

VELA School Leadership Team Development Pilot Project II Summative Report

**By David Ford
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During the 2002-2003 school year, the VELA implemented a pilot program to strengthen school leadership teams in five Vermont school districts. 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. The evaluation of the '02-'03 pilot project encouraged us to redeploy a revised model during the '03-'04 school year with additional school district teams.

Feedback from our consultants and the collection of input from participants provided us with “lessons learned” in Pilot I which shaped the design of Pilot II. These findings included:

- Be much more concrete with the expectations/details for everyone involved at the beginning of the relationship. 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.
- Supervisory Union leadership groups require more face-to-face meeting time than groups who are accustomed to working together as a team.
- Seeking feedback from participants early and frequently is advised. Don't “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. Face-to-face tutorial sessions with any technology applications will be necessary.
- 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.
- Service delivery needs to be carefully coordinated.
- Start the work at the start of the school year and be completed before 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.

Two districts contracted with VELA in September, 2003 to develop their leadership team capacity by clarifying roles and responsibilities with school board members and administrators. The districts selected represented a total of 2,363 students. Thirty-three (33) leaders (16 school board members and 17 administrators) comprised the two teams. In both of the teams, the members were coming together in a configuration that was new to them.

Chagnon & Reina Inc. of Stowe, Vermont and Ray Proulx of Johnson, Vermont were contracted to design and deliver the program. Their experience with the Pilot I teams provided a depth of experience that would inform the design of the revised program. Work with

both teams began in Sept.-Oct. and concluded in January. Both teams continued the work of implementing the concepts, agreements and suggested systemic changes developed during the VELA consultancy into the spring of '04.

During the pilot effort we:

- 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

FINDINGS

Similar to our findings in Pilot I, we learned that the process helped participants think and act systemically as they clarified their information about the roles and relationships of all members of the leadership team. They would recommend this process to others without reservation even though they lamented the amount of additional time the process required. In both pilot systems, more time from the consultants was requested and plans are being made that will bring the work forward to others into the next school year.

The work completed is seen as very useful in analyzing the workloads of school administrators in an objective manner. Both board members and administrators report a much greater understanding of the scope of work required to operate a school. The assignment of responsibilities is being used to develop revised job descriptions, orient new employees and clarify communication within the systems.

Participant feedback on the process used stated that:

- ◆ Everything is collaborative. It opens up discussions and allows us to look at issues from a variety of vantage points. The sharing is a learning experience for all.
- ◆ The project created an arena for discussing complex, difficult and often hidden issues in a thoughtful and almost relaxed way. We were able to make the time to tackle some of the SU's operations issues that have never come up at a Board meeting
- ◆ It allowed everyone to input their perspective into the discussion while regarding the different perspectives of others. It made for a broader view of the picture
- ◆ The work defines day to day operations of district- and subsequently clarifies roles and responsibilities
- ◆ The process caused us to speak our minds and generated real dialog as to how people felt about the issues being discussed

Our project team members were also willing to clarify what portions of the process did not work as well.

- ◆ I believe that we should have concentrated more on the “big picture” building consensus among the stakeholders first
- ◆ The software/technology made the tasks seem to move slower and limited us to what we could refer back to
- ◆ It was rugged and tough to accommodate this schedule, given it was during the budget and annual meeting season, as well as the holidays
- ◆ The time frame that we worked within was too pressured

The purpose of Pilot II was to test a revised model of leadership team development which emphasized systemic thinking by clarifying expectations and the associated roles and responsibilities necessary to meet the expectations. When asked how they see the work impacting their system in the future they responded by saying:

- ◆ The process has given us more open communication and valuable tools with which to work. It has given us a sense of focus and direction.
- ◆ This has given us the ability to clarify responsibilities and identify areas of need.
- ◆ Work better together with a better understanding of where each of us comes from.
- ◆ The roles and responsibilities are much clearer and defined for all members of the supervisory union. It is a starting place to really analyze if the roles and responsibilities are doable for the specific groups within the supervisory union.
- ◆ Hopefully, the dialog generated during the meetings will allow members from various schools/towns in the SU to continue to work together. I think the process should make our leadership team better.
- ◆ We now have clearly delineated the specific expectations of our district and assigned the responsibilities for these expectations. It gives us a framework for all discussions of our work, our role assignments, and our progress...

Concluding Thoughts on Pilot II

We asked our participants to evaluate the work.

We said: “Considering the entire project, would you recommend it to others?”

85% said they would recommend it “with enthusiasm” and “without reservation”.

We have also seen their plans for extending the work to all entities within their systems. Clearly they have validated the work with their commitment to move forward beyond the time frame of the project. They see the project results as “setting the foundation for the future” of the system.

The leadership turnover rate on the Pilot II teams for '03-'04 is 12%. This is somewhat lower than the state average of 17% for the same cohort. As was the case in Pilot I, the turnover rate is less than the state average.

We cannot claim a statistically valid connection between our projects and the lower rate in these systems. We can, however, claim a greater level of mutual understanding and improved relationship between the policy makers and administrators in the VELA teams. The complexity of the systems and the respect for the workloads of the participants is more thoroughly understood by everyone. In several instances, additional human resources and/or reallocation of responsibilities were proposed to relieve the stress and improve systemic capacity.

Clearly we have developed a model of leadership team development that works to improve systemic thinking, clarify responsibilities connected to expectations and improve levels of trust and relationship. We began our work focused on the “Leadership Crisis” and we conclude by working on the “Systemic Crisis” faced by most school systems. Along the way we have helped dedicated leaders renew their commitment to the children they serve.

In the near future we will train others to facilitate the model we have developed. We are confident that additional school systems will benefit from the VELA School Leadership Development process.

We wish to thank the leaders of the Orange Southwest Supervisory Union and Orleans Central Supervisory Union for their time, effort, humor, patience and dedication to their school systems. Without the efforts of our consultant team of Ray Proulx and Michelle Reina, our results would not have been possible. We thank them for their dedication, flexibility, sensitivity and skill as facilitators of learning.

In closing we are reminded by Margaret Mead to:

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful,
committed people can change the world.
Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”