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## Going Viral With Improvement

I once saw a school cafeteria manager who wore a funny hat. The cafeteria manager with the funny hat *greeted every student in the lunch line by name*. This man works in a school dedicated to continuous improvement. The principal of the school involves her staff in the continuous-improvement process, but the idea of progress is nonnegotiable. At this school, problems are identified, solutions are surfaced, and evaluation comes close on the heels of implementation. All this takes place in the context of a continuous-improvement journey that never ends. Process is king, and the blame game is out of bounds.

I could have begun this first chapter with a classroom-based story; I could have chosen many just from this particular elementary school, Sanders Corner, in Loudoun County, Virginia. In dynamic schools like this, however, progress is not limited to the classroom, and everyone in the school is a player. In terms today's web-obsessed generation can well understand, when improvement goes viral in a school or district, *everyone is involved*. In the case of the cafeteria manager with the funny hat, the kids liked the hat and loved the idea that he cared enough to get to know their names. I can also report that this particular cafeteria manager, Nick DeCicco (Mr. Nick to the kids), is constantly working to upgrade the quality of the food and service for the kids in his care. He talked with me about what they were doing in the cafeteria—and he spoke the language of improvement.

DeCicco began his tenure at Sanders Corner Elementary School with several goals: improving efficiency in the areas of the cost and quality of food; building positive relationships with staff, students, and parents; and making the school cafeteria a fun place to be. After many months of making changes and adjustments, DeCicco related to his sister that “something magic was happening” in the school cafeteria. He knew this because he was at the point of sale in the lunch line every day (not in his office), wearing a smile and one of those funny hats—and greeting each student by name. I observed this firsthand one morning, and I, too, saw the magic. Those elementary students love “Mr. Nick,” and I watched their faces light up when he greeted them in the lunch line. With the active support of a school principal who understands there is nothing that can’t be made better, DeCicco set about improving every aspect of every process connected to a system he understood would benefit his primary clients—the students of Sanders Corner Elementary.

Continuous improvement is not a destination; it is a journey that really has no finish line. The idea is to put in place a system that will outlast the tenure of a particular principal. The active components of this system are processes that are put in place to deal with and solve problems that might otherwise impede progress. For example, in the school I referenced in the opening paragraphs, the principal, Kathy Hwang, empowered the faculty to solve the problem of hallways that had become noisy enough to negatively affect learning in classrooms all over the building. The faculty agreed on a solution and then implemented it. They came back together to report on its efficacy, and that process is still in place three years later. I can attest to the fact that the hallways are quiet, and teachers can continue with lessons uninterrupted. The problem was surfaced by the faculty, and the solution came from the faculty; this serves to support the notion that those closest to the problems are often closest to the solutions. This improvement was not a top-down decree from the principal’s office. The faculty invested in the dialogue surrounding the problem, and they bought into the agreed-upon process that ultimately solved it. True to the spirit of continuous improvement, the process is consistently revisited to see if further adjustments are needed to ensure its continued efficacy.

## **The Very First Thing**

We’ll talk later about the whole idea of change, but suffice it to say here that veteran teachers can perhaps be forgiven for being skeptical

and even cynical about the latest change initiative passed down from the powers that be. My experience tells me that even the most skeptical and cynical veteran teachers were not always so. Part of the reason for their reluctance to jump on board what seems to them to be the program du jour is that improvement initiatives are often introduced with great fanfare (and often with great expenditure), only to be abandoned after a few months or years. Some of these initiatives die the death of a thousand cuts, as teachers and staff who were not part of the original decision begin to spot the flaws and problems as the initiative unfolds. Administrators at the building level receive pushback that they may, in turn, push back up the ladder, and people in the district's central office begin to feel the pressure from what could be dozens of schools. At some point, a decision may be made to jettison the program altogether, and scores of believers become skeptics, while scores of skeptics move to the ranks of the cynics. The whole thing leaves a bad taste in the collective mouth of the organization, and another opportunity for positive change and improvement is lost.

