

ON-DEMAND PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT SERIES



EPISODE 10

Organized Abandonment— Finding the Fuel for School Improvement



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doodles and notes

In the words of renowned management consultant Peter Drucker “All living organisms must have a functioning system of elimination...or they will soon perish.” (Drucker, 1999, p. 74)

Such it is with school organizations. It is common for school and district leadership to continue to add new expectations, new tasks, and new priorities without first determining what will be eliminated to free up the resources for these new tasks. It is preferable, even essential, for leaders to have an organized process for proactively determining what they will stop doing- to free up the necessary resources for future growth and improvement. Drucker’s name for this proactive approach is Organized Abandonment.

Note: The term organized abandonment is a “Druckerism.” This MLDS On-Demand Episode features a good many of his thoughts and advice on the matter. There are certainly other sources on the topic and many from inside the field of education rather than business management. Still, Drucker is considered the preeminent spokesperson for this aspect of change leadership. This episode seeks to give him his due.



More from Peter Drucker... *“The first policy, and the foundation for all others is to abandon yesterday. The first need is to free resources from being committed to maintaining what no longer contributes to performance, and no longer produces results. In fact, it is not possible to create tomorrow unless one first sloughs off yesterday. To maintain yesterday is always extremely difficult and time consuming. To maintain yesterday always commits the institution’s scarcest and most valuable resources, and above all its ablest people, to non-results. Yet, to do anything different, let alone to innovate, always runs*

into unexpected difficulties. It therefore always demands leadership by people of high and proven ability. And if these people are committed to maintaining yesterday, they are simply not available to create tomorrow. The first change policy, therefore, throughout the entire institution, has to be Organized Abandonment.” (Drucker, 1999, p. 74)

Drucker argues that abandonment is called for in these three cases:

1. Abandonment is the right action if a product, service, market, or process still has a few good years of life.
2. Abandonment is the right action if the only argument for keeping a product, service, market, or process is that it’s already paid for.
3. Abandonment is the right action if the maintenance of the old and declining product, service, market, or process is causing a new and growing product, service, market, or process to be starved, stunted, or neglected.

*“When I let go of what I am,
I become what I might be.”*

Lao Tzu

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A three-step pilot process:

First: Think it through on paper

Assemble a team of people that are experienced and knowledgeable in the system. Have the team construct a cause – effect diagram of the system’s probable reaction to the proposed abandonment. Share the diagram with a broader circle of people to check for possibilities you might have missed.



Then: Test the abandonment on a small scale



Try it with a single grade, subject, school, department, etc. Compare the observed effects with the predictions from step 1. Modify the abandonment strategy by applying things learned in the pilot. Also, modify the strategy to account for predicted differences between the small-scale pilot and full-scale abandonment.

“Neither studies nor market research nor computer modeling are a substitute for the test of reality. Everything improved or new needs therefore first to be tested on a small scale, that is, it needs to be piloted.” (Drucker, 1999, p. 87).

Finally: Check for symbolic, unintended effects of the abandonment.

Remember that the major impact of leadership actions such as abandonment is often symbolic, rather than technical, in nature. What culture shaping, symbolic message does this abandonment, and the abandonment process, send to internal and external stakeholders and customers?”



“We must be willing to get rid of the life we’ve planned, so as to have the life that is waiting for us. The old skin has to be shed before the new one can come.”

Joseph Campbell

Principles of Successful Re-Deployment:

Check your sequence. It is first, abandon. Then, redeploy. All too often, schools and districts spend the resources from an anticipated abandonment well before they exist.

The Myth of the Bank. It is tempting to believe that we can save the resources generated from abandonment – put them in the bank for future use. Usually, however, the time, energy, money, space, staffing, etc. from abandonment quickly find new homes. Left to chance, these new homes will likely produce no better results with the new resources than did the abandoned activity. Therefore, an essential part of the abandonment process must be to proactively plan for the effective and relatively immediate redeployment of resources.

Exploit Success. Keep a list of activities that are producing results that are better than expected. Re-deploy resources towards these activities.

All resources are not equal. By far the most valuable freed resource from the organized abandonment process is the time and energy of the organization’s ablest and highest performing people. Apply these golden nuggets to the very most promising new opportunities.

“The first step towards getting somewhere is to decide that you are not going to stay where you are.”

J. Pierpont Morgan

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“First we make our habits,
then our habits make us.”

John Maxwell