

Things I now see differently (and some things I now see for the first time)

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On most days, people head into workplaces where they are confronted by a daily dose of challenges and opportunities—one event after another. Some are urgent; most are mundane. But all of them keep us busy—too busy, in fact, to look around, make observations, and think.

And, that is why we are all more reactive than proactive. We simply don't see a lot of opportunities and threats, and we don't reflect on what we are doing because we're too busy to look around, make observations, and think. As a result we often spend more time cleaning up messes than capitalizing on opportunities.

Another downside of not observing and reflecting on our thoughts is that it takes us longer to catch on. The fact that something is different or that something didn't go as expected usually dawns on us over time. On those occasions when it doesn't dawn on us, we hope that there is a benevolent soul willing to take us aside and explain what happened. But, whether we eventually figure out what is going on or someone has to explain it to us, our response is usually the same: "*Now I get it!*"

This exclamation is usually followed by a question: "Why didn't someone tell me this sooner?"

So, looking back, here are some things that I now see differently and some things that I now see for the first time.

My mentor told me that the perception really *is* the reality, that it is usually the little things that blind-side you, that it is impossible to please all the people, that curriculum development is not the first priority if buses are late and lunches are bad, and that there are some nasty people out there. His cautions and insights proved invaluable, and they helped me make "looking around" a lifetime habit.

His advice also caused me to wonder why so much of formal education is not concerned with the little things that can make all the difference. There are a host of little things that should be discussed in the safety of a college classroom. They should not be things that you have to discover while tiptoeing through the work day.

Now I get it!

Most people don't know what they're trying to do. That's pretty direct. In his book William Ian Miller says we are all "faking it" much more than anyone would care to admit. That may be a little more tactful, but not much.

Look around. Many elementary teachers we're never taught how children learn to read or how to teach students to read. These teachers are in our classrooms, faking it. Many are figuring it out as they go. Sooner or later they will have an insight or a friend who will tell them. Then they'll say, "*Now I get it!*"

Sit with a principal or curriculum director or any other administrator. Ask them, "What are you trying to do here?" Most have difficulty articulating an answer. Many simply don't know.

I once met with a group of accreditation chairs. All of them raised their hands when I asked how many were preparing a questionnaire to assess parent opinion. Then I followed with, "How many of you would say that you know what you are doing?" No hands.

When people can articulate a mission, vision, and goals, they tend to know what they're trying to do. Unfortunately, most people either don't have a mission, a vision, and goals or they can't articulate them. What these people clearly communicate is that they don't know what they're trying to do.

It's tough getting your act together. It's tougher keeping your act together. The nature of change may be the culprit in both cases.

The nature of change has changed. Change is frequently more radical and less linear. Further, most change that affects us is generated by external forces.

One consequence of these factors is that the implications of many changes are difficult to predict. This makes it tough to get your act together unless you have a process through which you scan the environment for changes and issues that have potential for impacting your school.

And, unless you have a have a planning process that is flexible enough to accommodate new discoveries, enhanced techniques, or unconventional points of view, keeping your act together is impossible (although you can probably fake it for a month or two!).

Most educational decisions aren't. Student enrollment in Nosedive School District is dropping and—because state aid is tied to enrollment—the loss of students is also draining the budget. Much of the enrollment decline is happening because parents of Nosedive School District students are enrolling their children in two new charter schools. The new charter schools offer full-day kindergarten; Nosedive School District does not. More than three years into the enrollment decline, Nosedive administrators cite research about the benefits of early childhood education and make and administrative recommendation which the school board approves: all kindergarten classes in Nosedive School District will operate on a full-day schedule.

The decision to offer full-day kindergarten wasn't an "educational decision." It was an economic decision. Nosedive School District didn't attend to education research about early childhood education until it was headed toward bankruptcy. The decision to go with full-day kindergarten had nothing to do with education. It had everything to do with economics.

Why does a school district select an architectural firm? Is it because the firm can design a school that enhances the educational program? Or, is the firm selected because—all things being equal—it generously wined and dined school board members?

Does the textbook that's being recommended for adoption best meet the educational needs of students, or is it the textbook that has been diluted by special interest groups (aka textbook censors) operating at the state level and, hence, is politically safe?

