



# School Systems: In Search of Competence and Connectivity

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**The secret recipe for all successful ventures is three parts innovation, two parts resourcefulness, and at least one part sheer trust and will.** The lessons learned from successful corporate ventures, inspiring civic endeavors, and superstar public schools are the subject of countless books and movies in our never-ending fascination with what works. Though we may debate the attributes of success, most of us know it when we see it.

There is something about hard-won victories that is so alluring that we find it difficult to avoid staring at them and wondering how they did it. In truth, the greatest of great ventures have always found success in transformative places that exist somewhere beyond corporate structures, business plans, and spreadsheets. In one form or another, such ventures operate in ways that those inside and outside the system find purposeful and meaningful.

Schools can have that type of effect on people, even if no one makes a movie about us. To get us to such a place, schools and local communities must aspire to lofty heights in their expectations for themselves and the children they serve. We have to ponder whether our systems can mature and evolve as a child does and reach levels of awareness that might be described as metacognitive, enlightened, or even moral.

In tribute to Maslow, we will call this place “self-actualized.”

For in the end, it is hard to fathom a school or district that is not self-actualized producing graduates who are.

## **A Hierarchy of Social Systems**

School systems are social systems or what some call “human systems.” The entire structure is built around people, with planned social interactions and (get this) with a common sense of purpose. School systems, neighborhood associations, and even political parties are social systems that (if fully

functioning) are designed to produce a great deal of energy and, hopefully, synergy around a common cause that brings together people and processes in connected and meaningful ways.

Let us be clear that no system can be fully mature (self-actualized) until it is fully competent and fully connected. To frame what this means, let us imagine what a school or school district would look like if it was functioning adequately per its day-to-day operations, but was not truly inspiring its employees and students and not producing dramatic results.

To the casual observer, everything appears to be in order. The system has some structure to it. There are plans and processes in place. Some successes are evident. System leaders can point to an award-winning program here or there, while other schools or departments are not meeting their full potential. Students are only somewhat engaged. Parents are only somewhat interested. The community is only somewhat proud.

Yes, the system is self-sufficient and operational. Yes, it employs people who generally get along. It provides an adequate service to those who interact with it (e.g., parents). This type of system might be described as civil, transactional, and efficient.

A system like this one is not broken. In fact, it is typical. The system does not yet realize the success it could have if it valued and embraced a bit more innovation, resourcefulness, trust, and will. Let's ponder for a moment what such a system might look like.

## **Highly Competent Systems**

Presenting the attributes and values of systems in human terms like "competent" or "wise" is intended to describe the great possibilities within systems that dare to know more and be more. Systems as transformational. Systems as self-actualized.

Describing a system as being wise or resourceful is not much different than describing those qualities within each of us. These terms also serve to deepen our understanding of systems as alive, with the ability to learn, falter, and grow from their experiences.

As employees, what would our day-to-day work look like if we wanted others to regard us as wise or resourceful or entrepreneurial? We have to question whether the same qualities can be required of the system itself.

Actually, the system itself would be in such a constant state of learning that it would function in a manner not unlike what was asked of our teachers and leaders: facilitating instructional change, fostering meaningful relationships, navigating community connections, and seeing around the bend. The system would be profoundly self-aware as to anticipate the changing dynamics of learners months (even years) in advance.

Let's think about the growth of a system (a single department, a central office, a local government) like we do the plight of a new teacher. Most enter the profession with the basic skills needed to do their jobs, with some mastery of the requisite content, and with some ability to motivate children. Still, these foundational skills are a far cry from being wise or enlightened, light years from where the teacher may be some day in acquiring the skills and talents of our strongest, most experienced teachers in the field.

In fact, the new teacher is so far from that reality that he or she cannot imagine aspiring to such heights. In truth, he or she might be just trying to survive the day. The same can be said for our schools and systems themselves.

