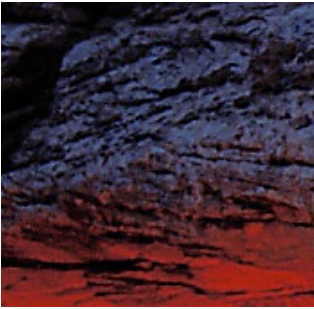


Seeing Opportunity



It occurred to me there are actually opportunities embedded in this “crisis”

As superintendent of a local school district, I often use the slower pace of the holiday season to regroup and reflect on the work that lies ahead. The holiday break is also the time when we begin to deliberate on our budget for the upcoming year. This year, the Christmas break gave me that time and space. I made sure I took advantage of it, so I didn't do a whole lot of work in that period of time.

Even so, I still thought about our school district budget. Nearly everyone would call this a time of crisis in terms of budgets and fiscal management. Certainly, our local community is very affected by what is going on nationally. Our city is filled with people who “do money” for a living, and a lot of them are suffering. The buzz around town is, “Oh, my God, we're going to be in terrible shape. We're going to lay off 25 or 30 teachers. We're going to have a zero-percent budget,” although it takes us almost four-and-a-half percent to provide the same level of service we did this year. Right now, people are speaking in hyperbole and imagining the worst-case scenario.

During the Christmas break, I just turned off all the chatter. I said, “This is ridiculous. If we act smart, then, even if we aren't as well off as this year, we're going to be okay.” I asked myself: “What would make us okay in a time of crisis, when people feel vulnerable and unsure about their jobs?” It occurred to me there are actually opportunities embedded in this “crisis”, and we can use them to our advantage to make ourselves better off than we are this year. We can turn this burden into a real opportunity to make changes in the shape of the school district we've wanted for a long time but haven't been able to permeate the culture to accomplish? I realized you can get things done in a time of crisis. In a more stable climate you may meet resistance to change and have to cajole and work harder to convince people to take action. In a time of crisis, People will say, “We had to....”

Over the holidays, I did a lot of treadmill walking, and the monotony of the treadmill creates a kind of a meditative state if you're not pushing yourself too hard. As I walked, I started thinking of the ways that we could actually use the current economic condition to accomplish some of our goals and to create new opportunities. One specific change we have been discussing for some time is our leadership structure. Many of us want to re-vamp this area, but there are a lot of sacred cows. Many of our leaders have been in the district for many years and have the reputation of taking care of kids, yet they're not doing the work we need them to do, and we've been unable to



break through that part of our culture. By seeing our current economic condition as an opportunity, we can restructure now and use the money we save to retain teaching positions. The fact that I was able to slow down and think about the “budget crisis” as an opportunity instead of a terrible burden will help our organization end up in a better place.

When I slow down my thinking, step back, take a breath, look at things from a different perspective, and refuse to engage in hyperbole and the mentality of “Oh, my God, we’re going to hell in a hand-basket,” my mind is open to new perspectives and says, “Wait a minute. How can I use this?” I didn’t do a lot of formal thinking over the winter break, but, even so, I had insights about how I can use the budget issue as an opportunity to improve our school district instead of fearing it will take apart all the good work we’ve done in recent years.

I notice I’m approaching this situation very differently than I would have a year ago, before I was familiar with insight thinking

I notice I’m approaching this situation very differently than I would have a year ago, before I was familiar with insight thinking. I’m more deliberate at recognizing when opportunities arise to really stop and investigate what I now recognize as an opportunity for insight. Earlier, I might have done it in a more haphazard way. I might have thrown out an idea and pursued one particular angle. But now, I’m more systemic about how to change the way I think about an issue and how to reframe it into an opportunity. I’m not simply responding to one specific idea or another. I really stop and say to myself, “So, what are the various opportunities?” And I’m engaging others in this kind of thinking.

For instance, at our cabinet meeting on Monday, I created space to put aside our regular agenda and we spent upwards of an hour identifying issues in the organization that haven’t changed because our culture is so strong and keeps us from doing the structural work we think would make a big difference. We also discussed how the budget crisis actually creates the opportunity to get these things done and the ways in which we can use technology to change the delivery of some services and realize cost savings. By the end, we came up with a list of seven or eight items that will cause us to change and deliver services and programs in a forward-thinking way. Before I understood the power of insight thinking, we never would have taken the time from our long list of tasks to hold such an open and free discussion, and we probably wouldn’t have surfaced these new, creative ideas that will actually improve what we do.

With my understanding of insight, I’m now aware when those kinds of opportunities arise, and I do my best to use them. Before, I might have treated the insight as sort of



an incidental thought. I clearly would not have done the kind of in-depth thinking on my own, nor would I have been able to lead others in such thinking without having experienced a physical level of what it feels like to stop and really make yourself slow down and reflect. For me, it's an inkling of an insight, not a fully developed insight, until I really stop and think about it. I've had those inklings all along, but now, I know how to stop and make something of them. Now, they register louder, and they catch my attention like never before.

I'm also able to lead others by asking them to slow down for a minute

One of my leadership strengths is the capacity for these little flashes of “What about this? What about that?” In the past, I haven't used them effectively. Now, I'm able to weave that capacity into my leadership style and my strategy. I'm also able to lead others by asking them to slow down for a minute and consider: “What are the possibilities, and how can we see this situation as an opportunity?” Some of the folks around me are doing more of this on their own now, although not as consciously as I hope they do eventually. It's starting to rub off in some small ways, but they're not yet aware it's a real strategy for thinking. They're doing like I did, which is to have little flashes of insight, as opposed to establishing a discipline for yourself.

I was talking with one of our principals the other day and he commented on how calm, thoughtful, and inclusive the budget process has been this year. He expressed appreciation for the openness and the creativity we collectively have shown throughout the process and how reassuring that has been. In my view that is a direct result of increased capacity for insight thinking not only for me, but also for our leadership team.

In a capsule, my exposure to Insight Thinking methods put me in a situation where I had to slow down, take a breath, do the deeper-level thinking. I now know what that state of mind feels like, and I can call on it when I need it.

© 2008

Sylvia is currently a Superintendent of a large school district. The above description is the result of her attending a 2½-day seminar on Insight Thinking.

1 508 788 9890

www.insightmanagementpartners.com



Insight Management Partners, Inc.