

VELA School Leadership Team Development Pilot Project I Summative Report

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During the 2001-2002 school year, the Vermont Education Leadership Alliance designed a program to strengthen school leadership teams. Clarification of roles and responsibilities within each group and increased awareness of the importance of organizational trust were the primary focus areas of the program.

As a result of a state wide mailing about the program, twenty school districts inquired about the opportunity and seven made formal application to be considered for the project. Five districts were selected in May, 2002 to participate in the program during the '02-'03 school year.

The districts selected represented a total of 7,841 students and the teams consisted of 37 school board members and 58 administrators. In three of the five pilot groups, the members were coming together in a configuration that was new to them.

Nineteen consultants were invited to submit proposals to provide services in support of the program design. In June, 2002, the VELA Executive Committee recommended to the VELA Board of Directors that Chagnon & Reina Inc. of Stowe, Vermont and Ray Proulx of Johnson, Vermont be contracted to design and deliver the program to the five districts.

The expertise of the consultants in the areas of organizational trust (Chagnon & Reina) and school organization/operation (Ray Proulx) encouraged us to contract with both groups. We were also interested in the potential of a web based, e-learning platform focused on the content of trust developed by Chagnon & Reina. We saw significant potential for a seamless and logical context for the participants with the combined content and process of these consultants. Contract negotiations with Chagnon & Reina extended from June through August, 2002. Final agreements were signed on August 26, 2002 and the program design work began shortly thereafter.

After the design work for the interactive, web based platform utilizing the content of the Chagnon & Reina trust model was completed, site visits to the five teams began in November, 2002. The initial meetings quickly revealed that the newness of relationship within three of the five teams would present challenges for the building of teamwork. Soon after the start of the project two of the teams withdrew due to a "full plate" and "internal issues" related to difficult relationships within the group. Additional teams were offered the vacant spots and services with one new team commenced in January-February 2003.

After a daylong face-to-face workshop on building trust in the workplace, teams were directed to their own password protected web site to continue the discussion about trust within the team. The online work was moderated by members of the consultant team skilled in facilitation and certified in the content of the trust model. A second consultant team began work on clarification of roles and

responsibilities with each team as soon as each had completed the trust content introduction. All of this work was done in face-to-face settings. As soon as the work on role clarification began, participation in the web based platform declined dramatically.

One team exhibited successful and significant participation in the platform while the others never demonstrated realistic participation in this format. The introduction of the trust content in workshop format was highly rated by participants but the transition to online work with similar content was very challenging for the majority of the teams. The presence of board members as part of the online discussion was a new experience for the administrative members of the teams. The newness of this relationship/role was cited as a significant reason for the reluctance to participate fully in the electronic format.

The work on clarification of roles and responsibilities continued beyond the intended closure of June, 2003 through August, 2003. As a result of this extension, final feedback from the four teams was not available until October, 2003. Nonetheless, ongoing feedback from the participants and the consultants provided valuable insight about the design of the work as well as the dynamics within school leadership teams. This feedback has allowed us to redeploy a second pilot project during the 2003-2004 school year.

FINDINGS

Based on a review of the VELA mission statement, the original USDOE grant application and the content of the proposals for service recently developed, the following outcomes were expected as a result of our pilot program of team support during the 2002-2003 school year.

We expected to find evidence that:

1. Organizational trust and mutual respect have increased on each team.
2. A culture of collaboration exists within each pilot team.
3. Intentional practices for decision making and problem solving are in place.
4. Effective meeting strategies are used in both school board and administrative team meetings.
5. Roles and responsibilities for school operation are clear as reported by all members of the team.
6. A Leadership Handbook codifying the roles, responsibilities, relationships and procedural guidelines agreed to and developed by each team exists and is used by the team as a reference guide for district operation.
7. Prospective school leaders have participated in some or all of the training activities.
8. Communication within the team has improved.
9. Levels of personal satisfaction about the leadership team have increased.
10. Leadership turnover has decreased.
11. Team members describe change as a systemic process.
12. Management skills and knowledge across the team have increased.

To determine the results of the pilot effort we:

- Collected culture survey data from each team before and after the project
- Collected written and oral feedback from participants
- Collected feedback from our consultant team
- Calculated turnover rates for the pilot team group compared to state wide data

Culture Survey Data:

The survey data distinguishes between four organizational cultures. Cultures of control, collaboration, competence and cultivation were surveyed for each team as part of the application process and the same survey was reassessed at the close of the project. None of the teams made significant changes in their cultural ratings over the course of the work. One team maintained a very strong rating of collaboration while two others showed no strong preference toward any one of the four cultures. Smaller numbers of people completed the second survey and thus, the meaning that one can bring to this data is minimal. We can clearly demonstrate that the project did not cause a dramatic shift in the cultural norms of the participant teams.

Clarification of Roles:

Participant feedback confirmed satisfaction with the clarification of the roles and responsibilities portion of the Pilot program. Three of the four teams have created documents with descriptions of the assigned roles and responsibilities. Each of the three teams completed written descriptors assigning levels of responsibilities for all members of the team. They anticipate using the product to focus their efforts. They will also utilize the work to orient new members to the team.

The fourth pilot team used the project to discuss a new organizational structure. They used the consultation to clarify a governance arrangement and will continue the work of clarifying roles and responsibilities once decisions are made about the new structure. Relationships have been formed and strengthened between administrators and school board members that will sustain the ongoing effort to create an effective school leadership team.

Turnover Data:

Turnover of principals, superintendents and school board members in the four VELA teams averaged 6.8 % which is less than half that of the state average during the same time period. While we are pleased with the stability of our teams, we do not claim a cause /effect credit for the lower turnover among the VELA teams. We suspect that those who would choose to do this introspective work may have already in place relationships and strengths that encourage their members to continue in their positions.

