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Irreplaceable Parts

As administrators, at times we have difficulty viewing our faculty objectively. We have worked and struggled side by side with our teachers; even though some of them may have pretty obvious warts, we still care about them as people. Caring is a wonderful trait that every educational leader should have. However, if we view our faculty through rose-colored glasses, we may lose sight of the needs of the most important people—the students. Although district evaluation tools make some attempt to objectify people, they are a guide at best and unhelpful at worst.

Businesses often have more concrete determinants of success. A salesperson may generate a certain dollar amount in revenue each year. Performance quotas—the number of test-drives or cold calls a month—offer a fairly objective basis for comparison. Finding objective criteria is much more challenging when the job involves working with students and other adults. Test scores represent a common attempt at measuring performance, but we all know how many variables come into play using this standard. We need a better method.

In this chapter, we present descriptions that offer a framework for neutral assessment and comparison of teacher effectiveness. One reason we need this neutral measure for understanding the quality of teachers is so we can determine where to focus our retention efforts; another is so we can evaluate the potential of candidates to replace any teachers that we lose. Whenever we think about retaining teachers, we must also ask, “What else do I have to choose from?”

Six Types of Teachers

The framework presented here encourages school leaders to evaluate the teachers in their schools and districts in terms of which ones they really want to keep and which they may be

better able to replace. Looking at teachers in this light enhances the school leader's ability to view them objectively. The framework describes teachers in three general groups, with six specific labels:

- ◆ The Irreplaceables
 - WOW (walks on water)—the role model
 - Impacter—great in the classroom
- ◆ The Solids
 - Stabilizer—solid at everything
 - Dow Joneser—pluses and minuses
- ◆ Replacement Level
 - Harmless—no complaints, little benefit
 - Negative Force—addition by subtraction

Valuing the Irreplaceables

We refer to the most talented teachers in our schools as the Irreplaceables. If one of these people leaves, we have little chance of hiring someone else as talented and effective. Al Burr (1993) describes the people in this category as superstars—the teachers that parents seek out for their children and that many students would rate as their best teachers.

The irreplaceable teachers often represent a very small percentage of a faculty or staff—5% to 10%. Depending on the school's size, this may mean just two teachers or a dozen, but all of them are at the very top of the talent pile.

We subdivide the people in this rare group into WOWs (the ones who *walk on water*) and Impacters. The difference between the two lies in the effect they have on the school as a whole.

A key characteristic of the WOW teachers is their ability to lead others in a positive manner. They earn the respect of their peers, who may work to emulate them. But even more important, they have the knack of teaching teachers—helping other teachers become more effective. Above and beyond their richly positive influence on the students in their classrooms, they help make the entire school better.

These individuals, while incredibly valuable, are also at high risk to leave. The same talents that make them able to interact positively with students, peers, and supervisors would serve them equally well in another school or in any work setting. Losing a WOW or adding one to your faculty can have a tremendous effect that ripples throughout the school.

The second group—Impacters—may be just as talented as the WOWs, but their impact is limited to the students. They may be considered the best classroom teachers in the school or district. In addition, their willingness to do extracurricular activities with children makes their effectiveness go beyond the classroom. However, the group they affect is the students, not other staff members.

This is not at all a criticism of an Impacter. Having this level of ability to work with students is marvelous and a rare commodity. However, it also provides a framework for understanding the strengths of an Impacter as well as differences between groups of teachers.

Losing a WOW is a schoolwide loss. Although the loss in the classroom is significant, the reduction in leadership among peer teachers may be even more devastating. Within a grade level, team, or department, often one or two personalities determine the attitude and morale of everyone involved. A negative leader can suppress the efforts and motivation of others. A positive teacher leader—WOW—can equally shift the group in a productive direction. If this person is truly special, the loss can be comparable to losing several teachers, because others may not have as much energy and direction after their peer leader departs.

The Impacter is also difficult to replace but not necessarily for the same reasons. Many times it is the parents who miss an Impacter most. They saw what this teacher did with one child and hope for the same with a younger sibling. Students and parents will probably compare the new staff member with the outstanding educator who left. Everyone in the school may have recognized this teacher's quality, but the departure does not affect the other teachers as directly. Indeed, other staff members may even have felt a degree of jealousy because of how students and families regarded this talented colleague.

However, as principal, you have no doubt that the Impacter's departure will make a difference to the students who would have had that teacher.