This leads us to the very first thing administrators at any level need to do: *Commit to putting in place a system of improvement that will outlive you.* Too many administrators try to be “the answer person.” By this I mean that when teachers or other employees approach the principal, he immediately provides the answer to their questions. It is as if the principal has a mental briefcase full of answers; all that needs to be done is to find the right answer from the briefcase, and the staff member walks away happy (or not)—*but no closer to being able to solve problems on her own or with others in any collegial way.* Have a question? Go find the principal. One problem here, of course, is that when the principal leaves, *the solution-to-the-problems briefcase goes with him.* Everyone on staff then hopes that whatever else the *new* principal is or is not, he or she has a briefcase full of answers. The more critical problem is that the staff is no closer to being able to build a capacity to solve problems on their own. They have come to rely totally on “the powers that be” for answers and solutions. Any principal about to retire ought to be able to do so without worrying about what will happen to the staff and students. If members of the staff have the capacity to walk confidently down the continuous-improvement highway, the retirement of the principal will not be an impediment to forward progress; the system for steady and effective improvement is in place and functioning.

The best principals I know are everywhere in the building. They observe classrooms, talk with custodians, interact with teachers, and

know the names of scores and even hundreds of students. I know principals who read to students, and I know principals who have students read to them. They love what they do, and they have enormous reserves of energy. Most of all, they know how to harness the power of the human beings in the building in the search for progress. Some things may be negotiable for these principals, but one thing that is *not* negotiable is the drive to improve. Putting in place the mechanisms for continuous improvement requires an understanding that wherever one is as a teacher, paraprofessional, secretary, custodian, school bus driver, or cafeteria worker—*there is always a need to get better.*

## The Role of Leadership

From the beginning of any conscious effort at organizational improvement, everyone from the front office to the classroom to the cafeteria must understand that the continuous-improvement journey has no end, and that is as it should be. As Smylie (2010) reminds us, improvement is not just about change. Something can change for the worse or for the better, so “improvement requires change in the direction toward some valued objective.” He continues,

To be sure, there is progress to be made, successes to be attained, and objectives to be met. But improvement in the sense of continuous improvement is never fully achieved. The valued outcome is the organization getting better and better and better at what it is, at what it does, and what it achieves, ad infinitum. It is the stance that good is never good enough. (p. 25)

This idea of no finish line is sometimes difficult for employees in an organization to understand. “Never good enough” is not something people long to hear, but leaders need to invest the time necessary to help everyone understand that it is not about good or bad, or right or wrong; it is about moving inexorably forward from a baseline—wherever or whatever that baseline is.

There is no one—teacher, administrator, secretary, custodian, or cafeteria worker—who cannot improve over time. Customer service in the front office can always be improved, positive changes can always be made in the way the building is cleaned and maintained, improvements in connection with the lunchroom are always possible,

instruction can be made better—improvements in all these areas make the school more efficient and productive. A common belief that continuous-improvement efforts are desirable will make the building a more pleasant place to be. Employees who pay attention to their external customers and their internal customers will help move the organization steadily down the continuous-improvement highway.

## **Whom Do We Serve?**

Efforts at continuous improvement often come not as part of some master plan, but as a realization that no matter what our job is in the schoolhouse, there are those whom we serve externally (students, parents, community) and internally (colleagues). Those who greet parents and students in the front office also interact with members of the administration, faculty, and support staff. I have observed front office personnel who treat absolutely everyone with courtesy and undivided attention, and I have seen office personnel smile at parents and then snap at employees, all in the space of a few minutes. Whatever standard of customer service is in place for external customers ought to be in place for everyone else in the building, for the simple reason that a double standard in this area can be detrimental to the organization.

While teaching social studies at a middle school in the early 1990s, I was also the yearbook adviser. Anyone who has held that job understands that a great deal of time is spent after school and into the evening in an attempt to make the book worthy of publication. Working late, therefore, I often had the opportunity to chat with the night custodian. Early in the school year, she sat down and asked me what she could do to make my job easier. I thought for a moment and then suggested some things having to do with what part of the board to erase, furniture placement, and so on. Appreciating that she had taken the time to solicit my feedback, I returned the favor by asking what I could do to assist her. She came up with two or three things that would help in the efficiency department, and from that moment on, we both went out of our way to assist one another. This night custodian understood that I was her internal customer; she was invested in making my classroom a better place for me and my students.

