Event 2
Establish or Redefine Your Relationship with a School District

When and Why To Use This Event

Who conducts this event. The facilitator.

Intent. If you are new to the district (which we call an external facilitator, even if you are employed by the school system), the primary intent of this event is to help you identify a good district (school system and community) to work with and to establish a personal relationship with a contact person and the superintendent. If you have been in the district for some time (which we call an internal facilitator, even if you are not employed by the school system), the primary intent of this event is to explore the extent to which you can redefine your relationship with the superintendent and other key leaders, in consideration of the biases for which you are known (revealed in Event 1). One result of this event should be a decision as to whether to proceed to Activity 3.1 with the district, or to avoid involvement as their facilitator. Another intent of this event is to help the leaders with whom you meet to acquire a better understanding of the need for, and nature of, a systemic change process.

When. We recommend that this event be done for every change effort. This event should not be undertaken until you are confident you are at a sufficient level of readiness, as determined by Event 1.

Context. Having just assured your own readiness for facilitating a systemic change effort (Event 1), you are ready to establish or redefine your relationship with a district. It is followed by deciding whether or not to undertake a change effort with them (Activity 3.1). Then, if you decide to proceed, Activity 3.2 entails making a formal agreement with the district, including all its stakeholder groups, that spells out the roles that all will be playing in the change process. Upon entering into such an agreement, Event 4 then helps you to gain knowledge about the district's capacity for change, so you can take advantage of its strong areas (existing capacities) and build up weak areas.

Synopsis. If you are an external facilitator, this event entails identifying a district (school system and community) that you might want to work with, talking with the contact person by phone, making a site visit, deciding whether or not to proceed to Event 3, and, if yes, entering into an agreement for assessing the district's readiness for change. If you are an internal facilitator, this event entails attempting to analyze your relationship with key leaders, deciding whether or not to proceed to Event 3, and, if yes, developing a plan for redefining your relationships and entering into an agreement for assessing the district's readiness for change.

Rationale. If you skip this event, you may take a lot of time with Activity 3.1, only to find that your time was wasted, because you could have figured out earlier that the district was not at a sufficient level of readiness.
Implied Values. Relationships (because sound relationships help to build trust and honest communications, which are essential for a systemic change effort), strong support from the top, your attitude and how you manage it, neutrality (not being perceived as being beholden to, or favoring, any particular group or solution).

Prerequisite. Event 1

Calendar Time. 1-2 weeks
Goals

If you are an external facilitator (have no relationship with the district):
To identify and select a school district to visit, and make a tentative “Go or No-go” decision to assess their readiness for systemic change.
To start to build a relationship with the key leaders in the district.
To gather important information about the district.
To begin to help the key leaders to acquire a better understanding of the need for, and nature of, a systemic change process.

If you are an internal facilitator (already have a relationship with the district):
To start to redefine your relationship with the key leaders in the district, in consideration of your biases uncovered in Event 1.
To decide whether or not you should accept the role of process facilitator.
To begin to help the key leaders to acquire a better understanding of the need for, and nature of, a systemic change process.

Process for External Facilitators

1. Identify a school district and appropriate contact person.
   If you are an external facilitator, then some of the ways you might identify a school district include:
   • They approach you because of work you have published, publicity you have generated, or word of mouth from other districts with which you have worked. For example, you could publish an announcement in a newsletter that goes out to superintendents within your geographical reach describing the kind of service you would like to provide and asking interested parties to contact you (see sample announcement on the next page). Alternatively, you could send out a mailing to superintendents within your geographical reach.
   • You approach a particular school district because you have heard they may be at a sufficient level of readiness and have a supportive superintendent.

   In any event, you should also identify the most appropriate contact person. This will almost universally be the superintendent, for you need someone with a lot of influence and authority to be actively involved in promoting the change process.

   (Time: widely variable)
Sample Announcement Describing your Services

Are you interested in how professional development, technology integration, and change can work together synergistically? The ABC Change Facilitation Center would like to establish a long-term relationship with a small school district whose leadership is interested in a systemic (integrated) approach to dealing with these and other challenges it faces.

We are not interested in a relationship in which we tell you what you should do; we are interested in working with you in a process that will help you to decide what is best for you. The ABC Center will provide a skilled, competent facilitator and a support team to help you engage in an effective process for planning and change. We view our role as facilitating, not leading, that process. Unfortunately, we can only work with a school district that is within about an hour’s drive of [ABC Center’s city].

What we ask of you is that you:
- Are interested in exploring fundamental changes;
- Want to give all your community stakeholder groups participation and ownership in the change process;
- Want to explore creative uses of technology to help all children learn; and
- Are interested in creative ways to better meet your teachers’ and administrators’ professional development needs.

