Many leaders find it difficult to manage sustained high-level organizational performance. Most institutions experience steadily declining results, flat-line stagnation, or roller-coaster performance. Without a doubt, there are many factors that explain our inability to create and sustain performance excellence. But as Richard Koch explains:

A great deal of what happens is unimportant and can be disregarded. Yet there are always a few forces that have an influence way beyond their numbers. These are the forces that must be identified and watched. If they are forces for good, we should multiply them. If they are forces we don’t like, we need to think very carefully about how to neutralize them. (1998: 14)

There are two causes for failing to sustain performance excellence that bear close examination. First is that education has attention deficit disorder. Educators do not expect any strategy, program, or ap-

**BY STEVE BENJAMIN**

Checklists, rubrics, and regular communication between educators can help a district set its most important goals, create a strategy to achieve them, and ensure proper implementation.

STEVE BENJAMIN facilitates the Indiana Coalition of Quality Schools and consults regularly with schools and school districts.
Although (or perhaps because) leaders have many responsibilities, it is necessary to focus their attention on their most important job: deciding where they are going (goals), how they will get there (strategies), and whether they are making progress.

Instead, school districts should institute a simple leadership technique — a combination of job aids (rubrics, checklists) and structured collaboration — in order to ensure that our best knowledge can be collected, broadcast, and grown.

THE CURRENT LANDSCAPE

Many central office and building administrators, teachers, and parents are unable to satisfactorily answer the following four questions:

• What are the most important goals that we are trying to achieve?
• What are the key organizational strategies that we believe will help us achieve our goals?
• How well are the strategies being implemented?
• Are the strategies working?

Few educators can provide convincing answers to these questions. I know that because I ask — many times each week. Although respondents sometimes compose a reply after some thought, I find a lack of coherence, specificity, and alignment when I pool their statements. I am left unconvinced. Equally troubling is that far too few principals and teachers can discuss, with confidence, their most important performance results: percent of students reading at or above grade level, percent of students mastering core academic standards, or three-year trend results for state testing. Clearly, many leaders have failed to implement a system that has impressed on stakeholders a sense of urgency about the gap between current and desired performance (Benjamin 2007a). They have failed to articulate the vision and strategy (if they exist) well enough or to identify methods and measures for determining to what extent strategies are being deployed and whether they are delivering results.

This is not a problem only for schools. Michael Mankins and Richard Steele (2005) surveyed executives from 197 companies worldwide in order to determine how effective they had been at translating strategy into performance improvements. They found that most companies fail to achieve their strategies’ full potential and that most strategies deliver only about half to two-thirds of their potential. The reasons include poor communication of the strategy, unclear implementation steps and accountability for successful deployment, and inadequate performance monitoring linked with consequences and rewards for strategy deployment. Robert Kaplan and David Norton (2005) charge that leaders and organizations spend a lot of time developing strategy but very little time checking to make sure that strategy is implemented. They found that 95% of a company’s employees do not know or understand the organizational strategies and thus can’t implement the desired approaches.

Why is strategy so critical? Because strategy — whether at the district, school, or classroom level — is the work we agree to do in order to close a performance gap. If the work we are engaging in is the wrong work, or if it’s the correct work and we fall short in our implementation, then we have little chance of success.

EVIDENCE-BASED BEST PRACTICE

I borrow the term “evidence-based practice” from health care. David Sackett and his colleagues (1996: 71) write that “evidence-based medicine is the conscientious, explicit, and judicious use of current best evidence in making decisions about the care of individual patients. The practice of evidence-based medicine means integrating individual clinical expertise with the best available external clinical evidence from systematic research.” Substitute student for patient, education for medicine, and teacher for physician. Clearly, educators should engage in evidence-based practice, but when I ask groups of administrators and teachers questions about best practices, I am often greeted with blank stares or body language that suggests that I’ve asked an unfair question. Consider these questions:

• Can you identify the five dimensions of reading specified in the National Reading Panel Report?
• Do you know the No. 1 predictor of future...
reading success in young children?

• What are two of the most important contributors to greater reading success in adolescents?

• What are two of the most important interventions that can be used to support struggling elementary and middle school math students?

• Have you teamed with colleagues in your grade level, school, or department to identify a list of best instructional practices in your content area?

I do believe that administrators and teachers should at least be able to list some of the more important and generally accepted best practices in their areas of responsibility. If they cannot state these guiding principles, there is little reason to believe that teachers are embedding research-based approaches in daily practice even though, as Figure 1 illustrates, this should be their goal. In these same organizations, it is also unlikely that the leaders have worked to align knowledge about best practice with such processes as interview and selection, mentoring, collaboration, professional development, supervision, and recognition.