Think twice when people tell you that they are making an educational decision. It's more likely to be an economic, political, or marketing decision.

Sometimes people look but they don't see; sometimes they listen but they don't hear.

"How do you pronounce your name, Dr. Banach?"

"It's BAH-nik, like in bubonic plague."

Stepping to the podium my host begins: "Now I'd like to introduce Dr. William BAN-ich."

There is research which suggests that what people like to hear most is their name, properly pronounced. If that's true, you should make sure that you listen *and* hear (or make sure that the people you introduce have names like Smith and Jones).

Here's another example of not hearing: Not long ago we conducted a community-wide survey in a relatively large suburban school district. Included in the questionnaire was this free-response question: *If you could change one thing in the school district, what one thing would you change?* The most frequent response was, "Get rid of the new report card."

In grades 1-6 the school district had replaced a traditional ABC report card with a four-page 11 by 17, pillowcase-size document. The ABCs were replaced by P (performing), A (achieving), and N (not achieving).

Parents disliked the new reporting document because it was too complex and, more importantly, it deprived them of a familiar referent, As and Bs and Cs.

How did the school district respond to the survey result? In the words of the curriculum director, "We had a committee work on this new report card for over a year and we'll be damned if we're going to scrap it after all the work that's gone into it."

This is listening but not hearing. It's also stupidity.

You are compared to the best. Much has been said about customer service in recent years. Most of it warrants our attention.

Our world is one of options, and people typically choose the option that's best for them. Today people "shop schools," weighing all their options before deciding where to send their children. Often, the factor that cements their decision is how they were greeted and treated. If you can't clearly differentiate your school on the basis of price or program, you had better attend to customer service. (Even if you can differentiate your school on other attributes, you had better attend to customer service!)

You have probably heard someone say something like this: "The price was a little lower at A, but the people were a lot nicer at B." Do you think A or B got the business?

The best customer service that we can recall becomes the standard by which we judge all others. People think about the best customer service that they have received (or heard about) and measure every other option against it.

When I walk into a school, I compare the reception that I receive with reception that I receive at Disney World. There everyone smiles and seems genuinely interested in my well-being. Disney World makes people feel special—like guests (which is what they call them).

When I ask for something, I compare the response that I get to the way that I am treated at Nordstrom's. There, it seems, the sales people can't do enough to address my needs. They even send you thank you cards a few days after you shop.

Think about the way the people in your school greet people and address their needs. Compare how you perform to the best, today's benchmark for customer service.

It's hard to see the big picture. Everyone talks about the importance of seeing "the big picture." In fact, odds are pretty good that you have told someone that "We can't lose sight of the big picture" or "It's important to think about the big picture."

Superintendents and principals often say that their staff doesn't see the big picture. (In fact, many superintendents and principals readily admit that *they* don't see the big picture.)

Most people don't see the big picture because they haven't stepped back from the urgencies of the moment or their daily assignments to think about it. If you want to see the big picture, you'll have to make a conscious effort to look for it. If you want your staff to see the big picture, you'll have to help them make the same conscious effort. Then you'll have to spend time discussing what you see. (Remember, if you look, make sure you see!)

Here's another thought related to the big picture: Maybe there is no such thing. Instead of a big picture, maybe there is a big *story* that is continually unfolding, verse by verse. If that's the case, then we should be listening instead of looking. And, we should make sure that we're hearing what is being said.

You can't build, fix, or change a system one piece at a time. A system is a function of the interdependence of its parts. Change one part and you affect another (or others). In the school business (and in the private sector, too!) we routinely ignore this basic tenet of systems theory.

When the test scores are low in reading, we tend to focus on our reading program without regard to the system. We pull the reading program out of the system, we study it, we make changes, and then we reinsert the reading program back into the system. We too frequently do this without regard to the implications for professional development, the budget, and the integration of curriculum components, to name three other parts of the system.

Architects provide an interesting model here. They don't design houses one room at a time. Rather, they look at the entire system (the big picture!) as they make decisions about room size, location, traffic patterns, flooring, and so forth.

If you want to build, fix, or change a system, think systemically. Be an architect. Be concerned about the interaction of the parts of the system. You may find that your reading scores are low not because reading instruction is at fault, but because students don't have enough time to learn what is being taught.

