

Leading in Interesting Times

School leaders must strike the right paradoxical balance between not changing and constantly adapting

Robert Davidovich & John Koehn

The fabled expression, “May you live in interesting times,” is certainly fitting for today’s school environment. However, as a school board member, you may be wondering whether this is a blessing or a curse.

Either way you interpret it, there is no denying that public schools, and all people connected with them, are living in interesting times. An important question to consider is: *How do you lead in these times?*

Businesses, institutions, and organizations in all sectors of society are scrambling to keep up in a world of rapid acceleration of change. It is not just the pace, but also the unpredictable intensity of change that holds the potential for renewal or demise. Today a hard-to-notice ripple on the horizon can become a tsunami overnight. React too soon, or too late, and you could be out of business. Get it right, and you enter a new cycle of prosperity.

For education, we are in a time of transition. Educators are finding that the landscape is changing. This shifting environment is accentuated by paradoxical legislation and societal demands, including:

- To add expenses (*i.e.*, technology) while revenues decrease.
- To increase student achievement of content standards while customizing instruction to meet the

needs of each individual student.

- To stick to the “tried and true” core while developing 21st century learners.
- To manage people in environments of increased accountability while setting them free to innovate.

In short, these interesting times demand that board members—and everyone else associated with public schools—collectively work within the expectation of retaining fundamental aspects of schooling while at the same time endlessly adapting to meet new challenges.

As educators, our moral imperative is to prepare the next generation for their future, not our past. This always has been the responsibility of a society’s elders—and it always will be. Doing so is easier when the future of the next generation is expected to be similar to the experiences of the present generation. It becomes much more difficult when the next generation faces a future that cannot be clearly imagined or accurately forecast.

Today, school leaders are facing important questions:

- How do we do more with less?
- What role should technology play?
- How do we prepare students for

meaningful jobs that are yet to be created?

- Can we get to where we need to be by continuously improving schools, or does our journey require us to design and follow a different path?

■ Technical Problems and Adaptive Challenges

How we answer these questions starts with how we see the problem. If we see our schools as needing to be fixed, then an “All you need to do is ...” mindset drives our actions. If we see our schools as needing to adapt to meet the needs of society, then we recognize that no one person has all of the answers. Diverse perspectives and the commitment of everyone are needed to solve our problems.

In their 2002 book, *Leadership on the Line*, Ronald Heifetz and Martin Linsky describe problems as being in two categories: technical problems and adaptive challenges. Technical problems are those where people apply current know-how to develop solutions. Adaptive challenges are those where a new way needs to be learned in order to solve the problem. These challenges are addressed through new discoveries and new learning and require adjustments in attitudes, values, and behaviors.



Leaders' understanding of the difference between these two types of problems is a key factor in determining whether our times are a blessing or a curse. The authors warn that leadership failures often stem from treating adaptive challenges like technical problems.

When you advocate for fixing schools, you are framing issues as technical problems. Certainly that's true for some issues, such as increasing student achievement or managing with fiscal responsibility. When facing technical problems, we call on the work of experts and seek best practices.

Adaptive challenges require a new approach, one that we must design and develop because the past context does not fit the new situation. Sometimes, strategies that have been successful in the past actually hinder our ability to solve new problems. More and more of the issues schools face are adaptive challenges, such as creating a system where every student is career- or college-ready.

■ The Past and the Present

Our schools once were charged with a different responsibility than they are presently. When we were an industrial nation, employees capable of working in highly structured jobs without the need for critical thinking or problem-solving were in demand.

Today, global competition requires our schools to produce students with different capabilities. We need self-regulating and independent learners who enter the workforce capable of high levels of

creative thinking and problem solving.

Our Industrial Age school system was not designed to produce this type of student. We need our system of education to produce something different. This is an adaptive challenge.

Our past experience of fixing schools limits our ability to transform them. School leaders need to recognize that it is important to help our system of education get better — but getting better alone will not meet the challenges we face. Getting better at the old ways is not enough. School board members also must help their system become different.

Schools don't need to be fixed. They need to evolve.

■ Green, Yellow, Red

In our work with school districts, we see that board members are increasingly concerned about their role. Serving as a board member in these times means that you will be wrestling with paradoxes, contradictions, conflict-ridden options, and many uncertainties.

As you think of your duties and responsibilities, you might want to consider the following metaphor: traffic lights. They tell us when to stop, when to slow down, and when to go. Let's apply this metaphor and relate it to your decision-making process.