While her efforts on my behalf were laudatory, and much appreciated by me, it was not part of an overall program of continuous improvement in the building. It happened because we both came to understand the supportive relationship between us. After forty years

in education, I could mention scores of employees who acted in the spirit of improving how they did what they did on their own, with no direction from above. The problem with this, of course, is that these individual efforts are not part of a system of improvement; they are isolated incidents, and unlikely to move the organization forward in any meaningful way.

Let's suppose for a moment that the head day and night custodians, along with several teacher leaders, administrators, and other support staff within the building, could be brought together every month from August until May in a succession of two-hour sessions. The expressed purpose of these meetings would be to look closely at what is working in terms of building maintenance and to surface areas in need of improvement. Meetings like that would not be about right or wrong, or good or bad, or about playing the blame game; they would be concerned with *where we are now and where we want to go*. In facilitated meetings with custodians, teachers, and staff, what my night custodian and I had agreed to as it related to my classroom might very well have been set as the standard for every room in the building. Those meetings—dedicated to how the custodial staff and the other adults in the building could help each other—might have moved us all forward. Monthly work sessions with this same group would have gone a long way toward systematizing the sporadic improvement efforts of a few people in the building—and, importantly, everything decided upon in those sessions would have benefitted the students in our care.

In a profession where the continuous improvement of students is a given, the adults in the building ought to model for students the same methodology for success over time. Students should *see* teachers and staff collaborating on problem-solving techniques, taking risks on behalf of kids, and accepting inevitable mistakes as feedback—all in the name of moving confidently down the continuous-improvement highway. Modeling collaboration in the name of improvement is powerful.

This brings us to the second requirement for administrators who seek to put in place an improvement system that will outlive them: *Involve everyone at every level from day one*. Any serious attempt at systemically and continuously improving a school or school district must begin with involvement from those who have a stake in the outcome. Totally top-down efforts and improvement invariably lead to pushback; it then becomes a matter of how much pushback the administrators who introduced the initiative can take before they throw up their hands and call an end to it. If staff is expected to

implement reform efforts, they should be directly involved from the start. The whole improvement effort must be utterly, completely, and consistently transparent in every way.

## Those Closest to the Problem

One important role, then, of building leadership is to work to set in place processes (the monthly meetings we just described, for instance) dedicated to building the capacity of the adults in the schoolhouse to identify and solve their own problems. It is not the job of the administrators to simply provide all the answers or even to ask all the relevant *questions*. Those monthly meetings should continue even if the principal retires or transfers elsewhere in the district. Even in the absence of the principal, those in attendance can ask the right questions and seek corresponding solutions. Process-improvement teams should be empowered to make decisions when possible, so that the good work goes on no matter who is principal; there is always work to do because there are always problems in search of processes, and there are always processes in search of improvement.

Anyone who wants to find out what is right and wrong with a school from the viewpoint of faculty need look no further than the faculty lounge or the parking lot. To the casual observer, a school may appear clean and well run, but every organization has processes that break down in practice, attempts at communication that go awry, inefficiencies that are clear to everyone, complaints in search of an outlet, and problems crying out for solutions. To this extent, schools are no different than any other organization. As in any organization, the people who are closest to the problems may be in the best position to surface ideas and solutions. When it comes to improving the school in order to better serve its primary customers—students, parents, and the community at large—a building principal has an important and perhaps unique perspective, yet it is one perspective among many in any potentially effective improvement process.

Of one thing I am certain: Concerns, problems, and outright complaints *will surface* in the school building. The question is, will they surface in a controlled way, as the result of a systemic approach to problem solving, or will they surface at random wherever teachers gather in the parking lot, or chat on cell phones or at computer keyboards? Great principals regularly surface concerns and then enlist everyone's help in dealing with those concerns or solving those problems. Effective principals involve staff in the decision-making



process. Top-down improvement efforts instituted without buy-in from those directly affected may flounder down the road, and this is true with any organization.

