

Systemic Execution: What it takes for organizations to get things done

Research from business, organizational development, and education has shined light on the practices of organizations effective at executing their improvement strategies. These bodies of research, while sometimes using different vocabulary, point to a similar set of organizational practices that characterize and predict organizational effectiveness. Analysis of successful school districts—including District #2 (NYC), Charlotte-Mecklenburg (NC), Aldine (TX), Baltimore City (MD) and others—validates the research. Below are organizational practices that, when done in concert and as a part of coherent leadership practice, explain those organizations that are effective at implementing improvement strategies well and with an impact on the desired outcomes.

The aspects of execution described below are aligned and complementary to the features of a coherent and high-capacity district described by LEAD Connecticut.

Execution Components	Evidence and examples	Self-rating: On a scale from 1-7, to what degree is this in place districtwide?
<p>Clear focus and priorities (“Place your bets”). The organization’s mission and vision are clear for all stakeholders. In addition, the key players in implementing the improvement strategies know the focus of the organization and understand the underlying theory of action behind the improvement strategies.</p>	<p>When asked, individuals across the organization can explain the mission, vision and theory of action. In addition, they can explain how the improvement priorities impact their respective work. The theory of action is explicit and widely understood.</p> <p>Example: Farmington’s use of nested school theories of action (as a part of action plans) that are aligned to the district’s theory of action (which promoted a small number of key improvement priorities).</p>	
<p>Addressing the system (“It’s the system stupid”). The organization’s improvement priorities target the systemic nature of the underlying performance problems. The organization looks beyond mere symptoms, analyzing and directly addressing the forces that give rise to those symptoms.</p> <p>In addition, the assumptions undergirding the improvement strategies are consistently surfaced and challenged. The organization is not satisfied at simply implementing with fidelity, it is in a constant state of improving its approach to improvement.</p>	<p>Leaders across the system can explain how the improvement priorities address deeper systemic issues. Time is taken to gather evidence and investigate the more complicated drivers of current performance.</p> <p>Example: Conducting 4Cs or Fishbone diagrams on regular basis to interrogate assumptions about the organization</p>	

<p>Backwards Design of the Strategy (“Begin with the end in mind”). Leaders across the system take the time to backwards map the improvement strategies (informed by the theory of action) from the desired outcomes. This action is more than simply completing an action plan; it is an opportunity for leaders to think through and attend to the various details that need to be addressed in making the chosen strategies successful.</p> <p>This is done with an explicit eye for how well material, human, financial and intellectual capital are aligned to the strategy. Resource alignment is key.</p>	<p>Leaders use tools like logic models or strategies maps to clarify the delivery chain—all the various and intricate actions that need to be taken to make strategies successful.</p> <p>Time is taken to regularly tend to the details of implementation.</p>	
<p>Identify Leading and Lagging Indicators of Implementation and Impact. The organization identifies a small number of indicators that indicate whether the strategies are being implemented and whether the desired results are being produced. Indicators help drive continuous improvement of strategies.</p> <p>As opposed to being simply overwhelmed by volumes of data, these organizations are clear about how they measure success.</p>	<p>There is clarity about which data points are most predictive of long-term success. While the organization pays attention to the bottom line, equal attention is paid—and on a regular basis—to the indicators that predict future success.</p> <p>Example: School-specific data dashboards that track attendance, suspensions, formative assessments, etc.</p>	
<p>Routines for Monitoring, Accountability, and Continuous Improvement (“Habit-ualize the behaviors you want”). The organization creates and implements specific routines designed to force dialogue, interrogate the improvement logic, and monitor ongoing progress of improvement strategies. The leading and lagging indicators are scrutinized within these routines. Moreover, these improvement routines help to model and shape the culture of how business is conducted.</p>	<p>Leaders create regular opportunities for key actors to meet, examine evidence and data, interrogate the improvement strategies, and continually tweak actions. As a result, regular attention and importance are placed on consistently making implementation more effective and the strategies more impactful.</p> <p>Examples: Monthly school quality visits; capacity reviews; Instructional rounds visits to gather evidence around the problems of instructional improvement</p>	

<p>Clear structures and power relationships informed by theory of action (“Clarify the rules of the game”). The organization clarifies the rules of engagement around implementation of the strategies. Who has the power and authority to make what decisions is clear and transparent. Clear lines of authority and accountability are outlined and acted upon.</p>	<p>Authority, responsibility and power are clearly defined. The rationale for these delineations are aligned with the theory of action, not merely past practice and cultural norms.</p> <p>Examples: CMS’s strategic staffing initiative putting great authority in hands of principal, with specific central officer personnel held responsible for defined supports.</p>	
<p>Align the Culture (“Focus on how we do work here”). Effective organizations have cultures defined by a focus on performance and continuous improvement. Relational trust is fostered, as it is necessary to support honest dialogue about the impact of the improvement efforts. Individuals have confidence in (and are celebrated for) taking calculated risks aligned to the district improvement focus. People are encouraged to name and help fix improvement breakdowns.</p> <p>The new culture is modeled, and “talking the walk” is done to make sure people understand what is being modeled. In addition, leaders focus on key behavioral changes that can help lead to the desired cultural shifts.</p>	<p>The mores, norms and ethos required of the improvement strategies are tended to directly. Culture, left to its own devices, will win, outliving the improvement strategies and those implementing them.</p> <p>Examples: D2 re-culturing by moving out a significant number of principals over first five. CMS allowing principals to bring in a team of effective teachers to create a cultural critical mass.</p> <p>High school principal that demands all teachers greet students at the door--by name and with smile and handshake. Overtime the culture and climate begins to shift, with teachers developing better rapport with students and students developing more trust of adults.</p>	