



Service: A Continuation of our Mission

January 2006

MOISD MISSION

Helping Schools Help Students

The last five months we have focused on revisiting the MOISD's mission through the eyes of the book, Good to Great by Jim Collins. The Mecosta-Osceola Intermediate School District does not want to be just another ISD, but the best ISD in the State. Three groups contributed to this process: the local Superintendents, the ISD Board of Education, and the ISD Administrative Team. The process involved the reading of chapters in the text, discovering the kernels of knowledge and the potential applications, and discussing the implications of the findings in regards to our mission. At the core of the exercise was the desire to improve the MOISD – to progress from Good to Great!

Although the text was more of a “business approach” to taking a company from the survival and existence mode to becoming a great institution, it was still very valuable; many of these principles can easily apply to education. It is obvious there are some inherent and systemic hurdles to change that we face which differ from private industry. Conversely, there are other variables that make our mission easier than the private sector. For example, some of the unique internal hurdles for change schools face - politics, tenure regulations, financial structure, administrative turn-over, contractual configuration, and institutional history, just to name a few. Some outside forces for change are the concentrated level of highly-educated personnel, educational research, and legislative decisions. In general, ISD's and local school districts wrestle with these issues from different perspectives than business.

The overriding principle in the text was: the Hedgehog Concept – an intersection of three questions: 1) What drives our (economic) engine; 2) What should we be passionate about; and 3) What can we be the best at? After meeting with all three groups for the past five months, it is apparent the MOISD already has the correct mission in place. This mission found in the 1980's motto was summarized by our predecessors: Helping Schools Help Students; best summarized into one word - SERVICE. The MOISD can become more passionate about service to the locals, but we must first realize that the locals need to drive our engine. The MOISD's number one priority should be “Helping Schools Help Students”, not the reverse.

Almost twenty years ago, our predecessors wrote the MOISD motto of Helping Schools Help Students. Throughout the discussions over the previous five months with the MOISD Board, local Superintendents, and the Administrative Team, it is apparent we have two competing ideologies at the MOISD: 1) helping schools improve so they can help students succeed; and 2) by helping students succeed, we help the local schools improve. Both thought processes are positive outlooks of education, but one distracts us from the MOISD's original mission. Some of the programs/services at the MOISD continue to survive on the premise that the local school districts need this program/service whether they know it or not; this viewpoint is in opposition to our mission. Other programs are correctly focused on meeting the needs of the locals first. By assisting the locals with what they need to improve, we are helping students succeed. No one is questioning the heart or efforts of the MOISD staff carrying out programs/services of the second ideology, but it is apparent the MOISD cannot have two competing missions and go from "Good to Great".

There are four questions (filters) which are excellent evaluators for our mission found in the text and in group discussions. If the MOISD is going to go from "Good to Great", we need to ask these four questions of each move we make: 1) Does the program we offer fit the mission of SERVICE to the locals; 2) What are the "brutal facts" surrounding the program as it pertains to the locals' needs; 3) Are the right people in place to lead it to greatness; and 4) Is the program bringing the desired results for the locals? If the program doesn't meet those four criteria, then the service/program should be eliminated or adjusted until it can answer all four of the questions appropriately.

Filter 1: Does the program/service we offer fit the mission of SERVICE to the locals?

The author gives numerous examples of businesses that were distracted by outside forces and "jumped on the latest bandwagon" to their detriment. Inherent in the "Hedgehog Concept" is the principle to be great as we focus on one thing and maximize its potential. The fox was speedy, full of ideas and energy, but lacked focus and perseverance in completing the task at hand. The hedgehog focused on one thing. In the case of the MOISD, SERVICE to the local schools should be our only focus.

Another implication for the company concentrating ONLY on one objective is the need to discontinue or adapt current programs that are not serving the mission of the organization, regardless of its value to portions of the company. In the MOISD's case, we must be careful to not allow a self-preservation mode to kick in regarding programs/services not wanted by the locals. Our motto is Helping Schools who then Help Students, NOT Helping Students so the Schools can be helped. The semantics indicated here are two entirely different trains of thought and have enormous consequences when put into practice.

One could argue the MOISD leadership will be in a reactive mode to the local districts' needs and not promoting vision for the local systems. Again, should the creation of local vision be the MOISD's role? A "we know how to do it better" attitude creates incongruence with the "Good to Great" model and is in juxtaposition to a local SERVICE motto. First, this attitude assumes the students attending MOISD programs are "ours" to begin with and second, the locals do not know how, or could never know how, to do the task as well as the MOISD.

