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Necessary and Sufficient Conditions for the Simultaneous Renewal of a School District and Its Partner University

Meredith Mountford

Organizational self-renewal is the process in which existing structural and cognitive order within an organization is dissolved and new order is created. The new order affects patterns of organizational activities such as structures, systems, processes, and culture. As new order is formed, new knowledge is created. Hence, organizational “self-renewal takes place irreversibly as existing knowledge is restructured to create new missions and domains for the organization.”¹ Several conditions are necessary for renewal to occur in either organization; yet these conditions alone are insufficient for simultaneous renewal to occur for *both* organizations. This article examines a set of sufficient conditions that have resulted in the generation of new organizational knowledge for both organizations.²

While successful school district-university partnerships are said to be few and far between, there is also significant evidence that suggests such partnerships can lead to positive change for both organizations.³ However, it is difficult to know if “successful” school district-university partnerships are, in fact, few and far between and/or whether *both* organizations actually benefit from these types of partnership. We posit a two-fold reason for this.⁴ First, the literature reporting on partnerships such as these typically base the notion of “success” solely on whether or not the school district has met their preconceived goals and objectives, and rarely pays attention to the effect the partnership has had on the university’s organizational objectives. A related reason for the lack of understanding of what success really means for university-school partnerships is that success of the partnership is most often measured using only the outcome data of the school partner such as student achievement scores, teacher retention rates, and other performance indicators for which school districts are commonly held accountable.⁵ To be sure, these measures are quantifiable and are often considered potential outcomes of a university-school district partnership which might indicate some type of success at the school level. Yet, outcome measures are inadequate for capturing the ongoing cyclic processes necessary for the renewal of a school district and university partnership which, we argue, are also important indicators of the success of such partnerships.

A different way of determining the success of these partnerships would require that the leaders of both organizations give more attention to and report on each organization’s ability to create and sus-

tain the conditions necessary to cycle through the various stages of organizational renewal.⁶ For example, consider how Starratt characterizes the role of the leader in any self-renewing organization:

Leaders in self-renewing organizations lead by calling attention to what the ongoing agenda is for all members of the organization by pointing to issues that need clarification, problems that need to be renamed, and old frameworks that realign old cause-and effect-patterns.⁷

In essence, Starratt is suggesting that detecting renewal requires a leader to capture the dynamic and multidimensional processes involved in creating new organizational patterns and structures during a change process rather than simply capturing quantifiable outcomes of the change. Detecting such a fluid process, however, requires a lens that has been adjusted to capture the presence of the various stages of the renewal cycle, the conditions necessary for these stages to emerge, as well as the conditions that are sufficient for simultaneous renewal to occur for *both* organizations.⁸

In sum, looking at the outcome measures of both partnering organizations will certainly help determine the success of the partnership, but reflection on the presence of the conditions and processes necessary for renewal to occur, critical inquiry into changes in organizational structures and patterns at each organization, and finally, observation and communication of the new knowledge created at each organization are also appropriate ways for leaders to determine the success of school district-university partnership.⁹

The purpose of this article is to describe how two partnering organizations, the College of Education at the University of Missouri-Columbia and the Independence School District experienced a successful partnership leading to simultaneous renewal. A demonstration of this successful partnership is described not by student achievement outcomes or similar measures, but rather a description of the cyclic stages and conditions that sufficiently supported the occurrence of renewal processes for both organizations.

This article describes the journey of simultaneous renewal for both organizations. The description of our journey begins at a point when each organization implemented chaos to stimulate simultaneous renewal within their respective organizations. Successful adjustment and adaptation to major changes within each organization provided and supported the conditions necessary to stimulate simultaneous renewal for both organizations. The new knowledge created at each organization served as evidence of successful simultaneous renewal and where the story of our journey ends—even though the process of simultaneous renewal continues at both organizations today.

Ultimately, this article argues that successful school district/university partnerships can be detected by examining cyclic stages of renewal which result in the creation of new knowledge that manifests itself in the form of changes to organizational structures and patterns. To that end, we have adapted Nonaka’s renewal process model to describe the cycle of renewal between a university and a school district.¹⁰ Those stages include: (1) pre-existing order and stability within the partnership; (2) the dissolution of existing structural and cognitive order at each organization; (3) the creation of new knowledge at each organization; and (4) the emergence of new structural and cognitive patterns at each organization which support both organizations. Each stage of the cycle and the new knowledge created at both organizations is described and further, as posited by Nonaka and Takeuchi, we also discuss how their five conditions—intention, autonomy, requisite variety, redundancy, and chaos—

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sufficiently supported renewal for both organizations.¹¹ Examples of how these conditions contributed to the creation of new organizational structures and patterns, and how they sufficiently supported simultaneous renewal are also provided.

The University/School District Partnership

A partnership between the College of Education (COE) at the University of Missouri-Columbia (MU) and the Independence School District (ISD) is one of the several relationships that was developed through the MU Partnership for Educational Renewal (MPER). MPER is a collaborative organization dedicated to positive systemic educational change. The partnership consists of the MU Colleges of Education and Arts and Science, the Midwestern State Department of Education, and 21 public school districts. The pre-existing stability of this partnership itself served as a primary condition for renewal to occur. However, when intention and requisite variety, two of the five conditions necessary for simultaneous renewal, were added to the existing stable partnership, they acted as a catalyst for change.¹² In the following paragraphs, each of these two conditions is described and followed by examples of their existence within the College of Education and the Independence School District.

Intention is simply an organization's aspirations to its goals. Intention frequently comes in the form of visions, mission, and strategic plans within an educational system.¹³ MPER's mission was to engage partnering school and university personnel with students and parents to improve Missouri's educational system from preschool through college. Demonstrated success of this intention could be witnessed in the form of a teacher fellows program, a teacher release program, and cooperative field experiences for teachers. While these programs met organizational intentions related to teacher development, they did not extend beyond to a leadership preparation program which was important for the university's contribution to the state and a strong leadership preparation program highly needed at ISD. ISD had several aspiring leaders who wanted to obtain doctoral degrees in educational leadership as well as obtain leadership licensure. The superintendents and board members at ISD wanted their aspiring leaders to be trained as a cohort in one program that could focus more specifically on the needs of the ISD district improvement plan. While the teacher leaders and administrators were involved in several different leadership programs and more were willing to further their education, there was not a program available that seemed to be addressing their needs as well as the needs of their district. Therefore, a common intent was also present at ISD.

Another condition important for both organizations to realize was requisite variety. Requisite variety occurs when the diversity within the internal environments matches the variety and diversity in the external environment. According to Nonaka and Takeuchi:

Everyone in the environment should be assured of the fastest access to the broadest variety of necessary information going through the fewest steps. If this does not occur organizational members cannot interact on equal terms which hinders the search for new information. Developing a flat and flexible organizational structure in which the different units are intertwined with an informational network is one way to deal with the complexity of the environment.¹⁴

An example of the presence of this condition came from several ISD administrators. While their school district, like many

others, is bureaucratically structured on paper and in policy, there existed enough informality and flexibility within the lines of communication for several of the administrators in the district to approach the associate superintendent and the superintendent with a new idea for the MPER partnership. These administrators were aware that the COE at MU had a reputable Doctorate of Education program in educational leadership, but they were also aware that the structure of the program mandated that students enrolled in the program spend a month for two successive summers at the university's main campus in order to complete rigorous and extensive coursework of the program. Many of the administrators at ISD were interested in applying for the 2003 cohort program but were concerned that their positions as administrators and new summer school requirements would not allow them to be on campus at the university during the summer sessions. In addition, ISD superintendents had a desire to focus their administrators' continuing education on the leadership skills necessary to lead their faculty toward achieving the objectives of the school district's improvement plan. The presence of the condition of requisite variety within both organizations, the COE and ISD, made it possible for all involved stakeholders to be aware of their internal organizational needs as well as what was being offered in the external environment.

Requisite variety, common intentions, and pre-existing stability within the partnership supported the development of both formal and informal relationships and lines of communication to develop between the superintendents of ISD and the dean of the COE. This enabled the superintendent and associate superintendent of ISD to approach the dean of the COE and request that their pre-existing partnership be extended to include a site-based educational leadership doctoral degree program for nine of their administrators in which the curriculum of the program would be tailored to the district's improvement initiatives.

The Dissolution of Structural and Cognitive Patterns

The dissolution of order as a primary condition for simultaneous renewal has previously been described as an intentional breakdown of structural and cognitive patterns which subsequently affect organizational activities and culture. This intentional disruption to order, however, is not intended to affect the stability of an organization, but rather to preserve stability amidst change. The environmental fluctuation triggers a breakdown in the organization out of which new knowledge is created.¹⁵ Changes suggested by ISD and the subsequent changes made by the COE serve as the best examples of how some structural and cognitive patterns related to the existing Ed.D. program would need to be dissolved in order for new knowledge to be created for the proposed site-based doctoral program.

In order to accommodate the request made to the COE by the ISD superintendents, several aspects of the existing Ed.D. leadership program would have to be reconceptualized. Prior to this request, cognitive models, structural patterns, and resource deployment models of the Ed.D. leadership program required students from across the state to come to campus for the summers. Regional faculty at partner institutions delivered fall and winter coursework. The Ed.D. leadership curriculum centered around five leadership themes, but were nonspecific to any particular district improvement efforts; therefore, the curriculum would require some reconsideration. Finally, the resources necessary to have the coursework delivered to ISD students by faculty from that region of the state (as done in the

existing program) were not available. A reconsideration of resource deployment or innovative ways to secure funding for the ISD project would be necessary.

Initially, superintendents from ISD, the dean of the COE, and faculty from MU's Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis (ELPA) department, who would ultimately be responsible for implementing changes made to the existing Ed.D. program, were not sure that it could be reconceptualized to meet the needs of ISD. However, the dean of the COE arranged a meeting with representative faculty members from ELPA, principals (prospective students) from ISD, and the associate superintendent and superintendent of ISD to brainstorm ideas. Several of these meetings occurred and resulted in sufficiently meeting a condition of the renewal process related to the sharing and creation of new knowledge: redundancy.

While people often consider redundant processes to be unnecessary or inefficient, Nonaka and Takeuchi describe redundancy as a condition in the renewal process as follows:

There is intentional overlapping of information about business activities, management responsibilities, and the company as a whole. Sharing redundant information promotes the sharing of tacit knowledge and allows individuals to invade each others functional boundaries, offer advice, or provide new information necessary for renewal.¹⁶

In other words, redundancy helps build unusual communication channels in which one organization learns of the structural and cognitive patterns of another organization.

To be sure, redundancy was present during the brainstorming meetings involving the stakeholders. Therefore, it served as a sufficient condition for communication to occur among the stakeholders most affected by the outcome of the decision. This continuous process of questioning and collaborative brainstorming, or redundancy, allowed an overlapping of the needs of the district with the structures of the leadership program which subsequently enabled the creation of new organizational knowledge. The redundant processes stimulated new ideas to emerge from various stakeholders, and a plan for a site-based Ed.D. leadership program in ISD was developed.

The Emergence of New Structural and Cognitive Patterns

The renewal process requires that new patterns of order develop after existing patterns have been dissolved. This is often called creating "order out of chaos."¹⁷ The benefits of this creative chaos and subsequent order is most likely to be realized after those involved in the process have had time to reflect on emergent ideas. Others believe that it is important that reflection also occur during the process. For example, Schön stated: "When someone reflects while in action, he becomes a researcher in the practice context. He is not dependent on the categories of established technique and theory, but constructs a new theory of the unique case."¹⁸ This statement suggests that during the process of new knowledge creation, participants must be able and willing to break free of the pre-existing structural patterns if new knowledge that will ultimately affect organizational structures and patterns is to emerge. Reflections from the meetings between the COE and ISD stakeholders were recorded, and the dean of the COE and others who had participated in the process created a project plan, soon to be known as the Independence School District Project. The plan summarized the potential

dissolution of existing organizational structures and patterns within the Ed.D. model and new organizational patterns that would potentially need to be created in order to facilitate an Ed.D. program specifically tailored for the administrators at ISD.

The plan suggested that the same (or a similar) curriculum and materials that were currently used in the Ed.D. model also be used in ISD but that the instructor of each course would specifically tailor the curriculum to align with the objectives outlined in the ISD District Improvement Plan. In this way, the majority of the curriculum used in the existing leadership program could be assessed to see how well it could be applied to an individual district's improvement needs. While students from the Independence School District were earning doctoral level credits, the altered version of the Ed.D. leadership program curricular model was being assessed for its usefulness to a specific district's improvement plan. Although the plan seemed to introduce a win-win scenario for both ISD and the COE, it also required a considerable amount of autonomy be given to faculty who taught the courses for the proposed project.

Autonomy is a condition for renewal described by Nonaka and Takeuchi where "individuals within the organization should be allowed to act autonomously as far as circumstances permit. This will encourage them to create knowledge."¹⁹ Autonomy has several beneficial consequences for an organization, such as amplification of information, self-organizing groups, and diminished suboptimization.²⁰ It would be up to those professors, working cooperatively with the associate superintendent, to modify the curriculum so that it was focused on district improvement plans and to assess the generalizability of changes made to the curriculum for potential use in other site-specific partnerships. In addition, the project plan included the idea that several of the courses could be redesigned and delivered by a team consisting of the associate superintendent, the superintendent of the district, and a professor from the COE. This was a self-organizing team that was catalyzed by the presence of autonomy within the renewal process.

The plan for site-based summers was perhaps the most significant change that was included in the project proposal. This change seemed to offer the biggest risk in terms of disrupting cultural patterns that had been established in the Ed.D. model. The inception of the Ed.D. program's month-long summer sessions—when all of the students from across the state come together at the university's campus to receive intensive coursework by a team of faculty—was a highly valued component of the program. Evaluations conducted on the program suggested it was the foremost means for student networking, collaboration, and team building. Therefore dissolution of this organizational structure meant that the administrators from the Independence School District would lose out on one of the most highly valued processes included in the existent Ed.D. model.

Those involved in writing the project proposal understood that sacrificing the on-campus summer sessions could have deleterious effects for the students from ISD. However, the condition of requisite variety made COE faculty aware that new state guidelines for summer school in school districts could also affect the Ed.D. leadership program's summer delivery model. This new knowledge caused a sense of "crisis" related to summer instruction regardless of where it was to be held. This "crisis" paved the way for faculty who typically delivered the Ed.D. leadership program to rethink how summer programming was to be delivered in the future if principals who made up about 40 percent of the existing Ed.D. program's summer

enrollment could not attend. Further, faculty believed that an on-site program could potentially be a new model for summer course delivery. Therefore, faculty from the COE began to view the ISD Project as a potential pilot program for a new way to deliver the summer curriculum in light of the new state requirements.

Thus, creative chaos was introduced from an external organization, the state, through new summer school requirements that now mandated summer school programs and required districts to have their administrators present for summer school supervision. Nonaka and Nonaka and Takeuchi argue that creative chaos stimulates the interaction between the organization and the external environment.²¹ When fluctuation is introduced into an organization, its members face a breakdown of cognitive patterns thus providing an opportunity to rethink fundamental perspectives. The creative chaos introduced in this case led to the dissolution of old cognitive models and generation of new knowledge that ultimately affected both organizations simultaneously.

The Generation of New Knowledge: Simultaneous Renewal

The journey conveying how each organization, the college and the school district, met the conditions which were sufficient in stimulating simultaneous renewal within their respective organizations has been described. Successful adjustment and adaptation to major changes within each organization is evidence that these conditions were sufficient for both organizations to cycle through the first three stages of a simultaneous process. This adjustment and adaptation to the positive changes that emerged from the simultaneous renewal process required the creation of new knowledge at each organization. In the following sections, we describe the new structural and cognitive patterns that emerged because of the simultaneous renewal process at the university and school district.

Evidence of simultaneous renewal at the university included examples of the emergence of new resource deployment, changes to the doctoral level learning outcomes, and a project plan and process for the implementation of a site-based doctoral program. Evidence of simultaneous renewal at ISD has come in the form of action research projects students will/are carrying out as the final requirement for their doctorate. As mentioned earlier, each project must provide evidence that new knowledge was created by carrying out the action research project within each administrators/student's building. Evidence that the students have catalyzed self-renewal within the buildings they administer will be marked by documented changes in student achievement and evidence of the existence of the conditions cyclic processes necessary for renewal.

The Independence School District Project Plan that was generated from the brainstorming sessions was met with resistance by some faculty members from the educational leadership department of the COE. A major concern existed that such a small site-based program would use too many human and capital resources and that the ELPA department could not afford to expend those resources. Therefore, for the first time, a school district and the COE pledged a considerable amount of money to run the program as a pilot project. In addition, faculty could earn extra compensation and would have all of their expenses reimbursed for teaching a course at ISD. This new form of cooperative resource deployment (never done before in the COE) generated considerable interest from faculty to become involved in the ISD project.

Final learning outcomes for the students from ISD were altered from those of the original Ed.D. leadership program. Changes to expectations for the final comprehensive exams for ISD students were also made. ISD students were expected to focus their writing on evidence of how their doctoral program had helped them to meet the district improvement plan objectives. In addition, a portion of their final comprehensive exam was to be a proposal for an action research project that would serve as their dissertation. Ultimately, students are expected to use an action research model of inquiry to guide their final research effort, and the outcome of the action research project is to catalyze a cycle of renewal within the buildings in which they serve as administrators.

As is the point of pilot projects, much is learned from the "first go round" which is useful if the project is to be carried out again with a different organization. Through the processes mentioned earlier, a plan has been established to carry out a similar program with any other district that requests to do so and whose leaders are able and motivated to meet the necessary conditions of renewal. To date, three other districts have requested similar programs in their districts.

Summary and Conclusion

This article posited four stages and five supporting conditions as necessary and sufficient for simultaneous renewal to occur between two organizations.²² Further, because of the occurrence and evidence we found of simultaneous renewal, we argue that the university/school partnership described in this article was and continues to be a successful partnership. Evidence that the conditions outlined in the simultaneous renewal process were sufficiently met by a partnering college of education and school district was provided, and examples of the new knowledge generated at each organization were given.

The point of articulating the stages and conditions that were sufficient in bringing about simultaneous renewal was to demonstrate that by examining and producing evidence of the cyclic processes and conditions necessary for simultaneous renewal to occur, we are able to more deeply understand what is necessary for successful school district/university partnerships rather than relying only on student performance measures as suggested in most reform models. Using models of reform which focus only on outcomes does not help us understand how new knowledge is created. Therefore, replicating the necessary processes and conditions to create new knowledge the same way again is and has been elusive.²³

Educational systems are perhaps one of the most stable organizations found in our society; and while some may view this stability positively, others see it as an organizational failure to challenge the status quo. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) has mandated several reform initiatives, but only a handful of school districts has experienced success in implementing them. The process described in this article suggests that layering new reform patterns on top of pre-existing structures is not sufficient for creating positive change and will not result in districts' meeting the new objectives of NCLB. While the majority of NCLB objectives focus on outcomes, others are meant to examine processes taking place in school districts. The processes school districts choose to meet objectives, such as closing the achievement gap, promoting collaborative decision-making, and implementing professional development programs, require the assistance of a university partner and simultaneously strengthen the knowledge within the university. As a result, in an age of increased

accountability and chaos, understanding and harnessing patterns and cycles can help districts and universities create new organizational patterns at both institutions and “redefine” what a successful partnership really means.

Endnotes

¹ Ikujiro Nonaka and Hirotaka Takeuchi, *The Knowledge Creating Company* (New York: Oxford University Press 1995), 72.

² Ikujiro Nonaka, “Creating Organizational Order Out of Chaos: Self-Renewal in Japanese Firms,” *California Management Review* (Spring 1988): 57-73; Nonaka and Takeuchi, *The Knowledge Creating Company*.

³ Richard Andrews, “Beyond Change and Reform: MPER and Simultaneous Renewal,” *MPERspective* 1 (February 2004): 1; Gary D. Fenstermacher, “Agenda for Education in Democracy,” in *Leadership for Educational Renewal*, Wilma J. Smith, Ed. (San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass, 1999), 1-10; John I. Goodlad, “Flow, Eros, and Ethos in Educational Renewal,” *Phi Delta Kappan* 80 (April 1999): 571-578; Margaret Wheatley, “Innovation Means Relying on Everyone’s Creativity,” *Leader to Leader* (Spring 2001), <http://www.margaretwheatley.com/articles/innovationmeans.html>.

⁴ Author’s Note: While this article was solo authored, the word “we” is used to acknowledge the collaborative efforts of the Dean of the College of Education at the University of Missouri, the superintendents of the Independence School District, the administrators in Independence who are enrolled in the Ed.D. program outlined in this article, and Mark Ehlert, a research professor at the University of Missouri, all of whom made the generation of this article possible.

⁵ Kenneth A. Sirotnik, “Making Sense of Educational Renewal,” *Phi Delta Kappan* 80 (April 1999): 606-610; Roger Soder, “When Words Find Their Meaning: Renewal Versus Reform,” *Phi Delta Kappan* 80 (April 1999): 568-570; Wheatley, “Innovation.”

⁶ Ulrich C. Reitzug and Leonard C. Burrello, “How Principals Can Build Self-Renewing Schools,” *Educational Leadership* 52 (April 1995), <http://www.ascd.org/readingroom/edlead/9504/reitzug.html>; Robert J. Starratt, *Leaders with Vision: The Quest for School Renewal* (Thousand Oaks, California: Corwin Press, 1995).

⁷ Starratt, 62.

⁸ Andrews, “Beyond Change and Reform”; Nonaka and Takeuchi, *The Knowledge Creating Company*; Sirotnik, “Making Sense of Educational Renewal”; Starratt, *Leaders with Vision*.

⁹ Sirotnik, “Making Sense of Educational Renewal”; Wilma F. Smith, “Leadership for Educational Renewal,” *Phi Delta Kappan* 80 (April 1999): 602-605; Soder, “When Words Find Their Meaning”; Starratt, *Leaders with Vision*.

¹⁰ Nonaka, “Creating Organizational Order Out of Chaos.”

¹¹ Nonaka and Takeuchi, *The Knowledge Creating Company*.

¹² Nonaka, “Creating Organizational Order Out of Chaos”; Nonaka and Takeuchi, *The Knowledge Creating Company*.

¹³ Richard DuFour and Robert Eaker, *Professional Learning Communities at Work: Best Practices for Enhancing Student Achievement* (Bloomington, Indiana: National Education Service, 1998); Nonaka and Takeuchi, *The Knowledge Creating Company*; Wheatley, “Innovation.”

¹⁴ Nonaka and Takeuchi, 80.

¹⁵ Nonaka, “Creating Organizational Order out of Chaos.”

¹⁶ Nonaka and Takeuchi, 79.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Donald Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner. How Professionals Think in Action* (London: Temple Smith, 1983).

¹⁹ Nonaka and Takeuchi, 80.

²⁰ Harold Hook, *Model-Netics* (Houston, Texas: Main Event Management, 2001); Nonaka & Takeuchi.

²¹ Nonaka, “Creating Organizational Order out of Chaos”; Nonaka and Takeuchi, *The Knowledge Creating Company*.

²² Nonaka, “Creating Organizational Order out of Chaos”; Nonaka and Takeuchi, *The Knowledge Creating Company*.

²³ Soder, “When Words Find Their Meaning”; Sirotnik, “Making Sense of Educational Renewal.”