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Asking the Right Questions

The tension was rising. I faced a roomful of staff developers from regional and state education agencies gathered somewhat against their will. I had been hired to do three things: (1) review the school effectiveness research as a shared knowledge base, (2) introduce and apply some concepts about school change, and (3) facilitate an integration of components from various improvement models into a common format for statewide workshops.

The planning session had deteriorated into a defense of each agency's preferred model for school change as the most current, most comprehensive, and most worthy of becoming a statewide model. Sincere, conscientious professionals who had spent the coffee break bemoaning the difficulties of breaking down departmental barriers in high schools were engaged in their own turf wars, talking at cross purposes about the same concepts, each armed with his or her particular guru's customized vocabulary. I asked myself, "Why is this happening, even in a group that *knows* better? What we need is to have a set of factors that are common to all these processes, use no educational jargon, and have *no* capital letters to turn into acronyms!"

The tension continued into lunchtime. The moderator of the meeting, an administrator with outstanding facilitation skills but limited history with the group, expressed a sense of failure due to the lack of progress, and a desire to go back to his office where he could accomplish something. The suspiciously convenient ringing of his cell phone granted that wish. By this time, doubting *anyone's* ability to meet the varied expectations of the group, I sincerely offered to withdraw and let the group clarify what it really wanted and determine whether another facilitator or approach would work better for them. One agency's representative actually asked everyone to give back her handouts, and went home. But one dedicated member of the group sat thoughtfully, apparently doodling on his napkin. We paused for a stretch break.

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When the group reconvened, colleague Dennis Glaeser volunteered his napkin notes—five questions that reflected the themes evolving during the discussion of change models. The questions were as follows:

1. Where are we now?
2. Where do we want to go?
3. How will we get there?
4. How will we know we are there?
5. How can we keep it going?

This set of questions broke the gridlock, and the remaining participants began to link their desired topics and activities to the five key questions. As the content agenda developed, the original direction to ground the workshops in the knowledge base of school effectiveness research and change was restated. This focus on findings from school settings created a common ground with ideas that had originated in business and industry.

REFINEMENT OF THE FIVE CRITICAL QUESTIONS

As I continued to work with these five critical questions, the first three remained intact just as Dennis had written them. They were simple and straightforward: “Where are we now?” guides inquiry into the status quo. “Where do we want to go?” helps shape the vision of an ideal or preferred future and articulate goals to achieve it. “How will we get there?” generates the concrete action steps that must be taken.

The fourth question, “How will we know we are there?” bumped up against the realities of time involved in substantive change. Writers on school change had described a span of 3 to 5 years for a moderately complex change, and 5 to 7 years for major restructuring to move from being an innovation to becoming a routine part of how the organization conducts its primary functions. During one of his presentations, Michael Fullan (1999a) shared a general observation that he called the “3–6–8 rule.” On the basis of his research and experience, he postulated that an elementary school could make significant change in 3 years, but it took 6 years to change a high school and 8 years to transform an entire school district.

With those time frames in mind, asking “How will we know we are there?” seemed inappropriate. Such a question implies that monitoring is exclusively summative, occurring at some distant point of completion in the future. In a society programmed for immediate gratification, motivation based on proof of successful results would be difficult with such a long lag time. The question “How will we know we are there?” thus became “How will we know we are (getting) there?” The added word in parentheses reminds us of the need for milestones or benchmarks that will verify gradual progress and reinforce continued effort.

Literature on stages of change also influenced the fifth question, which first read “How can we keep it going?” One of the most common problems faced by change agents in schools is the TYNT-NYNT syndrome: “this year’s new thing” soon replaced by “next year’s new thing.” Michael Fullan, Matthew B. Miles, Michael Huberman, and others have pointed out the need to continue a change process from initiation to implementation and on to institutionalization. The “bandwagon” approach so common to school change efforts prevents this sustained momentum. At the same time, Richard Elmore and others have pointed out that the time and effort it takes to restructure schools are not warranted unless they directly affect the aspects of teaching that improve student learning. The importance of maintaining focus on student outcomes, as well as the momentum of energy and resources, is reflected in the current wording of the fifth question: “How will we sustain the focus and momentum?”

