

# Assembling Your Crew

# 2

## CÉSAR CHÁVEZ ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, SAN JOSE, CALIFORNIA



Several months passed, and Meaghen recruited another coach, Tiara, to join the crew in formation in the old supply closet.

While their cycles of inquiry work—aka ROCI—had started to gain more traction, their attempts to deodorize the room had been less successful. The Paradise Breeze air freshener had worked a bit too well. After repeated attempts to cover the smell of trash, the room smelled so intensely of the cheap aerosol that they began referring to the makeshift office as, simply, “Paradise Breeze.”

The snarky nickname created enticing recruitment opportunities. “Meet me after school at Paradise Breeze” became shorthand for “We’ll be discussing standards-aligned instructional practices in a windowless room that you might still think is janitorial storage.”

In other words: Come for the cool, misleading name; stay for the relentless focus on results.

Meaghen was excited to have Tiara’s help at Chávez. Tiara, a former elementary school teacher in the next town over, had developed a knack for distilling content standards to their essence in a way that was accessible to both students and teachers. That experience, coupled with her local knowledge, meant that she knew both Chávez’s contextual challenges and the state-mandated instructional goals like second nature.

Together, Meaghen and Tiara formed a formidable duo.

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And yet, most days, they found themselves alone, gazing outward from the doorway of Paradise Breeze, trying to entice other educators to join their crew.

They had hoped their success with the fourth-grade team would generate enough cred to branch out to other grade levels. By the spring, the fourth-grade teachers had formalized their ROCI cycles. They were meeting as a grade-level team on a weekly basis, with Meaghen and Tiara's support. Every meeting included a preplanned agenda, hard examinations of real data, discussions about whether or not they had achieved the prior week's objectives, and goal setting for the following week.

This was textbook ROCI, and within just a few months, the fourth-grade team at Chavez had become a self-contained engine of academic improvement. Unlike other kinds of school reform that depended upon waiting for test scores, the ROCI approach led to small, immediate, measurable improvements. While changes didn't occur every day, the fourth-grade teachers began to see incremental shifts in their practice within weeks. Through making time to observe and provide feedback on each others' teaching, they learned to adopt additional shifts from their peers.

The process wasn't magic, but it felt new and exciting. And, not for nothing, it was nice to be a part of a group whose energy challenged the malaise that had dogged the school culture for years.

Therein, however, was the rub. The "little-fourth-grade-team-that-could" might chug along and get results, but without a mechanism for taking their work beyond the calming shores of Paradise Breeze, that work, however potent, would struggle to expand.

On the one hand, there was something liberating about trying something new without the added pressure of scrutiny and scale. On the other hand, this newly formed revolutionary cell of change agents had something to offer the broader system, and if they were on to something, it was educational malpractice not to share.

System change, though, seemed like a stretch, as they kicked ideas around the old supply closet.

## Becoming a Ground-Up Change Agent in a Top-Down World

When honeybees need to find new nesting grounds, no one single bee is responsible for picking the new spot. In a single hive, which might include tens of thousands of bees, several hundred will strike out as a group and investigate alternative future sites. After exploring a handful of promising alternatives, the colony debates the merits of the various choices through a complex process of inter-bee dialogue and disagreement, a little bit like the last scene in an episode of *House Hunters*. When the process is complete, the hive migrates to the new site.

In executing this kind of complex group thinking, bees possess, in the words of MIT data scientist Dr. Sandy Pentland, a “collective intelligence that is independent from, and greater than” their individual capacity to solve problems.

In this regard, humans have much in common with bees. When we come together to solve problems as a group, the results are almost always stronger and more durable than when handed down from on high. Research from Dr. Pentland and others demonstrates that the most powerful ideas and innovations spread through humanity—not by brute force or compulsion, but through the activation of social networks, built on interpersonal relationships.

Unfortunately, since at least the 1990s much school improvement policy has ignored these dynamics, favoring the top-down, splashy, and dramatic instead of the bottom-up, dynamic, incremental, and sustainable. National decision-making is not always a bad thing, as the idea of exclusive hyperlocality makes little sense in the 21st century; consider, for example, the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, where school officials were forced to make independent decisions about matters of global safety.

