

NOW I AM ONE!

A Parable of the First Year School Superintendent

By Robert Reeves & Eileen Haag

The Rookie Is Hired

Barry Moore was sitting, and fidgeting, in his office waiting for the phone to ring. This was the day Karl Schmidt, president of the School Board in Sunrise Valley Unified School District, was to call candidates to announce his board's choice for a new superintendent.

He said he would call by 9 a.m. but when Barry last checked his watch, which he had been doing at five-minute intervals, it was 10:30 a.m. He didn't know whether calls were being made first to also-rans, or whether he would be an also-ran.

He couldn't concentrate on the pile of papers on his desk. His stomach was churning. "Will I get this job? Has someone else already gotten it?" It was like a "She Loves Me; She Loves Me Not" rhythm running through his brain. He could barely stand not knowing.

Then the phone rang, and all of a sudden, he thought maybe he really didn't want to know.

"Dr. Moore it's THE CALL," his secretary said.

"Okay," he said with a sigh, "put it through."

"This is it," he thought, taking a deep breath.

"Barry," said the board chairman, "I'm calling to congratulate you on your selection as the new superintendent of Sunrise Valley Unified School District. The vote for you was unanimous."

Barry was so excited he could hardly talk. Somehow he managed to acknowledge the news, say thank you, and assure the board chairman that he'd do his best to justify the board's confidence.

After hanging up, he slowly absorbed what had just happened. He gathered his thoughts and said to himself – NOW I AM ONE!

The euphoria didn't last long. As reality set in, he realized he had been so focused on getting the job that he hadn't spent much time thinking about how he would do the job. "Now what do I do?" he asked himself.

He remembered his doctoral class at the university and the popular professor's offer to help his students. Barry couldn't think of a better time to take his old mentor up on his offer. Dr Johnson was both an experienced school superintendent and an adjunct professor in Educational Administration at the nearby university. Barry's phone book was at hand, it wasn't hard to find the professor's phone number.

"This is Bob Johnson, how can I help you?"

"Hi, it's Barry Moore calling, and I really need some help."

Dr. Johnson remembered Barry Moore as a good student. He had been a high school principal when he was taking doctoral courses. That must have been about five years ago. Johnson knew that Barry recently had been promoted to assistant superintendent.

Johnson's curiosity was aroused. "So what kind of trouble are you in?"

"Big trouble," Barry said, "but good trouble. You're talking to the new superintendent of the Sunrise Valley Unified School District, so now I am one!"

"Congratulations," Johnson said, but his excited former student quickly interrupted him.

"That's the good news; the bad news is that I start in six weeks and don't know what to do. I want to get off on the right foot. I'm scared and I want to survive at least this first year. Can you help me?"

"I guess all you learned from me went in one ear and out the other," Johnson teased. But he really knew exactly how Barry was feeling even though it had been a long time since Johnson had gotten his job as superintendent.

"Not everything." Barry said, joining in the lighthearted exchange. "I really used a lot of what you taught me when I was promoted to assistant superintendent, but now I'm the boss and supposed to know *all* the answers. I figure since you've lasted as superintendent at the same very successful school district for 25 years, you're my best bet to get the help I need."

Johnson laughed out loud. "You know, Barry, you sound just like Robert Redford in the 1974 movie "The Candidate". After all the struggle and compromise of winning an

election campaign, he turns to his campaign manager and asks, “What do we do now?” So it sounds like you’re asking me to play the role of a transition manager,” Johnson paused, and then added, “I’d relish the role.”

“We need to find some time so you can fill me in about the district, tell me what you’ve been doing, and what you’ve learned. How about if we meet for coffee at Denny’s near my office around 4 p.m. on Tuesday? We can begin looking at what a new first year superintendent needs to think about, plan for, and watch out for?”

“Sounds good. See you then. Do I need to bring anything?” Barry asked.

“Let me do some thinking and I’ll send you an email,” Johnson suggested.

After Johnson put down the phone, his mind began racing, thinking about the challenges ahead for the excited new superintendent. The first year is always fraught with opportunities to err.

