

The Six Boundaries of a School System

Adapted from *Restructuring Our Schools: A Primer on Systemic Change* by W. Patrick Dolan.

To illustrate the boundary concept, we can use the example of a typical school district. There usually are six boundaries or subsystems within a school district. Each of these boundaries plays a unique and essential role within the larger system.

Boundary 1:

The 3 Anchors, which represent the Board of Education, the Superintendent and Administrative Cabinet and the Executive Council of the Union(s)

Boundary 2:

The Teachers, Support Staff and Students

Boundary 3:

The Principals

Boundary 4:

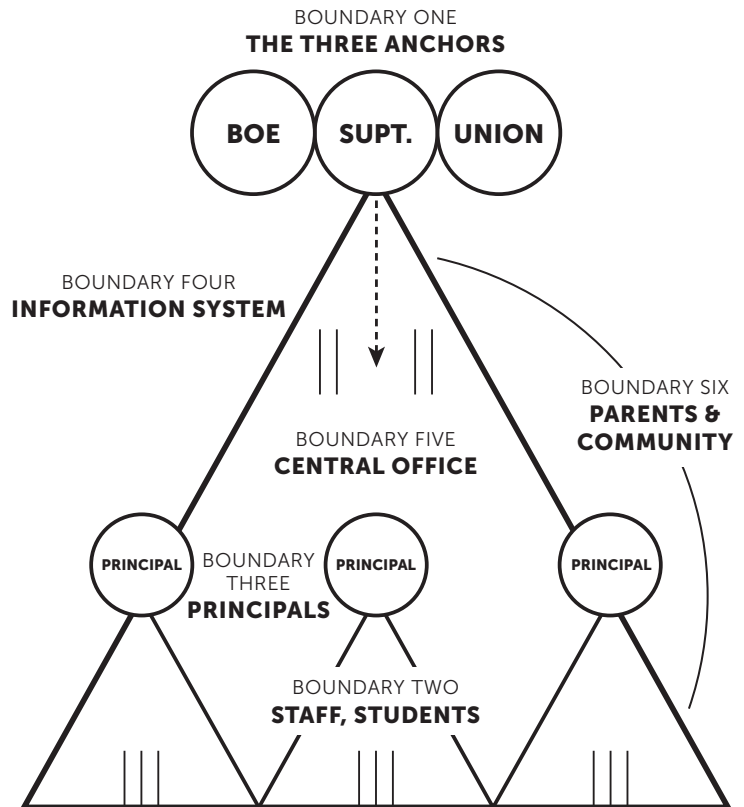
The Information System

Boundary 5:

The Central Office and Specialists

Boundary 6:

The External Environment, which includes Parents and Community



The Six Boundaries: W. Patrick Dolan

Download the full Boundary Audit Rubric: bit.ly/2KT8XLV

Boundary One – The Anchors

This comprises three major players whose jobs, morally and legally, are to anchor the system from the top. The *elected school board* expresses the educational goals of the community and translates that into policy directions. The *administrative leadership team* is responsible for taking the policy directions of the board and the resources allocated by the community to organize the highest quality and most efficient delivery of public education. The *organized labor leaders* are elected to represent their members and their rights within the work setting.

Each of the three anchor positions of Boundary One represents distinct legal and moral obligations. If you want to achieve any significant change within the larger system, you must find a way to move three often adversarial relationships toward a more trusting, collaborative, and supportive relationship that frees the rest of the system to act differently, even as they retain their separate functions.

Boundary Two – Teachers, Support Staff, and Students

Boundary Two includes the people who do the real work of the system – the teachers, support staff and students. In school systems, teachers teach and children learn. It’s the bottom of the pyramid, often unempowered and disconnected from the decisions made in the system that impacts their work - resulting in alienation from the system.

One of the most damaging outcomes in this scenario regards the issue of “responsibility.” The higher levels of authority have been taught that they are responsible for the quality and efficiency of “those below,” which pushes managers to develop fairly complicated methods of monitoring, controlling and assessing who is, and who is not, in compliance with the myriad of policies, rules, regulations and initiatives. As federal and state policies and initiatives multiply and rain down on districts, schools and teachers – open dialogue fades away, classroom teachers and students withdraw from the system, and eventually away from their own responsibility for their work.

The unique worker in education is the student. His or her work of learning is, of course, the real work, and all others are present to support this effort. Yet, who is responsible for this effort? All you have to do to answer that question is look at who directs, controls, monitors, evaluates, rewards and punishes in this particular pyramid. It soon becomes clear that it is the adults who have the information, the power, and by extension, the responsibility. Predictably, too many students display the same attitudes as workers in an industrial enterprise: hopelessness, powerlessness, anger, sullenness and finally deep alienation.

It may seem curious to group the teacher and the student together in a single categorization. But as you look at the two types of workers at the bottom of the educational pyramid, you will see that both are powerless, and both have had responsibility for their performance taken out of their hands, and assumed by those “above.”

