

Howard Teibel

On business officers as change advocates, the benefits of “failing fast,” a roadmap for making smart decisions about financial aid and much more. INTERVIEW BY LEAH THAYER



Howard Teibel is president of Teibel, Inc., a Boston-based education consulting firm that helps independent schools and other organizations by developing and implementing strategic plans, assisting with organizational restructurings, and conducting team-building and leadership development programs. He has worked in the field of organizational development for 30 years. In March, he led a workshop on “change leadership” at the NBOA Annual Meeting. www.teibelinc.com

1

Q After your Change Leadership Workshop, you blogged that the business officers you met were “hands-down the most excited group of change advocates I’ve met. This was a group energized and ready to engage their campuses deeply in positive change.”

Why do you think that is?

A I think it’s because there’s a real sense of urgency involving the challenges independent schools are facing. At the workshop, it wasn’t just business officers, but also heads of school, directors of HR and technology … entire leadership teams who recognize that their schools need to make some major changes to remain financially strong and academically and culturally compelling in the face of growing competition from charter and public schools.

2

Q Financial aid is a growing burden and a huge challenge. What do you see as keeping many schools from effectively confronting it?

A Financial aid has many interdependent relationships: enrollment numbers, tuition discount rates, the school’s history and culture,

its operating deficit or surplus. There is a high degree of concern that if you mess with any one of these elements, you could be in danger of affecting another. There’s this constant moving of the dials, and schools need to watch them at all times.

3

Q Can you provide an example?

A Sure. I was just talking to a college president. His school was in a challenging financial situation, so they experimented by modifying the discount rate, and in reducing it by 2 percent, the result was that many students chose to not attend. The school didn’t come close to making its class. The impact was in the millions.

4

Q What can independent schools do to avoid these kinds of mistakes?

A I think a better question is, how can we try new things that risk failure, but small failures? The concept of “failing fast” is an important

one in education reform. It’s only in experimentation that we learn how far we can test the model. It wasn’t that long ago that making decisions in silos was a sufficient way to work: facilities people made facilities decisions, IT people made IT decisions, enrollment and financial aid people made their decisions.

Today, forward-thinking heads are demanding a greater degree of real collaboration. It’s about getting collective agreement on mission, the markets to pursue and how to achieve a sufficient operating margin.

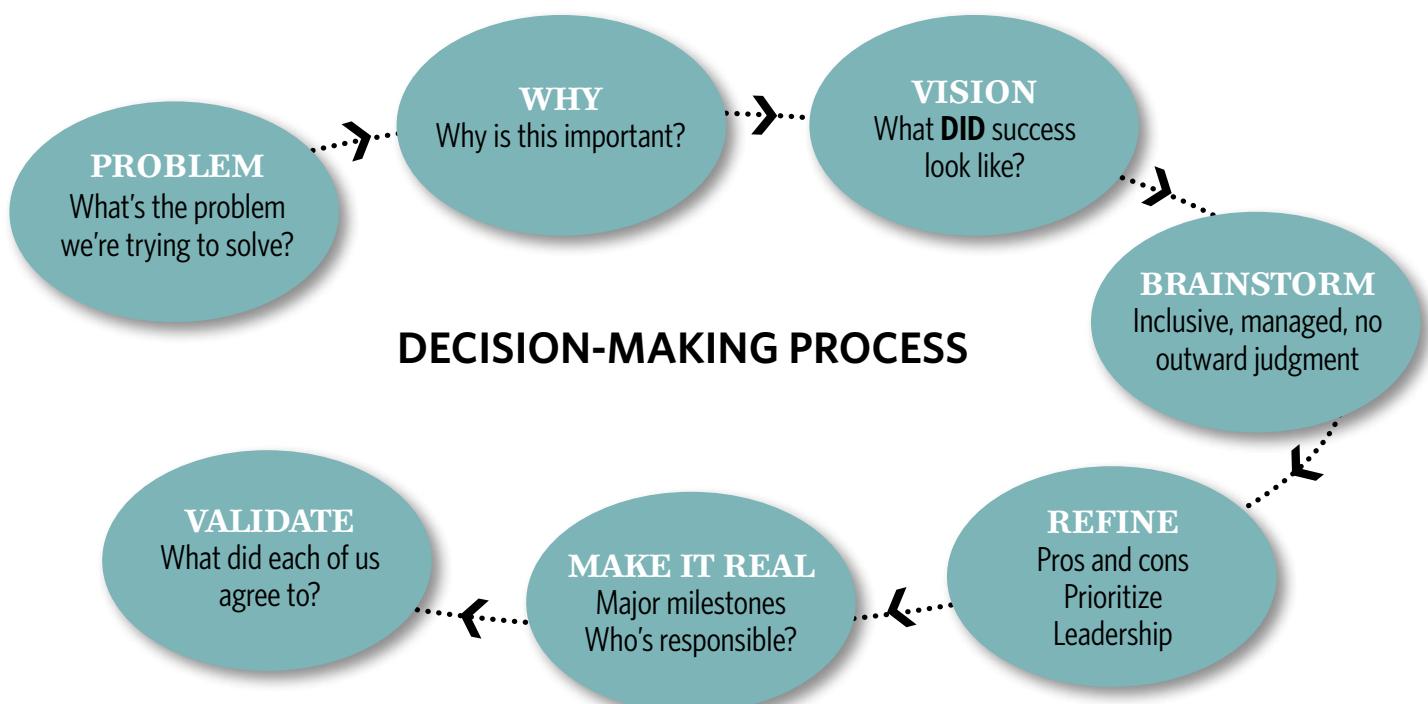
This is true collaborative leadership. Heads are in the unique position of either encouraging or discouraging it. Which way they go will probably be a function of their own comfort level with change and ambiguity.