One thing Johnson had learned, sometimes painfully was that during a change process you can’t move faster than your people and the community. He wondered how big a change it was going to be for Barry becoming a superintendent for the first time and in Sunrise Valley Unified. He knew the district had some interesting news headlines recently.

Johnson went to his computer and outlined what should be covered in the first meeting.

- 1) **What was the board looking for?** What really happened to Barry’s predecessor? What were his predecessor’s “weaknesses”, if any? Review the interview questions? Find out what Barry committed to.
- 2) **Do you know the territory?** Like the opening song in Meredith Wilson’s musical, The Music Man, with the traveling salesman singing the words, “you gotta know the territory, you gotta know the territory”. We’ll have to discuss what Barry knows and what he needs to learn.
 - ❑ The key issues for the first year: the cabinet level staff, schools and principals, the labor union(s), parent expectations, financial conditions, and community relations/business partners is a good starting list.
- 3) **Setting goals, Channeling Change and Surviving the first 12 months.**
 - ❑ We’ll want to clearly define Barry’s personal goals. He should know what he wants to say and do at his first school board meeting. He

should establish a reasonable timeline to set the stage for success. He'll survive by being flexible. Things will happen he can't even dream of now!

Johnson reminded himself: "I've got to go slowly so I don't overload him. OK. I'll send these three topics off in my email and I'll add a "not to worry" caveat. He will anyway!"

THE FIRST MEETING

Barry arrived at Denny's ten minutes early and found Dr. Bob Johnson going through some notes and there were two cups of coffee on the table.

"I ordered your coffee, since there's no time to waste," Johnson said with a welcoming smile. And the conversation began:

"Let's start with what you know. What do you think the board was looking for when they picked you? And tell me what happened to your predecessor!" Dr. Johnson began in rapid-fire fashion.

"My predecessor definitely did not want to be my predecessor," Barry explained. "After I talked with you, I got a call from his attorney, who 'suggested' that I not sign my contract because Dr. Branson isn't leaving without a fight. There will probably be some kind of buyout. I hope I can stay out of it."

"What happened?" Johnson asked.

"It was a political mess. Apparently after giving him a great evaluation in January the board on a 4-1 vote fired him in March. When he got his attorneys on board, I guess to minimize their legal exposure, the board rehired him as a classroom teacher for September."

"Sounds like you've got a pretty unpredictable board. We'll have to get to that, but for now let's talk about the weaknesses that caused the board to fire Branson after giving him a good evaluation. It's important to know because boards almost always hire to counter the perceived weaknesses of the predecessor. Sometimes they forget that a new superintendent should have well-rounded skills – not skills just for short term needs. We'll devise a strategy to get the board to look forward rather than backwards, and that's what you should do too."

“You’ve just given me my first homework assignment. Let’s talk more about that at our next meeting. You are going to stay through this aren’t you?” Barry asked feeling ever so much better to have someone to talk with.

“Sure, I’ll do the coaching and you do the heavy lifting because I’ve been there and done that. Now, I’m happy to say, it’s your turn.

“Let’s change the focus,” Dr. Bob said. “What do you think it was about you that most appealed to the board members?”

“A big thing I had going for me was that I was prepared. I analyzed some of the district’s publications and its web site, then made a couple of calls to two former candidates for director jobs there,” Barry explained.

“I decided to emphasize one of my strengths as a curriculum and instructional leader. My record demonstrates that my team at the high school had really made a difference in student learning. We focused on outcomes and we held ourselves accountable. We said that learning was no longer an option. We made it a mandate. I even carried this mandate into the district office and began moving the other schools in this direction.”

“Now that I think about it, that seems to be what people were describing as Branson’s primary weakness. He came from a military background and was seen to have fiscal strength. I emphasized my eight months as CFO in my last district, during one of our frequent superintendent upheavals and subsequent reorganizations. It was probably good to show that I could match his strength there,” Barry leaned back and finally took a sip of coffee.

Dr. Bob leaned forward. “Sounds like your strategy was sound. You got the job! What was it about Sunrise Valley that attracted you?”

“They passed a school bond in May – even with an acting superintendent, and in the middle of the Branson controversy! Even with their unpredictability, I liked the board members. I like the challenges, and I’m ready to test my wings,” Barry said confidently. “I believe that I can get them working together.”