Concentrating power at the top, however, has led to the real and perceived marginalization of educators’ voice in the process of school improvement. While there is nothing about standards-based instruction, or the application of data to improve classroom practice, that is inherently “top-down,” the way these reforms have been administered often treats educator buy-in and feedback as an afterthought.

That’s why becoming a change agent at your own school is such a revolutionary, paradigm-shifting concept. In acting more like bees and less

like bureaucrats, we can find, assess, build, and deploy smarter solutions to complex problems. Unfortunately, after decades of adapting to top-down reform approaches, many of our schools and systems lack the muscle memory and connective tissue necessary to propagate and expand ground-up solutions.

That's why we're dedicating this whole second chapter to one of the most important factors in stitching together the social fabric that allows good ideas to spread: good, old-fashioned relationship building.

Relationships are a foundational ingredient in driving, sustaining, and accelerating ground-up change. As such, the ability to forge new relationships is one of a handful of essential skills that change agents must hone. While we sometimes describe relationship building as a "soft skill," there are a whole range of concrete, learnable competencies that drive relational work, including respecting community, sharing leadership, giving feedback, receiving feedback, creating high-performing teams, and two-way communication.

All of those elements are critical, but one big skill we think about a lot is the ability to identify early adopters and collaborators.

The concept of the "early adopter" is central to the literature and research around the cultural dissemination of new ideas and technologies, and the notion offers powerful insights when considering change agency within public school systems. Changing behavior is hard, scary, unusual, and uncomfortable. While it's possible in theory—if not desirable—to force people to do something differently, there's no guarantee they'll do it well.

That's why early adopters are so crucial to the process of social change in schools.

Early adopters often have greater tolerance for risk and, therefore, are willing to get a little uncomfortable trying new approaches to old problems. In the case of the fourth-grade team at Chávez, their role as early adopters had them doing three things differently right away: They met as a team to discuss the subsequent week's lesson planning, used data to inform those plans, and departed from the district's strict pacing guides in order to make some professional judgments about how to link classroom instruction to standards.

## Being a Successful Crew

SOME POTENTIAL QUESTIONS TO ADDRESS . . .	
<b>Purpose and Goals</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Why do we exist as a team?</li> <li>– What specific outcomes are we aiming to achieve?</li> </ul>
<b>Membership</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Whose voices do we need on the team? Who is missing?</li> <li>– How do we ensure we are being inclusive?</li> <li>– Do we collectively possess all the skill sets we need to achieve our goals?</li> </ul>
<b>Roles and Responsibilities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– What unique strengths, skills, and knowledge do we each bring to the table?</li> <li>– What are our potential blindspots?</li> <li>– Who does what, and when?</li> </ul>
<b>Ways of Working</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– How do our intersecting identities affect the work we are doing together?</li> <li>– What are our norms and agreements around communication?</li> <li>– How will we make decisions and hold each other accountable?</li> </ul>

It's important to remember that all change, no matter how small, can be scary. While none of the shifts previously described came anywhere near what one would consider "life or death," each adjustment necessitated a modest risk calculus—a tiptoe out on a limb versus a nosedive into the abyss. In taking on those risks, early adopters show others that trying new things can create great outcomes, making it easier for the next group of change agents to give it a try.

That last part is critical: Not all change agents are early adopters! Even if you aren't the first person to the party, you can still be a leader for change. Some of the most powerful proponents for transformation emerge in the messy middle of an effort, which we discuss in later chapters.

Beyond that, sometimes the first people at the transformation party form a new clique that reinforces old, tired norms about who gets to be included in the change process. Personal identity markers like race,

class, and gender can play a harmful role in determining whose voices are prioritized in a school, and it's important to make sure that bad old habits don't infect new transformation efforts. Reach out to people across lines of difference and keep in mind that the "first followers" are just as important as the "first movers" in spreading new ideas.

The idea isn't to form a new, exclusive clique. Transformation work means abolishing artificial divisions that prevent us from working together.

That's why it's so important for the early adopters to sharpen relational skills.

You've gotta assemble a bigger, more formidable crew.