Money talks. Quick, name the top five school districts in your state. Use any criteria that you want to use.

How many of these five school districts are in impoverished communities? Odds are none of them are.

Better communities—economically speaking—build better schools (which, in turn, build even better communities). Money talks.

Yet, people often contend that you can do more for less. This is true to a point. Increased efficiencies are possible in every organization, and staff can work smarter and harder. But there comes a point where less means less.

If funding is cut, you might be able to adjust by improving the way a service is delivered or by asking staff to “give another 10%.” But by the time all services are operating at maximum efficiency, staff will tire of giving 110%. Then the slide begins.

If it’s important—and education is important!—it should be funded. Schools that depend on bake sales, salmon derbies, 50-50 raffles, golf outings, selling stadium naming rights, and other fund-raising schemes don’t do as well as schools that are fully funded. The reason: money talks.

Most change is first social, then political, and finally economic. Take air bags in cars. The societal problem is that lots of people get killed in car crashes. The political solution is to install air bags. But the economic reality is expressed by this question: Who will pay the cost?

While the answer to this question was being debated, two higher-end auto manufacturers attempted to create a “marketing edge” by offering air bags as standard equipment. People bought them and liked them. The news media carried stories about these air bag-equipped cars saving lives. This tipped the equation. Soon air bags were available in all cars. (Incidentally, the answer to the economic question—Who will pay the cost?—is “you.” You wanted air bags and your money talked.)

Complicated things break down. Sometimes people look at the options and “special features” on consumer products and say, “There’s just one more thing that can go wrong.” While this sounds pessimistic, it is frequently true—the more complicated things are, the more likely something will go wrong.

Think about your strategic plan. If it is a three-to-five year plan with hundreds of people involved and has more than five goals with more than five objectives each, it's likely to collapse of its own weight.

We tend to take good ideas (like strategic planning) and make them too complicated. When we do that, the odds of something going wrong escalate at the same rate as the odds of nothing happening as a result of your planning. Simple things—both process and product—are best.

Doing more can mean doing less. If you really get your act together, you can actually generate more output with less input. Take planning. Some principals believe that a unique mission statement, vision statement, and goals are needed for school improvement initiatives, strategic planning, accreditation, state accountability measures, and educational marketing. Not so.

If the vision of your school is *to help all students achieve academic success*, why is something different needed for school improvement, strategic planning, or any other purpose?

The key here is having a process and a big picture perspective. If you have an operating process, you can do a lot of things once and then recycle your work to accommodate other initiatives or requirements. Of course, you'll have to look at the big picture and figure out how all the pieces go together.

What gets tested really does matter. If pay, performance, and reputation are determined by reading and math test scores, how much time will a school staff spend on the fine arts?

School people are not stupid. If a state's accountability program focuses on two or three subjects, those subjects will receive inordinate attention. For example, if the high stakes game is to have the highest possible scores in reading, math, and science, one can expect that reading, math, and science programs will be analyzed and improved. If reading, math, and science scores are the ones that will be reported by the news media, these are the subject areas where there will be more professional development and more time on task.

Unfortunately, when the focus is on one, two, or three subjects, all other subjects receive less attention. In fact, sometimes subjects are dropped from the curriculum because they aren't tested and—in the eyes of some—“don't really matter.”

The problem, of course, is that many of the things that don't get tested *do* matter. They are the subjects and programs that often round out an education and produce a more knowledgeable citizenry.

Perhaps we should identify the essential ingredients of a quality educational program and treat all the related subjects as if they'll be tested. Then what and how we teach would be what really matters.

Clueless people don't provide meaningful input. Under the banner of community engagement, educators often seek professional advice from people who don't have a clue.

I once worked with one of the country's leading career-technical centers. The top two administrators at the center were retiring, and it seemed like a good time to ask primary clients—the business people in the community—what the career-tech center should look like a decade down the road.

We had a series of early morning meetings during which we shared demographics, job trend information, social forecasts, and a host of other data. Then came the defining moment. We said to the business people, “Given that we have a great career-tech center, given that we want to keep ahead of the curve, and given all the information that we have presented to you, what do you think the career-tech center should look like in five or ten years?” The response: “It really doesn't matter to us as long as your graduates are on time for work.”

