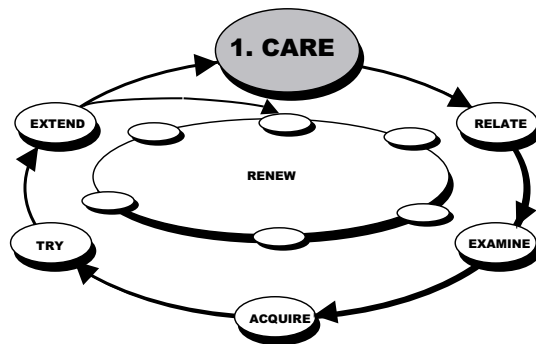

Stage 1

Care

Establishing the Need for Action



ORGANIZER QUESTIONS

- What motivational set is needed to initiate a change process?
- What initially makes a social system move toward change and why is this necessary?
- What types of change agents are most important to begin a change?
- What are the major forces for change in special education, inside and outside?
- What are the downsides of too much caring?

Change begins with a problem or a need that somebody really cares about, a recognition that something is wrong, that something requires change. This recognition must be accompanied by a sense of urgency, a feeling that action must be taken either now or soon. Social systems like schools or school

districts do not automatically welcome such impulses to action. Stability is a hard-won and tenaciously held attribute. Thus, the people who really care and are willing to voice their concerns serve the valuable function of unfreezing the status quo, upsetting the stability, and forcing the powers that be to confront issues they might prefer to ignore. Therefore, this chapter is devoted to the caring aspect of the change process. Who cares? How much do they care? How can they most effectively express their caring so that the system is unfrozen, then moved, and then restabilized in a new configuration that deals with their concerns in a better way? It also considers the possibility that too much caring, too high a level of anxiety about getting something done, can actually get in the way of a positive change process. Caring is not the same thing as understanding. Those who care the most may not be the best people to define what the real dimensions of the problem are or to work on solutions. The delicate task of the linking agent is to find and empower the people who care the most so that they can fill the helpful role of catalysts for change while introducing other players and other resources to work on the other aspects of the overall process.

Someone Must Care Enough to Make It All Worthwhile

The first stage of the CREATER model is Care because change begins with a care or a concern, a feeling that something is wrong and that something should be done to correct that wrong. Caring provides the necessary energy to get things going, to overcome the inertia that inevitably presents itself in the face of change. Where is this concern located? Who has it? How strongly is it felt? Is this concern the right starting point or an appropriate rallying cry to action?

Special Education Linking Agents in Action

In the case study about the Hilldale County schools, which have a history of implementing strong change initiatives, it is clear that a great deal of care lay behind the push toward change.

This is not a district that rests on its laurels. There is good evidence from past history that district personnel care about making improvements. They have made a serious and continuing effort to provide a better educational environment by addressing a broad array of issues, including those that concern special education. They want to improve for their children.

It's important to start with a rough conception of the school system, which contains the group of people (special educators, other school system personnel, parents, students) who have a common concern. In what sense are they a "group"? To what extent are they even aware that they have a shared concern? Are they capable of achieving enough

consensus to drive joint action toward a solution? If they do have a shared concern, can an outside linking agent be useful to them? And if so, what type of skills would make that linking agent most useful to the school system?

The only principal who expressed a real interest in the new project was Catherine Stone at North Slope School, which was also the only school that had clearly defined its needs. She met with the School Improvement Team (SIT) and the School Achievement Team (SAT). Together they determined that they would like to improve the reading instruction available to the special education population. They felt that the reading instruction offered in the special education classes should resemble that offered in the general education classrooms.

A concrete concern, such as North Slope School's need to improve reading instruction for special education students, provides a focus for the energy of caring. When you sense a concern, you must direct yourself to the question of whose concern it is and how you interact with those people. The next step is to identify the real problem underlying the concern, which will help focus the search for solutions and for a strategy that will put the solutions into practice. When you have identified an appropriate solution, tried it out, and found it to be effective, you will then want to extend its application to solve the problem for the school, or school system, as a whole.

The change process is cyclical. The seventh stage, Renew, leads back to the first stage, Care. Have you successfully altered the conditions that got you started in the change process in the first place? To find out, you start at the beginning again by asking, What is the concern now? This question should lead you into a whole new cycle of relating, examining, acquiring, trying, and extending.