## CÉSAR CHÁVEZ ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, SAN JOSE, CALIFORNIA

After several months of prioritizing ROCI, the fourth-grade crew was in a groove. Practices that had once seemed novel began to feel more like habits. Things that once caused spikes in anxiety, like looking at unflattering student data, became easier because that information wasn't used as a "gotcha," but as a tool for reflection.

This was a sign to Meaghen and Tiara that it was time to branch out.

There were several challenges with branching out at Chavez, though. The first was the absence of concrete channels for sharing new practices. Because so much of the curriculum was scripted, teachers were not accustomed to using schoolwide professional development as a collaborative learning space. When teachers got together for meetings, they were more likely to receive canned presentations about compliance.

Absent formal channels for sharing stuff, the next place to look was the informal ones, but those were strained too. Chávez wasn't a toxic place, but it wasn't necessarily collegial either. Teachers tended to keep their heads down and mind their own business, showing the sort of learned social avoidance that comes from years of having been told that you're The Problem. Programmatic churn, layer upon layer of reform, and frequent teacher turnover meant that there were two major groups of teachers in the school:

1. The Survivors: folks who had been there forever, seen everything, learned to avoid controversy, and were justifiably skeptical of new ideas; and

2. The Newbies: novice teachers with very little experience, placed in the school through little choice of their own, and therefore with few outstanding relationships on the ground

The fourth-grade team knew that making inroads would be an uphill battle with both groups, so the team started devising a plan. Because the school day was packed with instructional responsibilities and few breaks, union representatives were disciplined about monitoring extra minutes getting tacked onto the school day. Teachers were known to stand up and walk out at 4:00 p.m., even if a scheduled meeting hadn't ended yet, so relationship building had to happen during school hours. Figuring out how to do that in a context where most time is spent in a classroom was tricky, to say the least.

Meaghen and Tiara decided to be "strategically opportunistic." When enticing the fourth-grade team into meeting for the first time, Meaghen had observed teacher behaviors throughout the school, with an eye toward finding creative ways to strike up conversation. She realized that there were only a few places in the school where casual convo seemed to happen: on the playground during lunch duty, in the faculty lounge during free periods, and outside the principal's office when people were on their way to and from meetings.

Armed with this information, Meaghen and Tiara started spending their spare moments lingering in these liminal spaces. They volunteered for playground duty and joined the circle of teachers that tended to congregate near the swings. They asked René, the principal, to share his meeting schedule so that they knew when people might be coming from, or going to, group meetings.

While this approach might give off modest stalker vibes, it was effective—so much so that the team started cheekily calling their ideas "Meaghen's traps."

The motivations behind the traps were pure, though. All the team wanted to do, after all, was get more teachers involved in ROCI.

Over time, more and more teachers were willing to have a conversation. After a few weeks, a third-grade teacher expressed interest, leading to a ROCI meeting. Fifth grade followed several weeks later.

And by the end of the spring semester, all but one grade-level team was engaged in transformation work.

## They Told Two Friends, and Then They Told Two Friends . . .

“Meaghen’s traps” were a creative way to initiate and build new relationships in a context where trust is low, suspicions are high, and spirits are exhausted from unfulfilled promises. Even in the most trusting of environments, though, there is an art and a science to building productive relationships. In many organizations, especially schools, there exists a formal hierarchy that dictates who talks to whom; there are also informal channels that privilege some voices over others, which can reinforce unequal—and unethical—power dynamics rooted in race, class, gender, and privilege.

Real, authentic relationship building disrupts old ways of doing things through creating new interpersonal dynamics that can facilitate radical change.

One fruitful place to look for guidance in this arena is the domain of community organizing, where trust is earned, hierarchy is rare, and consensus building is the norm. Community organizers routinely seek to facilitate ground-up change among historically marginalized people, and the skills developed by organizers over the course of generations are useful when assembling a crew to tackle a big local challenge.

### Skill #1: Listening

One of those skills is listening. As we mentioned in Chapter 1, listening is a critical precursor to forming relationships that lead to transformation. Great listeners quickly find common ground with their peers, identify promising venues for collaboration, and build consensus. Meaghen and Tiara had extensive training in, and experience with, listening to their peers and colleagues in order to understand the root causes of challenges. Their willingness and ability to listen—with an ear toward eliciting otherwise unspoken truths—is a competency essential to the work of building relationships and, therefore, also to the work of improving schools.

