

When knowing what to do isn't enough: The importance of

# SUPERIOR EXECUTION



By Bryan Goodwin

If we know what to do, why aren't we doing it?

This question has long plagued education reformers. After all, it isn't that school leaders don't know *what* to do. Nor are they willfully ignoring the research or obstinately refusing to change. Most districts and schools have improvement plans and work hard to enact them. So, it's not from a lack of effort or will that schools continue to struggle to raise achievement for all students. But, it may be that too few leaders understand how to ensure superior execution of their improvement plans.

## Open secrets in the business world

School leaders are not alone in their inability to ensure superior execution. We might just as easily ask why automakers, airline companies, and banks do not apply the "open secrets" of success in their industries. Consider, for example, the airline industry. Everyone in that industry knows the strategies that Southwest Airlines has used to become one of the most affordable, and thus, fastest growing airline in the nation: They buy only one type of airplane to minimize training

time and maintenance costs, do not offer "frills" such as movies and meals, operate out of cheaper second-tier airports, and employ a no-reserved seat policy. Others have tried to copy these strategies, but never as effectively as Southwest, which managed to be the only profitable U.S. airline in 2008.

Here's a second example. Earlier this year, Toyota ended GM's 77-year reign as the world's top auto manufacturer. Like Southwest, its formula for success is hardly a secret: It focuses on cutting waste, ensures that parts arrive precisely when workers need them, and empowers employees to fix problems as soon as they arise. James Surowiecki pointed out in a recent *New Yorker* article, "The Open Secret of Success," that these principles aren't new and are widely known. Toyota has simply applied them better than any of its competitors.

Wells Fargo is another company with a well-known strategy, having been detailed in Jim Collins' best-selling business book, *Good to Great*. The company focuses on "getting the right people on the bus," creating a corporate culture

focused on customer service, and selling additional services to existing, loyal customers. While not completely unscathed in the sub-prime mortgage crisis, Wells Fargo eschewed many of the riskiest lending practices owing to its commitment to customer service and the simple insight that apparently eluded its competitors: If your customers go bankrupt, you do, too.

Jonathan Low and Pam Cohen Kalafut, authors of *Invisible Advantage: How Intangibles Are Driving Business Performance*, assert that for investors, a company's ability to *execute* its strategy is even more important than the strategy itself. The same might be said of schools and districts. *What* is in your plan is probably less important—as long as it focuses on using research-based strategies to address student needs—than *how well* your staff implements it. A closer examination of highly effective companies, districts, and schools offers some key insights into how leaders can ensure superior execution of their plans.

continued on page 2

continued from page 1

## Simplicity and clarity of focus

In a meta-analysis on high-performing districts that McREL published in 2006, titled *School District Leadership that Works*, Timothy Waters and Robert Marzano reported that highly effective districts set “clear, non-negotiable goals” for teaching and learning. Most districts and schools do have improvement plans in place. Indeed, you may be required to have one. But ask yourself, can everyone in my organization articulate our goals for student performance or our plans to raise achievement?

Our experience is that the answer often is no—primarily because many district and school improvement plans are excessively complicated. You may be thinking, though, that school improvement is not simple. So, shouldn't our organization's goals and objectives reflect that complexity? Following that logic, one might expect Wells Fargo and Southwest Airlines to have multi-tiered goals and objectives with dizzyingly complicated improvement plans stored in hefty binders. Wells Fargo, for example, has 160,000 employees working in 6,000 banks across the United States, providing six different kinds of financial services. Southwest Airlines has 34,000 employees who operate 3,400 daily flights, carrying 280,000 passengers out of 64 cities on 535 airplanes. Both are sprawling companies, operating in highly competitive and complex businesses.

Yet one of Wells Fargo's strengths is the simplicity and clarity of its focus. “At the end of the day, they've kept [their strategy] simple: generating more business out of

existing customers,” one banking analyst told James Temple of the *San Francisco Chronicle* (C-1). “What we did was so simple and we kept it simple,” a former Wells Fargo CEO told Jim Collins. “It was so straightforward and obvious that it sounds almost ridiculous to talk about it” (p. 97). Similarly, as Chip and Dan Heath recount in their book, *Made to Stick*, Southwest CEO Herb Kelleher has remarked, “I can teach you the secret to running this airline in about 30 seconds. This is it: We are THE low-fare airline. Once you understand that fact, you can make any decision about this company's future as well as I can” (p. 29).