If you would like to consider building a long-term relationship like this, please contact me to set up a meeting. [Contact information provided here.]

2. Talk with the contact person by phone.

   There are three objectives worth pursuing at this point:
   - Begin to establish a relationship, a rapport.
   - Decide whether it is worth your while to make a site visit; and if it is, make arrangements to meet with the superintendent and anyone else the contact person thinks would be important for you to meet, if any (one or two more people, at most).
   - Get useful information for your first site visit, including who the formal leaders are in the district (school system and community).

   In pursuit of these objectives, you may want to consider asking such questions as those appearing on the next page.
Questions to Consider Asking

We offer the following as ideas for you to consider. We encourage you to delete, add, and modify these questions for your specific situation, and arrange them in whatever order you think is best.

Is this a convenient time to talk?
How did you hear about us?
Why are you interested in us?
What need of yours do you think we will meet?
About the contact person: What are their motives and intentions? What is their relationship to the school district? Are they associated with a certain stakeholder group or existing team? Are they influential? With whom? How good a relationship do they have with the superintendent?
About the superintendent: What are their motives and intentions? What is their relationship to different stakeholder groups in the district?
What do you see as the major stakeholder groups in the school system and community, and who is the formal leader of each? What agendas does each leader have?
Is there a change process under way? If so, why are you considering us?
Ask about their recent, current, or desired efforts to find out what they think about change.
Do you want a district-wide effort?
Is there already an agenda about what needs to be changed, and/or do they already have a solution in mind?
Tell them some things about our values and approach regarding the change process, and ask if they are interested in us.

Criteria for the Decision to Visit them

The following are some criteria you may want to consider in making a decision about whether or not to visit them. We encourage you to revise these criteria in ways you think beneficial, but only after carefully considering why you are accepting, rejecting, modifying, or adding each.

Reasonable driving distance to the school district.
Openness of the contact person and superintendent to your perspectives about the change process.
Compatibility of the contact person’s and superintendent’s mindsets with your perspectives.
Either lack of existing agendas or flexibility about their agendas.
The role they see you playing is compatible with your perspectives.
Level of commitment to change on the part of the contact person and the superintendent.
Your gut feeling (intuition) about the district.

(Time: 1/2 hour per school district)

3. Visit the school district.

If more than none school district seems promising based on your phone conversations, we recommend you visit all the promising ones. There are several objectives to pursue on your site visits:

• Build a personal relationship with the contact person.
• Build a personal relationship with the superintendent and anyone else the contact person thinks would be important for you to meet.
• Begin to help the people you meet to acquire a better understanding of the need for, and nature of, a systemic change process, and why you are a good choice to facilitate it.
• Gather information to help you make the “Go or No-go” decision for working with them.

To pursue these objectives, you might want to consider the following suggestions and sample questions for your site visit. You should adapt both to your situation.

Suggestions
Don’t try to meet with all the formal leaders of stakeholder groups yet. If the contact person is not the superintendent, it is imperative that you develop a personal relationship with the superintendent and gain his or her full support.
Ice-breaker: Ask them to share information about the district and what is going on there. Describe your values about change and process facilitation. Ask them what questions they have about you and your view of change. Ask what relationships they have had with outside change agents in the past. Use the same criteria as for Step 2 (see previous box).

Questions to Consider Asking
What are the attitudes and relationship like between the superintendent and the school board?
What conflicts or disagreements exist among school board members?
What is the predominant management style on the school board?
What are the attitudes and relationship like between the teachers and administrators? How have recent contract negotiations gone?
What is the predominant leadership style in the district (top-down or participatory)?
What conflicts or disagreements exist among teachers?
What are the attitudes and relationship like between the teachers and parents?
What are the attitudes like between the teachers and the students?
What are the attitudes of the community in general toward the schools?
How much stability has there been in personnel (board members, superintendents, principals, teachers, staff)?
Do they think change is needed? If so, why? What kinds of change? Are they open to changes in the administrative system as well as teaching/learning system?
What do they see as the biggest barriers to change in their district?
What change efforts have occurred recently? What problems did they encounter? What attitudes do teachers and administrators have about change?

(Time: 1-2 hour visit)
4. Decide to "Go or No-go" for Event 3.
Decide whether you and the superintendent want to proceed with examining the readiness of the district for systemic change (Activity 3.1).
(Time: negligible)

5. Prepare for Event 3

If you have decided to do the readiness assessment (Activity 3.1), there are two things you should do to prepare for it.