The toughest truths about a school’s challenges rarely emerge during a few minutes of small talk, so you have to practice getting to the bottom of things. One way to practice is to conduct “deep listening exercises” with a colleague.

### Practice Deep Listening

1. First, sit face-to-face with a partner, ideally someone in your school whom you don’t know well.



2. Pick a question that requires intense thought and introspection.
3. Take turns listening to each other answer that question for a predetermined length of time. Ten minutes each is a good start.
4. When it's your turn to be the "listener," don't interject with your opinions or ideas; just listen until your partner is done talking. When they've said everything they want to say and if there's still time left on the clock, ask a question to deepen your understanding. Keep going like this for a full 10 minutes. Resist the urge to end the exercise early, even if the other person stops sharing. As the listener, embrace the discomfort of silence, continue to listen, and work on your ability to frame probing follow-up questions.
5. Don't forget to spend a full 10 minutes as the listener!
6. When you're done with your turn as listener, switch roles, and the other person becomes the listener for a full 10 minutes while you reflect and answer their questions.

Another way to improve listening skills is to exercise "stepping back" during a meeting, particularly if you're accustomed to talking a lot in group settings. While it might sound counterintuitive, the process of "saying less" can have a transformative positive effect on the quality and quantity of your contributions. One practical way to "step back" is to "hold your comment" when you think you have something critical to add. Let at least two more people speak before sharing your idea and see where the conversation goes. Your ideas are bound to be sharpened by the contributions of others. (*Side note:* The corollary practice to "stepping back" is "stepping up." If you are someone who is reluctant to share during group settings, practice "stepping up" instead!)

### **Skill #2: Trust**

Trust takes time to earn. The trust-building process, however, can be accelerated through taking meaningful steps, and sometimes risks, together as a community. Calculated communal risk-taking is one of the core design features of ROCI: Through participating in incremental, confidence-building inquiry cycles, educators ramp up their ability to do things together as a group, which can be leveraged to exert more creativity, take increasingly complicated risks, and drive additional trust-building activities on a broader, schoolwide scale. When it's "safe to fail" at the early stages, you set the stage for bigger, bolder work later.

In books like *Crucial Conversations* and *The Speed of Trust*, management consultants and self-help experts discuss other behaviors that can drive or derail the trust-building process. Transparency is a common theme, as hiding critical information is the antithesis of creating a trusting environment. In contemporary workplaces and schools, information is often held in “silos,” which can isolate individuals from the data and context necessary to make decisions as a group.

One quick way to enhance transparency in a school is to regularly discuss schoolwide achievement, attendance, disciplinary, and assessment data. Part of the reason these data points can be so anxiety producing for educators is because we tend not to discuss them on a regular basis. If schools and the teams within them build data transparency into their regular practices, the emotional weight of that sharing is lessened.

### Skill #3: Giving and Receiving Feedback

Another big factor in building meaningful professional relationships is giving and receiving honest feedback in real time. Great feedback is best given—and received—in appropriate doses. Teams that tackle big challenges together will encounter roadblocks, make mistakes, and experience hardships. The ability to talk openly and honestly about the most difficult things, even if that means sharing something uncomfortable about a teammate’s behavior, is essential to moving forward together.

The first rule of giving feedback—whether positive, negative, neutral, or constructive—is that the guidance must be specific and actionable.

“Hey, Tiara, that presentation was great!” might be nice to hear, but there is no specific or actionable information in the praise.

A more useful piece of positive feedback might be something like, “Meaghen, I really liked the way you disaggregated our school’s disciplinary data by racial identity in that presentation. I’m not used to seeing the information presented so pointedly, and the way it was described made me reflect differently on our students’ experiences.”

Research across sectors also indicates that adults best incorporate constructive feedback if they receive five positive comments to every one negative comment. This is a rule of thumb, and you don’t have to keep a running tally of every interaction you have with colleagues. That said, it’s important to keep this “golden ratio” of feedback in mind because when the scales tilt too far in the other direction it gets harder and harder for someone to hear and incorporate constructive comments into their practice. Consider what it’s like to hear criticism when you’re agitated or angry—in one ear, out the other.

