

MEMORANDUM

I was asked to analyze to reflect a past experience where failure to think systemically had an impact on the intended results of a policy or program intervention. This memo will be about a school's experience of failing to address to handle one of its main problems, students' attitudes and skills, and finding another way of trying to solve the problem after noticing its failure point.

Özel Ege Lisesi, the private K-12 day school I manage in İzmir, Turkey, which has 1,100 students and 100 faculty members, initiated a different study starting from 1998-1999 academic year, namely "life lessons"; which did not work out in the way intended because of neglecting to address the whole system when dealing with the problem. The study had been triggered because of the following rationales:

- a. The observations of school administrators regarding the students' attitudes sounded pessimistic in the sense that the way the students behaved in school settings - aisles, dining halls, library, etc.- implicitly showed that there have been educational problems.
- b. At the very same period, complaints from faculty members started to increase, mainly emphasizing classroom management problems.
- c. Annual questionnaires conducted among the parents, while also raised disciplinary issues, added that the kids need to be more polite, kind and tolerable against one another, use their daily language more properly by getting rid of usage of slang.
- d. The number of student visits to guidance counseling service regarding problems such as being unable to manage time, lacking focus to study at home and being unable to cope with anger started to increase.

The above points, signs of patterns rather than independent events, made the management of the school act to give further training to pupils -both in general and in case-basis- who were, on the other hand, academically competitive in the standardized tests and doing fine with the school's rigorous curriculum. The main purpose of school administration was to tackle the ongoing attitude problems of its kids before it would turn out to become a structure.

Starting from the first grade, every week all of the students started to get a training from their advisor teachers for one hour in above subjects. The topics were centrally prepared by the guidance counseling service after taking the input of faculty for the most desired and needed issues, and a manual for each month was distributed throughout the school.

The study did not work in the way it was intended and the results were less than anticipated mainly because;

- a. In spite of the fact that the input (need) of teachers and parents were taken prior the start of this unique study, the whole system was not prepared while the

process was in action. In other words, people were not completely in the organizational process of learning.

b. The study lacked feedback. A continuous feedback had to be taken from the parties of the system with respect to the outcomes; for example, whether the study discipline at home was improved from the lense of parents or whether the classroom management seemed to be better in the eyes of the teachers.

c. The outcome was not measured at all. Hence, it became clear that there should have been regular and concrete assessment periods aiming at how things were working.

d. Parents and teachers expressed their thoughts but they were not trained along the study. The teachers had to know how they would handle each subject or case that they were asked to examine or train the students, which was centrally designed by the guidance counseling service, and the parents had to be educated as to how they would support the school's efforts so that a parallel understanding between the school and the family would be established.

e. Finally, the whole project missed a head person, namely an administrator or a faculty member, who would lead the process from scratch to the end as an organizing authority.

One probable missing point of the administration's well-intended study was not "thinking of the big picture" and not "recognizing the dynamic, complex, and interdependent nature of systems." (Anderson & Johnson, 1997, p.18) Missing the whole view of the system which was comprised of managers, teachers, parents, students, and even staff, the institution put the whole energy on one-hour-per-week teacher-to-student meetings. Given that in such a big learning atmosphere the steps taken for any kind of educational purpose would take three to four years on average so as to observe the output objectively, the school continued this one-sided intervention from the stand point of management for around four years before discovering that a new understanding was needed in order to attain the target of improving the in-and-out-of-school manners of its pupils and making them gain certain level of life skills.

To "develop an awareness of complexity, interdependencies, and linkages" (Cassidy, September 2005, lecture notes), the management of the school decided to bring the the people of the organization together and to ask for outside help from the world of academia following the winter recess of 2003-2004 academic year. The new step, called *Positive Behavior Improvement Project (PBIP)*, changed a static **study** to a more thorough dynamic **project** and the major changes were as follows:

a. The project has been coordinated by an assistant principal who has the initiative to bring the parties together and conduct broad-based meetings among the administrators, teachers and parents whenever necessary.

b. People of the whole system were included in the project. First, the administrators got prepared to the new learning environment for more than 10 months before a new teacher training process had been initiated for faculty members. Faculty participated in several meetings with describing problems on a case-basis and

produced a wide variety of suggestions for in- and-out-of-school misbehaviors of students. Parents were invited to become a part of various well-known academicians' seminars. Last but not least, pupils have been gathered in the school's auditorium frequently to discuss their own aspects and expectations to address a "student view" of problems.

Such a training of teachers and parents produced a very positive outcome. The linkage between the school and parents became much stronger since then, thanks to the non-ending calls of professionals mainly to the parents to increase their contacts with their kids' school with the assumption that closer relationships would help see the details better and create a mutual understanding. Senge (1990) stated that people with different mental models can observe the same event and describe it differently because of different details.

c. The secretariat of the project has started to ask for continuous feedback of the parties, namely administrators, teachers, parents, and students. Necessary changes or modifications have been made accordingly throughout the project, depending on the needs or complaints of these parties.

d. Despite the heavy work load of the teachers, almost every month faculty members have come together to discuss the outcomes and to assess this exhausting project's results. This particular part is documented regularly so as to create an *institutional memory* by the time goes.

There have been less complaints coming from the teachers regarding disciplinary issues now. The parents' understanding of raising a kid has been greatly influenced after parental trainings. The relationship between the school and the families is now much more stronger. The kids' attitudes have been more appropriate and polite. They are becoming more aware of how to behave in the dining halls. The number of students who enter a building with holding the door for the next person coming started to increase. While things are much more concrete and measurable now, yet there is a long way to improve. As in the words of a senior administrator of the school, Özel Ege Lisesi needs another 20 years to fully change the cultural atmosphere of its learning environment with that many kids preparing themselves for life.

References:

Anderson, V. & Johnson, L. (1997). *Systems Thinking Basics: From Concepts to Causal Loops*. Waltham, MA: Pegasus Communications.

Cassidy, T. (September 21, 2005). *Lecture Notes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Senge, P. (1990). *The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of the Learning Organization*. New York: Double Day.