THE FIVE QUESTIONS AS A ROAD MAP

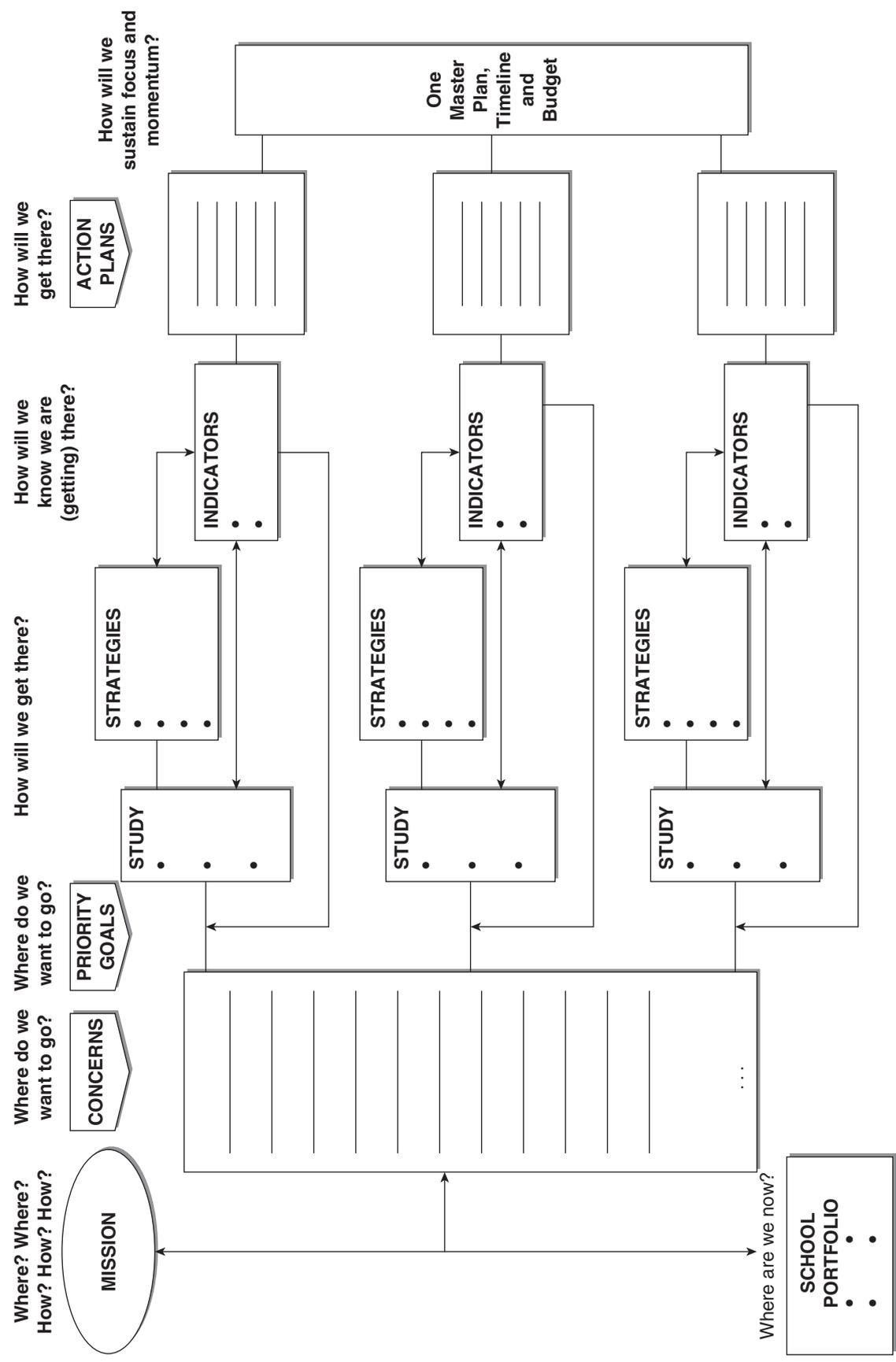
Change is a journey, not an event, so the five questions lend themselves to several travel metaphors throughout this book. “Where are we now?” is a starting point. “Where do we want to go?” is the destination. “How will we get there?” includes the route we will take, what we will pack, what we will need to buy new for the trip, and what we will leave behind. Hotel reservations, freeway interchanges, scenic outlooks, and excursions on the itinerary represent milestones that assure we are making progress—“getting there.” Regular fuel, food, and rest stops are critical for “sustaining focus and momentum” on the trip.