Creating durable relationships among a crew of like-minded change agents requires communicating, listening, trusting each other, and taking incremental steps as a group. While each of these skills is adjacent to core educational competencies like pedagogy and instructional leadership, these skills are not necessarily emphasized on ed schools' syllabi. That is neither a knock on ed schools nor a dismissal of these skills; it's just a statement of fact. In some ways, these skills are more native to other domains, like the aforementioned grassroots organizing or social work, where decentralized decision-making, ground-up power, and trust-building are foundational elements.

That said, when you're an early adopter change agent in a school that needs improvement, you are, in many ways, a community organizer. You're starting from the ground up, in a specific context, to achieve definable wins that can drive the whole community forward.

You're also confronting and managing power dynamics that can alternately help or hinder the process. That's why building relationships with your peers, while essential, is just a part of the puzzle.

You have to think up, and out, as well.

## CÉSAR CHÁVEZ ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, SAN JOSE, CALIFORNIA



René Sanchez, the Chávez principal, was pleased that the grade-level teams were starting to gel. He stayed abreast of their work through Meaghen, who acted as connective tissue between the classroom teachers and school administration. He watched with optimistic curiosity, providing cover with the district as necessary, while early adopters on the faculty navigated new continuous improvement processes together.

He even learned and embraced the ROCI lingo.

While the proverbial clock was ticking on his transformation strategy, René knew better than anyone that transforming his school would require not just time but also the broader community. He had grown up in the neighborhood, whose most famous citizen—César Chávez—was also the namesake of the school he helmed. Chávez (the person), along

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with his partner Dolores Huerta, organized farm workers throughout California under the motto “*Sí se puede*,” a testament to the possibility inherent in collective community power.

By the time René became a teacher, though, that famous tagline—in English, “Yes, we can”—had been reappropriated by locals as “Leave if you can” (or “*Sal, si puedes*”) to reflect the increasingly dire civic situation. The schools, like many of the city’s public services, had fallen into disrepair. PACT, a community-based organization under the banner of the PICO network, had been organizing parents for years to demand more progressive education policies from the Alum Rock school board. The activists’ complaints about Chávez (the school) were straightforward: a lack of basic educational materials, crumbling hallways, and unsanitary bathroom conditions.

PACT publicized the physical conditions at Chávez, which galvanized families. René was hired to transform the school after a more transformation-oriented board was elected in the early 2000s. At that point, the basic physical conditions had improved, and relentless community organizing meant that the district could no longer get away with denying the school its basic needs.

Chávez’s next growth spurt, however, would be just as complicated as the first. While René inherited a school with toilet paper and cleaner hallways, student achievement results, disciplinary data, and longitudinal districtwide student success rates were as low as ever.

As such, embracing the ROCI process was just one component of René’s role in transformation. He also had to play ambassador back to the superintendent and other district leaders, who were counting on René and his team to deliver concrete results. In taking a teacher-led, ground-up approach to school improvement, René was bucking multiple national trends at once. He knew the teachers needed space to work and deliver, and he intended to provide the room they needed to grow, even though the superintendent had made it clear that time was a finite resource.

The other major diplomatic role René had to play was with the community at large. Although he will be the first to tell you that he’s

not a “touchy-feely guy,” René’s heart and family were all in East San Jose. The local history was his own, and he intended for the collective future to be even brighter for the children he now served. He attended community meetings, met with local stakeholders, and comforted families, all of whom were anxious to know whether his plan for improvement would lead to better results than the broken promises of the past.

In short, René viewed the whole city as part of the transformation crew, and he treated them as such.

### **Making Friends Everywhere: Garnering Community and Family Support**

School transformation requires the improvement of teaching and learning. Period. That’s why we started this book—and our chronicling of the transformation journey with classroom teachers. Top-down approaches to school reform are limited, in part because policy changes take too long to manifest in classrooms and, as such, are difficult to link to actual student achievement.

On the flip side, though, bottom-up reforms are vulnerable to a related, opposite problem: Classroom-level changes can remain so far below the radar of policymakers that good ideas nurtured on the ground may never get the chance to expand and flourish.