“Passing a bond does indicate strong community support, and that’s a real plus. What are the challenges as you see them?” Dr. Bob asked.

Before Barry answered he scribbled some notes on his napkin. “There seem to be these issues: Let me count some of them.”

- 1) Divided Board
- 2) Building community relations
- 3) Controlling the budget and knowing where the money is.
- 4) Labor Negotiations

Barry explained: “On the issue of the divided board, it seems to be split on whether the curriculum should be the tried and true approaches supported by the new state assessment program, or whether the district leadership can be open to new ideas.

I’d like to do more than prepare kids to get good SAT scores and into college. What really matters is what kids ought to know to be effective when they leave high school and college.

“I have to convince both camps on the board that both of them are right,” he emphasized.

“Regarding the labor negotiations,” Barry said, “the teachers’ union got a commitment to have me come to the table and negotiate. They don’t trust the current management representatives.”

“Your advice would be really helpful on the labor stuff,” Barry put his napkin down.

Dr. Bob let some quiet interrupt their conversation and then said softly, “I learned a long time ago there is no one best answer on any of the challenges you listed. You have to read each situation and adapt as necessary. There are ways to get to win-win negotiations. That will take time and commitment for you, the board and the teachers’ union. This kind of change is usually slow and time consuming and it can be done. Maybe during your first year ‘honeymoon period’ you can start working on this.”

Dr. Bob raised his voice and increased its intensity signaling what he was about to say would be important. “But it always helps to stop and organize what you know.” Then he suggested, “let’s do some backward thinking. Where do you want to be at the end of this first year?”

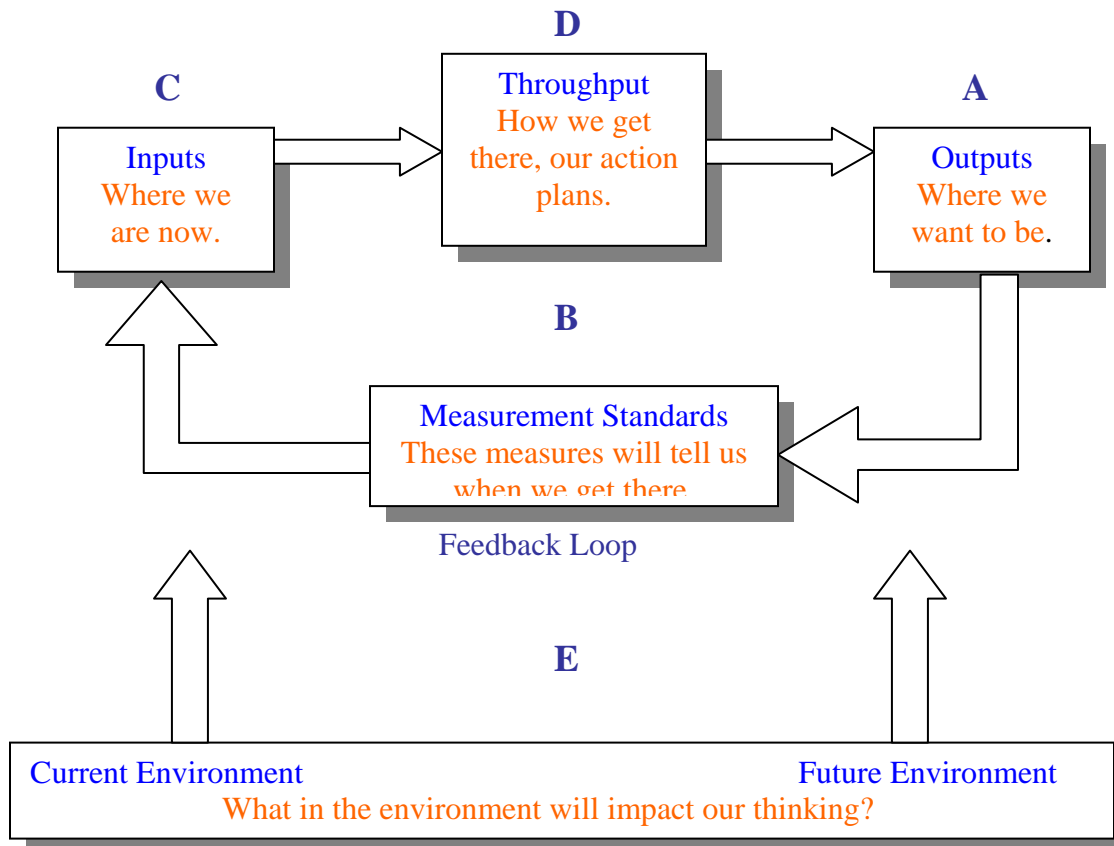
“One thing you taught that I didn’t forget is that I have to make sure to keep the main thing the main thing,” Barry stated emphatically.