## A Matter of Perspective

A business acquaintance and I were once discussing the whole issue of continuous improvement, and he told me of a bank whose upper management team decided they would improve customer service by installing a very efficient telephone-answering system to replace the person who had always answered the phone and transferred the calls. The problem, of course, was that *customers really liked talking to the wonderful lady who used to answer the phone as the first point of contact*. Unfortunately for the bank, no one thought to ask the customers about this *before* the system was installed and before the (considerable) expenditures had been made in support of the new system. The outcry against this change was so loud and widespread that the bank was forced to scrap the new, efficient telephone-answering system, and replace it with the nice lady who loved talking to customers. The higher management of the bank, of course, put efficiency above what the customers loved—and never sought feedback from them or from the employees at ground level in the bank. At the upper managerial level of a bank, efficiency may be of primary concern; to customers—and to the employees who have to deal with those customers on a daily basis—the personal touch, a smile, and a bit of light banter might well be what customers want. In short, management simply thought like management and not like customers; this lack of empathy led to disastrous results.

For years I facilitated workshops on customer service for school-district employees, and I asked the following question: How many of you would prefer to have a person answer the phone when you call a company, rather than a machine? In every single case, almost every hand went up. Almost every hand, every time. Hardly scientific, I know, but telling nonetheless. Every reader, I suspect, has a horror story about being on hold for an inordinate amount of time, waiting to speak to a person. My personal record is twenty-three minutes—twenty-three minutes I'll never get back. Imagine being the person who sits there all day long, answering the phone for customers who have spent a good chunk of their lives waiting to talk to them.

If organizations, including schools and districts, were to conduct surveys of parents (customers), businesses (customers), and other



community members (customers), those organizations might come to the conclusion that stakeholders might prefer to have a happy, attentive, alert person actually answer the phone, rather than have to punch buttons and deal with an unnecessary rise in blood pressure. Decisions as to how to treat members of the school community (teachers, paraprofessionals, classified employees, parents) might best be arrived at with the help of those very people—stakeholders all. Decisions made by one or two people in an administrative office—the product of one or two sets of eyes—may not be effective over time; a commitment to continuous improvement requires the direct involvement of those who are most affected by the results. Their input results in better outcomes, smoother processes . . . and happier campers.

## The Search for Feedback

Any principal or leadership team willing to put a facilitator and representative stakeholders together long enough to surface perceived strengths and weaknesses in the system may well find other critical areas in need of improvement: among them communication, communication, and—oh yes—communication. If there is any single barrier to improvement more critical—or potentially damaging—than effective communication, I'm not certain what it might be.

The principal who thinks his skills as a communicator make him particularly effective in that regard may be surprised to learn that others disagree, but he will only discover that if feedback is sought through a working group, survey, or dozens of conversations intended to solicit feedback from employees. Here is something I know for certain: Unless leadership makes an effort to surface feedback through a regular process, the feedback will surface in the faculty lounge, the hallways, and the parking lot. School administrators may never hear it or see it, but it will be there—and *it will not contribute in any way to continuous improvement.*

In the process of purposefully soliciting feedback on any number of issues, building administrators can practice that communication skill so often lacking in organizations today: listening. Employees in buildings (and students in classrooms) where it appears that no one in charge is listening may not share what is on their minds, except with their peers. (Stand in a lunchroom full of students for half an hour, or in a faculty lounge full of teachers.) Communicating effectively is not just about great articulation and clarity in the written and

spoken word; it is about focusing on an employee, listening intently and purposefully to what she has to say, and seeking understanding in the form of paraphrasing or asking pertinent questions. It is also about taking the time afterwards to reflect on what that employee said, and getting back to her later on in order to make certain both the administrator and employee (or teacher and student) are on the same sheet of music.