▶ STOP:

- Looking back and relying on the “tried and true” when attempting to solve the really big problems. We are referring not to the technical problems, but to the big, unsolved, adaptive problems. Remember: Treating an adaptive challenge as a technical problem is a recipe for failure.
- Relying on a command-and-control method of leadership.

Recognize that there is a time to lead and a time to manage — and they involve very different skills.

- Accepting “all you have to do” solutions and “quick fixes” to complex problems. A school system is complex and full of variables that ultimately affect its effectiveness. There are no “silver bullets” designed to deal with adaptive problems.

▶ SLOW DOWN:

- Take time for reflection. Use this time to think the problem through from varied perspectives. Expect others to do so as well.
- Look for what the data say about the capacity of your system as a whole, rather than the effectiveness of its parts.

- Be watchful of “surface-level innovation.” Innovation is less about doing new things and more about doing things in new ways.
- Read, ponder, reflect, and read some more. Challenge your own status quo so that you can learn, unlearn, and relearn.

▶ GO:

- Continually focus on your system's core values, beliefs, and mission. The only way to navigate through turbulence is by constantly referencing your compass: your core values and beliefs.
- Make friends with change. Where you stumble, therein your treasure lies. Amplify disturbances; don't try to make them go away too quickly. Innovative leaders use creative tension to disturb the system in order to help it let go of unproductive ideas so that new, more powerful ideas can develop.
- Listen, listen, listen. Listen for what is meant, not just what is



spoken. Listen to a diverse array of perspectives and ask clarifying questions.

- Be a catalyst for change — not just for best practices but also for “next practices.” Keep in mind that change starts from within. You can’t ask others to change without changing your own perspectives. Consider the perceptual shift caused by systems guru Russell Ackoff when he stated, “It is better to do the right thing wrong than the wrong thing right. This is very significant because almost every problem confronting our society is a result of the fact that our public policymakers are doing the wrong things and are trying to do them righter.”
- Understand your superintendent’s change leadership style. Your most important role is to hire someone to lead in this environment. Leading innovation requires a different set of

skills than does leading improvement. You and your superintendent have to be the catalyst for leading the community to a supportive understanding of the adaptive challenges schools face.

■ Evolve, Don’t Fix

These are times of turbulence and uncertainty. Expect this to be the norm: The pace of change will not slow down. As futurist Ray Kurzweil tells us, “The 21st century will be equivalent to 20,000 years of progress at today’s rate of progress; about 1,000 times greater than the 20th century.”

Take a deep breath. You don’t have to fix things. Schools need to evolve, not be fixed. You don’t have to be the hero who has all the answers — and don’t expect top administrators to be that either. Leading others in solving adaptive challenges requires creating opportunities to engage more people more deeply rather than just relying on the thinking of those at the top.

Leading is not all about change. To thrive, it is important to strike the

right paradoxical balance between not changing and constantly adapting. It is more important than ever to articulate, reference, and champion your district’s core purpose, mission, and values. These shouldn’t change significantly. Use them to make sense of the changes around you and to continually renew your purpose so that what it means to live the mission constantly adapts without losing its essence.

Leading in interesting times requires seeing problems as opportunities. In this environment, understanding how to lead for innovation is an essential leadership attribute. The most important innovation you can make is to innovate the way you lead. ■

Robert Davidovich is an assistant professor in the School of Leadership at Cardinal Stritch University. John Koehn is a consultant and facilitator of strategic planning. They are co-founders of Leadership Enterprises and co-authors of The King’s Baker: A Tale of a Journey to Innovative Leadership.

Reprinted with permission from American School Board Journal. Copyright 2013 National School Boards Association. All rights reserved.



WASB BUSINESS HONOR ROLL



Recognize the local businesses that support your schools - Nominate them for the 2014 WASB Business Honor Roll

The WASB invites member school boards to submit the names of up to **five** local businesses, including newspapers or other media, that have been helpful to your school district over the past year.

Tell us who they are and what they have done for your schools, and we will help you promote your business partnerships.

- *All nominated businesses will be posted on the WASB website for one year.*
- *Districts will be provided a sample press release and a personalized certificate to present to the business(es).*
- *Select nominees and the stories of their successful partnerships will be featured in the Wisconsin School News.*

Submit your Business Honor Roll nominations at wasb.org by Friday, August 15, 2014!