Although Irreplaceables are just that, irreplaceable, we as school leaders need to understand the effect of losing (or hiring) a WOW or an Impacter. This enables us to sharpen our focus on the teachers we can least afford to lose.

Solidifying the Solids

After the upper echelon comes the largest group of teachers and staff in our schools, the Solids. Typically they represent about 80% to 90% of our faculty and staff. They do most of the teaching in our schools—and most of the secretarial work, cooking, bus driving, and maintenance. By and large, the Solids count as dependable, hardworking contributors to the good of the school. As you might expect, their personalities vary widely. Some Solids are friendly and cheerful in the teachers' lounge and pretty good in the classroom. Others are well above average in their work with students but don't take on many extra responsibilities. Many Solids do a pretty good job pretty much of the time—but they lack that certain spark that would make them Irreplaceable. Maybe they have less charisma; maybe they don't go the extra mile. Perhaps they just need a few more years of experience to become Irreplaceable. But for now, they are in the large constituency nicely known as the Solids.

When an Irreplaceable leaves, you will probably have trouble hiring someone as talented. Nudging that standard down a little, a quick description of a Solid might be that if two or three of them left your organization, you would probably break even in terms of ability when you replaced them. That is, if three Solids left a school, you could most likely employ three others of about the same effectiveness. Sometimes you can do a little better, and other times a little worse, but in general, that is what the level of talent in the world is like—the Solids.

Please understand that we do not intend this description to be at all mean-spirited or insulting. We might really miss

Mr. Jones's jokes or Mrs. Henry's helpful spirit. Conversely, we might not miss Mr. Baker's body language at staff meetings. But in terms of talent, they fall into the large group of staff members that we have labeled as Solids.

We can also identify two subgroups of Solids: the Stabilizers and the Dow Jonesers. One is not necessarily better than the other, but they are quite different. With Stabilizers, what you see is what you get. Basically, they are the same every day. Whatever their talents, they perform consistently. They can be pretty good in the classroom, pretty good as coaches, and pretty good in enhancing the climate of the school. Monday to Friday, September to May, you know what to expect of them, and you get it. The talent of the half-dozen Stabilizers in your school may vary a great deal, but you can count on their consistency. Some of your Stabilizers may be almost Irreplaceable. Others may border on the Harmless. But once you have evaluated them, you know what you have.

Dow Jonesers don't fall into such neat categories. The legendary basketball announcer Dick Vitale coined this term to describe inconsistent players—the ones who may score 20 points one game and 6 the next. Teachers, too, may vary from day to day; we also describe as Dow Jonesers the staff members whose talents vary depending on the task at hand. Some may be good in the classroom but disorganized when it comes to extracurricular activities. Others may be fantastic as track coaches but rather humdrum in the classroom.

In addition, a Dow Joneser might teach pretty well for the first three-quarters of the school year but run out of steam as spring turns to summer. He could have unpredictable ups and downs; she could reliably manage the janitorial staff but lose her temper on occasion. Weighing the ups versus the downs will help determine how much you want to retain a Dow Joneser. Maybe the ups are so valuable that your goal is to smooth the rough edges. Perhaps you want to limit the situations where Dow Jonesers are not as effective and increase those where they shine. Potentially, the downs are so negative that the ups are not worth the trouble. You have to decide that for yourself. But understanding and even being able to articulate the description of a staff member in this manner may help

clarify whether you want to retain or employ someone of any category, including the Dow Joneser.

Managing the Replacement Level

The third group of staff members is a little easier to identify, but they may be harder to work with. Bill James, author of the *Baseball Abstract* (1996), describes replacement level players as those that are barely in the major leagues. In other words, if one of them retired, many players even in the minor leagues are as good if not better. Batting .240 may be “not bad,” but we can always find someone at least as good and possibly a great deal better.

This is sort of what a Replacement Level teacher is like. Typically, 5% to 10% of our faculty and staff are Replacement Level—the other end of the bell-shaped curve from the Irreplaceables.

The quickest description of a Replacement Level staff member is that if one of them left our school, we could almost certainly do at least as well, and most likely quite a bit better, employing someone else. If your district has even minimal applicants to choose from, you should have no concerns about losing a Replacement Level employee. And, potentially, a Replacement Level could even be such a negative force or hindrance that you would be better off even if you did not hire a replacement at all.