“I guess we should begin with the end in mind and do some systems thinking like the models you used in our doctoral class. Can you outline it for me again?” Barry questioned with a hopeful smile.

Dr. Bob was ok with this notion. He always thought that if you couldn't outline a learning model on a napkin in 10 minutes, there was little chance that anyone would remember it anyway. During his long career, he had used many models integrating them into a workable whole for his management team.

"Here let me draw this for us to look at" he offered. "It will only take a minute." "After we do this, you can describe what you know about the system in place. While we need to be thinking future, I'm not forgetting that you're feeling near panic right now," he told Barry gently.

THE A-B-C-D-E MODEL



"Remember that the Outputs box is where we start," Dr. Bob said." Where should we be, let's say, at the end of year one? Let's hit about three or four quick ideas so we can begin to think backward from year's end. I think we can really get a good plan done by the end of summer after we do an environmental scan and get more information from all the players involved."

“The first thing that comes to mind”, Barry responded,” is that I want the board to recognize that I’ve done a good job in the first year so they want to keep me around for at least three more.”

“Basic survival is a good place to start,” Dr. Bob agreed. “That’s why we should develop this backward thinking system plan.”

“Starting at ‘A’, the Outputs box, the model loops us back to the Feedback Loop ‘B’, where we have to develop the measures or criteria that tell us howl we measure success. What will we accept as successful targets? At the Inputs box, ‘C,’ we need to do an analysis of what the status quo is relative to where we decide we wanted to be in June. It’s all this we are discussing today basically. The ‘D’, Throughput, notion is the tough part. We have to really plan well to get there. We need to plan incrementally from our targets back to today. The ‘E’ will help shape our planning by focusing us in the current environment as well as getting data that will help us define what we think things will look by the year’s end. We don’t have go farther than that to get the plan working for you.” Finally, staying in touch with what really is happening might suggest that we may need to loop around again. This is a dynamic process. The plan should be no more than two or three pages, and therefore not suitable to put on a shelf and gather dust!

After asking the waitress for another cup of coffee, Barry started writing what he thought some Output targets might be:

- 1) Be continued on the job
- 2) Bond the board into a positive working force with the best interest of kids as a priority.
- 3) Successfully finish negotiations and begin on developing a win-win model.
- 4) Have a balanced budget and an increase in the ending balance.

“That gives us an idea of how we need to approach the planning model. Keeping all this in mind, let’s focus on the more urgent and important issues.” Dr Bob continued.

“We’ve got about 30 minutes so let’s get as much information out as we can.”

“Speaking of urgent,” Barry said, “I don’t think I told you that when I was introduced at the board meeting the night after Mr. Schmidt called, a newspaper reporter stuck a microphone at me and asked what my vision for the district was?”

“What did you say?” Dr. Bob asked seeming anxious about the answer.

“ I didn’t really say much specific as I was caught off guard. Never did I dream this would happen. I wasn’t prepared. I talked about improving the schools and being part of the community, I think. I haven’t seen the paper yet. You know I really didn’t have a specific vision. I worked so hard to get the job I never really looked ahead. I think I could answer that question a lot better now.”

“ Well before you do,” Dr. Bob said, “ You’ve got to be able to articulate the vision so that people will remember it. Let’s think about what you do believe and want people to know about you. You need to go back to your basic belief system. I looked over some of your papers you wrote for my class and saw that you frequently address the concept ‘all students learning – whatever it takes.’ Do you still believe in this ‘heresy’ of all students having to learn?”