Maps are visuals that make complex, written directions easier to understand. They also allow us to find our way back to the planned route if we lose our way or get detoured by events beyond our control. The school improvement framework is a visual map for our journey to higher learning for all students and closing achievement gaps.

With a few minor revisions, Figure 1.1 has served as a visual organizer that has been useful in my work with schools, districts, and state departments for over 20 years. I have reviewed district and school improvement plans developed under many models originating in educational or business settings, and all of them have included components of mission, data, goals, strategies, and action plans—although by a full thesaurus of various names. The concepts and interrelationships among the components are the essential understandings. The terminology can be changed, and I rarely argue semantics. In fact, the first step when I work with groups is to encourage them to change the labels to match their state, district, or school outline. Most recently, the Office of Field Relations in the Ohio State Department of Education adapted this figure to guide its statewide system of support for schools identified for improvement under No Child Left Behind.

The oval labeled **Mission** is the only oval on the page and has the first word of all five questions posed above it (Where? Where? How? How? How?). The unique shape and the reference to all five questions are visual reminders that the core values of the organization must be continuously and consciously introduced in all discussions of all decisions in a change process.

Figure 1.1 School Change as Inquiry



SOURCE: Adapted from *Getting Excited About Data* (p. 3), by E. L. Holcomb, 1999, Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press. Copyright © 1999 by Corwin Press. Used with permission.

“Where are we now?” is the question posed above the **School Portfolio** component of the change organizer. The analysis of current status must include a variety and blend of objective data and perceptions of shareholders. The four bullet points in this component represent information on

- Student learning
- Student characteristics (e.g., demographics, behavior, attendance) and perceptions
- Staff characteristics, education, experience, and perceptions
- Parent and community characteristics and perceptions

The two-way arrow between **Mission** and **Portfolio** illustrates that the distance between what we *believe* and what we really *achieve* may be short or long. The courageous question “Are we walking our talk?” must be raised and confronted from the onset of a change process. The greater the discrepancy between our mission and our results, the longer will be our list of **Concerns**. From these, we must carefully select a limited number of **Priority Goals**. These goals further answer the “Where do we want to go?” question.

Once goals are set, collaborative groups undertake the **Study** process that will lead to decisions about the **Strategies** for “How will we get there?” and the **Indicators** that will be monitored to answer “How will we know we are (getting) there?” One reason that school improvement efforts fail is that too many schools leap into planning without devoting adequate time to analyzing their own issues internally and learning from others outside the school. The three bullets in the **Study** box represent different tasks:

- Dig deeper into the data available for more specific information about concerns, strengths, and challenges. Look for root causes. Confirm or contradict hypotheses and hunches to better understand the challenges and identify barriers that must be overcome.
- Review the research on effective practices that address the goal, and consult with other schools, districts, and education agencies that face similar challenges and identify their successes as best practice.
- Courageously compare the “best practice” findings with the practices and programs currently in place in the organization.