First, enter into an agreement to assess the district’s readiness for systemic change. The agreement should be written (a letter of agreement is fine), and should clarify expectations about the purpose, goals, methods, and amount of your time required for the readiness assessment (look at Event 3 for specifics on each). It is important that they understand that the readiness assessment is a process to provide them and you with information regarding whether a systemic change effort should be undertaken and whether you both want to enter into a long-term agreement. It is also important to decide whether or not you need to be paid for conducting the readiness assessment (1-2 weeks of your time), or whether you are willing to invest your time as a cost of business. If you do need to be paid, then negotiate a fee with the superintendent or her/his designee as part of the agreement. A sample letter of agreement is provided on page XX.

Second, ask the contact person and the superintendent to identify the people who should be notified of your agreement, and then to notify them.

(Time: 4-8 hours, or longer if yours or theirs is a large, bureaucratic organization)

Potential Problems with the External-Facilitator Process

The following are some of the problems you may anticipate in trying to conduct this process when you are an external facilitator to the district:

• If the contact person has little power or influence in the district and is unable to gain the support and presence of the superintendent, then this is a big red flag about your working with the district.
• If the superintendent is unwilling to notify others of your agreement or does not want you to meet with certain leaders in the district, then this also is a red flag.
• The people you meet with may be more interested in impressing you or recruiting you than in being totally open about their expectations and the conditions in their district.
• There could be a strong interest in co-opting you into a current change effort that may be incompatible with a systemic change process.
• If you agree to do the readiness assessment for free, it may give the impression that your services are not worth very much or that there are other things that they can expect you to do for free later.
• Lack of willingness to pay for the readiness assessment may indicate a lack of commitment to change.
• Your eagerness to get a client may obscure your objectivity in assessing whether or not you should engage in a change effort with this district.
Process for Internal Facilitators

1. Attempt to analyze your relationship with key leaders.

   Since you have worked in the school system for some time, people have developed perceptions about you and your biases, motives, influence, working style, and personal associations. These perceptions may interfere with your ability to be an effective, neutral facilitator for a systemic change process. (To be a neutral facilitator, you must not be perceived as being beholden to, or favoring, any particular group or solution.)

   Therefore, you should try to get an objective sense of the way others in the district (school system and community) perceive you, including your biases, motives, influences, working style, and relationships with others in the district.

   • Find a person who (a) is not viewed as partial towards you and (b) can be trusted to keep the results confidential; and ask her/him to interview key leaders in the district about their perceptions of you. You might want to have the district hire an outside consultant to do this. In either event, you may want to insist on a contract with the interviewer that has a confidentiality clause guaranteeing that information will be shared with no one but you. And you should be prepared for some unexpected results.

---

Setting the Context

The superintendent and possibly one or two other leaders should decide which leaders to interview, in order to maintain the confidentiality of those who are interviewed.

If the interviewer is unknown to the key leaders, the superintendent should probably contact the key leaders and explain the reason for the interview. Otherwise, the interviewer will need to explain the reason. An important issue here is what should be said about the prospective change effort. It may be important to indicate that you are exploring whether or not to undertake a change effort, rather than to hit them with the surprise that one is being imposed on them.

You, the facilitator, should work with the interviewer to decide on the interview protocol and questions. It should be clear to the interviewer that his/her purpose is to gather information for you, and that it will not be shared with the superintendent or board.

Issues to Address while Interviewing

To get honest perceptions, it will be important for the interviewer to convince the leader that s/he will maintain strict confidentiality regarding who said what, and even who was interviewed. Also, the interviewer should assure the leader that s/he will remove any details that would allow identification of the source of the comments.

Try to think of other ways the interviewer can increase the openness and honesty of the interviewee, such as her/his trustworthiness, the fact that the information will only go to the facilitator and not to the superintendent or anyone else, and the importance of honest information for the facilitator to decide whether or not he/she is the most appropriate person to facilitate a successful change effort.

Continued
The following are some issues you may want to have addressed by the interviewer:

- The context in which the interviewee has worked with the facilitator.
- How the interviewee would characterize her/his relationship with this person.
- The interviewee’s perceptions of the facilitator’s biases, motives, influence, and working style.
- The interviewee’s perceptions of the facilitator’s biases, political ties, and personal associations with other key people and stakeholder groups in the community.
- The interviewee’s perceptions of the facilitator’s trustworthiness, professionalism, political ties.
- The interviewee’s perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses that the facilitator would bring to the facilitator role.
- How the interviewee feels about working with this person again in the future.

- Analyze these results with the help of the interviewer. Compare the results with your own analysis of your biases (Event 1), and try to understand the reasons for any discrepancies.

