

The Classic Mistakes of New Superintendents

Strategies to help you avoid committing the common pitfalls of newcomers

by Judith A Kerrins and Katherine S. Cushing

School districts, in communities large and small, urban, suburban and rural, and hundreds of others across the country began the school year with new superintendents (or interim superintendents) at the helm. There is no shortage of job opportunities for would-be superintendents or for those looking for a new venue or different scenario.

Beginning a new superintendency is a challenge and an opportunity. After hundreds of interviews and conversations with teachers and administrators nationwide, we are convinced that the job for many is more challenging than it needs to be. That's because new superintendents typically come to a new school district excited and eager to be there, believing they have a special connection or fit with the district and can accomplish things that haven't been realized before. New superintendents often bring vision, energy, knowledge, experience and expertise. However, these very strengths also can be their greatest weaknesses.

Many new superintendents also arrive with a set of preconceptions and biases--beliefs that they can turn things around, get things moving or save the district from some dramatic and negative fate that would befall it had they not accepted the position as superintendent. This kind of belief makes them appear arrogant, and it's that arrogance, we believe, that contributes to their making classic mistakes.

A Repetitive Misstep

Because these mistakes are so predictable, they also are avoidable. We offer our insight for newly appointed superintendents, for those in their first few months on the job and for those aspiring to the superintendency in the hope they can reflect upon these classic mistakes and avoid making them.

Before identifying the classic mistakes, we must urge caution in overgeneralization: Not all newly hired superintendents make all these mistakes and certainly they don't make them all the time. Some new superintendents may not make any of these mistakes.

Classic Mistake No. 1: Talking about how it was done in the school district you came from. ("I haven't been here very long, so let me go back to my experience base at [fill in name of former district])."

This is not only one of the first mistakes many new superintendents make; it's also the one they repeat again and again and again--sometimes the same day! To the superintendent, it may seem justifiable. After all, new superintendents often are recruited and hired because of the good work they have been doing and with the expectation they would bring some of that work with them to their new district. But it's offensive to the teachers and administrators who've been working in the district, many of whom have been doing good work.

These kinds of statements and attitudes dishonor the work that's gone on before the new superintendent got there. Too often these pronouncements are heard when the new superintendent is unfamiliar with what the new district is really like, what the teachers, administrators and community have already accomplished and what goals they've set. People get tired of hearing about all the good things happening where the new superintendent came from. If shared too often, many folks just wish the new superintendent would return from whence he or she came.

Classic Mistake No. 1 almost always occurs simultaneously with No. 2.

Classic Mistake No. 2: Assuming you are the only expert. ("I'm an expert in [fill in the topic], therefore anything that happened before I got here wasn't any good because I wasn't here to tell you how to do it.")

We heard stories over and over again of new superintendents who wanted existing programs and initiatives scrapped in order to put in place something the new superintendent brought along from the previous district. We know of a new superintendent who insisted the district had "no curriculum" because it was different from the curriculum he had used in his former district and another superintendent who insisted the standards-based assessments that had been developed over the past three years be thrown out so the district could adopt the criterion-referenced tests his previous district had developed.

Similar to mistake No. 1, this attitude discounts all the work that went on before the new superintendent arrived, as well as work that's currently underway in the district. Perhaps more importantly, this attitude underestimates or, worse, ignores the thoughtfulness with which that work was undertaken and discredits the intellectual and conceptual leadership that's gone on before the arrival of the new superintendent.

Classic Mistake No. 2 can be about something as big and important as the district mission or strategic plan (or the adopted curriculum or assessment program as noted above) to something as small or trivial as the use of early-release days. Whatever it is, you can count on teachers and administrators, some of whom may have expertise in the particular area, feeling hurt or offended that what they've been working on isn't viewed as either important or good enough by the newly hired superintendent.

Such an attitude always makes folks wonder, "If we're that bad, if the quality of work here isn't any good, why did you want to come here in the first place?" Much like their response to the first classic mistake, lots of district folks say they would be willing to "pitch in and buy him a ticket back from whence he came."

Know-It-All Attitude

Classic Mistake No. 3: Having the answers before you know the questions, a/k/a data-less driven decision-making.

Too often new superintendents believe they know what should be done, how it should be done, when it should be done and who should do it before they've been in the new district long enough to identify the real issues. Sometimes they're responding to what they've heard during an interview or what they've picked up from talking to one, two or three people (often, board members), or from reading the local newspaper. Sometimes they're just moving forward with their own vision, yet to be jointly developed and shared.

In this age when professional journals are filled with manuscripts about systematically collecting and carefully analyzing data and using it to guide decision-making and budgeting, this classic mistake is viewed as just the opposite: decision-making driven without data.

The corollary to mistake No. 3 is getting only one perspective and forming opinions, answers or actions based on that perspective. Everybody's got his or her view of the world, and most everyone's glad to have the ear of someone in power, especially the new superintendent. Often what the new superintendent hears is one perspective, one point of view and therefore only part of the picture.