Our role in leadership and vision at the ISD level should be: 1) attempt to assist the locals to understand the value of the current MOISD programs and services; 2) promote the coordination of their cumulative needs into cooperative programs that meet their individual and collective needs; and 3) assist in the assessment of their local systemic needs that may only be met through an ISD program of cooperation. If the MOISD can't create the program or service to meet the local need, then it is our responsibility to search for an equivalent solution.

Although we may be able to accomplish some tasks "better" than the local school systems because of our location, size, revenue resources, and/or collection of personnel, the questions must always come back to our mission of SERVICE to the locals. The better questions to ask: 1) How can we assist them to work this program better; 2) Can we suggest organizing more levels of cooperation to better assist them in this area; and 3) What are we hiding from the locals that renders them incapable of becoming great in this area? Any institutional structural mechanism that provides an internal advantage should be harnessed to provide a better service to the local school district. Perhaps more and better communication/education with the locals is the key to greater understanding in this area.

Conversely, the MOISD's ability to manage a program/service better is not the only reason it should continue. If the local district hasn't learned of its value, then it is the job of the MOISD to educate the local districts of its potential or current value to their particular district. Additionally, there may be a need to adapt the "outstanding" program/service to meet the local needs. If corrective adaptation cannot be accomplished to meet the locals' needs, then it must be discontinued. Again, ISD self-preservation is not our mission, nor is Helping Students our direct mission – it is Helping Schools Help Students. We best accomplish that mission through the attitude of SERVICE.

Filter 2: What are the "brutal facts" surrounding this program/service as it pertains to the local needs?

One of the most important principles in this book was the power of "confronting the brutal facts" of the situation. The author's use of the word "brutal" implies two types of challenges inherent with companies in general. First, companies that morph from "Good to Great" are able to put their problems on the table and talk about them, even though it may be unpopular or uncomfortable. Second, the negative implication of the word "brutal" establishes the possibility of drastic action to address problems and/or find solutions.

The best illustration in the text of confronting brutal facts was a reference to the Stockdale Syndrome: Vietnam prisoners of war that were optimistic, but not realistic about their potential release from prison, died. Those prisoners that realized release was not an option, lived. The brutal facts, although hard to process, saved their lives while the others perished because they refused to face the facts. Again, education struggles with this concept. We are historically a system of protectors, not a system of evaluators.

The author also used the word "confront" to emphasize the importance of addressing the skeletons in the closet. Many companies, including ISDs and locals, do not have a strong record of addressing issues from a confrontational position. Many systemic variables, both internal and external, assist in the problem. The single greatest road block in education in regards to brutal-fact confrontation is the type of employee that works in an educational system. Educators are "helpers" by nature and their inability to confront the "brutal facts" has enabled them to remain a culture of

protectors. In the business world, companies that don't examine the hard questions just disappear from the business landscape.

Filter 3: Are the “right people” in place to lead it to greatness?

Industry has an advantage over the educational world in this area. The text was very emphatic in three particular areas: 1) system “vision” is totally worthless, if the right people are not in the right spot to complete the task; 2) it is more important to get the right people on your team than it is to create a vision or direction for others to follow; and 3) the right people, in the right spots, are the number one secret for taking a company from “Good to Great”.

Two of these three points apply quite fully to our system; however, vision is probably more important in education than in the business world for two reasons. First, the archaic structure of educational systems invites slower change and second, the ability to make total program changes usually takes months and years, not weeks and months as is the case in the business world. Program vision will continue to be a key to success at the MOISD. The Administrative Team must think five years down the trail at all times. As each administrator focuses their programs to meet the needs of the locals, they need to hire and engage the right people that will maximize the MOISD's usefulness to meet those local needs whether the program/service is completed at the MOISD site or at the local school district.

Filter 4: Is the program bringing the desired results for the locals?

As the local districts focus more and more on making data-driven decisions, we too must focus on the data that may assist our decision-making, with one over-riding caveat – the needs of the locals. As pointed out earlier, there are options at this point in the model if the two parties view the same program/service differently. It may be possible the MOISD needs to communicate more with the locals about their needs in this area in order to refocus the program/service. When the MOISD discovers data which may support the programs/services in question, but does not properly educate the local district of its potential value to their district, it becomes the responsibility of the MOISD to double its efforts to educate the locals on its value and/or remove the hurdles. If the parties do not agree, then the local can carry the blame for not adapting; the lack of local change does not

abdicate the MOISD's responsibility of trying to meet the desired local request. In the end, if a local school district does not wish a MOISD service to continue and the obstructive hurdles cannot be removed, the MOISD must change.