RUBRICS, CHECKLISTS, AND COLLABORATION

The two most important reasons why employees fail to implement strategy are unclear expectations and failure of the leaders to check for satisfactory implementation. Therefore, the first step for leaders is to create rubrics or checklists that clearly specify what each person is to do to support the strategy (Benjamin 2007b). The checklist becomes a sort of contract between the district and building leaders and between building leaders and each teacher. Thus the rubrics must be lean and represent the vital few behaviors that will deliver the greatest return.

Atul Gawande recommends that good checklists “do not try to spell out everything. . . . Instead, they provide reminders of only the most critical and important steps — the ones that even the highly skilled professionals using them could miss. Good checklists are, above all, practical” (2009: 120).

Checklists also can help teachers in the classroom. For example, if a school is facing problems with students’ reading levels, a teacher team can compile a list of the top five causes of the problem. Then they would gather evidence on potential high-value strategies to combat each dimension of the problem. The checklist might look like the one shown in Table 1.

Elmore advises that “improving school performance requires transforming a fundamentally weak instructional core, and the culture that surrounds it, into a strong, explicit body of knowledge about pow-eful teaching and learning that is accessible to those who are willing to learn it” (2003: 10). I believe checklists and rubrics can help us get our arms around at least the most important knowledge. In the spirit of continuous improvement — and because of the half-life of knowledge — rubrics should be updated periodically. Mai writes that “successful organizations must strive both to standardize their operations around ‘best practices’ and, at the same time, to look constantly for more effective alternatives — better best practices” (2004: 212).

“When supervisors and managers are too busy or distracted to verify work and provide feedback, there are some potentially negative consequences.”

— Sittsamer et al.

But merely developing rubrics and checklists falls short. Leaders must ensure that structured collaboration occurs regularly to determine how well the organization is implementing a practice.

The best way to ensure that a strategy is implemented is to combine rubrics with regular System-to-System (S2S) talks. All organizations are multi-leveled, and S2S talks require leaders from one level (central office) to meet with the next level (building) to examine performance data and to look for evidence about how a strategy is being implemented (Benjamin 2007a, b). I’ve found no better way to learn what’s happening in an organization — and to advance strategy and accountability — than S2S talks. Figure 2 shows one possible S2S exchange between

FIG. 1. Moving Toward Embedding Best Practices

![Image of a rating scale from 0 to 10 with options for agreement and disagreement]
### TABLE 1.
**Checklist for Improving Reading Results for Students**

| School: ________________________________________________________ |
| Date: __________________________ |
| Person Completing Checklist: ____________________________________ |

- **=** A real priority at this time  - **= OK; need to do more**  - **=** We have good systems

#### Students can’t read.

- ___ We have high-quality screening, diagnostic, and progress monitoring tools in place.
- ___ We have recent (past three months or more frequently) data for each student. We know at what level every student is reading.
- ___ We have identified a list of research-based strategies for phonemic awareness, vocabulary, fluency, and reading comprehension to use with students.
- ___ We have highly qualified teachers who model these research-based strategies.
- ___ We have additional instructional time for students who require extra direct instruction.

#### Students have nothing to read.

- ___ We ask students at least twice each year (needs assessment) to tell us what kind of material they want to read.
- ___ We know that we have materials that span a wide range of reading levels.
- ___ We have established excellent classroom libraries that allow easy access to books.
- ___ Students are reading many books.
- ___ We coordinate with the public library to ensure availability and access.

#### Students have no time to read.

- ___ We have an uninterrupted 90-minute reading block in our schedule.
- ___ Each teacher also sees content time as an opportunity to practice reading skills.
- ___ Students who need extra help have an extra 30-60 minutes of support each day.
- ___ We have aligned our homework policy with research and require at least 20 minutes of reading and writing per night before other work is assigned.

#### Students lose ability to read during the summer.

- ___ We develop a summer reading list with input from students.
- ___ We have two two-week reading camps for all students who are struggling.
- ___ All students are invited to come to summer camp every two weeks for an entire day to discuss what they have read, to write about their reading, and to engage in other literacy-building experiences. These camps are led by our literacy coaches.

#### Adults are not collaborating about best practices and performance data.

- ___ We have identified a list of best practices, created a self-reflection tool, and meet weekly to discuss growth and needed improvements to our list and to our practice.
- ___ As part of our collaboration, we review student growth in reading.
- ___ We have highly trained literacy coaches, and all teachers must regularly engage with the coaches — some more frequently than others.
a principal and a teacher. This school chose to implement the Eight-Step Instructional Process (Goldberg and Cole 2002) as a strategy for closing the gap in student mastery of academic standards. Once this strategy was selected, teachers and administrators developed a deployment rubric like the one shown in Table 2.

