

# Big mountain high school case study analysis education essay



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

In this case study analysis, I will give a brief summary of the case and the problems I found along with specifics. I will also provide recommendations for the district and school leadership that will address the anticipated barriers to change. I will base my recommendations on the required readings for this course as well as other theorists and their research applicable to the case study.

Big Mountain High School serves over 1450 students in grades 10-12. Big Mountain is the only high school in the county, and also the largest high school in the state. Its geographical location is known for its wilderness and beauty. Because of its location it is largely a rural district where many of the attending students commute more than thirty miles every day to receive daily instruction. The population of the school ranges from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. As evidenced in the case, 40% of the students will go on to attending 4-year colleges, while 20% of the students attend 2-year colleges. For students that are not college bound, as an extra educational option, the district provides them with a vocational program (Smith & Louis, Winter 1999).

The Superintendent of the district is Mr. Bob Carpenter a native of the district. He has been the superintendent for four years and he is described as being charismatic, a person who makes decisions and gets things done. He is highly respected amongst the teachers and staff because he meets directly with the teachers and listens to what they have to say. Mr. Carpenter is also described as using a bottom-up leadership style philosophy.

The principal Mr. Vogel has held the position for 15 years. He is known as being a dedicated coach, candid and fair to his staff. Mr. Vogel also adopted a bottom-up leadership style philosophy. Some however, consider him to be “gruff and impersonal” and even unapproachable. He makes hiring decisions, nominates the department chairs, usually communicates with teachers in short staff meetings, and maintains that administration has full authority over the procedures and policies in the school.

The departments at Big Mountain high school were given total authority and autonomy as how they distribute the teaching assignments, how curriculum and instruction is designed and they also make the decisions on budget allocations. Meetings between the principal and department heads are not regular events, they usually meet once every three weeks and the meetings are usually very short.

Finally, there are the teachers. The district ranks the highest paid among other districts in the state, providing the district with a large pool of highly qualified applicants. Teachers at Big Mountain control how they teach, have little or no discussions over teaching methods, the type of instruction, and have little or no input in the decision making process that takes place in the school. Faculty is divided and with very little interdisciplinary involvement.

There are several leadership issues present in the case. The major issues revolve around the ability of the leadership to efficiently lead the school during a much needed change. In the case of the mandated curriculum change as required by the state, the discussions of the new curriculum raised personal and pedagogical differences amongst the faculty. If the goal

of the leadership is to foster growth and change the direction in which the school is moving, it would be wise for the leadership to take a human resource frame approach as discussed in Bolman & Deal, where under the human resource frame, leaders provide and foster equal participation in the decision making (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

At Big Mountain, the heads of department have a substantial amount of influence and authority, and are perceived by the faculty as administrators and decision makers. These differences in power have led to a lack of interdisciplinary participation between department heads and faculty members where Hargreaves & Fink refer to as, traditional power blocks (Hargreaves & Fink, April 2004).

This lack of interdisciplinary participation and the misunderstanding of a collaborative leadership, as become a top-down hierarchy leadership, rather than a perceived bottom-up leadership as expressed by the principal Mr. Vogel. It is obvious that the principal in this school will not be developing meaningful relationships with the staff. His disregard for the opinions of the teachers during his short faculty meetings, along with his authoritative leadership style resemble what Fullan (2001) describes as coercive and autocratic leadership.

As the newly appointed head for the Language Arts Department, Mr. Chester not only appointed to the committee only those who agree with him, he also restricted the participation from the teachers that will be implementing the curriculum. By doing so, he derailed Bolman & Deal's framework approach, and the concept of the structural frame where the efforts of groups and

individuals are coordinated, and also the human resource frame, where involving others gives them a sense of belonging and ownership (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

Even though initially the principal shared the decision making with the committee, he quickly reversed that decision and decided to make the decisions himself. However, later he decided to appoint Chester to lead the new revisions committee to implement the new curriculum. One again his rushed decision was made without the participation and the input from the teachers, leaving it little room to succeed and demonstrating the lack of communication and coalition building, necessary when addressing change (Kanter, Summer 1999).

As the superintendent, Bob Carpenter was not of much help to the principal in establishing and developing a successful culture of committed members within the organization. Although authoritative and charismatic, his strong interaction skills, the ability to build relationships while meeting with teachers and listening to their concerns when the principal was not supportive, have earned him the respect of the teachers, minimizing the authority of the principal. As the superintendent, Bob failed as a role model, and a mentor to the principal. He came across as having his own political agenda, demonstrating the lack of his leadership qualities. Qualities required when building a successful organization.

### **Recommendations for Improvement**

Inspiring leaders have the ability to turn schools around. On the other hand mediocre leaders can change the culture of a school and impede the

progression of successful initiatives that may be ongoing within an organization driven by its members. “ A culture of change consists of great rapidity and nonlinearity, on one hand and equally great potential for creative breakthroughs on the other. The paradox is that transformation would not be possible without accompanying messiness” (Fullan, 2001, p. 31).

It is obvious that messiness is in the future of Big Mountain. Changes are inevitable, and a complete restructuring of the school is recommended. From the superintendent, to principal, to department leaders, and to teachers, all fail to develop a collaborative and cohesive work environment. In the case, the collapse was initiated from the top-down where is lacked sustainable leadership.

Hargreaves (2009) describes five obstacles that impede effective leadership and should be addressed in the restructuring process of Big Mountain. The obstacles impede the successful implementation of the restructuring when succession is poorly planned, succession transitions are badly managed, succession is often on the wrong frequency, succession planning fails to consider the emotional aspects, and lastly succession is not treated as a systemic problem. Succession in leadership is an important aspect when restructuring an organization and it is often overlooked, weakening the long term changes for a successful turn-around.

Big Mountain could benefit of an increased stability in leadership. It was apparent that neither the superintendent nor the principal were completely dedicated to the school and its vision. The superintendent and the principal

could have been more proactive in building and establishing a common vision for the school. Building a systemic leadership is another important aspect that should be taken into consideration. The superintendent should work on developing open lines of communication with other successful schools in the district, and develop partnerships with the other schools where information is shared, and ideas are exchanged allowing schools to help each other and ultimately increase achievement. Another recommendation involves the development of a distributed leadership and the creation of coaches for the new leadership. Bolman & Deal (2008) describe the human resource frame, where the superintendent and the principal would place more emphasis on building personal relationships, and the school would benefit from the establishment of an open and true bottom-up leadership style philosophy. Because more and more administration is comprised of first-time leaders, giving support to new leaders will alleviate the emotional stress associated with the position. Providing good supporting coaches will help the new leaders with the difficulties that come with the new administrative role.

A final alternative is to keep the status quo of the school. However, without changes in leadership, the instability that exists amongst the staff will remain and will continue to worsen.

Leadership stability can be improved by leadership succession, and this may be accomplished by distributing successful leaders across schools in the district and developing a support network that will assist superintendents, principals and teachers throughout the district.

“ Successful succession is about growing and connecting leadership throughout a system, not just finding the right fit for individual leaders.” And “ Lasting improvement rarely exists without leadership stability or successful succession. Effective succession is a strategic challenge but not an insurmountable one” (Hargreaves & Fink, April 2004).

## References

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