As you progress through these stages, you must continue to identify what the real need is, whose need it is, and what level of concern is driving that need. As you complete each cycle, you should reflect on your process and build your capacity to solve problems and make a school system that continually improves itself. This is the meaning of the seventh step, Renew.

A Three-Step Model of Change: Unfreeze-Move-Refreeze

School systems are required to absorb new inputs from the outside daily, but they generally do so in a highly controlled manner that does not disrupt the existing infrastructure. Barriers to outside influence and cohesive ties within the school system are necessary for stability, but these same barriers and ties hinder change coming from either within or outside the system. Internal rigidities and commitments inside the system prevent reorganization, innovation, and growth. Strong barriers protect the school system from unwanted external intrusions but also inhibit the entry of new people, new resources, and new ideas. The model described below, unfreeze-move-refreeze, posited by the

social psychologist Kurt Lewin (1951), explains how social systems change. These three steps also apply to school systems, which are a kind of social system.

Unfreezing: Often the First Task of a Linking Agent

Lewin proposed that the initial posture of most social systems encountering change is “frozen.” Therefore, the initial change task is to unfreeze the system, to create an environment in which ties are at least temporarily loosened and protective barriers are made temporarily permeable. We could also call this “system openness.”

Moving: Only Possible if There Is Openness to Change

“Moving” is the introduction of the change and its initial acceptance. The more permeable the barriers are, the more rapidly and easily new elements are able to enter. Permeable barriers allow advanced and sophisticated school systems to retain a great deal of internal stability while still welcoming many types of innovations.

Refreezing: Making Sure That What Comes In Stays In

“Refreezing” is the system’s return to a new equilibrium in which the change is incorporated. Changes may be tolerated for a time but then rejected when, for instance, members of the system are forced by circumstance to decide what is really important (e.g., when budget trimming is required). Thus, the greatest challenge is to gain a level of acceptance for the innovation that is strong enough to survive this closing-up process.

Lewin’s three-step model of change is simple and corresponds to the CREATER model. Lewin’s step of unfreezing helps explain the importance of Care, the first CREATER stage. Care is the level of concern for a problem. Care unfreezes a school system and starts the change process, along with open relationships (linkages) that allow the flow of new ideas into and through the school system. The moving part of Lewin’s model relates to the later stages of Acquiring, Trying, and Extending. It is during these three stages that the school system selects an intervention, implements the initiative in an initial pilot site, reevaluates effectiveness, makes adjustments to the project, and extends to include additional sites. Finally, Lewin’s refreezing step can be related to the Renew stage of the CREATER model. Renew is the acceptance of the intervention by the school system as a regular part of the school program, which allows the intervention to become institutionalized.

Special Education Linking Agents in Action

North Slope School *Unfreeze*

- Teachers told the principal they did not like any of the reading approaches selected as possibilities.

- The Early Literacy Project (ELP) was the best, they thought, but it would require a change in the entire language arts curriculum.
- The linking agent and the principal went over the ELP curriculum point by point and concluded that North Slope had already made a lot of the changes suggested in the ELP. Therefore, they could focus on incorporating the program's other innovative features without a lot of stress.
- The staff then agreed that the ELP was an intervention they could consider seriously.

North Slope School Move

- Troy concentrated mainly on writing interventions. Using charts and samples of actual student work, he described Morning Message (MM) and POWER (an acronym for a way to organize writing: plan, organize, write, edit, and rewrite).
- Teachers were impressed with the samples of student work that he provided.
- Within 5 days of the training, the linking agent demonstrated MM in a special education class. The students and the teacher participated enthusiastically.
- The next day, the linking agent returned to the class with a copy of the story. When she got there, the teacher was already in the middle of doing MM with her class! The kids were very excited and wanted to read their story to her.

North Slope School Refreeze

- All grade levels were now using the ELP strategies with modifications appropriate to students' ability levels.
- In late September, the principal and two North Slope teachers gave another presentation on the Balanced Literacy Model, emphasizing the value of MM and POWER when instructing students who are learning disabled and at high risk.
- At this conference, North Slope School was honored as being one of the top five inclusion schools in the state.