We had spent thousands of dollars in staff time working with the business community, and the return on the investment was near zero. Why? Because we made a mistake. We should have presented the background information that we did and then we should have said, “Given all this, here's what we think the career-tech center should look like in 5-10 years. Take a look at our thinking and help us strengthen it.”

We should have realized that the business people considered us to be the experts in curriculum and education design. We should have presented our thinking and engaged the business community to strengthen it. Then they could have reacted to our educational proposal from their business point of view.

As a result of this experience, I have a new planning premise: Never go to people with a “blank sheet of paper.” They might leave it blank (or they might put something on it that you can’t do or shouldn’t do).

Everybody is busy. “I can’t help you with that. I already have too much to do.”

“I can’t handle another committee assignment. There isn’t a spare minute in my day.”

These are common refrains in today’s work environment. Yet, there are always people who can “find time.” Why is it that some people are willing to take on a new assignment or work on a challenge when everyone else is busy?

The answer to the question seems to be unique to every individual. Hence, I’ve come to believe that personal values drive all behavior all the time. People do what they do (or don’t do what they don’t do) because they have something to gain (or lose) personally. This means that you have to match what you want done with those who are interested in what you want done because people find time for what they value... personally.

On a good day we give communication great lip service. Management guru Peter Drucker said, “Communication is the essence of organization.”

Everyone talks about the importance of good communication. Administrators vow to do more listening. Teachers say they are going to improve the way they dialogue with parents. School board candidates promise to improve communication if they are elected. And, everyone cringes when they’re accused of precipitating a “communication breakdown.”

Why is so much educational communication unplanned and reactionary? Why is so much communication little more than posting notices on a bulletin board (or in a school newsletter)? Why is so little attention given to the most important part of communication, listening?

I believe many educators simply don't know what good communication is. Many more don't know how to develop an effective, two-way communication plan. And, few are willing to invest the money and the energy that it takes to support a good communication program.

And, so, while we continuously talk about the importance of communication, we usually give it little more than lip service.

When it comes to communication, more of the right thing is a good thing. We've gotten better at print communication. We are working diligently to harness the power of electronic communication. These are good things and we should continue forging forward.

At the same time we know that relevant information delivered one-on-one, face-to-face, is the right thing to do. We know that information delivered in this manner has the most impact and is most likely to be understood. And, we know that we should be doing more of this good thing. (Why do you think marketing people call the ideal market "the market of one"?)

The key here is *relevant* information. What we frequently fail to realize is that all messages have to get past an intriguing device that all humans possess. I call it the crap detector, and I think it is located just above the pit of the stomach. This is the device that listeners use to block or negate messages that are not believable.

Messages that promise eternal youth tend to get snagged by the crap detector. People say, "That's just a bunch of crap!" The same is true for messages about products which claim to help you lose 100 pounds in ten days, that promise to eliminate cellulite deposits with a cream, or that tout used car dealers who care about you. "Crap!" you say.

When we proclaim that our school is the best in the state, the message is snagged by the crap detector. People know that only one school can be best in the state and, so, they think: "There's no way that we are number one. That's a bunch of crap. We could be in the top ten, but I know that we are not number one."

Personal communication, messages relevant to the receiver, and one-on-one listening are the right things. It would be a good thing if we could do more of them.

Modeling bad behavior is not good. Classroom teachers have always believed that you have to model the behavior that you expect. This is an important lesson for everyone in education.

School boards encourage and support superintendents who install planning processes that result in goals for the school district, the schools, and the staff. But rarely do school boards set goals for themselves. This is modeling bad behavior. It leads people to ask: “If goals are good for everybody, why doesn’t the school board have goals?”

When a principal says that a district initiative is mundane and irrelevant or that a planning process is “just more paperwork that won’t make a difference,” that’s modeling bad behavior. Staff members aren’t motivated by unmotivated leaders.

In the education business everyone should be modeling something. For example, the secretary should model efficiency, teachers should model life-long learning, the principal should model effective leadership, the superintendent should model enthusiasm, and the school board should model professionalism. If the people in your schools are not doing these things, they are probably modeling bad behavior.