Administrators who understand the balance between talking and listening in professional relationships are on their way to improving their own communication skills and defusing potential problems that arise because of a lack of communication or understanding. Teachers would do well to adopt this same balance between the amount of time they spend talking to students and the amount of time they spend listening to what students have to say; this is a great relationship builder any way one looks at it. Effective communication is the lifeblood of continuous improvement. Developing and using powerful listening skills is a critically important part of any communication system.

## **Improving Processes While Supporting Learning**

It is my experience that large teams of building-level employees do not work as efficiently in collaborative efforts as smaller teams. The more people there are in a working group, the harder it is to get everyone together, and the sheer size of the group may make efficient process facilitation difficult for the person running the meetings and coordinating the input and output of the group. As one who has facilitated dozens of teams, I can report that small teams are easier to manage, and communication is less cumbersome. Ultimately, the size of the team is less important than what is accomplished in the time allotted. As long as there are multiple perspectives on the team, representing every point of view, much can be accomplished.

The focus of any team should always be on learning. Every process in the building can be looked at in terms of how it affects students and their own continuous-improvement efforts as supported by the adults in the building. Small teams can be assembled in order to put the microscope on how—and how effectively—things are done. Conzemius and O’Neill (2002) describe process-improvement teams as those that “exist to improve any process in the school or system that, because of inefficiencies or unnecessary bureaucracy,

[has] the potential to divert resources away from the district's core mission of student learning" (p. 31). The team meets, dissects a particular process, evaluates how it furthers the district's emphasis on student learning, and if necessary, streamlines the process.

Let's suppose, for example, that four new teachers arrived at a particular middle school at the beginning of the last school year. In this instance, three of them came on board before July 1, and while the fourth was not actually hired until the beginning of August, building administrators knew who would be in which classrooms by July 1. My experience has been that new teachers are often tremendously excited about seeing and setting up their new classrooms, but there may be a process-based impediment to making that happen: Specifically, and traditionally, the building's custodial staff cleaned, waxed, and otherwise prepared the classrooms in a certain order during the course of the summer months, as defined by their own needs and priorities. Therefore, the classrooms of the new teachers may not ordinarily have priority for cleaning.

During the five in-service days prior to the start of school, the mentors for these four new teachers noticed that their protégés seemed stressed out because of everything that needed to be done before the students reported the following Monday. In meetings with the mentors, two of the protégés lamented the fact that in the midst of everything else that was going on—meetings, professional development, trips downtown to HR, setting up electronic grade-books, and so on—they did not get enough time to really set their classrooms up the way they would have liked. What could have been a very relaxed and enjoyable process on their part was less so because of everything else that came their way during that busy teachers' week.

Looking ahead to the *next* school year, the mentors, meeting with the assistant principal who worked most closely with them and with their protégés, suggested that a process-improvement team be assembled to take a look at the order in which the classrooms were cleaned during the summer months. The head custodian, along with one of the teacher mentors, the assistant principal, and one of the four new teachers all met in a small conference room in order to see if something could be done to get the rooms for new teachers ready prior to next August 1, so that new teachers hired prior to that date had some unencumbered time to set up the classrooms as they wished well prior to the first day teachers had to report back. The team began by looking at the process the custodians used in order to ensure that the classrooms were ready by that

teachers' week. With some adjustments to that schedule, the head custodian was able to talk with his staff and arrange for those particular rooms to be done first, along with the cleaning of those particular student desks and the other furniture in those rooms. The members of this process-improvement team also agreed that this adjusted process would be revisited the following September by this same team (with the addition of one of the new teachers who was able to take advantage of the improved process), in order to assess its effectiveness.

