

Seven Principles for Change Management

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Today more than ever leaders in education are required to lead and manage change. This paper will propose seven principles for change management. They are drawn from the author's experience in observing and having leadership responsibility for change in a number of education jurisdictions.

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With the central role that education plays in the development of human capital (Bassanini & Scarpetta, 2001) it is not surprising that education is seen at the forefront of social and economic planning and is therefore constantly subject to pressure for change. Leaders in education are required to address the imperative for change that comes from these extrinsic sources as well as intrinsic pressure from the growth of knowledge itself.

John Kotter has studied effective leadership of change for many years (See Kotter, 1990). One of his messages is that leadership entails establishing direction, aligning people and then motivating and inspiring to achieve the outcomes planned. To be effective, the process of change needs to be planned carefully.

Educators are a critical community and will require engagement with their criticism throughout the process. Addressing this criticism rather than considering it an irritant is essential if change is to be successful and sustained.

Leading change involves managing a range of forces which can frustrate the process. In this paper seven principles to assist planning and implementing change are described. They emphasize planning and communication as important factors in dealing with professionals.

Hopefully these principles will be of use in developing a game plan for the action that will follow your attempts to lead change. They are derived from the author's experience in leading and observing a number of change projects in education, including the reform of the NSW HSC in 2000-1.

1. Plan for change from a solid base.

Planning change is always easier than implementing it. It is important to be clear about *how* to change as well as *what* to change. Data and analysis are essential elements as a base for planning change. At an early stage all the relevant data that can support the proposed change program should be brought together.

There is an American saying: 'In God we trust; all others must use data'. It is hard to argue against data. Bringing together all relevant data gives the change leader a strong advantage. This advantage comes because others are unlikely to have accessed the relevant data before they are presented with it in the context of the proposed change.

Evidence-based practice has emerged as a major element in contemporary reform of the profession of medicine (Sackett et al 2000). Davies (1999) argued the case for education policy and practice becoming more evidence-based and there is a growing literature on evidence-based practice in education (Thomas & Pring, 2004). It has now been recognized as a significant management tool for change in all organizations (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006).

If there are no data we know that we are committed to argument about particular philosophies or theories. It is difficult to resolve such arguments. The data-driven

emphasis of the evidence-based practice movement makes opposition difficult. How can one oppose data?

The problem is that especially in education data is often less convincing than it should be and arguments based on data alone can be misleading. As Kohn (2006, p10) has pointed out '...studies with reasonable criteria for evaluating the success of an intervention should be applied with caution because on-average findings, however reliable and valid, may not apply to every student.' This is equally true when evaluating changes applying at a system level with schools.

Data is valuable, but how we make use of it matters. It is important to have a handle on the strengths and weaknesses of available data and how it can be marshaled in support of the change programme. When the data is relevant and convincing it is a powerful aid to the change agenda.

With the HSC reform in NSW there had been considerable research into aspects of the existing system that needed change. As a consequence the McGaw Report (McGaw, 1997) was able to use data to back up the arguments for change that were proposed and which were adopted in the NSW Government White Paper (Aquilina, 1997). The fact that the reform was based on data and research evidence facilitated the task of engaging the large team of professionals that were required to make the reform work.

2. Identify discrepancies between formal and informal practice in the organization.

Education as a profession and service sector has been dominated by ideals and values. This creates a problem when discrepancies occur between formal statements about schooling and what actually gets delivered.

What is more noble than pursuing the opportunity to develop life-changing activities that allow the development of every individual? Schools have been founded with high aspirations. Many prospectuses until recently have proudly proclaimed expectations of excellent progress for all who enter their hallowed or not so-hallowed halls.

The fact that such schools did not consistently achieve what they promised was not something that exercised the minds of their school leaders. After all, many had over a century of experience behind their claims. Such complacency has been challenged by a more assertive parent community. A recent legal claim against a private school which did not deliver according to expectation generated by a glowing prospectus has led many other schools to re-visit their marketing.

All organizations have formal rules and informal practice. Gaining an understanding of any discrepancy between the two can provide very useful data to assist the planning process and could signal some of the direction for change. If the formal agenda is not being followed there may be very good reasons which have not come to the attention of management.

Consideration of the reasons for discrepancy may provide some useful ideas about how the organization responds to formal processes. If the changes proposed are to be communicated primarily through new rules and procedures then how they are to be expressed may benefit from understanding why the previous rules and procedures were considered unworkable.

3. Control expectations about the proposed changes.

Many proposals for change come unstuck because there is a mismatch between expectation and deliverable change. In education we are constantly confronted by unachievable expectations. Working out what can be done is affected by the extent to which expectations about proposed changes can be handled and controlled.

