

Changing the System

The desire for school change is great, but much of the advice on how to lead for change is profoundly frustrating. Follow these five 'shifts' to see change for the better

It is a rare board member or school leader who believes, "My mandate is to keep things as they are and ensure that we do not improve." Almost everyone wants change, whether it is helping students meet the demands of global competition, helping teachers and administrators improve their skills to improve student performance, or helping systems leaders operate more efficiently to conserve resources in profoundly challenging times.

While the appetite for change is great, the leadership literature on systems change can be overwhelming and profoundly frustrating. Scholars of the highest rank have outlined the elements of successful change leadership in comprehensive and accessible fashion, but the vast majority of efforts fail.

Here are five suggestions for how we can shift and make successful changes in our systems:

From strategic planning to action

Today's strategic plans are significantly shorter than those of a decade ago as the emphasis of effective processes has shifted from producing an elegant document to directly monitoring the strategies themselves.

In the past, strategic planning processes consumed enormous quantities of time and resources for districts, often without actually leading to specific actions by the administrators and teachers who implement the plan. Evidence from research I conducted earlier this year suggests that fewer priorities are

directly associated with improved student results. This supports my earlier research that showed strategic plans can and should be reduced to only a few pages at the district level and to a single page for individual schools.

From '5 to 7 years' to 'now'

When change efforts run into trouble, a typical bromide often tossed off with a sigh is, "Well, don't you know that research shows that systems change takes at least five to seven years?" With that statement, another well-intentioned grand plan sinks into the organizational quicksand.

But think for a moment. A significant body of published research, in this magazine and academic journals, documents many cases of effective change that took place in a single school year—sometimes within a single semester. Look at it this way: What would you do if there were unsafe conditions in the school cafeteria or at a busy crosswalk in front of the school? No one would tolerate the excuse that "it takes five to seven years to change." If it's a matter of health and safety, they would demand immediate change.

The only question, therefore, is whether student learning is a health and safety issue. Evidence from the Alliance for Excellent Education makes clear that school success meets these criteria, as students who fail spend billions more in Medicaid and uninsured medical care costs than those who remain in school. Once literacy becomes a health and safety issue, no one will settle for a five-year plan.



From dips to short-term wins

When new initiatives start, many leaders are taught to expect an implementation dip—that is, a decrease in performance after the change begins. It's not clear why any organization would plan for failure when short-term wins are critical to sustain momentum for change. If past efforts resulted in a dip, then the cause of that dip should be rigorously analyzed and adjustments should be made before the next change effort.

From 'vision' to 'implementation'

Conventional wisdom holds that a hallmark of effective leadership is creating a compelling vision of the future. In fact, those who adhere to Abraham Zalesnik's "leadership/management" dichotomy—originally articulated in 1977—suggest that leaders create the vision and managers are the less lofty folk who merely implement it.

This inappropriate distinction between leaders and managers has led to a generation of university courses and innumerable professional development conferences that exalt leadership but barely mention management.

An exciting vision that is not implemented effectively does not inspire employees; instead, it breeds cynicism among people who have seen one vision after another introduced with great fanfare only to quickly fade

away, eclipsed by the next grand vision.

Nevertheless, the consulting industry remains full of people who offer to help craft just the right vision, typically in a bucolic setting with all the creature comforts necessary for deep thinking, while the implementation must be done in an intensely active classroom with a leaking roof and thin walls.

Here's a suggestion: Have your next strategic planning meeting inside one of your most challenging schools, preferably in a classroom where it will be implemented.

From 'buy-in' to critical thinking

Perhaps the most important shift in effective systems change is moving from the need for buy-in—or, more precisely, the illusion of buy-in—to a process of constructive critical thinking. The best example of illusory buy-in occurred during the frantic days of December 2010 as states completed their Race to the Top applications. Board members, union presidents, superintendents, parent associations, and other groups were asked to endorse documents that had not even been written.

Any veteran of board meetings knows there are two types of silence—one that signals assent and one that indicates the expression of contrary

views is dangerous and unwelcome. A far better approach is to welcome constructive critical thinking with such questions as: What are other decisions that we could consider? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each alternative? What will be the indicators that we made the right decision? What will be the indicators that we need to make a midcourse correction and adjust our decision? What will we do if we are wrong?

In landmark research on process fairness, W. Chan Kim and Renée Mauborgne found that employees who disagree with a decision are far more likely to support its implementation when they believe the process was fair and they had the opportunity to express their views in a safe and open environment.

Before you launch your next systems change initiative, reflect on what worked—and what didn't—the last time you attempted systems-level change, and consider these five shifts as ways to improve your probability of success. ■

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