The key to making the decision was the belief that getting these particular rooms cleaned and waxed early would reduce some of the attendant confusion that brand new teachers are bound to feel during teachers' week. While it might result in an adjustment to what was a time-honored room-preparation process, the potential benefit to learning outweighed the understandable desire to maintain a status quo that worked for the custodians during the summer. That same process-improvement team might very well look at other things that could be done for new teachers that would assist their transition into the school community. This particular process-improvement team was composed of those with the most investment in the possible outcomes: the custodians who cleaned the rooms and "owned" the current process, the mentors who worked more closely than anyone else with their protégés, the administrator who worked with both the mentors and the new teachers, and one of the new teachers who now had nearly a year under her belt and who could speak most eloquently to the pressures of that first week. Going forward, the assistant principal's task was to keep the head custodian informed concerning the number of new teachers and the rooms into which they would be assigned. Armed with this information, the custodians could make the adjustments that resulted in those classrooms being ready to go prior to August 1, a full two weeks before teachers reported.

There may be other teams, according to Conzemius and O'Neill (2002), that are formed in the name of improvement. Instruction-related teams (departmental or grade level) may deal with services that directly benefit students, steering teams that deal with major initiatives, and school-level improvement teams that are "stewards of the school's mission vision, and core values" (p. 26). Every one of these teams, large or small, is dedicated to improving systems and instruction in the building. Parents, as Conzemius and O'Neill affirm, may be sought for these teams, and "this is especially true when the outcome of the team's work is likely to require community support . . . or involves any decision having significant impact on student learning"

(p. 27). The composition of any improvement team should be careful to include those closest to the issue, problem, or process.

## The Benefits of Success

As it is with students, small successes can lead to an increase in the confidence and feeling of competence that can pave the way for future success in identifying and solving problems, improving instruction as part of a grade-level or department-level effort, and streamlining and improving processes and systems. The point at which it begins to go viral in the building is the point at which employees—instructional, administrative, or support—begin to see the positive effects of decisions made on their behalf, and in support of students and parents, and may be more willing to assist in the overall continuous-improvement process.

An example of this might be a school-improvement team that decides to survey the school community in order to find out what the perceptions are regarding how well the school is doing in the areas of safety, instruction, school-home communication, and first impressions when people enter the building. The survey is developed with the assistance of the district-level accountability office, and it is administered, collected, and analyzed so that everyone in the building can get an idea of just how the community perceives the school. The results of this initial survey can function as a baseline that will help inform decision making as they move forward in the various areas covered by the survey. One year later, that same survey might well show some interesting contrasts from the established baseline; if the perceptions improved overall, or in specific areas, this can once again inform decision making for the third year. This feedback, provided year after year, or at least every couple of years, can greatly assist schools in the continuous-improvement process. Again, demonstrable success leads to more demonstrable success, and the whole school moves forward.

Such surveys should be constructed carefully, and the persons constructing and distributing the survey should make certain they are free of leading questions. In districts that include an office or department devoted to accountability and testing, there may be testing specialists who can assist with survey development. The results of the survey should be made available to stakeholders, and any changes made on the basis of survey results should be communicated; the entire continuous-improvement effort should be well communicated and

transparent. It has been my experience that few things are more frustrating than taking part in surveys that subsequently disappear down a black hole; those who take part in a survey and hear nothing are less likely to participate in such efforts down the road.

## **Walking the Walk at the Administrative Level**

Any building administrator who wants her employees to hold up to the light *how* they do *what* they do on a daily basis must be willing to model how this might be done. There are plenty of processes that administrators can seek to streamline and, if necessary, replace with new processes. One example of this would be the whole nature and purpose of faculty meetings that are often devoted to providing information in a talking-head format, with one speaker after another going over “what people need to know,” things that might be as easily handled by e-mails or other means. Building leadership teams can ensure that faculty meetings can instead be dynamic professional-development sessions where teachers and administrators examine data, share ideas and successes, and make decisions about changes that will move the school forward.

Another area rife with possibilities for accelerating improvement is the system of teacher evaluation that is in place in many schools. In these schools, administrators make one or two visits per year, and the summative evaluation finds its way into the teacher’s mailbox or becomes part of a short administrator–teacher conversation at the end of the year—at which point the teacher and the administrator sign off on the evaluation form. It may be that the school district requires that form, but it is still possible for administrators to visit classrooms more frequently and to make the whole process more formative in nature. Observations can be followed by postobservation conversations that hone in on specific areas of improvement, as well as areas of strength. This would allow teachers to make adjustments as the year progresses, and might be part of a larger, overall improvement effort.