Like the new teacher, we don't have to apologize for the growth we have before us. We just have to want it. Still, we must get there, to a safe place where honesty and authenticity breeds integrity and innovation. If we do not, we may find that our current system is extolling the excellence and artfulness of its current practices while sounding somewhat like the new teacher who doesn't yet know what he or she doesn't know.

In offering some entry points for this work, the following simple steps are provided to help schools and districts define what it means to be "highly competent."

### **5 Entry Points for Highly Competent School Systems**

- Hire and retain highly competent and highly effective employees.
- Establish structures that empower highly effective employees to flourish and lead.
- Develop a work culture that is open to new ideas and rewards enterprise / experimentation.
- Develop a work culture in which knowledge, information, and ideas are shared and not held.
- Adopt employee appraisal models that are highly reflective, self-affirming, and self-motivating.

### **Highly Connected Systems**

As we consider a school or district that is not meeting its potential, there is more missing than system expertise or savvy. A strong thread of connectivity among people and processes is also hard to find. A system that is functioning at less-than-optimal levels tends to either breed isolation or not even recognize it.

Often, there is little coherence in thought or actions among leaders and employees. As a result, the focus is less on system outcomes and more on individual or departmental successes. When this happens, there is likely to be a quiet sense of frustration across the landscape in blaming some for not working hard enough and others for not caring enough.

Let's return again to the struggles that our new teachers face in understanding how this plays out. There is a good chance that a new teacher is working largely in isolation and may see no true relevance to the curriculum that he or she has been asked to teach. In a very short time, a once optimistic new teacher becomes increasingly distrustful of the system and blames the district, the principal, the parents, or the students for the mess we are in.

Just down the hallway, the master teacher works in constant interaction with her students and colleagues. She sees alignment and meaning in her work. She engages with her fellow teachers through common planning and social media conversations. She is not frustrated. She is empowered. She is invigorated.

In the same manner that successful teachers thrive, systems can as well.

As human systems, schools and school districts have unique opportunities to build deep personal and professional connections among departments, employees, families, and children. This goes much further than a simple alignment of goals and outcomes. This has much more to do with planned interactions that inspire and engage teachers and students.

Within highly connected systems, schools prioritize collaboration among teachers, leaders, and students. District leaders engage in meaningful debate, accept honest disagreement and “push-back,” and limit top-down structures. Such systems value employee and student agency, voice, and choice as key ingredients to deeper system learning.

In pursuit of greater connectivity, outcome metrics such as employee satisfaction, teacher retention, school climate, and community confidence are valued, along with reading scores and graduation rates. Information-sharing and decision-making is highly transparent. Power structures are softened in favor of distributed leadership, collective struggle, and combined impact.

In support of this transition, the following steps are provided in helping schools and districts define what it means to be “highly connected.”

### **5 Entry Points for Highly Connected School Systems**

- Hire and retain a diverse workforce (gender, race, background, attitudes, and beliefs).
- Establish structures that connect people to people in professional and personal ways.
- Establish structures that encourage discussion within safe and supportive workplaces.
- Hire and promote leaders who are highly relational and servant-minded. Distribute leadership.
- Communicate with and involve those outside the system in genuine and purposeful ways.

In deeply meaningful ways, companies or systems in search of high degrees of competence and connectivity are not seeking only to survive. They are systems with identity and purpose. They are systems with a soul.

If school systems are to reach such heights, vibrant new organizations must be built that emphasize greater connectivity and deeper purpose. Even organizations can accomplish such things. Make no mistake, the company is still designed for profit and success. It is still designed to win. It is designed as a system of high character so as to impact individual and system success, industry achievement, and even the bottom line.

In such place, the system has purpose and beliefs unto itself that are expressed through every action it takes. In such a place, the system has the ability to care for (or not) those who interact with it. It has the ability to value (or not) those who are impacted by its decisions.

The truth be told, our students, teachers, and leaders are seeking greater purpose in the things we have asked them to do, and between the things they see within our schools and those they witness on the outside. Only a self-actualized system can provide them with those answers.

And so let the search for those connections begin. And let our schools lead the way.