If it smells, pretty soon it will stink. We can learn some good and bad things from business people. For the past several years the public has been treated to news media accounts of corporate wrong-doing. Pay-backs, personal greed, conflicts of interest, and a host of illegal activities by one or a few people have damaged or destroyed many businesses (and left shareholders penniless!). Looking back, it’s apparent that many of the questionable activities smelled bad early on. Over time, smelly things get worse, and eventually they really stink. That’s when prosecutors knock on the door.

I like to believe that most educators are above such behavior. Yet, if you sniff around, you might smell something. If you do, fix it before it stinks. (An old cliché proclaims that people sometimes make “a big stink over nothing.” It is important to remember that you don’t have to swindle millions to get people’s noses “bent out of shape.” The littlest smell can turn into the biggest stink!)

Effective leaders help the inside see the outside. Cosmopolites are people who venture between the system and its environment. They bring back information about “the outside.”

If so much of the change that we face today is generated by external forces, it makes good sense to attend to the outside. Effective leaders do this. They help those who don’t have opportunities to venture beyond the system understand what is happening in the external world and how it is likely to affect them. That helps the entire system evolve to higher levels.

People are your most valuable asset. Many companies say this in their annual reports, only to treat their employees like disposable parts or expendable resources.

In a knowledge-based economy, competitive advantage comes from the brainpower people apply. It’s not as tangible an asset as a machine bolted to the factory floor, but it is likely more valuable.

The same is true in schools. Staff salaries typically make up more than 90% of a school district’s budget. In schools, people are programs; that is, you can’t have a program without people. And, where do good teaching, positive attitudes, and good customer relations come from? People.

Effective leaders invest in their people. They provide them with professional development opportunities. They listen to them. And they seek and support their ideas. The reason they commit to people is pretty simple: You can’t have an effective school if you have ineffective people.

Education has customers. School people don’t like the word “customer.” That aside, schools *do* have customers—lots of them.

Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary defines a customer as someone that purchases a commodity or service or patronizes an organization or uses its services.

This definition makes parents customers. In most communities they can send their children to your school or opt for a host of other educational options, ranging from private and parochial schools to cyber-charters and self-instruction. When people have the freedom to purchase or use services, they are customers. The case for parents as customers is completely closed when parents can use their money (or someone else's money) to send their children where ever they want for schooling.

Students are customers, too. And so are the business people who employ the graduates of your career-technical program.

If you haven't thought about customer service, you should. The way people (customers!) are treated determines what they think, and what they think determines what they say... and what they say creates perceptions. (All this aside, it never hurts to be nice... especially to a customer!)

The perception is the reality. What people think is often more important than what they know. People may know that your graduation rate is good, but they may think that the staff is uncommitted and that their children dislike school. What's the reality in this scenario? Everything! The graduate rate is good, the staff is uncommitted, and children dislike school.

If people think that your school is good, it's good. Conversely, if they think that your school is bad, it's bad.

Schools and school people send out signals continuously. Some signals indicate good maintenance and solid leadership while others communicate noxious messages such as, "We are the educational professionals, we know best, and we shouldn't be questioned." These signals, individually and collectively, shape perceptions.

Learn how to read the signals and you'll have insights into the perceptions. Then you'll know what's really going on.

Education is political; most educators aren't. It's not unreasonable to say that most educational decisions are legislatively driven (and many are judicially defined and enforced). Legislators determine the amount of the state aid payout, when students must have certain immunizations, that school buses must be painted "national school bus chrome" (the official color of a school bus), which subjects are tested, who will be accountable for what, and hundreds of other items.

Most educators don't understand the political process that affects their work every day. (It doesn't work the way that we teach it in our schools!) They don't understand that a resolution from 200 superintendents doesn't carry as much weight as a few telephone calls between two or three influential people. Nor do they appreciate the power of 5,000 upset parents standing on the capitol steps. As a result, most educators continually find themselves reacting to legislative initiatives instead of proactively influencing them.

Education's lobbyists face the same problem as many legislators. Outside major city school systems, most educational lobbying is done regionally or at the state level. In both cases, lobbyists try to represent all the positions in their service area. This is usually fruitless because what is good for one district may be bad for another. So, trade-offs are made and legislation is adjusted to do the least damage possible to the fewest number of schools. Instead of a rising tide that raises all boats, schools end up in white-water turbulence that damages many, sinks some, and allows a few to find safe haven.

