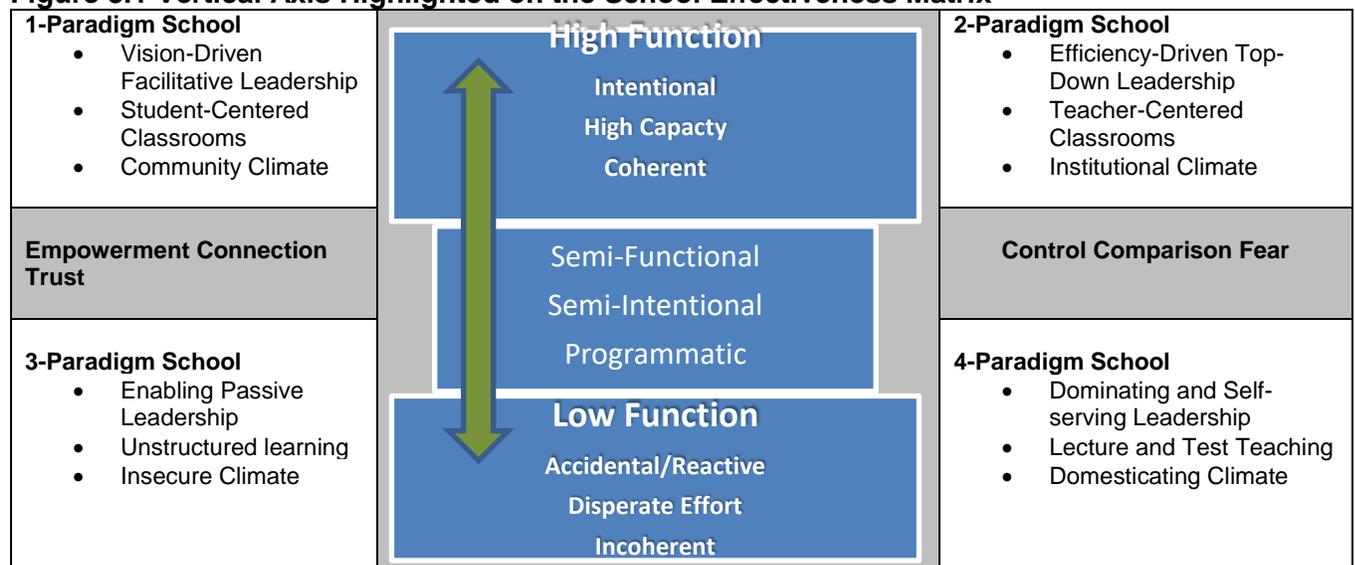


Chapter 3: The Vertical Axis: Examining the Level of Function and Intention within the School

This chapter explores the vertical axis of the school paradigm matrix that we will use to build the overall school effectiveness roadmap. This axis represents the level of intentionality and function for a school (or classroom, or individual). It is the “how” to the horizontal axis’s “what” and “why.” It does not imply the kind of intentions that are guiding a school but does infer that the stronger and better defined those intentions are the more effectively the school will function. Understanding what it takes to move up this vertical axis is critical to schools in all stages of an improvement process, but it especially so for schools that are early in the process. And so the considerations introduced here will be central to our discussion of how to move up the references, practices and outcomes (R-X-O’s) from lower to higher levels of function in chapter eleven.

The essential elements that make up the conceptual nature of the vertical axis are 1) intention, 2) capacity, 3) coherence, and 4) efficiency. The extent that these qualities are addresses and operating effectively will define the overall function level of a school, and thus the height of its location on the school effectiveness roadmap. The essential qualities of this vertical axis are depicted in the center column of the school paradigm matrix in Figure 3.1.

Figure 3.1 Vertical Axis Highlighted on the School Effectiveness Matrix



What is Intention, and Why is Growth so Dependent on it?

Intention is essentially having a picture of where you want to go and an awareness of what is good for everyone (individually and collectively), and then using that picture to guide your choices. We can call it a vision or a purpose or goals. But if we want to improve our school and move up the pathway, we will need a vision to pull us upward. If we were to identify some of the ways that the most intentional institutions operate we would see some of the following elements.

- There is a set of guiding values (R/references) that operate both implicitly and explicitly. That means people know them, understand them and appreciate why they are valuable.
- There is a vision. People know what the idea of “a good school” looks like and what people do there. What would the school look like if it was meeting its full potential?

