence that district personnel did not perceive additional resources as a result of the reorganization, and a majority did not perceive an improvement in school-based resources at all. Table 6 demonstrates that a majority of teachers believed that instructional materials, instructional assistants, art teachers, and volunteers remained about the same since the district initiated the reorganization.

In fact, with the exception of the small circle of executive staff around Superintendent Brooks, LRSD personnel perceived limited success with regard to the reorganization. Table 7 presents the executive staff's and school board's perceptions of reorganization success. Of the eleven executive staff members, seven responded that the reorganization was *highly successful* or *successful*, with none responding *not successful*. School board members were divided in their perceptions of the reorganization's success. Table 8 demonstrates that principals, staff, and teachers perceived even less success. Less than 14 percent of teachers found

**Table 7. Executive Staff and School Board Perception of Reorganization Success**

<i>Response</i>	<i>Executive staff (n)</i>	<i>School board (n)</i>
Highly successful	2	0
Successful	5	2
Somewhat successful	3	1
Not successful	0	3
Don't know	0	1
Refused	1	0
Total responses	11	7

**Table 8. Principals, Staff, and Teachers Perception of Reorganization Success**

<i>Response</i>	<i>Principals</i>	<i>Staff</i>	<i>Teachers</i>
Highly successful (%)	4.55	7.24	4.43
Successful (%)	20.45	9.05	9.23
Somewhat successful (%)	34.06	52.94	48.71
Not successful (%)	27.27	26.24	29.15
Don't know (%)	13.64	4.07	7.38
Refused (%)	0.00	0.45	1.11
Percent total (%)	100.0	100.0	100.0
Response total (n)	44	221	271

the reorganization to have been *highly successful* or *successful*, while nearly 30 percent believed it was *not successful*. Similarly, only 16 percent of staff indicated that the reorganization was *highly successful* or *successful* versus 26 percent indicating that it was *not successful*. Principals were more positive, with roughly a quarter indicating that they felt the reorganization had been *highly successful* or *successful* and another quarter responding that it was *not successful*. However, principals also had the highest percentage (13.6 percent) of all groups indicating they *don't know* whether the reorganization was successful.

Lacking any short-term wins, gains were not consolidated (step 7), and lacking any significant buy-in, change could not be institutionalized within the organization (step 8).

## Conclusion

Applying John Kotter's eight-step framework to the reorganization of the LRSD, we found that the breakdown in the change process occurred during steps four and five. While principals understood the reorganization vision, school staff and teachers did not. In the end, only a small circle of district leaders in the central office were empowered to act on the reorganization vision.

The ineffective training received by principals was at the root of this lack of empowerment and communication, and thus the entire breakdown of the reorganization. According to the logic of the consultants' reorganization plan, and indeed of the NPM approach, as on-the-ground unit supervisors, principals play pivotal roles. They become gatekeepers for information as school personnel lose alternative contacts in the district office with the elimination of subject-matter specialists and functional supervisors. They also become gatekeepers for resources as authority and responsibility are devolved from the central office. In a decentralized system, any change effort must work through school principals. Principals must know not only the change goals and means for achieving them, but also how to communicate those goals and facilitate others' achieving them. This requires substantial, consistent training. We found evidence that such training did not occur in the LRSD.

With regard to Kotter's eight-step framework, the case of Superintendent Brooks and the LRSD reorganization validates the assumption of Kotter's framework that change must be led rather than the assumption of Kelman's model that it can be unleashed. Despite initial support and some early successes, communication gaps and poor training stalled the transformation. More specifically, the case suggests that Kotter's steps 4 and 5 may have to occur simultaneously and perhaps in the reverse order. We argue that an important reason that the vision was not effectively communicated throughout the district (step 4) was that school principals were not empowered (step 5) through effective training to communicate to their school staffs what the reorganization goals were and how to achieve them. While Kotter recognizes that the eight steps need not be done in the order he presents, the steps do suggest a linear progression (Fernandez & Rainey, 2006). This case suggests that the relation between communicating a change vision and empowering action deserves further research.