“ Yes, of course,” Barry said confidently.

“Ok then! What do you want to say about who you are?” Dr. Bob continued.

Barry took a deep breath and then began:

“I want them to know that:

- 1) I am committed to every child being an effective learner, having the basic skills to move to the next level and then out into the world.
- 2) I want to make decisions based on the best interests of our clients-students and parents, ahead of administrative convenience of the system.
- 3) I am concerned about every facet of the system, not caring where I hear about problems, but having them solved at the lowest level appropriate in the organization.
- 4) I believe that everyone in the system has to be accountable for student learning.
- 5) I believe in excellence in all that we do, but not necessarily perfection.”

“I guess I’ve got a a major challenge,” Barry said with a grin. “I’ll probably still be working at it when I’ve been a superintendent as long as you have been. Can we take just a few more minutes to talk about my first cabinet meeting?”

Looking at his watch, Dr. Bob shook his head. “Before we talk about that let’s at least review what we’ve covered already.”

It was the professor’s turn to write, and he chose paper instead of a napkin.

“Here take this home, type it up, and keep it with you. These are the first lessons learned to begin your career as a superintendent.

IDENTIFY YOUR PREDECESSOR’S WEAKNESSES AND STRENGTHS
(Remember to offset the weaknesses and to emulate the strengths)

DEFINE YOUR OWN VISION BASED ON YOUR OWN STRENGTHS

KNOW YOUR TERRITORY AND WHAT IS EXPECTED OF YOU

ORGANIZE WHAT YOU KNOW

SET GOALS

DO BACKWARD THINKING

DESIGN MEASUREMENT CRITERIA

DECIDE HOW TO GET TO YOUR GOALS FROM WHERE YOU ARE NOW

BE PREPARED TO ARTICULATE YOUR VISION

KEEP THE MAIN THING THE MAIN THING

“We know the number one thing that followers want in a leader is someone they can trust or who is worthy of their trust. Remember in the ‘game of trust’ the leader must ante up first.

“Tell people who you are. Be honest, and you’ll figure things out as you go,” Dr. Bob said as reassuringly as he could.

“You’re right, I need to go slowly and not try to do everything the first month. I don’t want to make any waves at first unless I have a crisis or two that need immediate attention.” Barry looked exhausted. “Before we leave, let me try to establish some priorities. Watch me while I write!”

Important/ Urgent:

- 1) Dealing with my insecurity.
- 2) Dealing with a split board and my first board meeting.

- 3) Negotiations and getting a handle on the budget.
- 4) Working through the predecessor thing.
- 5) Determining how to present myself and what I believe in.

Important/Less Urgent:

- 1) Finding out more about teaching-learning in the district.
- 2) Getting the community's input and involvement in setting the direction for where the curriculum should be directed.
- 3) Developing a long-term more positive labor relationship.
- 4) Developing a more systemized approach to budget and operations.
- 5) Finishing the first year's systems thinking plan focusing on the successful outputs we should target.
- 6) Getting school open in the fall

“Let's try to list some ideas of how to deal with some of these items,” Dr Bob suggested, anxiously looking at the time. “We really do need to wrap this meeting up soon. Let me make a few suggestions.” It was Dr. Bob's turn with the pen.

- 1) The high school issue and bringing the community together –Let's consider setting up a community focus project in January.
- 2) Stay out of any controversy. Be positive and begin telling board members how you expect them to act. They need leadership from you now. – Have the board adopt publicly your first year goals. Let's say by November. That should give us enough time.
- 3) Teacher negotiations – Where is the money? Working toward win-win? Be sure you are cautious. Find out what the key issues are. What are the points of contention?”
- 4) Presenting your belief system – What you are all about – Student Learning.

“We've done some really good work here,” Dr Bob smiled. “The most important thing is for you to crystallize your vision. I like your focus on student learning. Effective student learning is why you are in this business and the main reason you got the job

As they left the diner, the two shook hands. Barry Was One and Dr. Bob was there to help.