



Charting the Course – The Path to Transformation in Education

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Leaders often reach out to us to share that they have used *Leading Change* as sort of roadmap as they guide their organizations through complex change. During many decades of research at Harvard University, and more than a decade of in-the-field work as a consulting firm, we have also received multiple messages each year from Superintendents, Principals and university Provosts and Presidents highlighting the impact our findings have had on their approach to change in education. In the last three to four years, we have seen a significant increase in inquiries from those in K-12 and in higher ed. So, clearly, something about this work resonates in the field of education.

We still regularly hear questions and comments like, “Does this *really* work in education?” and “You normally work in the private sector – we are different.” The research supporting the 8-Step Process for Leading Change – and underlying change leadership principles – was conducted mostly in businesses, but not entirely. It also included non-profit organizations, government departments, and educational institutions. We’ve seen again and again that although every organization has its own unique challenges and the tactical aspects of applying our methodology might look slightly different in different contexts, the core elements of the work seem to apply everywhere.

Here, we will briefly outline the 8-Step Process for Leading Change and will then focus on the beginning elements of this framework and its underlying principles. We will share what we know from our work with our corporate and higher education clients, and pose what we hope are thought-provoking questions to help you think about what this could look like in your world.

THE 8-STEP PROCESS FOR LEADING CHANGE

Through decades of empirical research, we found that organizations that successfully navigate transformational change have key elements in common. Initially articulated in *Leading Change*, and updated more recently in *Accelerate!* to better align with the complexity of change today, these key elements make up the 8-Step Process. While these are outlined as “steps,” we know that in today’s complex world, change doesn’t happen through a linear process. For example, it’s critical to begin with creating a sense of urgency (Step 1), but this urgency must continue to be cultivated throughout the entire change effort. These steps are iterative, with many occurring simultaneously and/or continuously.



Step 1. Create a sense of urgency around a “Big Opportunity.” This Big Opportunity – a compelling vision of why you need to transform and what is possible if you do – will galvanize others around the need for change using an inspiring, bold statement that articulates why it’s critical to act – and why *now*. It acknowledges the current reality, and paints a picture of the future.

Step 2. Build and maintain a guiding coalition. Pull together a diverse cross-section of individuals who are bought into the opportunity to help guide, coordinate, and communicate initiatives that energize volunteers.

Step 3. Form a strategic vision and initiatives. Articulate what will be different if you can successfully achieve the opportunity, and begin to shape initiatives that help drive towards that greater vision.

Step 4. Communicate the vision to create buy-in and enlist a volunteer army. Change happens – and lasts – when large numbers of people believe in the opportunity and are urgent to act in ways that will help achieve it.

Step 5. Enable action by removing barriers. Leaders must work to clear a path that can unlock the volunteer army to act in new ways. Change is hard, and there are very real challenges that require fast problem-solving. Work through these quickly, so efforts can shift back to passionate action that capitalizes on opportunities.

Step 6. Generate and celebrate short-term wins. Maintaining urgency throughout the change process takes intentional effort. Short-term wins show progress, maintain momentum with volunteers, and help skeptics come along the journey.

Step 7. Sustain acceleration. It's important not to declare victory too soon. Continually persist in driving towards your opportunity, allowing progress to build and build until the opportunity is fully realized.

Step 8. Institutionalize change into the culture. Sustained change occurs when it becomes embedded in the culture, because, among other actions, you have clearly articulated how new ways of working contributed to the realization of the opportunity.

CHANGE LEADERSHIP PRINCIPLES

Regardless of what step of the process you're in, we have found four critical principles that underlie the success of any change effort. These are the keys that unlock the process outlined above. The beauty of these principles is that anyone – no matter where you sit in the hierarchy – can use them to move toward your Big Opportunity.

Think about both Management and Leadership. Management and Leadership are often talked about synonymously. They are both critical to change but they require very different behaviors. Management focuses on maintenance and consistency – processes like planning, budgeting, and staffing. Leadership focuses on moving toward the future – establishing a direction, aligning people around that direction, and motivating and inspiring others to act.

Take care of both Head and Heart. To motivate people to change, you need to frame the opportunity from both a rational and emotional perspective. Too often, the “heart” of change is overlooked and glossed over. When challenges arise, it’s easy to come up with logical reasons not to change. It’s much harder to give into barriers when people are emotionally invested.

Move away from only Have To and create Want To/Get To. People more readily buy into the need for change and persist through challenges when they *want* to be a part of achieving the opportunity. While there will always be elements of “have to” in any change process, top-down, mandated change is rarely sustainable.

Expand from the Select Few to the Diverse Many. More perspectives – specifically *diverse* perspectives – lead to more creative and aspirational solutions to problems, and help identify potential barriers more easily. Creating a large network of people working on a solution – often outside their usual roles – will increase buy-in across critical stakeholders (including those within and those outside the organization), will help move people to “want to,” and will simply make available more capacity to get things done.

TRANSFORMATION IN EDUCATION

Many very thoughtful people believe that education has been using the same approach, to a large degree, for over a century. Why, when many other industries have evolved so much over time, has education, at least in a relative sense, been stuck? There are a few common responses we hear when we ask this question. Below, we’ll examine some of those top challenges – recognizing there are others we can’t cover here. We will provide ideas for how you can leverage the beginning of the 8-Step Process and change leadership principles to think differently about how you navigate these challenges.

“People aren’t bought into the vision.”

