Leadership NOTES

Dealing with Dilemmas

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A dilemma is similar to a problem. A dilemma looks like a problem and is often mistaken for a problem. In the world and work of school administration, it is important to be able to discern the difference between problems and dilemmas. Some help from the dictionary:

Problem prob-luh m (noun) (dictionary.com) *From the Greek problema- an obstacle A. Any question or matter involving doubt, uncertainty, or difficulty B. A question proposed for solution or discussion Synonyms: difficulty, complication, trouble, dispute, issue*

Dilemma di – lem – ma (noun) (American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language) *From the Greek: di (two or double) lemma (propositions or assumptions) A. A difficult or persistent problem B. A situation involving a difficult or unpleasant choice C. A predicament that seems to defy solution Synonyms: bind, catch 22, impasse, fix, jam, pickle, quandary*

School administrators, because of their natural inclination to push through difficulties toward solutions, often become adept, even fearless, problem solvers. This straightforward approach to overcoming obstacles and getting results is highly valued in school leaders. These attributes are reinforced in the interview and evaluation protocols of school districts.

Dilemmas, however, differ from mere problems in that they are systemic in nature, rather than local. Dilemmas often masquerade as problems, but are not solved in the same way problems are solved. In fact, attempting to solve a dilemma directly and quickly, as if it were only a problem, can multiply the negative aspects of the dilemma.

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Dilemmas are to be expected as schools seek to change and improve. They are a natural byproduct of seeking change in a complex system. As such, we should expect dilemmas, even anticipate, predict, and celebrate them. We should not, however, mistake dilemmas for problems and seek to solve them as such.

Below are ten principles that can support school leaders as they move from prodigious problem solvers to systemic dilemma detectives.

10 principles for dealing with dilemmas:

1. <u>Resist the quick fix</u>. Remember, dilemmas often masquerade as mere problems- inviting a speedy attempt at solution. Since dilemmas are more systemic than problems, quickly devised solutions often trigger unintended consequences.

2. <u>Resist solving a dilemma with a program.</u> Dilemmas are more organic and idiosyncratic than problems. Problems are more mass-produced than dilemmas. Problems, therefore, are more likely to be addressed well with an off the shelf solution. Dilemmas, being more unique in their composition, are resistant to treatment with ready-made programs.

3. <u>Resist the urge to blame people</u>. Dilemmas, being systemic in nature, resist being solved by simply swapping out people. Most reasonably competent employees, given the same system dynamics, will eventually produce similar results. Look first to the system's designs and limitations. It is usually the system that needs improvement, not the people working inside the system. If a dilemma can be quickly addressed by changing out a few people, it may have been simply a personnel problem.

4. <u>Resist an emotional response</u>. Dilemmas, by their nature, are frustrating, even infuriating. An emotional, heated response is unlikely to produce a solution and is very likely to make things worse. An instinctive-emotional response, by design, shifts the brain into fight or flight mode and away from reasoning, analysis, innovation, and creativity.

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Dilemmas require a health care mentality (stay calm and think through your options), not a criminal justice mentality (the guilty shall pay).

5. <u>Beware of consensus, compromise, and agreement.</u> A dilemma is not impressed by a group's level of agreement on a solution. Dilemmas are often well-solved by collaborative groups, since such groups deliver more ideas and generate more interplay among ideas. Collaborative groups, however, often mistake their agreement on a solution for the solution itself. Dilemmas are not solved by agreement alone. Collaborative groups are also susceptible to groupthink. Groupthink- noun. *A pattern of thought characterized by self-deception, forced manufacture of consent, and conformity to group values and ethics.* (Meriam-webster.com)

6. <u>Enlarge your frame of reference.</u> Gain some altitude. Dilemmas are systemic, their treatments must be systemic as well. If one could sketch out or diagram a dilemma, the illustration would be larger than expected. Dilemmas stretch out across grade levels, subject areas, departments, time frames, and budget lines.

7. <u>Get an education</u>. Dilemmas require deeper understanding and a broader knowledge base. It is unlikely that any given school leader, in the midst of solving a particular dilemma, will conveniently possess all the knowledge and insight needed to solve the dilemma. If the dilemma could be easily treated with current resources, someone would have likely already solved it. Albert Einstein's famous quote applies here: "We cannot solve our problems at the same level of thinking that created them."

8. <u>Look for environmental causes & effects</u>. Especially for dilemmas that involve human nature and interpersonal dynamics, the keys to unlocking a satisfactory solution often lie in the subtle interplay of the dilemma and its context/environment. Perhaps an ineffective team is ineffective because it always meets after school when energy is scarce. Perhaps arranging cafeteria tables into smaller groups instead of long rows would improve the quality of interaction. Perhaps hosting a guest speaker in the media center instead of the gymnasium

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would improve listening. Humans are innately attuned to their context and environment. Dilemma solutions are often found here.

9. <u>Solve root causes not symptoms.</u> The health care approach is helpful here again. Physicians do well to not simply treat a patient's symptoms, but to identify the causes of the symptoms. In some cases, treating the symptoms can mask the underlying causes and allow them to worsen while hidden from view. Schools leaders can benefit by making the full spectrum of cause-effect relationships inside a dilemma explicit. Draw it out. Make a flow-chart. Attempt to represent all the possible connections. Differentiate between causes and effects, between symptoms and root causes. Dilemmas are like many-headed monsters. You must find their heart to kill them.

10. <u>Design solutions for improvement, not perfection</u>. All solutions to all dilemmas produce mixed results. It is reasonable to expect to be able to improve results when dealing with dilemmas, but not reasonable to expect total victory. Don't allow perfection to be the enemy of improvement.

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