The willingness of building administrators to layer a formative process on top of a (required) summative process models for teachers the effectiveness of formative assessments in their own classrooms. Administrators could, in the fall of a given school year, pilot this formative process with several volunteers, evaluate the program, and then expand it schoolwide after the first of the year. The administrators and the volunteers can meet in order to gauge the effectiveness of the formative process. This examination of the effectiveness of the

program should, in turn, model for teachers the value of looking at their own processes and systems as they move forward on their own continuous-improvement journeys.

Administrators who are seen walking the walk are much more likely to get the support of school employees for any continuous-improvement initiative. Just as students pick up quickly on inconsistencies in the classroom, teachers and other employees watch administrators closely to see if what they are *saying* matches what they are *doing*. A decided lack of congruence between words and actions can short-circuit continuous-improvement efforts. Administrators can model effective change and process improvement in ways that get the attention of everyone in the building. Employees need to see that leaders are willing to walk with them, listen to them, and work with them—rather than simply hand down decrees from the front office.

It is one thing for administrators to develop powerful listening skills in working with staff; it is another to lose sight of what is most important for the customers who count most—students. The narrow interests of individuals in the organization must give way to the overarching goal of improved instruction, increased efficiency, and customer service, for both external and internal customers. In many schools, the newest teachers are placed with students who are desperately in need of the most experienced and effective teachers. This often happens because veteran teachers want—and receive—the classes and students they request, and it is the new teachers who move into situations where they simply do not have the amount of expertise and experience necessary to succeed. Administrators and leadership teams need to make certain that efforts to improve instruction result in a matching of teachers and students that best serves the latter.

## **The Power of Reflection and Self-Evaluation**

Empowered groups of stakeholders can do much to make forward progress on the continuous-improvement highway. With the success of students firmly in mind, individuals and small teams can accelerate overall improvement efforts from the front office to classroom. When, for example, teachers at the first-grade level meet with second-grade teachers in regular work sessions, they can work out exactly what is needed in terms of readiness when first graders make the transition to second grade. The basic understanding of both groups of teachers



is that if first graders are not ready for second grade, the second-grade teachers have to account for that and make up lost ground for those students. If, however, vertical teams working in concert can dovetail their continuous-improvement efforts, students and teachers will both benefit. The great thing here is that grade-level teams in the elementary schools already exist; it remains for them to meet with one another on an ongoing basis toward one purpose: making certain that when students move to the next level, they are ready.

The key with vertical teams, as with all teams, is a willingness to lay it all out there and to receive and accept input from those with different perspectives. It may be tough for a fourth-grade teacher to hear from a fifth-grade colleague that many students are not coming to the higher grade with necessary grammatical skills. If that is the case, it is not a time to play the blame game; it is a time to involve grade-level teams from K through 5 in working on what needs to be done at each grade level in order to ensure that each year more and more students are up to speed in terms of grammar. In order for continuous improvement to go viral, teachers and employees need to understand that improvement is not about assigning blame or finding scapegoats; continuous improvement is about being willing to self-evaluate, honor other perspectives, accept feedback, and work with colleagues regularly, in continuous-improvement mode. As we will see later on, this involves taking a big step for teachers and other school employees used to working in isolation. A true and consistent continuous-improvement effort requires a willingness to break the grip of isolationism, work collaboratively toward common goals, and develop a system of improvement that will facilitate and accelerate the growth of the organization.

## **Final Thoughts**

Being part of a successful improvement effort in one area will lead those involved to believe that it can be duplicated in another. Skeptics who observe that administrators are truly walking the walk can be turned into believers. For their part, administrators and other school leaders can act with a sense of urgency that keeps continuous improvement consistently on the front burner; they can also seek to involve all stakeholders in a process that is truly bottom-up, rather than top-down.

In Chapter 2, we'll explore change and the drag often induced by the status quo in schools.