The key here is education. At the school level make sure that your elected officials know what you are trying to do (your vision) and what legislation will help (or hurt) you. Once you do that, you should support whatever regional and state lobbying initiatives that you can and brace yourself to accommodate those that you can't.

Facts and logic don't sell anything. Chevy says its trucks are built "like a rock" while the competition proclaims that its trucks are "built Ford tough." There are not any facts here. And, it defies reasonable logic that you would need a truck built like a rock to pick up a sheet of plywood from a lumber yard. These

messages are designed to evoke an emotional response. They contain few, if any, facts and logic-based propositions.

Most advertisers address emotions because people think with their hearts and their stomachs, not their heads. (If you thought with your head, you wouldn't own all the junk that you own!)

Research indicates that most people don't do a lot of thinking before they make decisions. They tend to make emotional decisions and consciously justify them after the fact. That's why you tend to read ads for products that you already own—to justify your purchase decisions.

In the school business we are often tempted “to give people all the facts” and “to let them make up their own minds.” There are two mistakes here. First, people don't want to be burdened by the facts, even though they keep saying, “Give me the facts... just the facts.” Second, there are so many choices in today's marketplace that people don't want to make any more choices. Their favored state would be to face no choices. Their second favorite state would be to receive help making choices.

People use emotions to move from the agony of indecision to a less painful state. We should recognize this by shifting the focus of our communication from the square footage of the new science lab to the quality of the learning environment that we have created. We should show students achieving instead of overwhelming parents with test score pie charts and statistics. In short, we should help people understand education's story instead of working so hard to force-feed them facts and logic.

If you wait for someone to tell you what to do, someone will. While you wait for direction, you are creating a vacuum. Systems—like Mother Nature—abhor a vacuum. When vacuums exist, they get filled. When this happens it usually means that someone is shaping *your* professional destiny. You may also find someone questioning your capacity to exercise leadership or “get the ball rolling.”

Don't just sit there. Do something.

Answers describe the present. Questions define the future. This suggests that we should be more inquisitive.

When we ask questions, we begin shaping our future. When we invite people to join us, we gain ideas that we can use to build consensus for a preferred tomorrow. That, in turn, will make it easier to form coalitions that can turn community visions into realities.

Psychologists, it seems, always answer a question with a question. (Q: “Is it okay to feel this way?” A: “What do *you* think?”) Maybe psychologists have discovered something that we should adapt for our use. (Q: “How can we improve our communication with you?” A: “What are some ideas for improving communication that haven’t worked in the past?”)

Why not present citizens with a variety of educational scenarios? Then, why not conduct a series of “Future Forums” in environments that are conducive to thinking?

Start your “Future Forums” with some facts and forecasts. Present your take on the opportunities and challenges that change presents. Then ask people to raise questions about what they have heard and what they are thinking.

Here are a dozen questions to get things started:

1. What kind of education do we want for our children?
2. Why is school less fun than it used to be?
3. How can technology leverage the capacity of teachers?
4. What would spur staff creativity, innovation, and risk-taking?
5. Is anyone in the public or private sectors delivering education more effectively than we are?
6. Why does school have to start so early in the morning?
7. Why can’t our school offer some classes on-line?
8. Is the time that we invest in professional development making a difference?
9. What would be a desirable addition to the educational program?
10. What educational program or service should be phased out?
11. What are our educational priorities?
12. Do we have a vision for our school?

Answer these questions and you'll be defining your future. Best of all, you won't be doing it alone.

Keep your primary focus forward

There are other observations that could be added to our list. In fact, you probably thought about some of your own while reading. And, that's as it should be. You must keep observing and thinking continuously.

A word of caution here: Some people don't focus on the future because they are too busy looking in the rear view mirror. They are most concerned about who and what is behind them. They enjoy what used to be and the status quo.

But there is a difference between being reflective and being paranoid. Paranoid people keep looking "over their shoulder." They advance toward an uncertain future by running from a threatening past.

Reflective people make observations and think about the implications of what they see. They use the past much as a race car driver uses a rear view mirror. Traveling at triple-digit speeds, race car drivers need a 360-degree view of their position. They need to glance in the mirror to assess what's behind them that might affect the outcome of the race. But their primary focus has to be forward... on something defined before the start of the race. And that, of course, is the finish line.