One of the discoveries we learned in reading this text, is its philosophical resonance with local superintendents of how an ISD should operate. Personally, as a former local teacher, assistant principal, principal, and superintendent, I can distinctly remember the ISD's value to me increasing as I climbed the educational ladder of leadership. The reason was very simple: the closer the contact with the Board of Education, the greater the economic responsibility. Money impacts educational choices. Although this may not be the best model, it is a "brutal fact". In this era of tighter economic times in the State of Michigan, the value of the MOISD will continue to be evaluated by the locals through economic glasses.

The discussion surrounding this text became an exercise in clarity and a solidification of principles valued in the role of an ISD. The local school districts have only one way to disagree with MOISD systems and programs; remove themselves from the table. If you corner the local school districts around the State and ask them what are the purposes of an ISD and their connection to it, the responses would have the following two perspectives: 1) "We appreciate what our ISD does for our district"; or 2) "they are not helpful in solving my local district problems". Behind both answers begs the larger question: Is that ISD worried about self-preservation or service to locals? If the local is not appreciative, then it is highly likely the ISD is not helping to solve the local problems and meeting their needs. It is my opinion, that the MOISD is generally viewed in a very positive light by the locals. It is the opinion of the local superintendents, the MOISD's chances of becoming the best ISD in the State of Michigan is not far out of reach. Revisiting and refocusing on our mission will help push the MOISD to the top of the mountain.

Perhaps an analogy of a pitcher pouring water (programs/services) through four sets of filters (questions) to a glass (local needs) is a better way to imagine the importance of evaluative decision making (See Diagram). It is imperative for the MOISD to scrutinize each program/service before implementation can begin and/or the evaluation of a current program can be complete. The "filter" concept implies nothing can make it to the "glass" of local needs without passing through the mechanism. If a program/service has

to survive by going around a filter, it must be pulled or modified until it can pass through ALL of the filters. Only then will the MOISD truly meet the locals' needs in the purist form.

Therefore, in the interest of providing direction and clarity to the MOISD Administrative Team, local Superintendents, local Boards of Education, and the MOISD Board of Education, the MOISD will be re-emphasizing the importance of following our mission of Helping Schools Help Students with a concentrated focus of SERVICE to the local school districts. The last five months of discussion has brought this concept to the forefront. The Administrative Team, teachers, and staff will continue to focus its attention to the detail of meeting the locals' needs.

The MOISD Board of Education has asked the Superintendent of the MOISD to provide goals for a 5-year plan for our future. With this in mind, the "Good to Great" book helped provide a natural catalyst to focus our system for the next five years. After the five-month long discussion, three goals that fit the mission of the MOISD rose to the surface: revisit, evaluate, and report.

Goal 1: Revisit

The ISD Superintendent will semi-annually focus an exercise with the local superintendents on their current and projected needs in relationship to the current programs and services of the MOISD. Each MOISD program Director will also participate in an exercise with their counter-parts throughout the systems to assess the current and future needs of the locals. The Essential Services document provided by the State can assist in providing direction in this area.

Goal 2: Evaluate

The MOISD Administrative Team will evaluate all new and continuing programs/services through the filtering model before implementation or continuation. Each program/service will need to pass through all four filters before it can begin or continue. Programmatic evaluations will occur before the end of each fiscal year in written form to the MOISD Superintendent. The MOISD Superintendent will work with the Administrative Team and local Superintendents to devise a useful reporting tool.

Goal 3: Report

The MOISD Superintendent will develop an annual written report at the end of the fiscal year for the MOISD Board of Education, local Superintendents, and local Boards of Education on each program and service in order to provide better information for the local school districts to meet the needs of their systems.

If the MOISD truly desires to become the greatest ISD in the State of Michigan, it is imperative for us to re-emphasize our commitment to the MOISD motto written during the 25th anniversary of Michigan's Intermediate School District celebration in 1987: "Helping Schools Help Students".

This is an honorable and attainable mission, but one not easily sustained as it will require constant communication, evaluation, and self-reflection on programs and services carried out by the MOISD. It was German-born American Physicist Albert Einstein, who correctly stated, "Only a life lived in the service of others is worth living." If the MOISD wishes to continue its quest to proceed from "Good to Great" in every area of our service, only an MOISD program focused on service is worth keeping.

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