Boundary Three – The Principal

In the classic organizational pyramid, authority and strategy are held at the top. The middle manager, the principal, often acts as the shock absorber in the system. The most effective principals, interrupt the constant stream of demands and requests from above, soften the frustration and anger from below and mediate the tough issues between the two levels, protecting the site and its work from unreasonable demands. They shelter the “troops” and when a command comes down that can’t be avoided, they call their troops together and say: “Here is one we cannot dodge. How do we figure this one out?” The staff works with the principal in developing a plan that allows them all to stay afloat.

The principal’s role is a tough one in the system. If the command sees them aligned with the “troops,” they may be viewed as too close to the “troops” and unable to carry out the demands. If their staff members see the principal aligned with the top and ready and willing to carry out their demands regardless of the implementation challenges, they may not follow their site leader.

Boundary Four – The Information System

Boundary Four is the information system developed to answer the essential question – “How are we doing?” Every functioning system must have a clear set of objectives and a way of gauging its performance. Typically, objectives are set at the top and sent down in the form of specific directives to the middle via the principals, who are then charged with implementing, measuring, and reporting progress back upstream. In a typical system, Boundary Four very often exists for the benefit of the “central office.” The information that is accessible to the teacher is too often not helpful, not timely, and has very little to do with what actually is going on the classrooms. As a result, “someone else” is responsible for the work, and the teacher and students are there only to carry it out.

If you are going to redesign an educational system so that it places responsibility for quality where it belongs – with those who do the work – then they have to help create the vision, the goals, and the measures that are relevant to them. It is important to note that Boundary Four is continuous. You must constantly be working on it to keep the system listening, learning, communicating, and improving (i.e. pushing and pulling itself.)

Boundary Five: The Central Office and Specialists

School systems rely on experts in curriculum, assessment and instruction, special education and other educational areas to provide support and enhance the knowledge and skills of educators throughout the system. These are essential skills. The problem is what we have done with these specialists. They are often situated high up in the system, where they have become part of the command structure. Suddenly, their job isn’t just to help and support the real work but to monitor, control, police and evaluate.

The students and teachers often feel the central office and specialists are not there to collaborate in their difficult work of classroom learning. Instead, there is a feeling by students and teachers that the classroom is there to satisfy the discrete, un-integrated or even opposed special requirements of the command units above. These requirements become the focus, instead of what should be the focus - the needs of the classroom. It can become a system “gone haywire” – a system in reverse. The special expertise located in Boundary Five is absolutely necessary for excellence in the system. It should be the place where integration and strategy flow, to produce a quality product. The issue is how to use these special skills to support, inform, and improve without becoming a separate set of demands.

Boundary Six: Parents and Community

Boundary Six is the external relationship of the school system with the community. This is a critical environment where the school system offers its service. It also can be a place of tension, and at times antagonism. There is a dynamic relationship between customer and system, which can become heated and divisive if not fostered. At times, the external community is so diverse and demanding that the instinctive response by the school system is to treat it as a threat. This further heightens customer frustration and raises the level of shrillness, which in turn further increases the self-protectiveness of the system. The real question, however, is how to keep the listening sharp with respect to the customer's needs and requirements and still maintain the integrity of the system.

Summary

The central idea of systems theory is that the Six Boundaries are highly interconnected. This means that if we want to move any of the six, we must move the whole system. Each of the Six Boundaries represents a significant element or subsystem of the larger system. Any significant change to one boundary means a significant change for every other part. That makes the process of change highly complex and resistant. It also means we can create considerable torque on tough systems. If our tactics are consistent at each boundary, then the pressure on one place will create other pressures elsewhere. It is a source of powerful energy because pressure applied at one boundary can dislodge another resistant boundary.

This is a movement of responsibility, information, empowerment and engagement that goes deep into the organization - to the school level, to the student level and to the teacher level. It involves changing much of the monitoring and controlling that has traditionally been done higher up in the organization to one of support, consultation and facilitation.

By far, the best process to achieve this is to explore the possibilities together, in a way that builds a shared vision and deep buy-in throughout the system. There is a need to build district and site level reflective structures that enable the key stakeholder groups in the system to listen and learn together. This involves creating vertical and horizontal communication and sharing with a sharp focus on how best to support and sustain high quality teaching and learning in classrooms and schools through a culture of collaboration.

These structures are built at the district, school and classroom levels with clear linkages throughout the system. The District Leadership Team (DLT) comprised of school, district, teacher and union representatives focuses on listening and learning together primarily from the reflective work of the school sites. The DLT provides opportunities to model and support a culture of collaboration where all stakeholders are engaged in building a system that is focused on continuous improvement. The School Leadership Team (SLT) establishes and communicates a shared school vision engaging broad and deep participation from stakeholder groups to carry out and realize school's vision. The SLT sets the direction and pace for the school, consistent with school and district goals, and communicates progress.