

# **SCHOOLS WITH SOLUTIONS**

**Strategies that will enable every school leader to  
become a *solution facilitator*.**

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## SCHOOLS WITH SOLUTIONS

After 33 years as an educator – 10 as a classroom teacher, 3 as a vice-principal and the last 20 as a principal – I have discovered two absolute truths:

*Every school faces unique challenges.*

and

*Every school possesses the ability to effectively meet those challenges.*

The key to finding effective solutions within an organization lies in the ability of the leader to empower that organization to look within. The effective school leader needs to be a solution facilitator. The easy way over or around the challenge is to look for a template that exists elsewhere or to bring in the recognized *expert* along with his/her answer. In reality, this solution seeking often complicates matters and adds yet other challenges: *How does the "outside" answer need to be adapted to fit the current challenge? Does the "outside" solution create other stresses within the organization? Does the "outside" challenge negatively affect the school staff's collective sense of confidence insomuch that the school leader's choice to look outside the school for the solution undermines the staff's ability to be problem solvers on their own? Without ownership of the solution, will the school staff / students / community be committed to the successful implementation of the chosen solution?* Indeed, the school

leader who seeks outside answers to inside challenges runs the risk of inadvertently sabotaging important aspects of the school. Much can be gained from looking inward for solutions.

Solution seeking requires a certain amount of courage because, although the ideas may best be sought from within the organization, the solutions themselves may exist outside the proverbial "box". Questions such as *Why are we doing what we have always done?* and *Does there exist an alternate and better route to our goal?* can send a school into the foreboding realm of **CHANGE!** It is a realm that invites uneasiness and fear – human nature is often more about predictability than possibility. Schools with solutions are those organizations with the confidence to follow their instincts based on their staff's collective knowledge of what is not working and what needs to be done to attain success for the students.

Schools With Solutions speaks to every school because the potential for positive change is as prolific as the number of teachers in our classrooms who absolutely know in the depths of their teaching souls what is best for their unique students. Surely if we believe – and as educators we darn well better believe – that every student possesses the potential to succeed, then it is only one step further to believe that every school is a *solution garden* where school leaders need to cultivate the creative genius of staff. *Solutions exist in every school just waiting for a challenge to emerge!*

Realize that, as the school leader, the principal is not in the role of *solution creator*. Rather, it is the aspect of *facilitating solutions*, of setting the stage for the creative process and enabling staff to envision possibilities, that should be the principal's focus. A solution facilitator is all about empowering the group to become a team of problem solvers. Every challenge overcome paves the road to future successes.

In order to be that effective solution facilitator, experience has taught me that there are certain *key strategies* that should be used in order to empower a school staff to solve challenges unique to its school.

- ***HAVE THE COURAGE TO QUESTION "WHAT IS SIMPLY BECAUSE IT ALWAYS HAS BEEN."***

So often, the status quo goes unquestioned simply because no one ventures to contemplate an alternative. The courage of the solution facilitator to not only look for but to actually see that a challenge is present underlies the ultimate attainment of increased success. Beware of the status quo when its existence casts a veil over possible alternatives. The caution "Don't fix it if it's not broken!" may be holding back countless creations for the betterment of teaching-learning interactions. Rather than searching out broken components of a system, one would do better to examine degrees of effectiveness: Would a change here or there result in more success? Don't change things for the sake of change, but do be cognizant of things that exist at a certain level of attainment simply because that has always been the way. Do not let your school be satisfied with less.

- ***BE READY TO STEP OFF THE PATH IF IT IS NOT TAKING YOU WHERE YOU NEED TO GO.***

Schools that realize their solutions are those organizations with the confidence and courage to follow their instincts based on their staff's collective knowledge of what is NOT working and what needs to be done to attain success for THEIR students. The Solution Facilitator must lead with the courage that will inspire teachers to not be satisfied with anything short

of total success for each learner. Be sure to tread softly here – schools are certainly part of a hierarchical system that rests on historical precedence. Rather than being too quick to expose potential challenges, take the time to use the next strategy.

- ***CLEARLY DEFINE THE CHALLENGE.***

Describe your challenge in simple, straightforward terms. Write it down. Post it. Continue to refer to it. Keep it in focus. This may prove to be the most important component in the creation of an effective solution.

- ***CREATE THE TIME TO REFLECT.***

How often have we heard people say "I'm going to take some time to reflect on that."? It becomes a fairly common response to most everyday concerns when one truly believes that thinking about a situation will result in a more effective action. Put that scenario into the hectic environment of a school where the day is driven by a timetable and bells and, most likely, that time for reflection never materializes. It becomes far too common for educators to put pressing issues as lesser priorities than the pressing demands of the moment. The Solution Facilitator must understand the need to trade the short-term focus for the long-term gain – to get beyond the day-to-day survival mentality and devise a plan for staff to focus on successful teaching-learning interactions. Be it through the use of occasional teachers, school-wide assemblies or myriad other tactics, the leader must get the pressing demands of the moment away from the staff's focus in order to free their energies and abilities to effectively reflect on the bigger challenges. Truly see time as a necessary component of success and go about creating that time!

- ***PLAN FROM THE FACTS.***

The most effective solutions grow out of empirical facts. Get into the relevant literature and know from whence you lead. Solutions often begin from intuition, but, as should be the case in every educational initiative, moving beyond theory and "gut feelings" to tried and proven evidence certainly lends a great deal of credence to the final outcome. The Solution Facilitator sets the stage for staff planning sessions by providing relevant research findings upon which pertinent discussion can progress.