The multiple points in the **Strategies** box are less specific. There is no specific meaning for each one, as outlined for the three aspects of the **Study** phase. Instead, these multiple points remind us that there is no “one best way” that will guarantee success in reaching a goal. For example, increasing reading achievement may require a simultaneous combination of strategies, such as

- Changing or adding curriculum materials
- Learning new teaching strategies
- Revising the school schedule to allow for more flexible grouping and lower student–adult ratios
- Devising ways to attract and involve more parents/guardians in their children’s education

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The two points in the box labeled **Indicators** represent two types of evidence that will need to be collected to monitor progress and document success. In the above example, **indicators of implementation** would be criteria that are established to demonstrate that the agreed-upon strategies are actually being used. This evidence might include documents, such as the new school schedule and logs of parent activity, or observational comments made by the principal or peer coaches about new practices seen in classrooms. The **indicators of impact** would be measures of reading achievement that show that students are really learning more since the changes have been initiated.

Two-way arrows between **Strategies** and **Indicators** and back to **Study** illustrate that this is not a purely linear relationship. Sometimes groups have to think about how the desired situation would look and what evidence they would need to gather to have greater clarity about the changes in practice that are required. These arrows create a cycle within a cycle. If research-based strategies are faithfully implemented but the indicators do not yield evidence of improved results, further study and modified strategies will be needed.

Answering the “How will we get there?” question also requires development of **Action Plans** that clarify roles, responsibilities, timelines, and resources needed for implementation. The first answer to “How will we sustain focus and momentum?” is generated by assuring that these action plans are then coordinated as components of one **master plan**. Without this step, it is impossible to get a systemic picture of all the activity being attempted within a school or district. When the action plans are reviewed, competing demands for financial resources and professional development time become clear and can be adjusted so that the school’s efforts are cohesive rather than fragmented and can be conducted in a coordinated manner and within the collective capacity of the organization.

THE WRONG QUESTIONS

Too often, I receive a question that echoes all the components of this road map, so it sounds good—at first. It goes like this:

We’ve written a mission and analyzed our data. We brainstormed concerns and prioritized goals. We chose research-based strategies and decided what indicators to collect data on. Then we did action plans and tied them into a master plan. Now—how do we get buy-in?

Wrong question. First I have to ask about the “we” and “they” (their) who are referenced. Who did all the work described? In what setting and over what period of time? If, for example, the principal and a small group did it all over the summer and now want to “sell” it in September to a whole staff who were not involved or represented or even constantly informed, it’s already “too little too late.”

As I began to revise the book for this third edition, some readers asked for more content on “how we overcome resistance.” Again, from my point of view, it’s the wrong question. Authentic change in school culture and practices

doesn't occur by "overcoming" bad practice. It occurs by building commitment to students that becomes so strong that people are willing to voluntarily let go of the old and move forward. As Linda Lambert (2003) points out,

the benefits of participation—improved relationships, altered assumptions and beliefs, shared goals and purposes, increased maturity and cognitive complexity—emerge in a spiraling way: the greater the participation, the greater the development; the greater the development, the higher the quality of participation. (p. 12)

That is the intent of this book—to provide tools (skills and processes) that engage members of the school community throughout the process of facing the current facts, identifying shared goals, and mapping their journey of change.

It's not about "selling" or "overcoming" and it doesn't come "at the end." Every chapter is about building capacity and commitment, and Chapter 6 majors in sustaining and continuously expanding that effort.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

This kind of engagement that changes the culture of the school is similar to the transformation from teaching as isolated practice to teachers interacting as professional learning communities. The body of research on teacher collaboration goes back over 20 years to the foundational work of Susan Rosenholtz (1989); Jerry Bamberg (Isaacson & Bamberg, 1992); Milbrey McLaughlin (McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993); Gene Hall and Shirley Hord (2001); Linda Darling-Hammond (1994); Tom Sergiovanni (1994); Karen Seashore Louis (1995); and others.