How School Systems Show (and Don't Show) That They Are in Trouble

As the linking agent enters the scene, different school systems may show widely differing caring postures. For example, they may profess that everything is fine: There is no need for change. At the opposite extreme, a system may appear to be so completely absorbed with a particular concern that its members have no time for you. People are capable of expressing, and also of

The Four Types of Caring Postures

- When everything seems fine
- When concerns are all over the lot
- When concerns are not what they seem
- When concerns are very intense

hiding, their concerns in a baffling number of ways. Like a good psychotherapist, the linking agent needs to listen with the third ear. What members of a school system say may not really be what they mean and may even be a cover for something else. Let us take four types of caring postures and consider what they might really signify: when everything seems fine, when concerns are all over the lot, when concerns are not what they seem, and when concerns are very intense.

When Everything Seems Fine

Is there such a thing as a school system without concerns or without the need for change? Perhaps in theory, but not in practice. All human systems are unfulfilled, incomplete, or lacking in some ways. Yet, ironically, the systems that are most able and willing to change are probably in the best shape. These systems can adapt to changing circumstances, grow, and take on new missions. Therefore, if a school system presents itself as having no concerns that require a significant change effort, what is really going on? At least four explanations are possible (if we dismiss perfection): The school system is frozen; its members are not yet engaged; the key concerns have not reached the boiling point; or its members are not willing to tell you what is going on.

The System Is Frozen

Having achieved a certain level of equilibrium and integration, members of a school system may not wish to go further at this time—to rock the boat—particularly if the state of integration has been recently achieved. At the opposite extreme, some school systems may have existed at one level of integration for so long that even the thought of change is perceived as a threat to the system's stability. In either case, the system needs to be unfrozen before any serious change effort can be implemented.

Personnel Are Not Yet Engaged

We often make the mistake of assuming that people hear what they are told and see what they are looking at. Very often, especially on first encounters, what appears to be hearing, seeing, understanding, or agreeing is merely the polite or ritualistic posturing of people who are not really attending to your message. Linking agents may be angry and frustrated when they try to proceed with what they thought was an agreed-on plan of action only to find that their work is unsupported, contradicted, and undermined by the very people they thought were on their side. No doubt deceit is involved in some of these cases, but you should first consider the much simpler theory that genuine engagement never did exist. The other parties simply were not attending to what you were saying. The antidote to this problem is effective initial communication and active solicitation of feedback. If you can get your listener to repeat your

message back to you, there is a good chance that it got through.

Trouble Is Bubbling Just Under the Surface

Think of concerns in terms of threshold. Below a certain level of intensity, these concerns remain unarticulated—we might say unconscious. Then something happens to bring them to the surface: something breaks, someone dies, or someone quits. Many vital concerns can lie just beneath the surface for years until some catalytic event comes along and brings them to serious attention. Of course, you can be that catalytic event (linking agent as catalyst).

System Is Not Leveling With Outsiders

When linking agents from outside the school system enter the scene, people may not share concerns with them, particularly if they are thought to be a threat, of inferior status, from an alien work culture, or unable or unlikely to understand and respond appropriately. These perceptions are aspects of the definition of “outsider” that linking agents from outside the system must overcome before they can obtain real insights into how the system works. If you think this may be your situation, then your first task as an outside linking agent is to work on building relationships (Stage 2: Relate). After you have done this relationship work, return to a consideration of what the school system’s concerns are.

When Concerns Are All Over the Lot

In some school systems, a linking agent may face an overwhelming number of diverse concerns expressed by different members of the system. This multitude of concerns may reflect a nonsystem—a dysfunctional school system with weak internal linkages, a lack of integration, and a lack of perceived common purpose. If, however, system members’ concerns are somewhat coherent but tend to line up as polarities or as irreconcilable needs and conflicts, the linking agent may be confronting two strong subsystems that must be reconciled before positive change can occur. In either instance, the first task of the linking agent is to start building bridges, making the first change project a system-building exercise.

When Concerns Are Not What They Seem

It is possible that members of a school system may signal one concern to the linking agent although they really want help with another. It is important for the linking agent who is invited into a situation first to listen carefully to the manifest concern and second to consider that it might not be the real concern. Members of the school system may not be able to articulate their real concerns for a variety of reasons. One might be defensiveness or embarrassment. Another might simply be an inability to articulate what is really bothering them. Asking for

Convey Your Caring to Your Colleagues: An EMSTAC Linking Agent Comments on *Care*:

There were many times when I grew frustrated and simply wanted to give up. It is important to persist in motivating yourself and the district that you are working with as things go slowly or new roadblocks are encountered.