- There is a definition of quality and success. Good X/Actions/practices are operationalize – including an intentional definition of “the way we do things around here.
- There is a shared understanding of how we are going to get from point A (current state) and point B (our vision). Process values are emphasized over product values.
- There is a well-defined picture of the school’s intended product. What should a student have learned in their time at the school? What qualities define our graduates? What do we need to orient our new students with to they understand what the school is about and how they can succeed?

Capacity and Encouraging Structures that Maximize Potential

An institution will be able to move up the function continuum to the extent that it takes advantage of and/or builds its capacity. Capacity relates mostly to the extent to which the human capital is harnessed for the benefit of quality systems and outcomes for the whole. Analogies would be such things as the yield of a garden or the extent of the utilization of the individual skills and use of teamwork among the players on a team. There is a vast array of variables that will influence the extent to which an institution or classroom is maximizing its potential – many of them related to complex people skills, but for an examination related to the vertical axis we will focus mostly on organizational structures. Some of the ways schools that are effective at optimizing the capacity of human and organizational elements at the school include.

- Structures in place that provide a means for individual teachers and students to share expertise and collaborate. One of the most effective is for the school to embrace what it means to be a true “professional learning community,” which we will expand upon later in the book. Another is to develop expertise in developing the cooperative learning skills within the classroom.
- Structures in place to make informed decisions. Ideally, schools are best served when there is a committee of committed individuals that possess a good deal of expertise, who digest key data and insights relevant to the schools purpose and performance, process that data, and uses it to inform the school’s agenda, strategic planning, and improvement efforts.
- Likewise, there are structures in place to include student voice and include students in decisions that most affect them.
- Creativity and growth is encouraged. New ideas are welcome. And a systemic process of self-reflection is structurally embedded.
- Professional development (coherently aligned to the schools intention) is cultivated that includes both external expertise and perspective as well as internal expertise.

Example of an intentional quality at a school
From interviews

Coherence – It needs to all work in harmony

What our research says is that everything is connected and consequential. So attaining higher levels of function require coherence among the elements in the school. Keeping in mind the R-X-O sequence, it is essential that the references (values, visions, missions, beliefs, narratives, etc.) that drive the actions at the school are congruent, and that the actions/X’s/practices are congruent with both the references and one another. What our experience tells us is that initially most school leaders assume this to be true about their schools practices and policies, but in most cases, when they examine their climate and function data related to this area they find that it not the case. Incoherence is the norm, and has become increasingly so given the ever

expanding number of imposed external values, policies and competing public and professional demands.

In the book *Coherence*, Fullan and Quinn (2016) outlines a series of what they term “drivers” (and fit into the broad category of what we call R/references) that lead to either more or less coherence. The list will be useful as we build a pathway up the effectiveness roadmap. But what we find is that they are quite challenging to the current way many schools are run, so what they identifies as the right drivers are less commonly used as guiding references than those they suggest are the wrong drivers.

Table 3.x Fullan and Quinn’s Right and Wrong Drivers from the book *Coherence*

Right Drivers	Wrong Drivers
1. Focused Direction	1. External Accountability
2. Collaborative Culture	2. Individualism
3. Deep Learning	3. Technology
4. Internal Accountability	4. Ad hoc policies

One of the key take-away insights from exploring these lists is the implication that schools can be working hard at applying the wrong drivers. What we see is that many schools are working hard at being stuck in a middle level of function, as a result of their guiding references not being sound and coherent. In our examination of schools we find that most schools will improve more by 1) rethinking their guiding references and 2) stopping the use of certain X’s/practices than they would by adding new programs or working harder at their current R’s and X’s. As we build the complete school effectiveness roadmap and pathway, the reader will see that emphasizing the right drivers and deemphasizing the wrong drivers will be necessary to move up to higher levels of effectiveness.

We might think of coherence as harmony and congruence. In its most powerful application, it looks like a well-functioning team, systems that have been internalized, shared vision, high levels of intrapersonal confidence and trust, the micro and the macro being aligned, and the absence of the feeling that you are asked to violate one value to meet another value, or use practices that feels wrong. But in its more common and pragmatic application coherence in a school or classroom appears as consistency of policy, alignment of curriculum, program fidelity, quality control and uniform standards of practice (See Table 3.x). Some of the ways that a school can encourage coherence include the following.

