

Changing the Context What Can a Principal Do?

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The Moral Imperative of
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Context, n. structure, framework, environment, situation, circumstance, ambience, surrounding—Oxford Thesaurus (1992, P. 26)

Everyone would agree that the context is changing; few define reform as changing the context for the better. The leader's job is to help change context—to introduce new elements into the situation that are bound to influence behavior for the better.

How important is context? The recent Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD; 2000) PISA study (Programme for International Student Assessment) of literacy performance of 265,000 fifteen-year-olds in 32 countries puts it dramatically:

PISA shows. . . that two students with the same family characteristics going to different schools—one with higher and one with lower socio-economic profile—could expect to be further apart in reading literacy than two students from different back grounds going to the same school. (p. 21)

We can't easily change the socioeconomic profile of the school, but the basic point is made—**change the context, and you change behavior**. Context is equally—if not more—important than the background or personalities that people bring to the situation. This is Malcolm Gladwell's (2000) argument: "The power of context is an environmental argument. It says that behavior is a function of social context" (p. 150).

Part of Gladwell's Tipping Point, which is easy to miss and is incredibly encouraging for our purposes, is that it is not the heroic actions of tackling complex societal problems that count; instead, "the power of context says that what really matters is little things [added]" (p. 150). As he puts it, most of us will be "better [on a clean street or in a clean subway than in one littered with trash and graffiti]" (p. 168). Most of us, to use another example, will pay attention to the plight of individual students if those around us are doing so.

The starting point, then, for changing context is not the external environment (although I get to that later); rather, it is our immediate situation. Change the situation and you have a chance to change people's behavior in the short run as well as beyond. If you want to change people's beliefs and behavior, says Gladwell (2000), "you need to create a community around them, where these new beliefs could be practical, expressed and nurtured" (p. 173). Selecting and supporting good leaders is a crucial starting point for beginning to change the context in powerful, new ways. The leader's job description, then, is to help change immediate context.

The power of context is usually seen as a forceful constraint— as a given that you cannot do much about. What Gladwell (2000) is saying is don't believe it and don't get overwhelmed by big environmental factors.

The key to change is new experiences. As Kotter and Cohen (2002) say, “people rarely change through a rational process of analyze-think-change” (p. 11). They are much more likely to change in a see-feel-change sequence. In this argument, the role of the leader is to work through a process that does the following:

1. Helps people see [possibilities and situations]
2. Seeing something new hits the emotions
3. Emotionally charged ideas change behavior or reinforce changed behavior (p.11)

Context is social, not individual.

Let's investigate 3 successful principals to see what they do to work through this process

References:

Fullan, M. (2001b). *Leading in a culture of change*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

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Gladwell, M. (2000). *The tipping point*. Boston: Little, Brown.