In other words, it’s possible to enact a “systemic reform plan” without ever affecting the quality of teaching and learning . . . but it’s also possible to change the quality of instruction in classrooms without achieving a systemwide effect. The fourth-grade crew at Chávez could meet for years, avoiding the limelight, and nobody on the outside would necessarily know what was happening.

That’s why building relationships with families and the broader community is essential to every school transformation initiative. Building relationships outside of the school is hard work, though, especially for educators operating in politicized contexts. It’s possible to read the vignette detailing the experience of Chávez and PACT and think that community engagement is synonymous with tension. But the other way to understand that story is that families and communities have deep, inherent power that must be understood, acknowledged, and respected.

When the community organizers at PACT were holding rallies about Chávez, it's safe to say that the relationship between the school and the community had taken on an adversarial character. Sometimes, that sort of pressure is necessary. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. noted in his *Letter From a Birmingham Jail*, there is a difference between “a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice.”

While hastening justice can involve short-term strife, it is hard to run a successful school amidst constant tension. That's why educators engaged in school transformation must enlist various stakeholders around the transformation process, even when relationships with the public have become sour. The strength to persevere will come from the power of community, even if the community and the school haven't been on the same side lately.

One group of stakeholders to engage is, of course, children and their families. Unfortunately, too many schools, especially those serving marginalized communities, treat families as an afterthought—or worse, an obstacle to school transformation. Parents, guardians, aunts, uncles, grandmas, and cousins can be your biggest cheerleaders during the process of transformation, but they have to be engaged early and often.

There are numerous benefits to having strong, clear communications with families, and it is critical to mitigate the obstacles that threaten authentic relationship building. Language barriers—both literal and metaphorical—are real and complex. Most parents don't know the jargon we learned in ed school, so it's important to practice discussing pedagogical strategy in plain language. If families at your school speak languages other than English at home, educators and front-office staff should be able to speak fluently in families' native languages. Nothing says “you're not welcome here” like a school secretary speaking increasingly louder English to a grandparent who was born in another country. The written word matters too: Make sure that the fliers you send home are in languages that families can read.

Another barrier to communication with families is power dynamics, which exist among education professionals and marginalized communities. Many parents who send their children to struggling schools may have negative associations with schooling; perhaps they also attended a school that didn't serve them well, or maybe they've tried to get attention for their children in the past, only to have educators and administrators ignore them. Whatever the reason for the broken trust, it's important to revisit the skills we discussed in the prior section to build

transparency with families who may not be predisposed to trusting educational institutions.

One additional barrier to establishing great relationships with families is time and place. Sometimes, schools schedule community meetings at 4:00 p.m. on a Wednesday and wonder why attendance is low. Guardians and parents, particularly those who work hourly jobs, do not have the luxury of attending meetings during work hours without experiencing financial penalties. “Attend this parent–teacher conference at the risk of losing your job” is not a productive way to entice participation. Schools in the process of transformation must consider how to “meet parents where they are” to achieve strong, lasting relationships. Consider weekend meetings or town halls later in the evening. Texting and phone calls can be effective when meetings are impossible to coordinate. Because of COVID-19, more and more families are comfortable with videoconferencing technology, which may create additional opportunities for interactions that don’t require physical attendance.

Another critical place to seek outside relationships is with community-based organizations. In the vignette that started this section, local community organizers were so frustrated with the school that they mounted an adversarial organizing campaign. Antagonistic relationships with local organizations do not, however, need to be the norm. Proactive outreach among schools and community organizations can create lasting trust and great outcomes for children.

Beyond visibility and activism, some community organizations offer concrete services, which can be a boost for schools with fewer resources. Those services might include family counseling, mental health support, college admissions help, or after-school programs. As with any relationship, the best work happens when schools and communities are transparent about their needs and hopes for a partnership. If a school already is struggling to juggle relationships with a handful of after-school providers, it’s okay to say “no, thank you” when the next group approaches. While this might sound counterintuitive, the most successful school transformation projects tend to involve fewer, stronger partnerships and not just a long list of organizations on a flier.