- Creating a list of practices that “one should see” and a list of those that “one should not see” at the school based on a high quality intention/R (I recommend using the construct “psychology of success.”)
- Aligning professional development with the mission of the school.
- Aligning the teacher evaluation process with the highest values/R’s of the school.
- Making decisions about the furniture and physical environments in the classrooms based on the highest learning values/R’s at the school.
- Regularly auditing practices and policies for congruence with one another and the highest values/R’s at the school.
- Checking in on how everyone feels about using certain practices or policies.

Efficiency – Everything Works on a Practical Level

A school could be considered more or less functional to the extent that things at the school work in an ordered fashion and the results are desirable and reflect quality (See Figure 3.1). In other words, things are working to get us where we want to go. But, we have to be careful when we conceive what we mean by “what works.” In a technical sense, everything works. Every action/X works to produce some outcome/O. What we have done at our school has worked to produce what we have currently. We have to consider not just if things are working, but if they are working to encourage our highest R’s, desirable long-term results, and sustainability.

On a practical level if the procedural, day-to-day policies, routines, bureaucratic and housekeeping issues are not in order, things will feel off and people will be frustrated. We have all seen a little thing become a big thing when it interferes with the well-being of either the students or the adults at the school. It is difficult to appreciate having a well-designed car when we keep losing our keys, or have a flat tire. Our ability to enjoy the sense of ease and comfort to be able to think creatively, feel secure, trust one another, etc, are all dependent on things running smoothly on a practical level. The following are some of the ways we can encourage our schools (or classrooms) level of efficiency include the following.

- Recognize when the small stuff is significant and when it is not. If you want a no-cell phone policy, it will only work if everyone is consistent. But if you are tired of bugging students about hats and no one really cares, then maybe it is time to lose the policy. Likewise, hearing that student’s put-down of another student within your earshot, or seeing the nets on the basketball hoops being ripped or missing are small things. Yet, they have huge symbolic significance. However, a lot of other small things are better ignored. Don’t maintain policies that are not consistently applied, either because they are not critical or no one has the courage to follow through on them
- Have sound reasons (and hopefully input from stakeholders) if you are going to change a long-held routine. Most teachers have a concrete-sequential cognitive type, and changing routines is especially troubling for that group (reference).
- If a sound structure is not in place that encourages a desired practice, the responsibility for poor execution is on the leadership. For instance, the schools schedule will have an enormous impact on such things as your ability to encourage collaboration, professional development, teachers feeling like they are valued and appreciated, as well as your ability to deliver various kinds of instructional practices.
- Have those who are most concerned about and impacted by a policy or procedure develop it, and be responsible for periodically re-evaluating it.

Why is a School More or Less Functional?

In Figure 3.2 the differences between the R’s and X’s at high, middle and low functioning schools are outlined. As one explores the dimensional differences represented, one can see that function is more than just “things working.” Of course, things working is usually a byproduct of functional R’s and X’s, but high functioning organizations have other common qualities as well. When some of these qualities are missing, function level will be limited. When many are missing, a complete reboot is probably required before improvement will be possible.

Figure 3.2. Defining Three Levels of the Vertical Axis by its Primary Qualities.

	Intention	Coherence/ Alignment	Capacity	Function/ Efficiency
High/ Target	The school has a clear vision that is shared by most. Quality instruction is operationalized and expected. The mission is seen in the actions of the adults. Excellence is valued.	The school tends to be principle and system-driven. So all practice and policy decisions are made based on the integrity of ideas in relation to the mission. One can see the big picture in the micro practices and vice versa.	Structures are mission-driven. Data is used by teams to inform growth. The school is actively evolving the structures necessary to be a PLC.	Actions are purposeful and things work effectively based on a clear standard for quality. Efficiency is taken on as a collective duty.
Common/ Middle	The school has a vision statement. There is a shared expectation that the adults are accountable for the success of students. Good behavior and academic standards are spelled out.	The school tends to be program-driven. So attention is given to making sure practice reflects fidelity to the plan. The school implements a lot of things the “work” to maintain order and keep students on task.	Structures are in place that promote effective management of the school. Data informs decisions. Teachers are given time to collaborate within departments.	“Things working” is the primary goal, so this level is usually mostly effective when it comes to practical day to day matters. What works is the primary R at the school. Efficiency is primarily the domain of the administration.
Low/ Problematic	Vision and mission are in writing only. The intention is to find ways to get through the week and avert risks for non-compliance. A lot of attention is given to students who are not behaving properly.	The school tends to be reactive and incoherent in its policy development. Policies and programs are brought in to deal with discrete issues and perceived deficiencies.	Structures are mostly related to contractual obligations and fulfilling district level mandated professional development.	There is a great deal that could be defined as dysfunctional. On many levels there are things that do not work and frustrate those in the school. There is a lot of blame that is generated as a result.

