When you ask people, ‘What’s the opposite of fragile?,’ they tend to say robust, resilient, adaptable, solid, strong. That’s not it. The opposite of fragile is something that gains from disorder.

Nassim Nicholas Taleb
Board/Superintendent Relationship & Board/Community Relationship
Brief 3-Year History
Highlights from 2018-2019

ACTIONS TO DATE BASED ON RECOMMENDATIONS

- Moved Mitchell DAEP to Liberty Academy Site
- Liberty Early College Students merged to East and West High School supporting a more inclusive program.
- Liberty Academy expanded Credit Recovery program.
- Received Designation as a System of Great Schools District.
- Received Planning Grants for two School Action grants supporting expansion of Early Childhood and campus re-start programs.
- “Student as Learner” and “Student as Person” becomes a focus.
July 2019
Task Force present recommendations to Board of Trustees

August 2019
VISD Board of Trustees Adopt Resolution
Transform the Core of Learning

1. Learning Cultures
   Create new personalized learning cultures

2. Learning Structures
   Enable development of diverse learning structures

3. Talent Development
   Develop human capital around learning

4. Data & Digital Ecosystem
   Develop a learner-focused infrastructure and ecosystem

5. Assessment & Credentialing
   Enable new forms of assessment & credentialing

Transform Supporting Systemic Structures

6. Funding
   Establish equitable funding structures around student learning

7. Quality Assurance
   Establish new quality assurance frameworks

8. Community Ownership
   Foster community-wide ownership of learning

9. Leadership & Policy
   Foster courageous leadership and policymaking

10. Public Will
    Cultivate public will & understanding for transformation
The paradigm Shift

- Decision-making paradigm shift with Boards of Trustees and Community

- It is imperative that we move away from words like “engagement” and “buy-in” and towards words like “ownership”
Two thoughts...

- The smartest person in the room...

"Where you stand depends on where you sit."
- Nelson Mandela

IF YOU'RE THE SMARTEST PERSON IN THE ROOM, THEN YOU'RE IN THE WRONG ROOM.
The paradigm Shift

From “Communication” to “Radical Transparency”

“Radical Transparency” is our lifeblood

But, who gets to make what decisions?

Transparency is The New Green.
Governance isn’t rocket science…

...IT’S ACTUALLY MORE DIFFICULT!
What is an example of a complicated Decision we all face?
What is an example of a Complex Decision?
Leadership, evolved

You aren’t doing it wrong if no one knows what you are doing.
The paradigm Shift

The importance of the shift from “Closed and Knowing” to “Open and Learning”
The paradigm Shift

From Accountability to Responsibility

ACCOUNTABILITY VS RESPONSIBILITY
(a subtle but very powerful difference)
The paradigm Shift

From Competent to Compassionate

The Power of COMPASSION
The paradigm Shift

From open-minded to open-hearted

An open heart is an open mind.

Dalai Lama XIV
The paradigm Shift

From excuse to explain
The paradigm Shift

Exchanges

From feedback to feed-forward

The difference between “who you are” and “Who you are becoming”
The paradigm Shift

From Commitment (rational or irrational) to Discipline (knowledge or instruction)
BE BRAVE ENOUGH TO SUCK AT SOMETHING NEW.
From Thank you...

To Profound Gratitude...
The first time I came across the difference between the words complex and complicated was several years ago. I had just come through a difficult bond campaign in a fast-growing Iowa school district where I was superintendent. The $80 million bond referendum in 2017 was voted down by the community.

I learned a lot from that experience — notably that whether a bond campaign will be successful or not mostly depends on a good plan and a good communication campaign. In the Iowa district, we had a communications campaign, which involved gathering input and holding community forums. I received some feedback from the community, but something in my DNA was telling me there was more than just traditional public communication at work.

When I subsequently encountered research literature about complex versus complicated decisions, it was as though a bell went off in my head, signaling to me this is where we had messed up. I believe I’ve now changed in how I lead with my board of education as superintendent of a 14,000-student district in south Texas and in the language we use.

The language of leadership has been changing dramatically in our schools and in our communities. The ubiquitous presence of social media has a lot to do with that. Digital presence and digital voice are growing exponentially, and we must adapt our leadership to accommodate the social media beast.

Some leaders have tried to resist (at their own peril). If you have not noticed, let me state the obvious: The language of leadership evolved in the past decade in substantial (and positive) ways. Some of the words we have traditionally used are mostly gone from our vocabulary and have been replaced by a new lexicon of leadership.

For the last several years, I have been intrigued with companies, corporations and school districts that have moved beyond the traditional communications campaigns and strategies and into the world of better governance and more robust leadership in this new era. As this new language of governance takes root, it brings a new language of leadership for all of us to embrace and master.

This change in language is important because the language we use tends to frame how we view the world. The traditional language always viewed the world in such a way that the leader needed to have the right answer. The new language of leadership comes with the recognition that leaders don’t always hold the answers but must be able to create ownership around the conversation.
Seeing Differences

Today, I have come to realize the nature of board work is all about recognizing the difference between complex and complicated. In essence, complicated is anything that requires a technical expertise, typically takes years to master and usually has one right answer. Building an engine for a space shuttle is complicated work. I would not hire any of my superintendent colleagues to do this work because I’m fairly certain none know how to do it!