One way to make that process easier is for schools to conduct a “needs assessment” to proactively identify what service gaps exist for their children and families. That assessment can be a survey that families fill out at the next parent–teacher night, an online form, a series of focus groups, or all of these. However a school decides to assess, understanding what

services children and families need is an important antecedent to enlisting outside partners in filling those gaps.

Philanthropies and the local business community constitute another place to look when identifying resources that can help drive improvement. As is the case with community organizations, transparency and trust are critical here. Private interests have a history of imposing their will on schools, through leveraging their power and money, causing some educators to turn their backs on potential collaborations with foundations and companies. While a healthy dose of skepticism can be helpful, there are countless parties outside of the school building who can bring resources. It's important to create a context where those folks can be helpful, especially when their motives and values are aligned with yours.

Different private entities can offer different kinds of support. Sometimes, resources are available as grant dollars that your school can put toward critical pieces of a transformation agenda. Other times, resources come as “in-kind” support, which can be any number of things: an executive on loan to help with strategy, free trips to visit other schools that have already transformed, or needed supplies. This is another place where having conducted some sort of “needs assessment” is critical. When funders or companies ask you how they can be helpful, it's important to be prepared with concrete answers, rooted in data.

As you're building relationships inside and outside of the school, heed the advice of Jim Collins from his classic book on transformation, *Good to Great*: It's not enough to “get people on the bus”; you also have to get them in the “right seats.” Remain vigilant for partnership opportunities and flexible enough to figure out how to enlist partners in the right ways.



## CÉSAR CHÁVEZ ELEMENTARY, SAN JOSE, CALIFORNIA

René, Meaghen, Tiara, and the teachers at Chávez were driving toward something big.

As Tiara had anticipated, using standards-based instruction as the centerpiece of grade-level team meetings was a perfect way to engage teachers in collaborative practice. By the end of the second semester of



the 2010–2011 school year, most grade-level teams were meeting for weekly ROCI cycles.

The process was far from perfect. Sometimes, team leaders forgot to prepare agendas for meetings. Other times, teachers abandoned agreed-upon changes once they got in front of their classrooms because they blanked on what they had decided to do in the first place. None of these mistakes, it turned out, was detrimental to the change process. Because every week, the grade-level teams would meet again and recommit to improving together.

The work was just starting, though. Now that the team at Chávez had crewed up, they needed to think about next steps and how to start building momentum for schoolwide, and maybe even systemwide, change.

René was concerned about accelerating the work, though. The superintendent had agreed to let René and the team run with the transformation initiative, and he was pleased by the early progress, which he monitored through regular meetings with René, Meaghen, Tiara, and other members of the crew. René played a primary role in communicating back to the district, ensuring that there were “no surprises.”

But there were, in fact, some surprises, as is the case with all transformation efforts.

Through engaging classroom teachers in standards-based instructional design, the Chávez crew had realized that the district’s pacing guides were a potential obstacle. Try as they might, it simply was not possible to use the district’s scripted pacing while also ensuring that teachers became masters of their content.

This created a conundrum for René. Some principals revel in butting heads with central offices, living for the thrill of paying bureaucratic jiu jitsu. René was not one of those principals, as he saw tension with his colleagues in the central office as a major distraction from constructive work. He knew that minimizing unnecessary tension was critical to sustaining collective willpower—inside and outside of his school—for the transformation work.

Could he pick a fight when he needed to? Sure. But in his judgment, this early in the game simply was not the right time.

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In light of that, the Chávez crew, with Rene’s blessing, agreed to minimize tension until the end of the school year. They would err on the side of asking forgiveness later and not raise the issue of the pacing guides with the central office. Grade-level teams continued to meet and engage in ROCI cycles. René and his instructional leadership team held space for monthly goal setting, and the district seemed excited about the progress.

As the school year approached its end, though, and the team began planning for the following school year, they knew that the status quo wouldn’t last forever.

The second—not to mention third and fourth—years of change management would require a level of honesty with the central office for which they still needed to prepare.

### School Transformation Is a Marathon, Not a Sprint

The complicated relationship between a school and its central office is the stuff of legend among educators. The importance of managing this relationship in a positive direction is so profound that we’ve dedicated an entire chapter later in this book (Chapter 9) to navigating the opportunities, challenges, and struggles that arise when transformation is afoot.