More practically, this case offers a clear lesson for change leaders. It should be no surprise that the only people who received early, consistent training—the school board and superintendent's executive staff—were the only ones empowered to act on the vision. The superintendent and his leadership team should have ensured that others beyond the central office were empowered to act on the vision. Specifically, they should have devoted more attention and resources to planning and executing training to assist school principals in their new roles as line managers and change agents.

This training challenge is a serious one. For a successful transformation, principals needed not only to change their own deeply ingrained routines and expectations but also to facilitate the way dozens of adults made the same big changes. Provided it was well-coordinated with principals' own efforts, direct training from the central district office for schoolteachers and staff would have been helpful in initiating and reinforcing these transformations. Beyond traditional

seminars and lectures, change leaders should consider less centralized strategies such as mentoring, coaching, and peer-to-peer support that have proven successful in other professional development settings, such as new principal induction and master principal training.

With increasing calls for management and structural reform of public organizations and the continuing popularity of the NPM, this study suggests that these transformations will be more successful if leaders pay particular attention to training on-the-ground unit supervisors. A successful decentralization program requires central office leaders to ensure that these supervisors (e.g., principals, store managers, captains) have the strategies and knowledge necessary to set a course toward changing routines and roles and, even more important, to empower their teams to adopt the changes.

### Note

1. Unless otherwise noted, quotations come from personal interviews conducted by the authors.

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**Appendix. Selected Questions from Principal Survey**

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On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being *completely misunderstood* and 10 being *completely understood*, how well do you understand the goals and purposes of the reorganization plan?

In your opinion, what is the most important goal of the reorganization implemented by Superintendent Roy Brooks in 2005? (circle one)

- a. Streamline the organization
- b. Establish a chain of command
- c. Provide more authority for principals
- d. Allow more resources for schools
- e. Don't know
- f. Other \_\_\_\_\_

In your opinion, how successfully has the reorganization plan achieved its stated goals? (circle one)

- a. Highly successful
- b. Successful
- c. Somewhat successful
- d. Not successful
- e. Don't know

The March 2005 Organizational Audit report produced by Smith, Klempen, and Newcomer called for training concerning governance or management.

Have you participated in this type of training? (circle one)

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Don't know

How effectively did this training prepare you to achieve the goals of the reorganization (e.g., clear lines of authority, school-based decisions)?

- a. Highly effective
- b. Effective
- c. Somewhat effective
- d. Not effective
- e. Don't know

Since the reorganization in 2005, how would you rate the coordination among other principals at your grade level (e.g., elementary or secondary)? (circle one)

- a. Better
- b. Worse
- c. About the same
- d. Don't know

**Selected Teacher and Staff Survey Questions**

In your opinion, what is the most important goal of the reorganization of the Little Rock School District?

Thus far, how successfully has the reorganization plan achieved this stated goal?

1. Highly successful
2. Successful
3. Somewhat successful
4. Not successful
7. Don't know

On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being *completely misunderstood* and 10 being *completely understood*, how well do you understand the goals and purposes of the reorganization plan?

In your school, how would you describe the teachers' commitment to the reorganization plan?

1. Highly committed
2. Committed
3. Somewhat committed
4. Not committed
7. Don't know

How would you describe your PRINCIPAL'S/SUPERVISOR'S commitment to the reorganization plan?

1. Highly committed
2. Committed
3. Somewhat committed
4. Not committed
7. Don't know

In your school, how would you describe the STAFF'S commitment to the reorganization plan?

1. Highly committed
2. Committed
3. Somewhat committed
4. Not committed
7. Don't know

As a result of the reorganization, do you feel that the distribution of resources DISTRICT-WIDE is now *More equal*, *Less equal*, or *About the same*?

1. More equal
2. Less equal
3. About the same
7. Don't know

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