(Time: 5 - 10 hours)

2. Decide to "Go or No-go" for Event 3.

Decide whether or not you should proceed to doing the readiness assessment (Activity 3.1). There are two factors to consider: would you be good for the change effort, and would facilitating the change effort be good for you. If it is apparent that key leaders do not perceive your biases, motives, influence, working style, and relationships as conducive to a systemic change effort, then this should be an indication that someone else may be a more appropriate facilitator. Whether justified or not, perceptions of your biases, motives, and so forth are very difficult to overcome. Regarding whether or not it would be good for you, you should consider the professional consequences of accepting or declining the responsibility to facilitate.

(Time: negligible)

Questions to Consider Asking

We offer the following as ideas for you to consider. We encourage you to delete, add, and modify these questions for your specific situation, and arrange them in whatever order you think is best.

Why are they interested in you?
What need of theirs do they think you will meet?
What are the superintendent’s motives, intentions, and relationship to different stakeholder groups in the district?

Continued
What do they see as the major stakeholder groups in the school system and community, and who is the formal leader of each? What agendas does each leader have?

Is there a change process under way? If so, why are they considering you?

What do they think about change?

Do they want a district-wide effort?

Is there already an agenda about what needs to be changed, and/or do they already have a solution in mind?

What do they think about your values and approach regarding the change process.

**Criteria for the "Go or No-go" Decision**

_The following are some criteria you may want to consider in making a “Go or No-go” decision. We encourage you to revise these criteria in ways you think beneficial, but only after carefully considering why you are accepting, rejecting, modifying, or adding each criterion._

- Openness of the superintendent and key leaders to your perspectives about the change process.
- Compatibility of their mindsets with your perspectives.
- Either lack of existing agendas or flexibility about their agendas.
- Compatibility of the role they see you playing with your perspectives.
- Level of commitment to change on the part of the contact person and the superintendent.
- Your gut feeling (intuition) about the district.

3. **Develop and initiate a plan for redefining your relationships.**

If you decide to assume the responsibility to facilitate the change effort, develop a plan for changing, to the extent possible, any perceptions that could hinder the change effort, and initiate that plan. The interviewer (from Step 1) may be helpful in brainstorming such a plan.

Also, considering how time-intensive a systemic change process is for a facilitator, you will likely need to negotiate a reduction of your other responsibilities (assuming you, like most facilitators, have other roles and responsibilities). If the superintendent is not very receptive to this idea, do what you can to get sufficient time for assessing the district’s readiness for systemic change (Activity 3.1). That activity will, in turn, give you more information for negotiating for more of your time as a part of Activity 3.2. Sufficient time will be essential to the success of the effort!

(Time: 1 - 3 hours)

If you have decided to do the readiness assessment (Activity 3.1), there are two things you should do to prepare for it.

First, enter into an agreement to assess the district’s readiness for systemic change. In the agreement, clarify expectations about the purpose, goals, methods, and amount of your time required for the readiness assessment (look at Event 3 for specifics on each). It is important that they understand that the readiness assessment is a process to provide them and you with information regarding whether a systemic change effort should be undertaken and whether you both want to enter into a long-term agreement.

Second, work with the superintendent to identify the people who should be notified of your agreement, and ask the superintendent to notify them.

(Time: 2 - 5 hours)

Potential Problems with the Internal-Facilitator Process

The following are some of the problems you may anticipate in trying to conduct this process when you are an internal facilitator to the district:

• If the superintendent is unwilling to notify others of your agreement or does not want you to meet with certain leaders in the district, then this is a red flag.

• It may be difficult to get truthful expressions of the key leaders’ perceptions of you, especially if the interviewer is not perceived as impartial towards you.

• If the interviewer does not give you guarantees of complete confidentiality, you run the risk of any negative perceptions of you becoming more widespread and possibly even used against you by the superintendent or board.

• There could be a strong interest in co-opting you into a current change effort that may be incompatible with a systemic change process.

• Your eagerness to facilitate the change effort may obscure your objectivity in assessing whether or not you should engage in the change effort.

• If you decide you shouldn’t serve as the facilitator, you should try to play a major role in helping the district find someone who will make a good facilitator and doing what you can to help that facilitator get started on the right foot. This kind of event may help to keep you in the good graces of the key leaders, who can impact on the future quality of your life in the district.
Understandings

Several understandings are important to the success of this event:

• Why is it important to build personal relationships and rapport with key leaders?
• Why is it important for those relationships to be based on positive perceptions regarding your biases, motives, influence, working style, and personal associations?
• Why is it important to have an agreement to assess readiness, (if you and the key leaders decide to proceed with that event)?
• What is a systemic change process and why is it needed?

Sample Letter of Agreement

(This needs to be added.)