For the sake of this chapter, though, we thought it was important to close with an important reminder: Some of the most critical relationships you need to cultivate are with the people who work at your district’s central office. The relative strength or weakness of those relationships can be the difference between a transformation process that is hard, but manageable versus one that feels like a series of poorly anesthetized root canals.

In the best-case scenario, the central office is full of confidants, cheerleaders, and collaborators, ready to put *their* shoulder to *your* wheel of transformation.

In the worst situations, the central office is the “party of no,” committed to shutting down every creative idea that emerges from you and your crew.

The reality, as is the case with most relationships, is usually somewhere in the middle—hopefully, somewhere closer to marital bliss. Because school transformation doesn't happen overnight, you need to think of your work as a marathon, with the central office playing a role that alternates between support crew and referee. When you need administrative backing, whether in the form of resources or permissions, you're going to need them to be there. And when you and the crew screw up, the relationship needs to be strong enough that you don't disqualify yourself from the rest of the race.

Despite the fact that a relationship between a school and a central office might be hierarchical or supervisory, it's still a relationship that requires cultivating. In the previous vignette, René was careful to keep his superintendent abreast of the work, in part because he knew that he would need more explicit support later when harder challenges cropped up.

Because remember, we're just getting started. If your work attracts too much negative energy and attention in its early days, it will be hard to get the long-term gears of transformation in motion.

But on the flip side, if you can get some quick wins and use those to build additional trust, the later months and years of your journey will be just a bit easier. Success breeds success, and an object in motion is harder to stop than one standing still.

That is why, in the next chapter, we'll head a few miles north of San Jose to San Francisco to talk about how to move those gears, build momentum, and find bright spots to build upon.

## THE RELATIONSHIPS CHECKLIST

- **Understand your role as an early adopter.** You were willing to take the risk of becoming a change agent before others. That's why you're reading this book! Not all of your colleagues will have the same risk tolerance. That doesn't mean they aren't change agents—just that their role in the process of change hasn't become obvious . . . yet. Part of your role as an early adopter is to help your peers find their roles and voices.
- **Build relationships like a community organizer.** The skills and competencies that you need to drive change are not exclusively

*(Continued)*



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pedagogical in nature. Whatever your role is in a school, when you're building momentum for ground-up change, you're also a community organizer. And remember, how you define "community" should be expansive enough to include anyone who wants to be a part of your transformation crew.

- **Make time to practice the skills that lead to strong relationships.** Listening, transparency, and trust are all essential to forging lasting relationships. While these qualities may seem abstract, like anything else in your life, doing them well requires explicit attention. Make time with your crew to practice these core skills, using the activities we shared in this chapter. You can also try these skills at home, if your partners, roommates, and families are patient enough!
- **Remember the 5:1 golden ratio of feedback.** Giving and receiving quality feedback is a form of love. If we cannot tell the truth about our relationships to each other, how can we be truthful with the children we teach? Hone your feedback skills with your crew. The more feedback you give and receive, the easier the process becomes.
- **Look inside and outside of the school building for critical relationships.** School transformation requires internal and external support. Whether that support comes in the form of resources, talent, in-kind help, or the sustenance of community political will, it is very hard to sustain long-term transformation without public backing. Conduct needs assessments to determine what supports your school needs and map the assets in your community to determine what individuals or organizations might fill some of those needs.
- **Cultivate your relationship with the central office.** Your colleagues in the district office can be huge allies in advancing the cause of transformation. Whatever the starting context for your relationship with those colleagues, you should aspire to making the people who work there part of your crew.

## CHAPTER 2: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. When was the last time you tried to solve a complicated problem, working with a group? How did that work compare to solving problems alone?
2. Are there barriers that exist in your school when it comes to building relationships with peers, parents, and members of the community? Which of those barriers can you challenge? Which require administrative support?
3. Who are your biggest allies in the school? What steps would you need to take to enlist them in the work of continuous improvement?
4. Who are your biggest allies outside of the school? Who can help you to enlist those allies in this work?

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