—EMSTAC linking agent

outside help, for instance, on the disproportional representation of minorities in special education, might be the manifest request when the underlying problem is racial tension. Linking agents should always enter situations with an open mind but be prepared to view the presented concern skeptically. They should look for any signs that contradict the priority claim of this concern and independently develop their own list of concerns to see whether they match the official one.

When Concerns Are Very Intense

Sometimes the concern may be so intense that it interferes with constructive problem solving. The high anxiety level may lead to paralysis or counterproductive, quick-fix solutions. Further, focusing excessively on one issue may blur perception of other concerns—the school system will not get the big picture, may miss other important concerns that might yield more easily to problem solving, or may fail to perceive underlying problems that need to be addressed.

An intense focus on a concern may also diminish an appreciation for the need to apply deliberate, rational, and collaborative processes. The sense in the school system that action is needed immediately can forestall the diagnosis of problems, the search for resources, and the consideration of alternative solutions. In effect, all the change processes that are described in *Guiding Change* are rendered useless. Thus, the linking agent may need to develop strategies to calm the intense pressure for solutions and buy time to create space for reflection and for viewing the school system's concerns.

Knowledge Base

The Care Stage

In his most recent writings, Fullan (2001a, 2001b) describes moral purpose as the appropriate starting point for thinking about change and exerting leadership on its behalf: "The moral purpose of schools is to make a difference in the lives of students" (2001b, p. 16). This concept is close in meaning to Stage 1: Care as used here. Slogans such as "leave no child behind" articulate broad societal goals for what we really care about. The goal of ensuring that children with disabilities have "access to a free appropriate public education" as mandated by the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 is another example of a Stage 1: Care statement expressed as a broad societal goal.

Gene Hall (1974) originated the Concerns-Based Adoption Model (CBAM). Hall's focus was the concerns that teachers had when they were required to adopt innovations passed down from on high. To understand the real change process on the ground, we must pay attention to the real concerns of teachers. They know what the real problems are, and they know what additional problems are going to arise when they try something new. Huberman and Miles (1984) used the same model to contrast the motives of administrators and teachers. This contrast has a loud resonance in special education, where mandates, or pressure from above, are passed down to regular classroom and special education teachers. Hall has continued to pursue studies based on his CBAM model for more than 30 years (Hall & Hord, 2001).

Fullan (2001b, pp. 30–31) observes that all real change involves loss, anxiety, and struggle, regardless of where the initiative comes from—top down, bottom up, or from the side. Because the real meaning behind any change is usually obscure at

early stages, stakeholder response is shrouded in ambivalence. Hence it is vitally important to share the care among all those affected. Fullan quotes Marris (1975): A (planned) change “cannot be assimilated unless its *meaning* is shared.”

In their zeal to advance a cause, change agents may rush ahead on the assumption that everybody has bought in to the obvious need, but many real Stage 1: Care issues can remain hidden. Fullan warns, “Be wary of superficial acceptance of adoption decisions” (2001b, p. 195). Argyris (2000, pp. 202–203) also warns of the dangers of false consensus. Later on you can expect silent doubters to “drag their feet in implementation or work actively to subvert implementation.”

When concerns are all over the lot, a lack of care focus can also be a problem. Hatch (2000) (cited by Fullan, p. 22 ff.) reports on 57 California and Texas school districts surveyed from 1992 to 1995. The typical urban district was found to have 11 major change initiatives going on simultaneously. The result: “frustration and anger at the school level.”

Deal and Peterson (1999) describe “toxic school cultures” in which key opinion leaders become “negaholics,” pessimistic storytellers who create a hostile environment for any proposed change. Clearly, in such environments, the real Care issue and the first responsibility of any change agent is not how to implement this or that innovation but how to change the school culture.

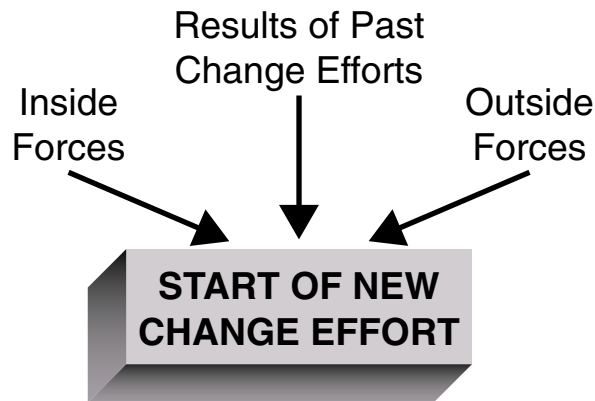
Deal and Peterson (1999, p. 87) also note that a school leader can sometimes personify the Care issue by becoming a visionary who mobilizes the community by articulating “a deeply value-focused picture of the future for the school.” In the presence of such a leader, the special educator change agent has the added mission of making sure that children with special needs are included in that picture.

