



Book Review: *How Google Works*

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I don't believe schools should be run like businesses. The differences in their missions, either the education of children or the maximization of profit, plus many other factors, are too great to expect either to closely resemble the other.

However, public education can learn things from how businesses operate, even if the business is unique and has great resources. When it comes to leadership of successful companies, there are often lessons for board members, superintendents and association staff.

How Google Works is not a primer on understanding Google products or software. Instead, former CEO **Eric Schmidt**, who is now Google's executive chairman and **Jonathan Rosenberg**, current advisor to CEO **Larry Page**, provide some good tips to consider when handling various issues that could easily come forward in a school district, as well as at this hugely successful software developer.

Here are just some of the many lessons that I took from the book; I have also tried to tie some of them to educational leadership issues (in italics):

- Culture is critical in any organization. If the culture is not in line with the mission, the

organization is set up for failure. The slogans that any organization puts forward, must be believed by those who are in charge. *This is consistent with what we learned from the original Lighthouse study: if you say you believe all kids can learn, you need to believe it and ensure your actions implement that belief.*

- In making quality decisions, "pay level is intrinsically irrelevant and experience is valuable only if it is used to frame a winning argument." There is an obligation to dissent if someone thinks there is something wrong with an idea. A multiplicity of viewpoints – a/k/a diversity – is your best defense against myopia. *The "experts" are not always right and it's important to keep an open mind and hear all opinions when making a decision.*
 - The building blocks of organizations should be small teams. They are like families... In the end they usually pull together. *This also is applicable in other systems, like the military, where small squads develop strong ties and become willing to die for each other and, it is the current "push" in professional development in school districts.*
 - "The character of a company is the sum of the
- continued on back*

Google Authors' Recommendations

Here are some of the authors' recommendations on how to handle our overflowing email boxes:

1. Respond quickly
2. Every word matters and useless prose doesn't
3. Clean out your inbox constantly
4. Use LIFO—Last In, First Out
5. Make careful decisions on who to send emails. *[In Patrice McCarthy's words, "Reply All is not your friend."]*
6. Ask yourself why when you decide to use the bcc feature
7. If you need to yell, do it in person
8. Make it easy to respond to requests
9. Use keywords so you can search for something later

characters of its people, so if you want high character, you must set that standard” As **Tom Peters** stated, “there is no such thing as a minor lapse of integrity.” *This is critical for Boards and Superintendents, since one lapse can lead to destruction of a reputation... or worse.*

- Strategic plans are not helpful. Learn as you go and figure it out. And, look five years out and imagine all the possibilities. *Boards should have strategic plans, because they help define the focus of the school system. As you develop yours, you should also be looking at least five years out, and consider disruptions (usually quick and unexpected situations that can change an industry, a business or a school district) and opportunities.*
- Hiring is the most important thing companies do. It should be peer-based, not hierarchical, with decisions made by committees and focused on bringing the best people into the company, even if their experience might not match one of the open roles. In a peer-based hiring process, the emphasis is on people, not organization. Hire the best and there’s a “herd mentality” – other great people will follow... *This last point is a critical part of the Superintendent’s job and, obviously, the Board selects the Superintendent.*
- Passionate people don’t wear their passion, they *live* it. Its hallmarks: “persistence, grit, seriousness, all-encompassing absorption cannot be gauged from a checklist”. Nor is it always synonymous with success. Extracurricular passions can yield direct benefits. Encourage your staff to do more than just do their jobs. *Encourage them to be risk-takers and to try things they believe will make a difference.*
- Statistics are sexy and the democratization of data means that those who can analyze it well will win. “Asking the questions and interpreting the answers is as important a skill as coming up with the answers themselves.” No matter your business, learn how the right data, crunched the right way, will help you make better decisions. *Working with your superintendent, this IS the job of school boards!*
- A “well-run meeting is a great thing.

It’s the most efficient way to present data and opinions and debate issues” and to make decisions. “A badly-run meeting... is a giant, demoralizing time waster.” *This should be self-evident to all Board Members and Superintendents!*

- Overcommunicate. If something is important, say it over and over and in different media. Questions to think about when over-communicating:
 1. Does the communication reinforce core themes that you want everyone to get? Core themes should be only a few, related to your mission, values, strategy and industry.
 2. Is the communication effective? It may have to be varied to grab or grab attention.
 3. Is the communication interesting, fun, or inspirational?
 4. Is the communication authentic?
 5. Is the communication going to the right people? (The ones who will find it useful.)
 6. Are you using the right media?
 7. Tell the truth, be humble and bank goodwill for a rainy day if you have to communicate bad news.
- Interviews with the press “shouldn’t be an exercise in regurgitating bland marketing messages, it should be a conversation with insight.” A good interview consists of listening to the questions and answering intelligently, “with insights and stories, while reinforcing the message, but not parroting it”. *We have seen both and the latter is and looks too scripted.*
- Forces of disruption and technology are too powerful for a bury-your-head-in-the-sand approach. It will end tragically. The traditionalist will eventually fail or become irrelevant. *This is true in the business world and in education, too. We must address the issues, such as public school choice. We cannot bury our heads in the sand.*

How Google Works is an absorbing study of a fascinating, pervasive and very wealthy company. I recommend it to anyone interested in leadership, organizational management and in effectively serving our young “customers”.

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