Absent the whole picture and the history of the organization, the proposed answers or solutions are just as likely (or perhaps more likely) to be wrong or incomplete as they are to be correct. Sometimes new superintendents justify this attitude and behavior with a statement like "they hired me to solve this problem, clean up the central office and balance the budget." In reality, we are aware of no hiring process that is comprehensive and detailed enough to allow any new superintendent, no matter how experienced or competent, to develop a thorough understanding of the context, the players, the possible solutions and the likely consequences of different solutions. Therefore, attempts to justify preconceived answers or data-less driven actions ring false to those who've spent a good part of their professional lives working in the district.

Classic Mistake No. 4: Developing person-specific rules.

When someone doesn't act in the expected or accepted way (frequently based on expectations set in the previous district--see mistake No. 1), a new rule, policy or procedure gets announced to ensure that such actions never happen again. We know of several person-specific rules developed in different districts that just aren't good practice.

Some districts, for example, have a policy about the use of cellular phones that reads like this: "Never use the cellular phone for personal use." We know of two school districts where that rule was established as a result of principals using their cell phones for personal use--once after a car accident, once during a blizzard. When the rule was announced, everyone knew immediately the events and circumstances that led to the establishment of the rule. People generally agreed that personal use of district-owned cellular phones should be limited. However, making an absolute rule, considering the circumstances, was highly offensive.

Plenty of other examples of person-specific rules exist in school districts, among them: "Don't ever use the fax machine for personal reasons" (when there's been no abuse) or "Don't ever talk with a board member without first getting my okay."

The point is this: Such rules appear to be created in a vacuum absent the context or frequency with which the behavior occurs. When the general consensus is that the behavior was appropriate (after all, who wouldn't call home after being involved in a major traffic accident?), the rule becomes a joke. Worse yet, the new rule maker (the new superintendent) often is viewed as and labeled a jerk (or worse) who doesn't check things out before acting.

Whose Access?

Classic Mistake No. 5: Having either an open-door or a closed-door policy, a/k/a the "last person in" syndrome.

We know this sounds like a contradiction, but we believe that either policy does the organization little good, and here's why. An open-door policy, a now well-accepted management practice, simply encourages everyone to come forth with issues, concerns or questions and doesn't promote solving problems at the level closest to the problem. It tends to promote a patriarchal, "go right to the top," attitude. It undermines responsibility or accountability at other levels of leadership.

On the other hand, a closed-door policy limits the amount and kind of information and perspectives available to the new superintendent (see mistake No. 3) and may result in mistakes that could have been avoided with better input or additional information. A variation of the closed-door policy occurs by limiting who has phone or e-mail privileges and therefore access to the new superintendent.

Whether it occurs literally or electronically, the closed-door message is clear--the new superintendent only wants to hear from and only values the opinion of some district employees.

The "last person in" concept was shared by many as a survival strategy for dealing with open (and sometimes closed) doors. We know of superintendents who gave as much attention to unsharpened pencils as to a real crisis, say a school fire or an asbestos problem, if the last person in to see the superintendent was concerned about the pencils rather than the fire or the asbestos. The strategy among staff then became one of planning the order messages would be delivered or, in a worst-case scenario, out-waiting one's colleagues to see the superintendent so "their issue" would be the one that received the superintendent's attention.

Classic Mistake No. 6: Buying a new car, taking a vacation as soon as you get the job.

It seems obvious, doesn't it, that this would be another classic mistake? Yet over and over again we observe new hires, mostly new superintendents, who buy their dream car or take their dream vacations within a few months or weeks of getting the new well-paying post. Even when it's the car you've been saving a lifetime for--the Mercedes, Porsche or Cadillac--to drive up in a new, expensive car is another way of saying, "I'm the new boss with the big salary." It just doesn't feel right to folks who are making the same amount or only a little more than they made last year.

Taking the expensive vacation has the same effect. Because superintendents negotiate vacation days, they can take them whenever they want. But many administrators and all teachers don't

have that option. For administrators, it's typically one vacation day earned for every month worked. So when superintendents start a new job with a vacation, it seems as if they took the new job for the perks and not for the work.

Classic Mistake No. 7: Redecorating your office or rearranging the entire central office as soon as you arrive at your new district.

Many superintendents visit their new school district and view their office or even the central office with thoughts of redecorating or rearranging. For some, that means a simple paint job. For many, it means a complete redecoration, including expensive (sometimes antique) furniture, artwork, lighting and carpeting or area rugs. Other superintendents decide to re-do the entire central office--everyone may get new furniture or reassigned office space.

The bottom line is the work gets disrupted and sometimes set aside in the process. It is as if the new superintendent is saying, "I'm here and I'm deciding how to spend the money, and the way it was isn't good enough for me." Major redecorating often results in moving folks around, thus making them uncomfortable while the superintendent is making himself or herself more comfortable. It throws everybody off-kilter and is often seen as a power play or ego trip by the new superintendent.