Decision Making:

Decision making within the VELA teams has become more effective due to the clarification of roles within the team. While no new documents describing formal decision making procedures have resulted because of this work, more intentional practice regarding who should make decisions has been the case.

Aspiring Leader Participation:

Aspiring leaders have not participated in the pilot process to the degree anticipated. The participants included numerous people in assistant roles and they have been an important part of the development of the team cultures. They have been enthusiastic in their participation in the work and in some cases; they were the catalysts for moving the teambuilding process forward.

Other Participant Feedback:

Written feedback reports from Pilot Team participants reveal perspectives about the impact of this work on the future of the leadership team. Examples of their feedback include:

- ❖ *-It has helped us be more aware of the kinds of issues we should be dealing with.*
- ❖ *The content of the material was very valuable.*
- ❖ *...we did our homework; and ultimately, we had a very useable document that will stand us well for the future.*
- ❖ *... the work will be long lasting and have a major positive impact on us.*
- ❖ *It gave us the opportunity to face each other and to admit for the first time, "Our strength is in acting as a team."*
- ❖ *-This process has clearly helped us to define our roles and responsibilities, and has even helped to build a greater sense of trust (I think it was the face to face, cards on the table approach that did this).*
- ❖ *-The R & R document was formally adopted by the School Board and will be referred to often but especially when new employees are hired.*

The participants also let us know what did not work as well as anticipated. They pointed out that:

- ❖ *Process is good – computer work is not very helpful.*
- ❖ *The daylong presentation by ___ and ___ group was helpful for delivering content and for enabling some discussion. The electronic follow-up format was not useful to the majority of the team. In part everything is timing. Our group was hurting as we went through this activity and we were not able to take full advantage of all that was offered.*
- ❖ *-The concepts of trust and building trust are important. They are important for both short term and longer term relationships. It seems more difficult, though, to enact some of the principles gained in this experience with short term relationships.*
- ❖ *I think, generally, the platform took too much time for people who are volunteering their time and need to tend to the business of their elected duties as well.*

- ❖but we all know that the electronic format, when used for issues that may involve strong emotions and high levels of subjectivity, can be troublesome.
- ❖ I doubt there will be any follow through.

Consultant Feedback:

Feedback from our consultants and the collection of input from participants leave us with the following list of “lessons learned”. They will also shape the design of future deployment of the model. These findings include:

- Be much more concrete with the expectations/details for everyone involved at the beginning of the relationship. We must check assumptions about the details and formalize them in a written agreement prior to accepting participants into the project.
- A nonrefundable, cash contribution from the participant team should be required to help build commitment to the effort.
- Newly formed groups require a larger proportion of face-to-face meeting time at the start of the work than groups who see themselves as a familiar working unit.
- Seeking feedback from participants early and frequently is advised. We must not “assume” anything about the experiences of our participants unless it is based on direct feedback.
- Technology skill sets must be assessed before we launch any activity dependant on computer expertise. We encountered people who didn’t know some of the basic prerequisites for word processing, internet access and were unfamiliar with screen navigation.
- We need to provide a face-to-face tutorial session with the technology application prior to going on line.
- In -house partners should be designated by the team as part of the tech support design.
- Members of the participant teams should be designated by the team to be part of the planning effort.
- When utilizing more than one consultant group, service delivery needs to be carefully coordinated. Some perceived disconnection between building relationships and clarifying roles and responsibilities occurred because the participants didn’t clearly see the relationship.
- We must start this work in the August-Sept. time frame and schedule all work sessions at the start of the process. Work should be completed before the “season” of budget building and preparations for the next school year commence.
- Start with the R&R part of the work and bring in trust content as soon as participants encounter trust related issues in the work.

Concluding Thoughts on Pilot I

The pilot worked well to reveal strengths and weaknesses of our model. The participant teams felt that the work was valuable and that it will contribute to improvements within their respective leadership groups. We wait to see (one year hence?) whether or not the

participants keep the agreements they have crafted. We also wait to see if their turnover rates continue to be less than their colleagues throughout the state.

While initially intended to reduce the amount of face-to-face meeting time, electronic, web based interaction is still a very new medium for educational leaders. Some found the platform to be cumbersome while others were not comfortable with the level of technological skill needed to operate the platform. Some were reluctant to reveal their very novice skill levels with online interactions. Others were uncomfortable with the reality that everyone was expected to “find their voice” and contribute to the process. We have learned that we must confirm the technology expertise within the group “in the room” before we expect comfortable interaction on line.

The inclusion of school board members on the VELA team may have created a dynamic that caused the participants to need more face-to-face meeting time than was originally anticipated. The traditional experience in Vermont schools is for the board to operate closely with the superintendent and less closely with building level administrators. Openness (trust) with school board members as part of the VELA “leadership team” was a new expectation for some participants which may explain the reluctance to discuss important topics “on line”. The VELA configuration, by design, was a new arrangement for participants. We, in fact, were building new teams. We are reminded to plan for this accordingly.

The design and implementation of future programs will directly reflect the lessons learned in Pilot I.

All of these valuable lessons will benefit us as we redesign the model and test it with new teams. The greatest success of this pilot project was in experiencing those things that did not work as planned. We now have the hindsight necessary to create a model of support that will be of benefit to future generations of school leaders. We have also learned that our pilot teams benefited a significantly from the content and process used. This was not a waste of their time.

We look forward to the future based on the lessons learned in Pilot I. We also wish to thank our participant teams. Their time, energy and commitment to the work are deeply appreciated. Our consultant team frequently went beyond the scope of their contracted obligations to assure the successful completion of the work. We appreciate their dedication and commitment to this project.