



WORKING THROUGH CHANGE

Working with the people and needs of your district to implement change

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How many times have we seen this happen? The superintendent announces that he or she is retiring. The board decides the next person must bring change to the district.

The new superintendent starts, plans are made and everyone is excited about the possibilities. As the new initiatives begin to roll out, apprehension starts to surface. The changes are not welcomed by some parents and staff.

Soon, unforeseen problems surface. Results do not come as quickly as people would like and the board starts to hear complaints from the community and staff. Support for the superintendent begins to wane and within three years, there has been turnover on the board and the superintendent is ready to move on.

Superintendents and school board members who find themselves in this situation may not understand that leading change brings risks and that developing a good plan is only part of the work. Successful leaders focus heavily on the people involved and their needs as the organization moves through the change.

The world is changing dramatically and what was good enough in years prior is no longer good enough for today's students. As public school leaders, you are likely going to create some uncomfortable situations for your staff and community

as you work to transform your schools for the next generation of learners.

Adaptive vs. Technical Leadership

Before your district implements change, it's important to look at the different styles of leadership and how they can help or hinder an effort to instill change. While there are many different ways to view leadership, two useful ideas for this discussion are technical and adaptive leadership. To illustrate the difference, the local school district budget process serves as an excellent example.

Examining the budget to find places to save money is technical leadership. It is important to do this and engage stakeholders in the process, but it's not that useful when

attempting to make dramatic changes in your district.

Adaptive leaders look for efficiencies in the budget AND recognize that the conflict that may arise over how to spend money is rooted more deeply in the values of the community.

In any community, there is a diverse set of stakeholders with different priorities, some of which may not align with the vision being proposed. For example, you may want to introduce a new technology program and provide tablet computers for your middle school students. While you think this is a worthwhile goal, there may be segments of your community who don't agree. These stakeholders may not value technology in the manner that you do or may fail to understand that the tablets are part of a broader strategy to incorporate different teaching strategies and learning opportunities.

Successful leaders recognize that the challenges we face require adaptive leadership, which provides opportunity for people to learn new ways of doing things. Adaptive leaders know they are engaging in culture change, asking people to

modify attitudes, values and behaviors, and that this takes time.

Implementing Change

You can ease the transition process and increase the likelihood of success by addressing the needs of your stakeholders as you embark on a change effort.

Enter a new situation carefully. New leaders are enthusiastic and ready to make their mark. Successful leaders, though, recognize the need to carefully introduce the idea of change. It's important to listen to those who have been around a while and to incorporate their ideas into your plan.

Communicate the vision. We often talk about the importance of communication in the change process. One of the first things you must communicate, and communicate often, is the district's vision. It is nearly impossible to over-communicate the district's vision. People need to help develop it, hear it, talk about it, make sense of it, and figure out how they fit into it.

To strengthen your district's vision, provide opportunities for

dialogue about the vision, what it means and how people can contribute to the realization of it. When people are engaged in dialogue about the vision, they are more likely to support the effort. People support that which they help create.

Recognize that it is often difficult for people to see the benefits of change. Successful leaders recognize that people do not readily see the potential of change. Instead, the first thing people often see is the potential for loss. For instance, they might think they will not be able to learn new ways of working or will look inept along the way. Other stakeholders may stand to lose something in the change process and, therefore, they may strongly oppose your efforts.

It's important to step back and take a good look at the situation. If you want to be successful, you must learn to work with those who resist or oppose your ideas. The fears are real to the people experiencing them, and minimizing their importance does not help you achieve your goal. People need to let go of the old and make sense of the change before they can accept it and work with it.

Adaptive Leadership:

Providing Opportunities for Change

The big challenge of change is that no one likes to be told that they have to change the way they do things.

There is nothing wrong with this, it is just the way people are. And, because the challenges we face do not have neat and tidy solutions, there is risk in change.

Simply telling people what to do and handing down decisions from the top will not work. Instead, we need adaptive leadership that provides opportunities for stakeholders to make sense of the problems and solutions on their own terms and adapt their behavior to the new context. This doesn't mean that people get to do whatever they want to do, just that they get to figure it out for themselves with support from the leaders and those who have the technical expertise to coach them.



Adaptive leaders focus on the vision and continuously ask, "How does what we are doing move our vision forward?" Adaptive leaders create contexts for stakeholders to answer that question and understand that the nature of the problem may change and that solutions we thought would work, might not work and that we will need to continuously adapt our plans.

Another key concept of adaptive leadership is that the most important tool for implementing change is the relationships between and among stakeholders. The relationships provide opportunities for stakeholders to work together on the solutions. Adaptive leadership is less about telling people what to do and more about listening. It is about providing the opportunity for people to learn in new ways and adapt their values, attitudes and behaviors so they can be successful in the new context. □

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Recognize that people are losing something. Some stakeholders may have to give up their prestige as someone who was seen as an expert in the old way of doing things. Acknowledge this loss and accept that people's losses are real to them. What you may view as over-reacting is viewed as a real and appropriate response on the part of the individuals with those responses. These responses may not be reasonable to you, but that doesn't matter. Accept that people are grieving and do what you can to compensate people for the loss without losing sight of your vision and goals. For example, school boards now have the right to make unilateral decisions about employees' wages, hours, and working conditions. Collaborating with teachers as you create your employee handbook is a way to compensate them for the loss of collective bargaining. It doesn't mean you have to enter into an agreement with them. It just means

that you have given them a chance to be heard and participate in creating a system that will have a profound effect on them.

Include all of your stakeholders in the change process. When we are in difficult times such as the kind we face today, our instinct is to pull in and try to control the situation. This will not serve you well when leading change. Instead, provide opportunities for your stakeholders to own some of the change. If you reach out to stakeholders, not only are they more likely to support change, they are more likely to support change that is not necessarily in their own best interest if they have an opportunity to participate in the change process.

Recognize and accept that there will be an implementation dip as you embark on your plan. People in your district need time to make sense of the new plan and will make mistakes in the beginning as they learn new ways of behavior. Carefully look for times to apply pressure as well as times to

back off. The bigger the change, the more time is needed to get to top performance. Be hard on the system and soft on the people. Look for ways to improve the processes you are trying to implement, and assume positive intent on the part of those working to implement the plan.

Communicate, communicate, communicate. Be sure to celebrate successes along the way. Changing the culture is a long-term process (it could take up to 10 years) and people need to feel a sense of accomplishment along the way.

If you maintain your commitment and pay attention to the people who are implementing your change plan, in time, you will succeed. When you see people doing things differently, you will know you are on the right track to meeting your goals and fulfilling your vision. ■

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Members from the GoLD and PAR teams contributed to the writing of this article.



ACHIEVE

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