

Our Schools Can Never Be Changed From the Inside

Bureaucracies are self-designed to prevent change.



Sometimes companies send their executives to the wildest of training camps to teach them management skills. As a young Vice President with ADP, my previous employer, I had the opportunity to attend some really interesting training camps! These were usually experiences that were designed to teach management skills, teamwork, leadership and other concepts. Dangling from ropes in a chigger-infested forest; surviving on a deserted island; personality tests; brainstorming sessions—they were all designed to make us think. One of these experiences stands out in my mind above the rest. It was a simple contest. But it taught a concept I have seen come true time and again in my professional career.

Here is the scenario:

About 25, or so, Vice Presidents and Directors were in a classroom in downtown Boston, Massachusetts. The facilitator announced we were to have a contest. She told us when she said “Go!” we were to all jump up from our seats and form a single line of people. The line was to extend from the wall and be perpendicular to the wall with only one person touching the wall. The contest would end after 30 minutes and the person touching the wall when time was up would be declared the winner. The idea was for each of us to be the person touching the wall or at least be as close to that person as possible. You could shove, push, wrestle, negotiate with, or even pay the person in front of you to get a better position. What happened with this experience is a lesson I will never forget.

The scramble:

When she said “Go!” there was a mad scramble of pushing and shoving and yelling. I thought someone, especially one of the ladies, was going to get hurt. The contest was to last 30 minutes but the shoving was all over in less than three minutes. By four minutes all 25 people were in a line with one person touching the wall and there was no more movement, no more negotiating, and no more contest. Everyone was reasonably satisfied with where they ended up. Or at least everyone was satisfied that they had achieved the highest level possible. **And they all had given up trying to do better.**

We spent the next few hours discussing and analyzing what happened in those four short minutes. It was one of the most effective learning classroom experiences of my life!

Here is what happened at “Go!”:

- A few people immediately decided not to put up with the hassle and walked to the end of the line. (After all, it wasn’t worth getting hurt for a silly exercise.)

- Some of the more competitive men and women started wrestling for the number one spot. In general, the stronger and larger men had the advantage but several of the women hung in there. In fact, a few smaller women and a couple of obviously smaller men ended up close to the front and had out maneuvered some of the stronger men.

- The secret of the success of those in front depended less on size or strength but much more on those with whom they teamed-up.

- In a matter of seconds after the facilitator said “Go!” alliances formed between contestants. There was no time to talk about it or to strategize. These alliances just happened! They formed out of nowhere!

- As the line began to form at the front, people quickly gave up on vying for the front positions and quickly chose a spot they thought they could maintain.

- The line formed quickly, with people giving up on their original goals within minutes. For their own “survival” they were willing to settle for a lesser position.

- New alliances formed almost in an instant. People started protecting those **in front of them** in line! Because one’s position in the line was determined by how many were in front of them, people immediately figured out that protecting the front position was essential to keeping their own current position.

- After **only four minutes** no one in the line was trying to make changes (it was too dangerous to their own position).

- Everyone in the line was protecting the persons in front of them.

The lesson here is:

1. It is “dangerous” for those within a bureaucracy to try to change it.
2. As a member of the bureaucracy, you must protect all positions in the bureaucracy because after all, those positions are what protect your position.
3. Those who wish to change or better the bureaucracy soon learn it is hopeless to do and even dangerous to their own survival.
4. **Therefore: Bureaucracies are impossible to change from the inside!**

That is why if we keep electing people from within the school system hierarchy we will never get the changes in education our kids deserve.

We need Tom Luna as Idaho Superintendent of Schools! He is one of the brightest and most

dedicated people I know. Tom Luna comes from outside the education bureaucracy. But he has a great understanding of what our schools need. If we want better schools, we need to elect him State Superintendent of Public Instruction. Tom Luna has a passion to help our kids compete in a more global economy.

Most Idaho high school graduates don’t even know how to balance a check book when they graduate from high school. And most kids in Idaho are far behind their peers in other countries when they graduate. Anyone who has traveled overseas will know how the educational development of our kids lags behind kids in other countries. India, China, Japan, and almost all European countries are far ahead in teaching their kids math, engineering, biology, and almost all other disciplines.

The current system, designed by the teachers unions, does not create or reward better teachers. It is designed to protect poor performers. Change will never be created by those within the system itself. Therefore, the PhD’s and educational bureaucrats will never change our failing school systems. These are good people who mean well, but like the “line” of people in our learning exercise, the educational bureaucracy is designed to protect itself from change.

We have great teachers in this country! They should be applauded and well rewarded! And there are others that are not so great. The problem is that poor teachers are difficult to get out of the system and the least effective teachers get the same pay as the good teachers. Raises are earned (believe it or not) not by becoming better teachers, but by going back to school and taking more credits!

In all other walks of life, people are rewarded by what they do with their education, not for how much education they have. In Idaho, teachers are rewarded, not for being better teachers, but for getting more education! Talk about a system designed to support itself!

Many within the system will tell you it is working and does not need change, but the results indicate otherwise. Give credit to those within the system who have the courage to speak out for change. Others within the system will make it hard on them. Those who want better schools will vote for Tom Luna. And so will Belinda and I.

Please Vote for Tom Luna for Superintendent of Public Schools. Our kids need him. He is by far the best qualified to do the job. If you care about the future of our kids, please vote for Tom Luna!

—Frank L. VanderSloot
President/CEO Melaleuca