More recent adaptations of teacher collaboration by Robert Eaker et al. (Eaker, DuFour, & DuFour, 2002) stress three themes underlying the PLC conceptual framework:

(1) a solid foundation consisting of collaboratively developed and widely shared mission, vision, values and goals; (2) collaborative teams that work interdependently to achieve a common goal; and (3) a focus on results as evidenced by a commitment to continuous improvement. (p. 3)

Based on her extensive portfolio of research and work with practitioners, Shirley Hord (2003) reiterates five essential components for professional learning communities that are absolutely critical. They include

- Shared values and vision
- Shared and supportive leadership
- Collegial, intentional learning and its application
- Supportive conditions—structural and relational
- Peers supporting peers

Structural support is provided when time is allocated for collaborative work; appropriate technology and materials are available; external expertise

can be accessed; and there are open communication systems connecting teachers, central office personnel, parents, and community members. Relational supports require a culture of sustained and unified efforts to change, norms of involvement and respect, a culture of trust, and visible recognition of outstanding achievement. When these are in place, peers can support peers by observing each other, providing feedback, and reviewing student work together.

Those components are a close match for the terms and tasks used in this book and outlined in Figure 1.2. The goal is the same—to bring professionals together with a focus on their own and students' learning, so the school becomes a true community of highly effective professionals.

THE FIVE QUESTIONS AND THREE MODELS OF CHANGE

Figure 1.1 links the five critical questions to the conceptual components or stages of an overall, ongoing inquiry process within an organization. But as Michael Fullan (2005) cautions, “terms travel well, but the underlying *conceptualization and thinking* do not” (p. 10, italics his). Participants need more specifics. This section draws on three widely used models of change to provide a more concrete breakdown of the specific tasks occurring within each stage. Figure 1.2 provides a matrix to help participants identify the work, and choose tools and activities that will engage participants successfully in each of those tasks. For now, just focus on the column on the left of Figure 1.2. You will see the five critical questions in bold. Directly under the five questions (in parentheses) are references to the stages of change expressed in the three models introduced here. Lowercase letters a, b, and c are keyed to these models at the bottom of the figure.

RPTIM: Readiness, Planning, Training, Implementation, Maintenance

The first of the three models of change is Fred Wood's RPTIM model, a classic from staff development literature. The acronym stands for stages of readiness, planning, training, implementation, and maintenance. The **readiness** stage includes identifying major problems of the school or district, working in collaboration with key groups to develop goals, and examining current practices. The **planning** stage includes identifying differences between goals, desired practices, and actual practices, and developing training activities based on that diagnosis. During the **training** stage, all affected groups, including central office administrators, principals, teachers, and others, receive training and develop, share, and critique action plans. **Implementation** requires that resources are allocated to support new practices and that additional coaching and training are provided on a continuing basis. The **maintenance** stage involves supervision and monitoring to continue new behaviors, and use of feedback to guide further improvement. Although Wood's work focused specifically on staff development and instructional changes, his framework has been

Figure 1.2 Matrix of Tools for Asking the Right Questions

	Histograms	Run Charts	Symbolic Displays	Surveys	Focus Groups	Think, Pair, Share	Flowcharting	Continuum	Affinity Process	Brainstorming	Nominal Group Process	Color Coding	Weighted Voting	Priority Grid	Pie Charts	Pareto Charts	Fishbone (Cause and Effect)	Force Field Analysis	Graphic Organizer	Decision Matrix	Action Planning	Innovation Configuration Map	CBAM-SOCQ	Venn Diagram	Quick-Write	Talk-Walk	Go for the Green	Action Research	Reflective Study Groups	Networking	Open Space Technology	Active Listening
Where Are We Now? (readiness, planning, and training; ^a initiation ^b)			2		2	2	2		3	3							4	4				5		6	6	6						
Raise awareness of need for change					2	2	2		3	3		3					4	4						6	6	6						6
Clarify roles and responsibilities					2	2	2	2	3	3		3					4							6	6	6	6					6
Diagnose motivation for change (source, intensity)				2	2	2	2	2															6	6	6	6						6
Review existing philosophy, mission, belief statements				2	2	2	2		3			3	3											6	6	6						6
Diagnose governance and program factors				2	2	2	2		3			3			4	4							5	6	6	6	6					6
Diagnose student success	2	2	2	2	2																	5					6					6
Diagnose shareholder perceptions	2			2	2				3			3	3	3	4	4								6	6		6					6
Diagnose organizational culture, climate				2	2	2	2	2		3		3				4	4						5	6	6	6	6					6

(Continued)