In the special education linking agent study (Hamilton et al., 2002) where 32 separate change projects were initiated and tracked as they progressed through the seven stages, those projects driven by local school initiatives moved much further into implementation than projects responding to district or state mandates. Stage 1: Care must have a local origin or a strong local meaning in Fullan’s terms.

Improving Behavior in Denville: Alternative Approaches to Discipline

The Elementary and Middle Schools Technical Assistance Center (EMSTAC) has been working with Denville for 3 years to implement positive schoolwide discipline practices. Through the diligent efforts of a school-based linking agent and support at the district level, EMSTAC works with both an elementary and a middle school.

School staff received training in teaching social skills lessons and are in various stages of incorporating the social skills curriculum into their regular teaching routines. In the middle school, social skills lessons are video-recorded and then played on the closed-circuit television network. The lessons are used as a tool to expose all the children in the building to expected positive behaviors and alternative ways of solving problems. At the elementary level, the social skills initiative is just getting off the ground, with further training and support activities expected. EMSTAC’s work in Denville has been exciting and has provided the linking agent with opportunities to network, facilitate staff development activities, and support colleagues in her school building.

Figure 1.1 Sum of Forces External and Internal

Inside Versus Outside Forces

The level of caring required to push a school system into new action is a product of many forces, and the way these forces sum up will vary greatly from time to time and situation to situation. Most of these forces are either internal or external, that is, they come either from inside the system or from outside of it.

Many of these forces may conflict with one another. Some inside forces, for example, may be pushing the school system toward an equilibrium in which students receiving special education services are taught in self-contained classrooms and thus are isolated from their general education peers. Other forces could be pushing for increased inclusion of all students in the general educational classroom. Further, outside pressures, such as state and federal mandates, may be pushing for changes that require students with special needs to have access to the general curriculum in the least restrictive environment. Note that one strand of forces in Figure 1.1 comes from the continuing cycle of problem solving on some issues within a school system. As one cycle of innovative problem solving concludes, successfully or not, it inevitably changes the needs of the system, thereby contributing to the new mix of forces that will impel the next round of action.

Inside Forces

Within a school system, a number of influences, pressures, and circumstances can often be identified as inside forces impelling change in special education. Five categories are listed here as examples: pressure from the families of students, level of concern shown by particular parent and student advocates, level of concern shown by particular teachers or administrators, consensus level of concern among educators inside a school system, and unforeseen inside events.

Pressure From the Families of Students

Families of children with special needs have been instrumental in advocating for enhanced services and educational opportunities for their children at national, state, and local levels. Through their efforts and the work of other advocates, Public Law 94-142 (the Education for All Handicapped Children Act) was developed, which requires a free appropriate public education for each child with a disability in every state and locality across the country. Families and parents continue to put pressure on federal, state, and local governments, in addition to local school districts, to improve results for their children with special needs.

Level of Concern Shown by Particular Parent and Student Advocates

Somewhat apart from the pressures cited above are the articulated needs of particular parents and their children, often crystallized around a particular incident.

Level of Concern Shown by Particular Teachers or Administrators

It is very common for change to be initiated by one person, often a teacher or an administrator who has become frustrated with the way things are done in his or her school system. This person could already be a linking agent or could decide to become a linking agent. In any case, such a person is definitely a self-designated linking agent, initially of the catalyst variety.

Consensus Level of Concern Among Educators Inside a School System

It is also possible that a level of concern is shared by a number of educators inside a school system. General and special educators may share common concerns about how to help all students do well on state assessments or how to address the high incidence of violence in their schools.

Unforeseen Inside Events

Life holds many surprises, even inside smoothly operating school systems. A key person may leave. A school that has just instituted inclusive classrooms may have veteran teachers who are hostile to the idea of having students with disabilities in their classes. Their resistance to implementing an inclusive model of education could be because they lack knowledge about how to teach children with disabilities or do not want to participate in team-teaching in their

What Problems Do Inside Linking Agents Face?