Reflection 3.x: As you examine the descriptions of the three levels above, where would you rate the level of function at your school currently? Which are would you assess to be the most in need to attention or remediation?

When the four factors of intention, capacity, coherence and efficiency are given attention a school will tend to move up the vertical axis. But it is useful to understand the kinds of policies and practices that will limit movement upward – we can call them vertical axis roadblocks. They include

- Expecting the maintenance of intentions/R’s and faithful execution of practices/X’s that define the lower levels to somehow achieve the results/O’s defined by the higher level X’s. We will explore these in more detail in chapters 11 and 12.
- Putting too much attention on outcome values vs process values. Being outcome-driven will tend to keep us stuck at the middle level as we will discuss in chapter 6.
- Emphasizing what Fullan and Quinn (2016) call the “wrong drivers.”

- External accountability tends to encourage “doing what it takes” values. These are typically incoherent and individualistic or imposed in a disempowering manner.
- Individualism, competition, and comparisons will lead to long-term social dysfunction and work against the goals of collaboration, trust, and making the left hand turn on the pathway.
- Technology in the service of high quality references is wonderful. But when it is a goal in and of itself, it tends to keep us stuck in the middle of the roadmap.
- Adding programs based on good reasons seems sensible, but if they lack coherence with other values or practices the result is frustration and shifting attention away from building the capacity to actually become an excellent level school.

The components of the vertical axis were presented here in this chapter in a mostly value neutral fashion. They represent the “how” of moving upward on the roadmap. But to achieve one’s full potential as a school, we need to include the “what” – the content of the next chapter. What is our intention? Not all intentions are created equal and each will imply a different set of R’s, X’s and O’s and thus a different location on the roadmap. Likewise, our capacity for maximizing our human and structural potential will be best accomplished if we consider our efforts through the lens of what human beings need to thrive. And creating a school that reflects a high level of coherence includes using leadership and pedagogical principles and practices that are consistent with sound socio-emotional and human development principles. Even the notion of efficiency will look different depending on the goals we use to pursue it.

In the next two chapters we will complete the construction of the full school effectiveness roadmap. And as we explore the practical and applied process of moving up the roadmap later in the book the essential components outlined here will play a vital role.

Reference

Fullan, M & Quinn, J. (2016) *Coherence: The Right drivers in action for schools, districts and systems*. Corwin, Thousand Oaks, CA.

Exercise:

Examining Related Items from the ASSC SCAI (staff secondary version 7.4)

Below are three survey items from the ASSC SCAI secondary climate instrument. First, as you examine the items you will see that these three place primary emphasis on the level of function and coherence at the school. These are good examples of items that will bring some awareness where a particular school is on the vertical axis of the roadmap.

4. Leadership/Decisions

Level - 3		Level - 2		Level - 1	
<i>High</i>	<i>high-middle</i>	<i>middle</i>	<i>middle-low</i>	<i>low</i>	
4.a <input type="radio"/> ----- <input type="radio"/>					
School has a sense of vision and a mission that is shared by all staff.		School has a set of policies, a written mission, but no cohesive vision.		School has policies that are used inconsistently.	

5. Discipline Environment

Level - 3		Level - 2		Level - 1	
<i>High</i>	<i>high-middle</i>	<i>middle</i>	<i>middle-low</i>	<i>low</i>	
5.a <input type="radio"/> ----- <input type="radio"/> ----- <input type="radio"/> ----- <input type="radio"/> ----- <input type="radio"/>					
School-wide discipline policy is consistently applied.		School-wide discipline policy is used by some staff.		School-wide discipline policy exists in writing only.	
5.b <input type="radio"/> ----- <input type="radio"/> ----- <input type="radio"/> ----- <input type="radio"/> ----- <input type="radio"/>					
It is evident from student behavior that there are clear expectations and consistency in the discipline policy.		In many classes there are clear expectations and most teachers are fair and unbiased.		Students have to determine what each teacher expects and behavioral interventions are defined by a high level of subjectivity.	

Did you find that the items helped you in the processes of representing your school on the vertical axis of the roadmap?