WORKING AS ONE: SYSTEMS THINKING DURING THE PANDEMIC

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The pandemic has resulted to many challenges never before faced even by the best school leaders. Despite many trainings and seminars attended, school leaders know well that the results of their decisions and actions are yet to be defined. The job of a school principal is never easy even the pre-pandemic times as the position comes with many complex challenges (Eller, 2010). Expectations from school leaders are high (Carter, 2012) and they are expected to keep things aligned with the overall goal of the department. Specially during the pandemic, the school looks upon the guidance of the school principal, expecting both wisdom and support, in order to continue performing its functions in the community.

Due to the intricacies of educational leadership, school principals could benefit from systems thinking (Senge et al., 2012). Systems thinking is an organizational framework which can help school leaders in dealing with many challenges. It is a perspective which sees the relation of each part of the system and on how they work with each other. The interaction of the individual parts of the system is what determines the achievement of educational goals. These interconnected parts in a system define the behavior of the system as a whole (Merali and Allen, 2011).

While the central command of the school lies within the hands of school principals, it should be noted that the school is a system. As a system, it consists of many interconnected parts that exist as individual units with different roles. The office is a unit composed of many other units like the registrar, finance officer, department heads, disbursing officer, and more. The faculty is also another unit subdivided in terms of specialization, grade levels, and ancillary assignments. Similarly, the students, their
parents, the church, LGU and other small organizations of the community are, in their own, individual units that form part of the complexity of the school as an organization.

Systems thinking is considered an effective approach of facing real-world problems (Kasser, 2013). The pandemic has presented many unforeseen variables that affect the success of the school in achieving its goals. To mitigate the effects of these factors, a school principal could determine the relationship of each factor in relation to the current system and its parts. Understanding how each relate to individual parts of the system and to one another presents opportunities to identify solutions to existing problems. How school leaders appreciate the interconnections between the parts of the current system and the variables is necessary to achieve sustainability (Metcalf and Benn, 2013).

One important characteristic of systems thinking is the feedback loop. A feedback loop may be defined as a secondary effect of a direct effect of one variable with another (Walker and Salt, 2006). If a feedback is positive, the effect between the two units or variables are intensified while if it is negative, then the effect is dampened. Feedback loops are what cause the interconnectedness between the parts of the system (Kunz et al., 2013). If members of the system, especially the school leader, cannot appreciate or understand the consequences of these feedback loops, unexpected system behavior may emerge (Allenby, 2009). The resiliency of our schools depends on how school leaders and the other parts of the system make sense and respond to the feedback loops.

Achieving educational goals, however, is not a battle which the school principal could face alone. Members of the system should also be familiar with their roles. Teachers have to realize that their actions have effects on the administration, the students and other units as well. Parents have to know that the amount of support they provide affects student achievement, school policies, and more. Students, furthermore, have to learn that their efforts directly affect teaching strategies, school support and community involvement. In order to effectively address issues such as lack of budget, lax health
protocol, SLM quality, SLM availability, teacher inefficiency, student participation and other concerns brought by the pandemic, managers and individual parts of the system could benefit from an enhanced understanding of the dynamic interactions within the school system.

Managing a complex system such as a school is a tough job and school leaders need to have adaptive strategies necessary to handle the unique relations that exist between units. Indeed, the pandemic have its ways in pressing difficult situations to the various stakeholders of the school specially the leaders. However, this similarly presents opportunities to grow and once the pandemic is over, our school leaders, stakeholders and the educational system itself will be stronger than ever.

References: