

Jefferson High (D)¹

Phil Lee

The teachers and staff at Jefferson High thought they had become accustomed to change. After all, if you had as little as ten years of service you had seen four principals and at least three Superintendents move through. In the past if you kept your head down and tended to your business the “bold initiatives” and “agendas for change” would pass. But prior experience had not prepared them for Phil Lee.

Lee hit Jefferson High with the force of a tsunami. He had been headmaster of Jefferson for only two weeks when he welcomed teachers back for the 1997-98 school year with a letter in which he decried the school's low test scores and launched a major school restructuring effort with the declaration “Jefferson High must change.” (See Exhibit 1). Backing up his words with actions, Lee’s announced a new master schedule that placed teachers and students in six units (See Exhibit 2). It also detailed “the latest room assignments.” When teachers returned to school, they discovered that many of them had to move to a new room, even some teachers who had taught in the same room for over 20 years. Whether the faculty approved or not, change was happening at Jefferson High.

Phil Lee’s Background

Phil Lee was not a typical public school administrator. For years he had balanced two worlds as educator and entrepreneur. His passion was educating children and setting them on the road to a better life. Despite the availability of other choices, his personal and cultural values placed education at the center of his life. But there was no doubt his avocation, computers and technology, also shaped him and his thinking.

When talking about what influenced him Lee was quick to explain that many of his most powerful lessons did not come out of his M.Ed. or his MS from MIT, but from the challenges of starting a business. Lee had joined family members in creating a computer consulting firm, now run by his oldest son. Struggling to respond to entrepreneurial challenges he had discovered some answers in the business literature and in doing so, saw clear parallels between the issues faced by businesses and those of schools. An avid reader of the Harvard Business Review, Lee strongly believed that schools needed to adopt management practices such as reengineering the concept of redesigning an organization starting from a clean slate and

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This case is intended to serve as a basis for classroom discussion, not to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of administrative situations.

performance measurement. With the fervor of a convert, he would recommend and periodically distribute articles about management to the Jefferson faculty. (See Exhibit 3 for a sample list of articles.)

The center of Lee's life had always been and would remain education. He had years of diverse experience with the GPS. He began as a teacher in a bilingual program before serving as principal of Morgan Junior High School for 10 years, starting in the late 1970's. During this period he developed and tested many of the ideas that he would later put into practice at Jefferson High School.

Lee's success at Morgan was widely recognized, attracting the attention of a graduate student who was documenting successful principals. The student noted a variety of successful practices. Lee had a hands-on management style, greeting students as they entered and left the school each day, observing classes for an hour each day, and occasionally even teaching a class himself. He divided the school into units composed of teams of teachers with a great deal of autonomy and responsibility, for which he held them accountable. They worked together with the same group of students, and Lee encouraged them to solve discipline problems on their own. When forming teams each year, he listened to teacher preferences and gave a lot of thought to the distribution of stronger and weaker teachers before making final team assignments. Although he asked for feedback from the staff, he made the final decisions himself. As one mark of his successful leadership, several people who had served under him at Morgan had become headmasters or principals in Gotham by the 1990's.

Lee later served as superintendent of High Schools for the Gotham Public Schools for four years, supervising all secondary education in Gotham. Never far from his business roots, he also spent three years as the GPS Director of Technology and Information Systems until a falling out on a policy issue with the Superintendent prompted him to leave the position.

Tenured, but tiring of central administration, Lee decided to return to his roots in the classroom. For a year immediately prior to becoming Headmaster at Jefferson, Lee taught computer skills at another district high school. During this time Lee decided that he could make the greatest contribution by leading one of the city's troubled district high schools and he approached the Superintendent with the idea. With Lee's reputation and track record it was no surprise that he would be chosen to lead a school. What was a surprise was how it happened. The Jefferson hiring process was virtually completed with a final slate of candidates, including Betina Jones and Walter Restuccia, two Jefferson Assistant Headmasters, on the list sent to the Superintendent. Wilson decided to by-pass the process, avoiding the dilemma of choosing between two well-supported Assistant Headmasters and running the risk of dividing the faculty into factions. The Superintendent tapped Lee, who had not formally applied for the job. Lee accepted, on the condition that he be given latitude to implement his ideas for school

restructuring. So Lee entered Jefferson with a plan for change and an endorsement from the Superintendent.

Lee's Vision

Lee knew that he was assuming leadership for a school with a long history of turmoil and poor performance. Student discipline drained much of teachers' time and energy, leaving little space for learning. Lee's vision was to create an environment where learning would be the primary focus of everyone in the school. His bottom line was student achievement. As he wrote in his first letter to teachers, they needed to create "... a high school with graduates who are educated : literate, with a sense of the past, a vision for the future, and appreciation of the arts, a feeling for the suffering of the less fortunate, a commitment to decency and honesty and a willingness to serve."

To achieve this, Lee set goals for himself and for his staff. In the first staff meeting, Lee announced specific measurable goal for the school - raising student test scores. Lee believed that in the next year 50% of Jefferson students could reach Level 2 on the Stanford 9, a standardized test designed to tap critical thinking skills, that had been adopted as a benchmarking device by the GPS. In the year before Lee came to Jefferson High, 90% of the students scored at Level 1, the lowest of four levels, in the Stanford 9. A Level 1 score indicates that the student has "little, if any, mastery" of fundamental skills in the subject. Lee viewed Level 2, denoting partial mastery of fundamental skills, as minimum acceptable performance and was determined to push teachers to achieve this goal.

In this first faculty meeting, when he announced the goal, Lee described his reasoning: A study of local high schools showed that 15 to 16 percent of students failed each subject. Only 2 to 3 percent of these failures resulted from poor performance; 12 to 13 percent were due to attendance (students who miss 15 percent of classes fail the term). Teachers often gave a low pass (D) to keep students out of their classes the following year. If D's and F's were combined, then 25 percent of students failed due to performance. If two out of every three of the 75 percent of the students who passed each year scored at Level 2 on the Stanford Nine, then the school's scores would improve by 40 percent.

In Lee's view instruction needed to change. He was an ardent advocate of project based learning and an investigative, inquiry based approach to instruction. These methods were little used at Jefferson High. He believed there was no way to improve scores unless instruction improved. Setting the bar high, establishing a clear goal for the Stanford 9, and pushing teachers to achieve measurable results would prompt them to adopt more effective methods.

Change and Resistance

Lee recognized that structures needed to change to support this new focus. Operational difficulties had been compounding the school's problems for years. Lee noted, "teachers are reluctant to experiment with new instructional approaches if they do not feel they can maintain classroom discipline. Jefferson does not have a good record on operational issues. That is one of the many reasons the school has the highest dropout rate in the school system."

Lee lost no time in beginning structural changes at Jefferson High School. He welcomed teachers back to school with a new master schedule that required about 40% of all teachers to move to a new classroom on the first day. Acting as a self-described "dictator, Lee justified his swift, unilateral action: "I knew that I had to create a sense of urgency. It is undemocratic to begin with, but once people accept it, they will find they have more power over subsequent decisions and more independence."

Lee was able to put this structure in place without the staff approval generally required under union rules by spotting and taking advantage of a "loophole." The master schedule developed by the outgoing headmaster required three additional teaching positions. Instead of asking the central administration to fill these positions, Lee restructured the school into six units. Each unit consisted of 120 to 150 students and would be run by six to eight teachers with considerable freedom to create their own educational policies. The units combined regular bilingual and special education students and teachers. The goal was to create, in effect, "six independent mini-schools, each...with a shared vision and a common purpose." To facilitate coordination among unit teachers, Lee gave them not only common planning time, but also grouped a unit's classrooms and teacher offices in the same area. So the days prior to the official start of school were filled with packing and hauling.

Among most teachers, some of whom had to move from classrooms they had occupied for 20 years, there was little overt resistance. A few teachers vented their frustration privately:

Teacher A: I was mad. We got a brief un-welcoming letter from the School Department telling us when to arrive and then when we showed up we had to start changing rooms. This school has five floors and only one elevator.

Teacher B: We could have been better prepared. We were asked to buy into this plan without really understanding why. I think we all have a better feeling now, but at the time, he only briefly touched on the goals.

A handful of teachers resisted openly and were prepared to dig in for a fight. Mrs. Shields, the long-time head of one of the ninth grade clusters, announced at the first staff meeting that she had been in her classroom for 25 years and would move "over my dead body." Walter

Restuccia, the assistant headmaster, leaned over to Phil and sighed, "Look, I told you this could happen. A lot of unhappy people have been by to talk to me- I have known them for years and never seen them this bent out of shape." Lee let the comments pass in the meeting, but after he moved swiftly, arranging to meet with Shields in private. In the meeting Lee was matter of fact, explaining that he could not let her damage his credibility and authority by refusing to move, especially since she was an influential person in the school- a real opinion leader. He asked point blank for her resignation, if she could not support him. But, if she agreed to move, he would work with her in other areas and do what he could to ease the transition since he very much wanted her support. She reluctantly agreed to try.