A common hindrance has been the lack of synchronization between the support and interest of the school-level staff (principal, teachers) and the central office (superintendent, special education director, special education staff). In districts where the inside linking agents are school-based, they sometimes do not have the full support of the special education director, the superintendent, or even their own principal. In this situation, it may be difficult to achieve buy-in across an entire school or school district. Without support from the principal, interventions can die on the vine because the school is unwilling to act on the central office's mandate.

—EMSTAC linking agent

Thoughts of an Outside Linking Agent

The meetings with inside linking agents were primarily designed for the insiders to do the talking, and for the outside linkers to do the listening, to help them think through their problems and to help problem-solve with them. These meetings are intended to remind them of their roles as change agents, to celebrate their progress, to share their problems, and to solve problems as a group among their fellow linking agents. Because these meetings are informal and discussion-oriented, the inside linking agents lead the course of the discussion and the meetings, while the outside linking agents listen and guide discussions.

—EMSTAC linking agent

The Local Outside

It is commonly asserted that education is a local matter and that local schools should be locally controlled. However, this belief has rarely meant autonomy for

teachers or administrators. Rather, it indicates that control should rest in the hands of local government officials and elected representatives, such as school boards. The insiders of a school system, those who experience the daily challenges and successes of the school and the students, often perceive such influences as coming from outside. Outside influences can help create great positive change as long as they recognize the needs as expressed from the inside.

Local Community: Churches, Businesses, Voluntary Organizations, Media. The importance of nongovernmental groups varies greatly from one community to another. Numerous local not-for-profit organizations have the mission of improving opportunities for children with special needs. Further, companies, both local and national, have become increasingly invested in contributing to social activities, particularly to education. Often in a small rural town, the

What Do Outside Linking Agents Do?

Provide contacts and networking with other linking agents.

I work with the linking agents to coordinate all training events.

I call linking agents and other district partners, e-mail linking agents in order to ask for updates and communicate about the progress the districts are making.

I think that my primary task is to keep things moving forward.

—EMSTAC linking agents

business leaders and their families exert enormous influence and can be excellent resources in the process of initiating change. In communities with high church attendance, especially where one religion dominates, members of the clergy exert such influence. Anyone who has power in the community may have a tremendous influence on schools and school boards.

Federal Laws and Mandates

Numerous pieces of key early federal legislation supported improved programs and services for individuals with special needs. By 1968, the federal government had supported training for more than 30,000 special education teachers and related specialists and the education for children with disabilities in preschools and in elementary, secondary, and state-operated schools across the country. These laws laid the foundation for Public Law 94-142 more than 25 years ago. The four purposes of the law articulated a compelling national mission to improve access to education for children with disabilities. The reauthorization of Public Law 94-142 (the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA]) in 1997 articulated a new challenge to improve results for children with special needs and their families. Further, through IDEA-Part D programs, a significant amount of research has been federally funded to improve the identification, implementation, evaluation, and dissemination of information about effective programs and practices. IDEA-Part D programs provide an infrastructure of practice improvement that supports the national goal of educating infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities and their families.

An effective linking agent will need a fairly detailed knowledge of the various special education laws and funding opportunities and should know how to obtain additional information. Further, many states have implemented mandates that complement and enhance the federal law, IDEA. Therefore, understanding the state laws and funding opportunities is very important to linking agents who work with personnel in special education and for children with disabilities for a variety of reasons. Although linking agents do not want to be viewed as enforcers, they do want to be regarded as enablers who help their school systems find the most beneficial and cost-effective paths to full compliance. In the unhappy circumstance that linking agents are not accepted in such a role, they can use the teeth of the law as an opening wedge for change, but in taking on this catalyst role, linking agents may compromise their ability to act as honest brokers and connectors to other outside resources.

National Advocates and Advocacy Groups

Advocacy groups working toward enhancing educational opportunities for children with special needs and equality of opportunity for adults with special needs cut across religious, racial, social, and economic boundaries and exert

What Skills Do Outside Linking Agents Need?

Taking a real interest in their needs and concerns and circumstances and exhibiting this interest through good listening skills.

—EMSTAC linking agent

influence far greater than their numbers would suggest. Special education linking agents are at an advantage because they have such allies.