When we address the issue of retaining our existing staff members, we must remember that what we really want to do is retain our *effective* staff members. Losing someone who is not effective is not a negative at all. It is also critical to understand that the Replacement Level person is the least likely staff member to leave voluntarily. Because of whatever limitations they have in interpersonal skills, work ethic, or talents, they have few if any alternative job opportunities. Seldom would they interview well, and if their employers were honest, they would have poor references to assist them. We are not concerned about retaining this level of staff member. Quite the opposite should be the case.

But even within the Replacement Level group there are different characteristics and groups. The Replacement Levels fall into two categories—Harmless and Negative Force. Let's examine each.

The group we call Harmless represents people who are not very good but stop short of being a Negative Force. Their classroom performance seldom triggers parent complaints or office referrals, but it also does little to encourage learning. They contribute little, if anything, of value, but they do not get in the way. We tend to tolerate our Harmless employees; often, they hover just off our radar screen, not drawing attention or raising hackles the way our Negative Forces do. But it may be a misnomer to call these people Harmless; we can't really afford to keep them around. Everyone who works with students in our schools needs to pull a fair share of the weight. Furthermore, sometimes Harmless staff members provide an audience for more vocal negative leaders who would have much less impact without these followers.

The easiest way to describe the Negative Forces is "addition by subtraction." If they left our organization, we would (discreetly) celebrate, because our entire organization would be better off. Just as the WOWs spread positive effects far beyond their classroom, the Negative Forces send out discouraging ripples. This negativity can surface in working with their students, supervising other staff members, or griping in the teachers' workroom. And, unfortunately, it can leave traces on every path they cross.

In addition to the power they personally wield, they often draw others in the school into this dynamic. In an attempt to calm angry fires, administrators may actually protect Replacement Level staff members by reducing their responsibilities—giving them smaller classes, keeping them off committees, and shielding them from extra duties. We must recognize that the more we do this, the less likely they are to leave. And yet if they did leave, we could probably hire someone a great deal better.

Our initial instinct may be to protect our staff members, but we must realize how much better off the students and our schools would be if we improved the quality of our employ-

ees. Being aware of who is essential to retain and whom we might benefit from losing can assist in keeping this focus.

These same levels apply to all of our support staff. The lucky ones among us have some secretaries that rank as Irreplaceable. Many of our teaching assistants might be Solids. Perhaps we can name a bus driver or coach at the Replacement Level. We probably all have many people in each of the groupings. By understanding where our current faculty and staff fit into the scale, and by assessing potential replacements, we can recognize where to focus our retention and recruiting efforts. Our organization will be as good as its people.

We Are Not in a Vacuum

As leaders, we may not be able to slot every teacher neatly into one of these six categories—and that's fine. We cannot even do that with people we know. However, this framework should provide some guidelines to use to look at everyone in our schools more objectively. As you know, we can grow fond of people we have worked with for several years, regardless of their abilities. We remember that they sent us flowers when we were in the hospital or started our car every time the temperature dropped below freezing on a snowy afternoon. The relationships people build as they work together make it difficult to think of letting someone go. Of course these things come into play. Yet it is essential that we do not lose sight of our primary focus: What contributions does each person make to our school and our students? Taking the time to individually rank each staff member can help us establish a clearer picture of where to focus our retention efforts. It may also increase our understanding of different types of people, which can strengthen our abilities in selecting new teachers when opportunities arise.

It is also valuable to understand that people are not locked into a category. People grow and change. As leaders, we work to channel that change in the direction of improvement. We would like our best Solids to become Irreplaceable. Even moving someone from Negative Force to Harmless, or Harmless to Solid, can make a big difference. Yet we should not lose sight

of the value of talent as an important factor in making the correct decisions. Understanding ability levels can assist us in increasing retention and recruitment efforts.

Weighing the Peripherals

One of the challenges we face in evaluating staff members is that their jobs are so complex. A 10-year veteran teaches 10th-grade mathematics and coaches the girls' softball team. A weaker fourth-grade teacher does a great job coordinating the awards assembly at the end of every year. One of our seventh-grade core team teachers is a single parent who needs the income. All these factors come into our thoughts and emotions, and they should. But all of these aspects are peripheral to the core question: How effective is each teacher in working with students? Although we need to consider the whole person when we make a ranking of the contributions of each staff member, the decisive factor needs to be how well they work with the young people in our schools.

We have an obligation to serve all our employees. All good leaders do. However, a much more essential requirement is to serve our students. Maintaining a focus on our students can enable us to make clear decisions when evaluating our staff members. Although we always want to do what is best for our teachers, we always *must* do what is best for the students.