As with many of the corporate clients that reach out to us, we often hear the “problem” is that people aren’t on board with the leadership’s direction. For those in positions of authority it can feel like constant resistance – like you’re always trying to convince a room full of naysayers that your vision is the right direction for the future. In reality, few people resist change just for the sake of being difficult. Most people in charge (whether it be a CEO, a Superintendent, a Principal, etc.) create their vision in a vacuum, and then communicate the need for change through the lens of a “burning platform” (i.e. a crisis that needs to be resolved immediately). Effective leaders are highly attuned to real threats and crises, and intuitively understand when to go into hyper-focused problem-solving mode. But, too often, people get mired in this crisis mindset – which can create a sense of anxiety and inability to take action.

We’ve seen that successful change typically flips this problem-driven approach on its head. Challenges such as teacher shortages, budget cuts, and various views on educational policy are very real and serious, but on their own, they don’t tend to energize large groups of people to act

and sustain change. It's important to take the time to craft a path forward based on a Big Opportunity – a North Star that people want to move towards – that sets the stage for broad, creative thinking, and a proactive focus on what's possible.

The opportunity helps set the stage for the conversation. How you communicate it matters. You need to think about both the rational (head) and emotional (heart) pieces of the story if you truly want to build momentum, particularly with skeptics. In healthcare, this usually happens by putting the patient back at the center; in education, the student.

The other mistake we regularly see is allowing the vision to be crafted and communicated by one person or a small group of people – the usual suspects. Complex change requires that many people alter how they work. So why not bring diverse perspectives into the process from the outset? When crafting the opportunity, pull together a larger group of leaders – 15 to 20, for example. This typically increases alignment and consistent messaging. Once the opportunity is crafted, think differently about the stakeholders you might involve to execute against achieving it. What might happen if you pulled together administrators, teachers, parents, students, and community members to problem solve together? Some people we know have done this, and gotten a lot more buy-in and a lot more creativity.

“We can't risk experimenting with kids.”

When first hearing this challenge, it's a natural reaction to say – “You're right! Of course, we can't take risks with children's futures.” It's scary to think about all the things that could go wrong. We hear the same comments in healthcare and other highly regulated industries. A certain amount of risk aversion is appropriate and important at times, but when taken too far, it becomes overwhelming and an excuse not to change at all. Part of the power of a compelling opportunity statement is that it helps people understand that there is actually more risk by not acting, particularly when it inspires communication that engages the head and the heart.

We were working with a community college that needed to get faculty and staff to understand that advising processes had to change to increase student success, and to commit to working in new ways to support these changes. Conversation and data wasn't enough to get buy-in. To help illustrate how many students were dropping out of school – largely because they weren't receiving the timely support they needed based on real, concrete data – the team decided to create two piles of “diplomas” at graduation. The first stack was for those students who completed their degree. The second stack contained pictures of all the students who dropped out.

Think about how we tend to communicate the need for change. Presentations. Graphs. Spreadsheets. Email. Do you think this story would have been nearly as powerful in one of those formats? Seeing the pictures of students who didn't make it to graduation helped people understand the impact that not changing has on students every single day.

“It’s hard to change district/state-wide.”

Districts are often over-burdened with having to fix turnaround schools, leaving leadership feeling they have little time left to think about district or statewide transformation efforts. People feel handcuffed by education policy and testing standards. While there are examples of schools or districts that push the limits on innovation – such as Arcadia Unified School District – we have yet to find a district or state that has completed a major transformation journey across all of their schools. Nevertheless, we’ve seen much larger and complex businesses successfully transform across continents, cultures, and very different business units. We won’t pretend we have all the answers here, or that this type of transformation is easy, but we believe from what we have seen that there are a few lessons from our work in other industries that could increase the success of these efforts in education.

Clearly, one critical element to large scale, district/statewide change is leadership alignment and commitment. This requires that leaders in administration, the teachers’ union, department chairs and the board get on the same page about the need for change – and commit to putting the work in together. From there, identify areas where you could see impact quickly towards achieving the Big Opportunity. The evidence is overwhelming that early “wins” can help you build momentum and urgency. This could mean making changes to your transportation processes to ensure all students get to school on time, or instituting more professional development opportunities, which we know is a critical factor in recruiting and retaining quality teachers.

In any change effort, there will be early adopters who are ready to dive in head first – the people whose internal radars tend to look for opportunity in the midst of challenge. Empower these people to act as leaders, regardless of their role. Their efforts will also show proof of progress – more of those early wins to help skeptics see that change is possible. Wherever you can, build different kinds of networks to expand the sharing of lessons learned. What new ideas might come about if administrators from the lowest performing and highest performing schools in the district got in a room together? What about having a kindergarten teacher, high school teacher, college professor and an employer collaborate to think through the full educational journey? Are there opportunities to get parents and students involved in crafting innovative solutions? There can be immense power in creating these types of experiences.

GETTING STARTED

We know from organizations that manage to successfully transform (and sustain that transformation), you must create a compelling opportunity that serves as a North Star around which you can mobilize large groups of people. This step is too often missed or under-valued. Pull together those who are critical to the transformation and take the time to get this right. Then use it to build urgency – unlocking the potential of those across the school (or district) to innovate and take action. From what we’ve seen again and again, there’s amazing power within

the walls of any organization. It's a matter of figuring out how to channel it in an aligned and inspiring direction. That's what leaders do.



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