Creating a school district budget is complicated. Adopting a curriculum is complicated. Creating schedules for students and staff is complicated. We and our staff members should be doing this work.

What about the decision to close a school building? When is the right time to run a bond campaign? These two questions are not complicated, but they are complex. The complex almost never has one right answer, is filled with ambiguity and is ever-changing.

Mastering Lingo

Successful superintendents must master the leadership language to effectively differentiate between the complex and the complicated and then work with their boards and/or their staffs to handle each appropriately.

When I first started with my current school board two years ago, I explained I have a staff to deal with the complicated. These staff members are experts in their field and if they don’t have the answers, they know how to find the answers.

I asked my board trustees to be my partners in insisting that only the complex issues come before us in a governance setting. In holding ourselves to this standard, we have standing task forces, made up of volunteers throughout our community to address the complex issues we are facing. My board trustees are masterful in reaching out into our community and encouraging people to participate on our task forces to ensure it’s not the loudest voices that get their way, but the most thoughtful idea that rises to the top.

Last year, one of our local newspaper reporters sat in to observe our task forces as we were talking about closing four schools and rezoning a large portion of our school district. About 150 task force members were meeting regularly in person, using a digital tool to solicit feedback from our community asynchronously and sharing it with others. The reporter described the experience first as watching the inside of a beehive. Some people would head in one direction, others would head in a different direction, still others would head online, and everyone would reconvene from time to time to share what they had learned.

A few weeks later, the reporter came back to me and indicated it wasn’t a beehive so much as it was a social brain that was learning. I got goosebumps. When your community is described as a social brain making decisions based on what they think is
best for kids, great things start happening.

As our community task force on student learning would ask difficult questions, the administrative staff had been charged with staying alert to when the task force would start to move from the complex to the complicated. For example, I remember one meeting when a task force member said something like, “If we close this particular school, what will the implications be on the transportation routes? We should get a look at those routes for the next meeting.” At this point, the staff member who was leading that particular group gently reminded the task force of the charge (complex versus complicated) and indicated that the staff will work on routing information and bring a potential solution forward for the next meeting.

I will close this part of the story by sharing the outcome. After almost eight months of work, it was members of the task force who elected to come to the school board meeting to make the final recommendation to close these four campuses and merge the students with other campuses and to rezone a portion of our district. Were there still community members who were upset? Of course.

Everyone in the community had the opportunity to know what the task forces were working on and there were countless avenues for conversation and input. The use of the digital tool was essential for those individuals who were not participants in the task forces. They could still share their thoughts and read the comments of others, and that helped them feel as if they too had a voice in the discussion.

Accessible Knowledge
This has been a paradigm shift for our board of trustees and has led to some of the most interesting conversations I have ever been a part of in any community that I’ve served in a leadership role.

Board governance is hard. In some ways, governance is harder than leadership. Board relations with the superintendent are critical, and I now advocate for all of us to embrace this new language of leadership. Board relations with the superintendent often break down when a superintendent tries to make the complex seem complicated and when we tend to make decisions on behalf of our board or our community because we think we have some privileged knowledge on a topic.

Once upon a time in the years before social media, we could embrace the complex with our board and come up with a solution we thought was best. The times have changed. We now live in a digital era, which means our privileged knowledge from yesteryear is gone. When we sit in a city council meeting or just about any other public meeting, the existing knowledge is easily shared and available to everyone present, and we should assume our community has access to it. As such, we need to adopt a new language with our board members and our community to open the door for these conversations to occur in meaningful ways.

The leadership language shift needs to happen for all of us. Several years ago, I walked away from the word engagement. I haven’t used the word in years, and I’m now to the point that I chastise others when I hear it used. Engaging our stakeholders is a recipe for disaster in almost every circumstance. When you hear this word, my advice is to run. What we are after in Victoria, Texas, is ownership. We want community ownership for the decisions we are making. We want ownership around tax decisions, some budget decisions, the classroom technology decisions, facility bond decisions and strategic planning decisions, but we have a few. We are all about ownership around the complex.

A New Era
Improved board relations with the community lead to improved board relations with the superintendent. As superintendents, we ought to feel it is incumbent to usher in this new era of decision making. We can do so by helping our board members and community members recognize we are going to separate the complex from the complicated and handle these areas of decision making differently. We will find our decisions are almost always better. They will be better received by our community and allow for transformative change in our communities.

It is not unlike the time our ancestors years ago first discovered fire. There were some who embraced an entirely new language around the applications of fire, and it changed their world (think food, farming, weapons and tools). There were others who presumably didn’t change and who eventually became extinct.

Our world continues to evolve and this is our charge to adopt a new language of leadership and governance to really lead forward in our communities.

QUINTIN SHEPHERD is superintendent of Victoria Independent School District in Victoria, Texas. E-mail: Quintin.shepherd@visd.net. Twitter: @qshepherd
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