5

Q Of course, decision-by-committee can lead to muddled outcomes. Advice?

A In making important decisions, teams need to have robust conversations and not skip important steps. I use a decision-making

“ THE CONCEPT OF ‘FAILING FAST’ IS AN IMPORTANT ONE IN EDUCATION REFORM. IT’S ONLY IN EXPERIMENTATION THAT WE LEARN HOW FAR WE CAN TEST THE MODEL.”



model that prevents the default behavior of trying to jump to a solution before really understanding the problem's root causes and symptoms. Schools need to do a better job analyzing the problems they're trying to solve, and visualizing the solutions they hope to achieve.

The reality is that we have a financial model that has worked well in good times. Schools need to be willing to step back from "how we've always done it" and look for a simpler or at least different way to bring in the enrollment that doesn't hold the school financially hostage. This is especially true for schools that don't have a track record of positive operating margins. We need more candid conversations about this dual need for financial stability and affordability. It comes down to either bringing in more students or scaling back programs and services.

6

Q Beyond the challenge of changing the financial aid model, of course, is changing families' expectations about it.

A Well, this is no one-size-fits-all industry. The decision-making model can help schools tell a story about why they're structured the way they are, how financial aid is a part of their mission, how it has been done traditionally, and how it needs to be part of a financially stable future. The model also helps with articulating why things need to change. It's about finding the right language to not only define the problem but the results you expect to emerge from the change.

7

Q What about sharing the story with the people who will actually execute the new strategy, do the work behind the change?

A Right, the message needs to be translated effectively throughout the organization. In order to create a healthy sense of urgency, you need to communicate two things well: the brutal facts, and a positive view of the future. The brutal facts speak to people who want to know you're being candid with them. The positive view inspires them. For instance: "We have a \$2 million operating gap, and our financial aid strategy is not sustainable. On the positive side, there is great demand for our program, our new strategic plan is about to be launched and we're very well positioned to address long-term challenges." It's about being candid and giving hope.

8

Q Any tips on getting both of these groups to listen in the first place?

A Here's where it's important to understand the difference between forcing change and inviting change. What too often happens is we get caught up in the weeds. We never have the "why conversation." We put out our plan instead of showing how it's going to lead to the vision. Think of it as going on a road show, meeting with faculty and every other stakeholder, and saying here's what we're trying to accomplish. Imagine reaching across the table and saying we need you to be part of the solution. ■