Avoiding Pitfalls

Do you recognize yourself as someone who has committed some of these classic mistakes? Is there hope for avoiding them?

We think so. Most of these classic mistakes require sensitive human relationship skills--and those can be learned and practiced. To those newly hired superintendents and others who want to avoid these pitfalls, we offer these strategies.

Strategy No. 1: Always be from where you are.

In living that statement, both your words and actions should honor the work, thinking and plans of your new colleagues. It sounds so easy, but it's hard to do. Remember: You came to the new job to contribute and make a difference, but it is hoped you also came because of the work that was already occurring in the district. Learn about what happened before you arrived and brag about it to anyone who will listen. (Lots will!)

Let people know you're excited to be part of their team and that you came to work with them because you expect to learn from them at least as much as you contribute. When people understand you value the work they've already done, they will listen to ideas about how to make their work even better.

Strategy No. 2: Seek multiple perspectives and practice active listening.

Before you offer advice, recommendations or guidance, be sure you've collected data from enough sources with a variety of perspectives to develop a thorough understanding of the issues.

It's important to understand the history of the organization and how this issue was affected by what happened previously. Use strategic plans, accountability reports, assessment results and other pertinent information to frame your understanding of the big picture.

Before suggesting action, seek out both confirming and disconfirming evidence of your conclusions. Try, also, to understand the consequence any change might have on the organization, both in the present and future.

Inclusive Thinking

Strategy No. 3: Practice possibility thinking, a/k/a "and" thinking.

Try to avoid either/or, win/lose actions and language. Instead, model possibility thinking. Find a way to be more inclusive and to do the seemingly impossible. This will work if you truly believe that among the people you work with there's enough smarts to come up with and implement effective and creative solutions.

"And" thinking is solution-based and consensus seeking. If you can put action "and" thinking into practice, everyone will feel like a winner.

Strategy No. 4: Adopt a value-added perspective.

When you share your ideas, vision or action plans, be sure to note how each builds on the work that's happened before. Value-added means honor the old and add the new. Each contributes to where we are and where we're going. In that way, recognize and honor the work everyone's done to get the district where it is. Seek everyone's continuing support to keep the district moving forward. Remember, recognizing someone else's contribution will repay you doubly.

Strategy No. 5: Remember, timing is everything.

Although you can accomplish a lot in your first year, be sensitive to the pace and timing of your activities. It is critical to be there when good things happen to sing people's praises ("Great, we won the bond issue. Everyone worked hard and I really appreciate it."). It's also critical to be there when bad things happen to own at least some of the responsibility and to do problem-solving ("Whoa, we lost the bond issue! We all worked hard and I appreciate that, but now we've got to figure out why we lost and what to do about it."). And it's critical to be inclusive in making decisions and spending money ("I'd like to see us modernize the central office. How can we do it to create a better working environment without disrupting the flow of work and everyone's comfort?").

We know of one superintendent who, because of low airfares, flew to Europe for personal leave the morning after the school district lost two major bond issues. Staff was demoralized and in need of a strong, personal message from the superintendent about next steps. Distinguishing between what's important and what's urgent would have resulted in different action on the superintendent's part--and more support for a school bond the next time the issue came up in conversation.

We cannot emphasize enough this point about timing. We know of a district where the newly hired superintendent showed up for his first day of work and then took a three-week vacation. Granted, it was to see his daughter receive a prestigious award, but three weeks? Although he had negotiated the time into his contract before signing it, it just didn't look or feel right to folks--no one else got a vacation after just one-day of work. The thinking was, if he wanted to go on a vacation, why didn't he do that first, then start the new job. We know of another superintendent who took a month-long vacation in September, just after the school year started.

Much like the new car purchase, extended vacations when everyone else has to show up and work with students or faculty doesn't feel proper. Similarly, major redecorations, especially those that result in moving or rearranging of offices, often create hard feelings and resentment. Instead, be sensitive to the limitations imposed on others and to the perception others may have of your choices and your timing.

Deliberate Actions

Strategy No. 6: Start small and go slow.

Develop relationships with subordinates. Let them get to know you as you learn about the work they do. Most people would like to support you and see you be successful. They can do that more easily if they know you and believe you know and value their work.

"Too much, too fast, too hard" is a mantra we heard over and over from building and central-office administrators. Even when the ideas were good, even when everyone believed the work would improve the organization, moving to implement change too dramatically and too quickly was a killer of both the ideas and, ultimately, support for the superintendent.

Be thoughtful and thorough in your approach to implementing new ideas and new ways of doing things. Use problem-solving processes as a forum to develop meaningful, trusting relationships with staff and community members. Finally, act in trustworthy ways--open, honest, sincere, dependable. Once people know you do "walk your talk," future issues can be addressed in a spirit of trust and understanding.

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