Using rubrics and structured collaboration imposes accountability on the system. Murray Sittsamer and his colleagues (2007: 39) note that “people will listen to what you say, but they’ll do what you inspect. By nature, human beings are flexible, innovative and error prone. Regardless of [a person’s] experience, knowledge and attentiveness, the lack of

![Figure 2. Possible S2S Structured Collaboration Dialogue](https://example.com/figure2)

**Teacher:** I wasn’t sure what I was supposed to bring today.

**Principal:** You should know. We’ve been discussing these S2S meetings, our goals, and strategies for six months, and I’d asked everyone to bring evidence that shows where you are with one of our key strategies—the Eight-Step Process—as well as student performance results linked to your implementation of that strategy.

**Teacher:** This is all new to me. This is just another thing to do. My plate is already full.

**Principal:** Your students performed poorly on the state end-of-course exam. One of our research-based improvement strategies is implementing the Eight-Step Instructional Process. Remember? We expect you to identify essential standards, map your standards, create standards-aligned assessments, review your student’s performance results on these assessments, and re-teach for higher mastery. Remember us talking about that? You even have a deployment rubric that you are supposed to complete.

**Teacher:** Yeah.

**Principal:** So, where are you in the process?

**Teacher:** I haven’t started yet.

**Principal:** I’m disappointed. How do you feel about your lack of progress?

**Teacher:** Is there someone here who can show me how to do these things?

**Principal:** You received professional development on this, and there are sample maps and assessments on our shared drive, but if you need more help, Kent has the whole system in place. I just met with him, and he was able to show me performance and reteaching data for last month’s standards. See these charts?

**Teacher:** His students were able to make those gains after reteaching?

**Principal:** Yeah. Do you see why this is so important to me?

**Teacher:** OK. Yeah.

**Principal:** I want to meet with you in one month, and I hope to see similar data. I want you to document our conversation, and send me a copy for our files. Do the summary today so you capture everything we discussed. Any questions?

If the work we are engaging in is the wrong work, or if it’s the correct work and we fall short in our implementation, then we have little chance of success.
### TABLE 2.
### Deployment Rubric for the Eight-step Instructional Process

Strategy: Our Eight-Step Instructional Process (align taught and tested curriculum with state academic standards, especially core standards, and use data to improve teaching and learning through mastery model) goal is that 100% of classrooms have fully integrated the model and have reteaching data by the beginning of second semester.

Person or Department Completing Rubric: ______________________________________________

Date: __________________________

- = Have not begun  ○ = Some progress has occurred  ○ = Completed successfully

**Curriculum Alignment and Assessment Development**

- We have determined essential/core standards.
- We have sequenced the standards by three- or four-week blocks and have clearly indicated how we will maintain mastery of core standards by revisiting them throughout the year. We have placed a copy of our map in the High Performance Culture folder on our web site.
- We have developed three- or four-week standards-aligned common assessments.
- We have developed brief, short-cycle assessments for each of the essential standards (single standards). The purpose of these is to provide regular practice and to use when evaluating the effects of reteaching.

**Instructional Development**

- We view textbooks as resources, not primary instructional plans.
- We have engaged in action research to identify best-practice instructional approaches.
- We have posted our best practices in the High Performance Culture folder on our web site.
- We have developed milk crate folders for our standards.

**Mastery Learning**

- We have administered three- or four-week assessments.
- We have identified weak essential skills that should be retaught.
- We have developed reteaching calendars.
- We have developed high-quality mini-lessons using the template (bell-ringer activities).
- We track retest data.
- Teachers meet biweekly to review retest data.
- Principal and teachers meet monthly to review retest data.
- Students set goals, identify strategies, and track their own performance on mastery of the standards.
- We celebrate success data formally.

**Core Values Adoption (We have adopted the belief that . . . )**

- All students can meet with success, given enough time and resources.
- Data must drive instruction.
- Teachers must collaborate to improve the quality of instruction.
- Principal, teachers, and students are accountable for improved learning results.
- Alignment of standards, curriculum, instruction, and assessments is required in today’s accountability environment.
- Continuous improvement will be required to make our strategy work effectively in our school.
- There are no “quick fixes,” and improvement will take time.
- Fostering good reading skills for our students is another important area of focus that needs our attention.

**Districts and schools must set clear expectations, and leaders must engage in periodic review and candid talk regarding progress.**
timely, relevant and accurate feedback is sure to have a negative impact on performance.”

CONCLUSION

Districts and schools must set clear expectations, and leaders must engage in periodic review and candid talk regarding progress. Use checklists and rubrics to set the expectations and System-to-System talks to review progress. By using this technique, you will attend to several major leadership shortcomings. Because leaders have many responsibilities, it is necessary to focus their attention on their most important job: deciding where they are going (goals), how they will get there (strategies), and whether they are making progress.

REFERENCES


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