Popular Culture and Mass Media

All school-related activity survives despite a flood of influences from popular culture, most of which are conveyed by the mass media in a relentless and constant stream of messages about who we are, what we should look like, what we should possess, and how we should behave. Highest on the list is television, which pours its diverse commercial and entertainment content into nearly every household in the country at the rate of three to six hours per day. Growing influences are computers and the Internet, with its vast, readily accessible resources. These influences are neither uniformly negative nor uniformly positive, but they are omnipresent.

Effective teachers are good at tracking these influences just enough so that they can use those that are most positive to illustrate their own teaching content. Linking agents need to do the same but at a different level, tuning in to the aspects of popular culture that teachers and others whom they hope to influence most attend to. EMSTAC, for example, harnessed the popularity and versatility of the Internet by providing linking agent training on its website, www.emstac.org. Using the Internet to provide this training greatly increased the number of potential linking agents that EMSTAC could reach and train. It

also provided many resources collected especially for EMSTAC linking agents, who could chat with each other online about their various change initiatives; read up on areas of change, such as social skills or reading programs; and connect to a wide variety of linked pages and special education resources.

What Do Outside Linking Agents Do?

We have coordinated and conducted periodic “checkpoint” meetings that have served at least two purposes: (1) provided an opportunity for inside linking agents to share their progress and roadblocks they have experienced in their attempts to bring research-based practices into classrooms; and (2) provided a forum for inside and outside linking agents to problem-solve and consult among and with each other. We also communicate regularly with an intermediate-level linking agent within the county district, arranging and coordinating meetings with her, and learning about how the local school districts are doing.

—EMSTAC linking agent

New Technologies

Linking agents should be informed about and alert to the potential of new technologies. They should always be ready to support their appropriate introduction (as will be discussed under Stage 4: Acquire), but it is important that they not overestimate such new technologies as a force for change.

Unforeseen Outside Events

The many other outside influences that may become an important part of the Care mix are hard to predict. Some may be helpful; others may not. For example, a severe economic downturn on a local, regional, or national scale always puts pressure on local tax rolls—and education takes a hit. The administration of President Eisenhower in the 1950s paid no attention to education until a Soviet-launched

satellite, Sputnik, appeared, plain for all to see as it streaked across the night sky. After that, the federal role in education increased sharply. With the Cold War long over, we cannot expect another Sputnik to shock the country out of complacency, but lesser events can still move us, such as an unusually close national election in which education emerged as a consensus reform target.

Linking Agent as Connector and Orchestrator of Forces

Some linking agents will choose to be catalysts, jumping to the front of the battle as advocates for improvement in special education, but they do not have to become catalysts to be useful in the initial stages of a change process. The first question should always be, *Does this school system care enough to initiate a serious change effort?* If the answer to that question is definitely yes, it may be appropriate to continue with the process, starting with Stage 2: Relate. If, however, you are somewhat uncertain about the level of shared concern about the issue you intend to work on, you should first review the array of potential forces, both internal and external, that might become involved (as partially identified in this chapter) and, second, ask what you might do to strengthen or redirect any of these forces. Are there potentially caring influential forces, either inside or outside, that might be alerted? Is there an appropriate awareness and consideration of the special education laws and rules that might be violated? Does the local newspaper know what is going on? Linking agents have a number of ways to bring out the concern that a school system should have without directly being the advocate for that concern.

Whose Responsibility? The Value Issues in Helping

The word *change* can be a very hot button indeed. If you are the self-appointed linking agent and I am the one you are planning to change, I am not likely to welcome you with open arms. Who has the right to change anyone, after all? As the heroic farmer of an old western movie might have said, "That railroad ain't comin' through my land." Thus, it is important for us to clarify early on some value issues that swirl around the change process. When is change just obstruction and disruption of a school system that works? When is it just interference and meddling? More ominous, when is change subversion or manipulation? Can you ever justify serious intervention in other people's lives, however good your intentions may be by your own lights? This kind of question can be answered meaningfully only within the context of your personal values.

One way to avoid such a values question is to ask whether anyone has the linking agent "license." If you are called in by legitimate representatives of a school system to provide help of some kind, paid or voluntary, you have a kind of moral cover. You are not a self-serving independent operator; on the contrary, you are doing their bidding and you have their permission. By following the CREATER model, a linking agent works collaboratively with a school system toward improvement objectives that the system can see and value. However,

such stipulations do not protect you from moral challenges on a number of grounds. It can be argued that both people and entities such as school systems have a fundamental right to privacy to work out their own problems in their own ways. This problem is as old as the helping professions themselves. Indeed, the stricture of the ancient Hippocratic oath is applicable: *primum non nocere*, or above all, do no harm.