Current research can point schools and districts to the same clarity of focus. For example, after studying 2,500 elementary classrooms across the U.S., a team of researchers led by Robert Pianta at the University of Virginia reported in the journal *Science* that students only have about a 20 percent chance of receiving high-quality instruction throughout their elementary years. Armed with this information, schools and districts might narrow their focus to guaranteeing that every student, no matter what classroom they find themselves in, receives a world-class education from a supportive, highly effective teacher.

## Creating a culture of success

For some leaders, ensuring “superior execution” means giving everyone marching orders, then bird-dogging them into complying with top-down directives. Indeed, when faced with the need to get everyone on board with a plan, many leaders default to what *Fast Company* columnist Alan Deutschman refers as the “three Fs” of facts, fear, and

force. However, as Deutschman notes in his book, *Change or Die*, behavioral psychologists have long observed that these three Fs are ineffective motivators. Employees are more likely to implement a strategy when they not only believe in it, but also feel they truly belong in the organization.

That's one reason why Southwest Airlines has spent the past 30 years building a strong corporate culture where people can see and believe that change is possible. Southwest president Colleen Barrett wrote in the May 2008 edition of the airlines' magazine that her employees' widespread commitment to superior execution of Southwest's business strategy is, in effect, the company's “secret sauce.” Similarly, Wells Fargo CEO John Stumpf told Francesco Guerrera at the *Financial Times*, “I could leave our strategy on an aeroplane seat and have a competitor read it and it wouldn't make any difference.” According to Stumpf, “It's about culture.”

In our own research, we observed that “beat-the-odds” schools are distinguished by their “cultures of high expectations.” First, highly effective schools appear to establish, with input from teachers, a common school-wide vision and clear focus. This vision, in turn, translates into high expectations for student performance and behavior. Through shared leadership, teachers take responsibility for creating structured, well-managed



classrooms, where they ensure that students know their learning goals and are clear about the school's expectations for behavior.

### Empowering everyday innovation

Effective leaders understand that the real secret to superior execution is providing a clear focus for their organizations, then empowering employees to come up with solutions to current and future challenges. For example, in the early 80s, GM, hoping to learn some of Toyota's secrets, hired the Japanese company to turn around GM's low-performing Fremont, California, factory, which was stymied by labor-management tensions and producing poor-quality products.

The results were shocking. With the same unionized employees, productivity increased and defects decreased to almost nil. The secret to this success, writes Deutschman in *Change or Die*, was that Toyota encouraged bottom-up, everyday innovation by making their workers feel connected to a larger effort and encouraging them to think independently and make decisions. Today, Toyota employees submit up to a million new ideas a year, many of which are eventually implemented across the company. When people understand their goals and operate within a culture of success, they create "everyday innovations," constantly identifying small changes that improve what they do.

Wells Fargo is similarly known for its incremental growth strategy. As one Wells Fargo regional president recently told James Temple, "We understand that we get bigger by being better. We do not get better by being bigger" (C-1). Both companies appear to understand, just like the tortoise, that steady progress wins the race.

For district or school leaders, it can be tempting to launch bold new initiatives that capture local headlines and convince impatient board members and taxpayers that big changes are in the works. But as Stanford professor and education historian Larry Cuban suggests, most big new policy changes are like a storm at sea; agitation and turbulence are visible on the surface, but beneath it all, the ocean floor remains calm and serene. In short, big changes often result in less actual change than a steady string of smaller, more incremental improvements. When school improvement works, it does so because educators keep their eye on the big picture, yet take improvement one step at a time, a process we call "thinking *systemically* and acting *systematically*."

### Final thoughts

Encouraging everyday innovation may be, for some, a radical way to think about school improvement efforts. It does not direct people's energies into getting their heads around sweeping new plans or adopting bold new programs. Rather, it recognizes the simple truth that improvement is, by definition, about doing things better. It's about everyone—including district staff, principals, teachers, food service workers, and other support staff—getting clear about what's expected of them, and finding new ways, every day, to do what they do, just a little better.

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