The Unit System in Action

Another challenge facing Lee was getting staff to understand his management style. He preferred to make the major decisions about structure or goals and let others decide on the details. Implementation decisions and day to day operational decisions should be handled by those closest to the issues. So in the days prior to the teachers' return he had delegated the task of assigning teachers to units and selecting unit leaders to the assistant headmasters, Restuccia and Jones, since they knew and worked with the staff.

When the units were assigned, he did not second guess their choices. One of the 9th grade clusters from the previous year, headed by Mrs. Shields, continued intact with additions from special ed and bilingual. In contrast, the teaching groups in the other units were working together for the first time. Each unit had six to eight teachers from Group I subjects: math, English, social studies, and sciences and was headed by a unit leader with administrative experience- Restuccia and Jones each headed a unit along with two former deans of discipline and three department heads.

Lee gave authority for most decisions to the units. The unit system was designed to give teachers the flexibility to experiment with new ways to achieve educational goals. In October, for example, the teachers in one unit set aside Monday, the day with lowest attendance, to experiment with block scheduling. The students were split between Math and English during a double period. This gave teachers more time to reinforce basic concepts and provide enrichment activities. In addition, Lee gave each unit \$5000 to spend any way teachers desired, with no strings attached or additional approvals required. One unit purchased its own copy machine to reduce the hassle of copying materials.

Consistent with Lee's view that operational issues, particularly those around discipline needed to be handled more effectively, the unit system also gave teachers new resources and authority to deal with discipline. Now that teachers within a unit had the same students, they could work together to solve problems with particular students and implement solutions in a consistent

manner. For example, when a disruptive 9th-grade student continued to wear a walkman in class, even after his was taken away, the teachers in his unit met with his mother during their common planning time to discuss ways to handle the problem. Lee strongly supported teachers' decisions in discipline cases and discouraged second guessing by other staff. When Lee was approached by staff and teachers who were critical of a "harsh" disciplinary decision from another unit, he refused to intervene saying, "I gave them the authority. The kid was their student, they knew him best and they did what they thought was right."

Straightening out discipline issues was not proving simple. Each change brought a new round of discussion and brought new problems to light. Unit heads were frustrated with the system of sending students to detention in the auditorium after school. The student behavior reports required for detention had no space asking what the teacher had already done about the problem. This encouraged teachers to think of detention as a first resort. Several unit heads felt that teachers were avoiding their responsibility for discipline by simply sending students to detention and all agreed that most problems were best handled in the classroom by teachers themselves, with support from the unit head when necessary. Only when intervention within the unit failed should teachers look beyond the unit for solutions to discipline problems. Teacher reaction to the proposal was, not surprisingly, mixed.

Lee said he would not make the final call and told the Unit heads that they had the power to decide this issue. If they wanted the discipline policy changed, it certainly could be. So the burden was now on the units to reach a consensus and it was now the unit head's to take on the job of justifying an unpopular change and bringing recalcitrant teachers along.

Next Steps

The holiday break had given Phil Lee a chance to take stock of his progress. And as the end of the second marking period approached, he had to admit that his personal report card had mixed grades. He had accomplished some important goals. The school was restructured - a task that had thwarted two previous headmasters. He was on speaking terms with all of the staff. Even Mrs. Shields, after discovering that her unit and staff really did have more responsibility not less, was succumbing to his tireless outreach- last week she had even sought him out for advice.

But there were problems. Faculty support was wide but he was not sure it was deep. It was easy to deal with staff like Shields who laid their cards on the table, but this was not a place where most people spoke their minds in public. The grapevine reported mixed feelings and this was troublesome. He knew the hardest part of the change effort was still ahead and he needed the trust and support of the faculty to make progress. Looming ahead was a major test - in February the faculty would vote on issues critical to the next stage of restructuring and he was not sure of the outcome.

The units were working but they were not having the impact on instruction he had hoped. Few teachers had been persuaded to adopt different, more effective instructional practices. When he had entered the school he had seen only one teacher who regularly used a cooperative and project-based learning approach. That number was now up to three or four. He wryly observed that "At this rate it will only take me 10 years or so to change the habits of my 80+ faculty members." No, he could not wait for the class of 2008, not with more than 200 children a year graduating but unable to demonstrate 11th grade math skills. His business mind could not resist the calculation, that was thousands of children. A ten percent improvement a year would only be 20 children next year. Too few, too slow. He needed to find a way to reach his staff, to push instruction to the forefront and to maintain momentum on all the structural change. But how?

Exhibit 1

Letter to Faculty and Staff

August 25, 1997

Dear Colleagues:

As the new headmaster of Jefferson High, I wish to welcome you back for the new academic year. I look forward to working with all of you to make Jefferson High the leading district high school.