- ***KNOW YOUR PARAMETERS BEFORE YOU FIND YOURSELF BEYOND THEM.***

It certainly can be devastating to the creative process when an idea is thrown off track because the creators were not aware of obstacles already in place. Such things as an Education Act or a Collective Agreement exist for very good reasons and, when solutions are undermined because such things are not taken into account, getting the staff to pursue future challenges could definitely drift into the realm of *time wasters*. It is the responsibility of the Solution Facilitator to put the time and effort into

researching and identifying possible roadblocks before taking the staff on its journey of discovery. The focus here is on answering questions before they are asked.

- ***LOOK FOR POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS "OUTSIDE THE BOX".***

The preceding strategy notwithstanding, one may need to break through existing parameters in order to create the most effective solution. The effective Solution Facilitator keeps an eye constantly peeled for opportunities that can be linked to school solutions. If "outside-the-box" ideas can be aligned with school challenges, then one needs to be ready to go outside that box. Trips to the "outside" may need to be negotiated with the powers above, so be ready to use all of those empirical findings and that parameter knowledge to make believers out of the "keepers of the box".

- ***DO NOT OVERLOOK THE POWER OF THE OPPOSITE.***

When seeking a solution, do not become bounded by tradition and usual perspective. Sometimes we need to turn around and dare to look in the opposite direction in order to find the best answer. Just maybe, the most needy of learners can have something to teach the most gifted!

- ***EVERYONE HAS WITHIN THEM A POSSIBLE SOLUTION.***

In order to seek solutions from within an organization, the leader must be acutely aware of the culture that exists within. Be certain to set the stage for inclusive group discussions by building every member's reputation as a thoughtful and meaningful contributor. Do not permit the outspoken ones to silence the quiet ones. As a Solution Facilitator, empower each team member to be a full contributor. Expect every team member to hear and understand and appreciate each other's ideas.

- ***BE EVER MINDFUL OF THE ESSENCE OF THE CHALLENGE.***

One of the pitfalls of searching for possible solutions occurs when the solution itself takes on a bigger life than the challenge it is designed to overcome. Keep the challenge in front of the group by scribing it in clear terms, then post the possible solution beside that challenge. Focus on ensuring that the solution is not bigger than the challenge. One does not need a sledge hammer to crack a walnut!

- ***INSPIRE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONERS.***

A reflective practitioner is a person who is constantly assessing, evaluating and applying. As a Solution Facilitator, you definitely want your staff members to be reflecting on all aspects of possible solutions as those solutions are created. Inspire reflection by practicing it yourself and *thinking out loud* when working with others so that they can experience the techniques as you apply them.

- ***IF THE ROLE DOES NOT EXIST, CREATE IT!***

Sometimes chosen solutions require the filling of a role to ensure their ultimate implementation, and sometimes such a role may not exist that would perfectly suit the need. With the intimate knowledge of the challenge and the solution, the Solution Facilitator must be ready to oversee the creation of a role if its existence will enhance the meeting of the challenge.

- ***TAKE THE CALCULATED RISK.***

If there is an ultimate risk in the implementation of the chosen solution, be certain that it is a *calculated* risk. To that end, ensure that staff reflection and discussion have delved into the possible scenarios associated with anything short of a full success. Can the school succeed if the challenge is not totally met? As the Solution Facilitator, can you be assured that there is a greater chance of success than there is of negatively impacting the current status of your school if the desired results are not forthcoming? Ultimately, the best test of the efficacy of a solution is often to let it run its course and to let any associated risk be supported by the underlying decision to create it in the first place.

- ***STEER THE COURSE.***

If the intended path to meeting the challenge needs a little "course correction" from time to time, then, as the leader, ensure that your hands are always on the "wheel". Staying the course when obvious changes to the original plan are begging to be initiated is downright foolhardy. Having guided the staff to be reflective practitioners should guarantee that the creative juices will continue to flow and that staff will not be resistant to offer suggestions to enhance the outcome of the chosen plan as it is being carried into action.

- ***DON'T VIEW THE SOLUTION AS BEING THE END RESULT – IT MUST ALWAYS BE THE ANSWER TO THE IMMEDIATE CHALLENGE.***

*As wonderful as a solution may tend to appear, it is only as good as the degree of solving that it brings to the impending challenge. As a Solution Facilitator, do not get caught up in creating "the next big thing in education" or "the answer to every school's challenges". If the solution is effective for and transferable to other sites/challenges, then that will occur naturally over time. Your focus must always be on the unique challenge facing your school.*

- ***BUILD UPON YOUR PAST SUCCESSES.***

Every successful solution becomes the stepping stone to further successes. Take the time to "R C A" – Genuinely show RESPECT to your staff for their positive intentions; Genuinely show CONSIDERATION for their attempts and ideas; Genuinely show APPRECIATION for their

**accomplishments. Build celebration into your overall plan and always make your staff members truly believe that the solution is theirs, because today's success is tomorrow's rallying cry to overcome the next challenge!**

**Do the above-listed strategies form an exhausted list? Certainly not, or else the whole intent of this presentation has been for naught. They are meant as "jumping-off points" to consider when you find yourself in the role of a Solution Facilitator. As such, you will need to know your challenge, know your learning community, know your staff and know – really know – that you have within you the power to empower. Empower your teachers, as the experts on your school's unique learners, to look within and to create solutions for your school's unique challenges. The more you facilitate solution creativity, the more key strategies you will, no doubt, add to the list. In essence, you build your own repertoire of strategies that can be used for future challenges. And, you become a Solution Facilitator!**