# Cover Sheet

Article Title:           Of Cows, Sheep, and Leading Change

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**Of Cows, Sheep, and Leading Change**
David McKay Boren

When I was eleven years old my parents moved our family to a small farm. Shortly before moving, my dad's friend, Hal, who had grown up on a farm, warned: "Whatever you do on the farm, do NOT get cows. Cows will teach your kids to swear." True to form, shortly after moving, my dad bought a cow and calf. The calf, who we named Hal, grew over time to be an enormous, fence-breaking steer.

One day Hal busted through the fence and my cousin and I were sent to bring him back to our property. With a rope, a stick, and an abundance of naïve overconfidence, we set forth to conquer Hal. When we found Hal, one of us lassoed him and pulled from the front while the other pushed and hit from behind with the stick. We pushed, pulled and hit with all we had. Hal didn't budge. We tried again. No movement. After an eternity of pushing, pulling, hitting, and yelling, no progress had been made. My dad came to check on our progress, and almost fell over laughing. My wise father said something like, "Hal's not moving unless he wants to move! So, how can we help him want to move?" He instructed us to stand on either side of Hal to provide a loose boundary, while he stood in front of Hal with a bucket of feed, slowly walking back to our property line. Looking back, it seems laughable that as two young adolescents with a combined weight of maybe 250 pounds, we thought we could muscle a fiery 1,500+ pound steer that didn't want to move.

As a young new principal I was charged to help a seasoned faculty make fairly significant changes. Armed with a lot of great ideas from graduate school and my new positional authority, I was naively overconfident that I could force my faculty to go where I wanted them to go. Looking back, this seems even more laughable than trying to force Hal to move. While we eventually made some exciting improvements as a school, here are a few change principles I wish I had better understood at the time.

1. **Provide inspiration and urgency.**

Hal's urgency and inspiration came from an empty stomach and a bucket of grain. For educators engaged in complex and creative tasks, establishing inspiration and urgency will require much more than simple monetary stipends or extra preps (Pink, 2011). Simon Sinek explains that "those who are able to inspire give people a sense of purpose or belonging that has little to do with any external incentive or benefit gained" (2009, p. 6). Like most educators, my teachers were passionate, competent, noble individuals motivated by what was best for kids. When teachers understood the why behind a change, they were much more willing to give it a try.

2. **Examine evidence together.**

Unfortunately, in education we have too often relied "on gut feelings about what's working and what isn't" (Bernhardt, 2000, p. 33). Early in my tenure as principal, I was the only one really looking at the evidence-based research, meaning that I was the only one with any sort of ownership for any particular change initiative. "People stop being so arbitrarily demanding when they are part of the process" (Wheatley, 1997, p. 25). Including my teachers in the process of examining evidence to identify needed improvements resulted in much greater ownership for co-developed solutions to meet our needs.

3. **Leverage a guiding coalition.**

I learned fairly quickly that the school leadership team needed to own and promote whatever change we were pursuing. Rick DuFour and colleagues explain: "If you can't persuade a small group of people

of the merits of an idea and enlist their help, there is little chance you will persuade the larger group" (2016, p. 27). Fullan and colleagues encourage leaders to leverage "the group to change the group" (2017, p. 31). If we can inspire buy-in and ownership among our school's opinion leaders, they can then much more effectively promote it among the rest of the faculty.

### 4. Run a pilot.

Large corporations would never dream of rolling out a new product without running at least one pilot. Pilot programs allow schools to work out the inevitable bugs of solid programs, as well as identify weaker programs that should not be scaled up schoolwide. Sometimes pilot programs allow us a safe way to "get started, then get better" (Eaker & Keating, 2009, p. 51).

### 5. Enlist the advice of outside experts.

Outside experts can be nationally recognized presenters or teachers in the school down the street. Once after a full day meeting with a national presenter my leadership team said, "David, we need to..." I was thinking, "I've been trying to tell you this for over a year," but out loud I said, "What a great idea! How can we make it work?" Not sure about how to make it work, we visited some other schools in our area, and met with some of their best teachers, who for that initiative, were indeed outside experts. The very rationale I had been using for a year was much more palatable coming from others outside of the school.

### 6. Learn and grow together.

It is easy as a leader to feel frustrated when teachers resist due to an apparent lack of vision. Rather than wasting time and energy brooding about their incompetence, let's find ways to grow together. "Effective leaders . . . are vigilant about ensuring people have ready access to the most relevant information and that the group has collectively studied the information" (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008, p. 124).

### 7. Limit initiatives.

A Russian proverb states: "If you chase two rabbits, you won't catch either one." It is easy to spread ourselves too thin with too many initiatives.  "A major failure of education reform has been its exhaustive and exhausting call for doing 'more,' without identifying what to do less of" (Wagner & Dintersmith, 2015, p. 260). Some teachers may be waiting to see if this change ends up as yet another flavor-of-the-month change that will soon be abandoned for yet another change.

### 8. Stay tight on what and loose on how.

Principals "can be 'loose' about what means are used to achieve an end, but they are unshakably 'tight' on the end itself. Principals do not empower others by disempowering themselves. They cannot send the message that everything is acceptable: They must stand for something…Empowered teachers and strong principals are not mutually exclusive" (DuFour and Eaker, 1998, pp. 187–188).

### 9. Provide support and build capacity.

"When you talk about school improvement, you are talking about people improvement. That is the only way to improve schools" (Sparks, 1984, p. 35). Whether it's a well-placed question during collaboration, providing a substitute so teams can learn together, enlisting the help of a coach, reflecting with a team leader, sharing an article, or a casual but focused conversation in the hallway, we should always provide support and build the capacity of our teachers during the change process.

### 10. Build real, caring relationships.

While my dad was buying cows, my mom was buying sheep. My mom loved her sheep. She named each one and spent time each day with her "sheepies." I had no regard for the sheep and spent as little time as possible with them. Like cows, sheep have a knack for pushing boundaries and getting through

fences. Whenever this happened, which was frequently, my siblings and I had to get the sheep back into the corral. Our primary approach for gathering the sheep was to run behind them with sticks, yelling and herding them back toward the corral. One night while gathering the sheep, the yell and herd method wasn't working. When we were ready to leave the sheep to the coyotes, my mom came out, and with a knowing grin, began calling to her sheep, by name. The response was miraculous as each sheep came directly to my mom and followed her to the corral.

If sheep can sense when someone really cares about them, we as humans are even more attuned to these subtle nuances (Fullan, 2019). Do we ever treat our teachers like livestock, objects to be driven at will to support our vision, with what Martin Buber (1970) calls a very self-serving I-It relationship, rather than the more respectful I-Thou relationship? "Effective leaders know that people are not their best asset; they are their only asset, so the need to nurture, develop, and strengthen relationships is at the very core of what good leaders do" (Leithwood et. al, 2013, p. 261). Real improvement is accompanied by real, caring relationships.

**Conclusion**
Each of our schools needs to move and improve. Do we ever try to force our faculties to go where we want them to go? School change and improvement sometimes feel like moving a 1,500-pound steer or gathering a flock of scattered sheep. Rather than pushing, pulling, hitting, herding, yelling, or even swearing, let us find caring and thoughtful processes for working *with* our faculties so that we can better move and change together.

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