Jefferson High must change. Like all other GPS district high schools, we did very poorly in the Stanford 9. In math, for instance, almost nine out of ten students were performing at Level I, showing little mastery of the subject. In SAT I, the mean scores for Jefferson High students last year were 334 (Verbal) and 432 (Math), while the national mean scores were 505 and 511, respectively. It was once said that insanity is to do the same thing over and over again the same old way and expect a different result. If we want a far better result, if we are to succeed in our endeavor, we must rethink our purpose and our way of educating our students.

We are here to educate: to teach and to nurture. The time is now to reinvent a new Jefferson High, a high school with graduates that are educated: literate, with a sense of the past, a vision for the future, an appreciation of the arts, a feeling for the suffering of the less fortunate, a commitment to decency and honesty, and a willingness to serve the community.

After the announcement of my appointment, one of my first tasks was to examine the then current master schedule. That schedule required three additional positions. As I was not prepared to request those additional positions, I worked with John Smith to create a new master schedule and introduce a new organizational structure. The attached one-page flyer summarized the key features of this new structure. It also provides you with the latest room assignments.

For the moment, this is my plan and my vision. Within a few weeks, I hope this will become our plan and our shared vision. In time, for Jefferson High to be an exemplary high school, a school staff, students, parents and the community can be proud of, this has to be your plan and your vision. I look forward to those days.

Sincerely yours,

Phil Lee

Exhibit 2

New Organizational Structure

Under the new Master Schedule Jefferson High School will be divided into six independent mini-schools, each called a Unit. Jefferson High will be, in effect, a federation of small schools with shared vision and common purpose.

Each of the six Units will consist of 120-150 regular, bilingual, and special education students. Each Unit will be run by six to eight regular, bilingual, and special education Group I subject teachers. [Group I subjects are mostly English, Math, Social Studies, and Sciences. Group I teachers are free of teaching duties when their students attend Group II subjects. Examples of Group II subjects are physical education, art, home economics, industrial arts, JROTC. For this year, world languages are considered to be Group II subjects.] An administrator will serve as the Unit leader. In addition, for this academic year Jefferson High will have small Units of bilingual and special education students.

These are the key features of a Unit:

- Each Unit is accountable for the well-being of its students.
- Each Unit is independent. It adopts its own administrative rules and policies, including disciplinary and grading policies.²
- Each Unit is responsible for the “Unit administrative duties.” Unit teachers will not be assigned other administrative duties.
- As much as possible, the classrooms of each Unit will be located in the same area. Except for the two assistant headmasters, who are assigned additional duties and responsibilities, all Unit leaders will have their office located in the same area as the Unit classrooms.
- Each Unit determines its own instructional approach and curricular emphasis. (The headmaster encourages a project-based, investigative approach.)
- Each Unit can establish its own teaching schedule and will no longer be limited to the traditional 48-minute classes.
- Each Unit is allocated a budget of \$5,000 for this academic year.
- Unit teachers share at least one hour (for most Units, two periods) of daily common non-teaching time.
- Unit teachers will meet with the Unit leaders regularly and with the headmaster at least once a week (on Mondays).

² *Certain decisions, such as the suspension of students or fiscal expenditure, must be unanimous decisions.

Exhibit 3

Professional Development Readings From The Harvard Business Review

Required Reading

<i>Title</i>	<i>Authors</i>
What Leaders Really Do	John Kotter
Fix the Process, Not the Problem	Harold Sirkin and George Stalk, Jr.
Successful Change Programs Begin with Results	Robert Schaffer and Harvey Thomson
How to Deal with Resistance to Change	Paul Lawrence
The Effective Decision	Peter Drucker
Management Time: Who's Got the Monkey?	William Oncken, Jr. and Donald Wass
How to Make a Team Work	Maurice Haraker and Bryan Ward
Understanding Power in Organizations	Jeffrey Pfeffer

Background Reading

<i>Title</i>	<i>Authors</i>
The Coming of the New Organization	Peter Drucker
Reengineering Work; Don't automate, Obliterate	Michael Hammer
The Transition Equation: A Proven Strategy for Organizational Change	J. Allan McCarthy
From Control to Commitment in the Workplace	Richard Walton
Leading Change: Why Transformation Efforts Fail	John Kotter
Leading Discontinuous Change: Ten Lessons from the Battlefield	David Lawrence
Five Requisites for Implementing Change	Robert Bauman
Managers and Leaders: Are They Different?	Abraham Zaleznik
Demand Better Results - And Get Them	Robert Schaffer
The Information Executives Truly Need	Peter Drucker
The Leader's New Work: Building Learning Organizations	Peter Senge
Building a Learning Organization	David Garvin