Yet, can you ever guarantee that you will do no harm, that you will leave the school system in at least as good a condition as you found it? Definitely not. After all, you are trying to make significant changes in ongoing, living systems. You are interfering with linkages and arrangements that may have been in place for ages. When you open up a new room, how do you know that you

are not tearing down a bearing wall, threatening the collapse of the entire structure? There is inherent risk in what linking agents do, and you should be aware of it. You should strive always both to minimize the risk and to provide the system in which you are working with enough information about your intervention so that it can give informed consent.

One of the trickiest moral dilemmas concerns your school system's initial expectations. You are invited in because school personnel think you will do one kind of thing for them, but inevitably, if you are a good linking agent, you will seek to do more and different things than they may expect, things they may appreciate only after they have experienced them. If you are brought in by one member of the system to *serve his or her needs*, is it legitimate to reach out in an attempt to serve other members with other needs? As a linking agent, you will have to resolve these questions for yourself in your own way. *Guiding Change* should help you sort out these issues, but it will not resolve them for you.

Defining your role as that of a linking agent is also helpful in providing cover for many of the value issues of planned change, and it is partly for that reason that this concept is promoted here. As a linking agent, you can view your primary task as connecting people with each other, people with resources, people with knowledge, inside people with outside people, needs with solutions, and solutions with appropriate applications. It is really your job to make the connections and then back out of the way, leaving the members of the school system as the primary doers and the ones who should and will take responsibility for what happens.

Do's and Don'ts of CARE

Westville, a school district in a suburb not far from a major city, was shifting from site-based management of curriculum to a common-core curriculum of best practices.

Do

In choosing potential solutions to improve reading outcomes for special education students, the two linking agents in Westville emphasized helping all students benefit from the new initiatives instead of dividing the resources between special education and general education.

Don't

Because the linking agents first worked only with personnel at a high level to determine the focus of the change effort, teachers at the school level were not involved during the Care stage. When teachers were finally pulled in during the Relate stage, they were not supportive of the new reading initiative, which they felt was no better than the approaches already in place. Not including *all* important personnel at the Care stage can cause problems in the later stages.

Care: Summary

System change can be viewed as three steps: unfreezing, moving, and refreezing. Care is about unfreezing, getting the system to start moving toward serious change. Schools and school systems can show that they are in trouble in various ways, but often they do not want to show it at all. Complacency and manifest calm can be a cover for a host of serious problems. Sometimes it is the job of the linking agent to be a catalyst, upsetting the status quo by raising troubling questions and lending support to activists within the system. The parents of children with special needs often play this role.

The care stimulus can come from various levels within the system, and it can also come from outside—from the local community, from state and federal mandates, and from advocacy groups that work regionally and nationally for people with various disabilities. New technologies can also act in a catalytic way by opening up new possibilities. The linking agent's special role is to ensure that these various forces and voices for change are coordinated and orchestrated so that they can be heard by the system and can unfreeze the system so that movement is possible.

To get started, the linking agent should always address these Care questions:

- Is the system you are working with or about to work with sufficiently concerned and motivated to begin a change process to improve special education?
- Are particular persons or groups acting as catalysts, showing active concern, or agitating to improve special education in your setting?
- If the school system's level of concern is insufficient, are there ways to raise the level of concern that promote movement toward positive change?
- Does the school system require more unfreezing before any change effort can proceed? What is the best way to bring about this unfreezing, and who should do it?
- What is your own level of concern as a change agent in this situation?
- Does your level of concern and your type of concern match well with the concerns of the catalysts you identified above?
- Does your concern match well with others in the setting, such as the major stakeholders and decision makers?
- Is your level of concern enough to keep you motivated to proceed into a serious change effort with this system?
- What is the primary concern directly voiced by the school system leadership with which you will be working?
- How well does this voiced concern match the concerns and priorities set forth in federal and state legislative mandates for special education?
- How well does this voiced concern match the concerns of local special education catalysts?
- Are competing concerns present within this school system that might interfere with this change effort? If so, can you develop a strategy to contain them?