In the late 1980s when I was chairing a staffing committee meeting at the University of Melbourne senior academic staff approached the task of developing a position description for professors with considerable enthusiasm. However the initial product of their endeavors looked more like the description for Nobel Prize winners rather than a realistic description of what one could reasonably expect from an incumbent of a chair.

Of course the final operational position description for the position of professors had to be less grand than the initial draft proposed. More realistic descriptors came from considering those characteristics commonly achieved by professors in major universities i.e. from an understanding of common professional norms.

While it is desirable to have high standards in education, they need to be achievable to avoid disappointment with the result. Reality checking is an important element in controlling expectations about change.

Today one of the most common requirements for school leaders is to manage school improvement targets. When setting school improvement targets we have to confront an unnerving reality about expectations. Every parent wants the school to which they send their children to achieve above average outcomes.

Of course such a goal is unachievable across an education system because even if every school is able to put in a heroic performance the average would just shift upwards and there still would be a distribution of performance in which some schools would have outcomes at a higher level than others. This perverseness comes from the intrinsic properties of performance reporting systems built around normal distributions.

What then is a sensible goal for improving educational outcomes? There is no easy answer to this question. Everyone confronted with the task of change management has to start with a clear sense of what it is they are trying to do and then consider how they are going to transmit the change agenda to those who will be affected by the change. This is when control and management of expectations about the outcomes of change becomes very important.

The 2000-1 reform to the NSW HSC was designed to achieve a number of deliverables. The first was to move from a norm-referenced system of reporting student results to a standards-referenced system.

Such a change in principle ought to be relatively easy because norm-referencing has many disadvantages including obscuring the content of student achievement. It is reasonable to assume that teachers would prefer to see their students' work reported in terms of the content standards actually demonstrated in their work.

However one of the first issues that need to be confronted when proposing change is that there are people who are satisfied with the status quo. They have learned to cope with the present system and recognize that change may challenge them out of their comfort zone.

We should not underestimate the force of the existing benefits lurking in the system which is to be changed. For example, norm-referencing places student performance onto a normal distribution. Such a system of reporting can be quite comfortable at a school level because the distribution of results appears constant from year to year even if there is a decline in student achievement or knowledge.

However, in the current environment where student performance data is seen to be relevant to school accountability, there is a downside to norm-referencing that can be emphasized to assist people to agree with change. What happens when there is a concerted effort at a school to improve teaching and learning? Evidence of school improvement through better teaching may be hidden through norm-referencing because the outcome distribution is fixed without regard to the actual content of the assessment.

The change to a standards-referenced system of reporting HSC results involved managing the expectations of the teachers and parents of around 64,000 students taught at some 700 schools across the State. We had to convince them of the benefits of the change. Given that the HSC is a high stakes end of secondary school credential it was vital that communication of the change be carefully managed to avoid potential misunderstanding and any consequent media frenzy.

While there were inevitably many ideas about what should be changed in the HSC process, we were aware that there would be no tolerance of a cohort suffering disadvantage as a result of the reform. At an early stage of the process we worked with a professional media advisor to produce a video which could be shown at staff and parent meetings. The goal was to have as much consistency as possible in the transmission of the message that needed to be understood at each of the 700 sites where students were preparing for their HSC.

We also worked extensively with members of both the electronic and print media so that they could understand the new style of reporting student results. Talking about 'standards-referenced reporting' was not a good basis for a TV media 'grab'. We adopted

the phrase 'giving meaning to marks' as the populist slogan for the communication strategy and it worked.

As can be seen from this example we tried hard to assist understanding of the change so that expectations were not out of control. Controlling expectations needs to be an explicit management goal from the start of the change process.

4. Select change agents carefully.

Managing change has become a consultant industry in itself. Many consultants argue that it is difficult to re-engineer an organization from within. Undoubtedly there is some truth to this claim. Nevertheless choosing a change agent from outside can be problematic and in many cases unaffordable.

There are change gurus who have very engaging rhetoric about how to manage change. However more than rhetoric is needed for successful change to occur. It is sometimes said that people in the change industry are there because they are hooked on change and tend to be unable to handle stable or repetitive situations. Such a view is probably a little unfair, but there are plenty of case studies where change agents have been monumentally unsuccessful. It is important to check on the track-record of any change agent, especially if they are brought in from outside.

In this regard we can learn some valuable lessons from the corporate change industry. There are management myths about change which can be very compelling when presented by a person who has no doubts about their formula for success. Unless we know that they can produce sustainable change their contribution may be short-lived or counterproductive to longer term objectives.

As with any area of human endeavour, superstitious behaviour can get reinforced. A management academic colleague of mine from my Melbourne University days told me the sad story of a CEO, the main element of whose formula for managing change was to change the company logo. 'Mr Logo' as he was informally called switched companies a number of times during the early 1980s and the formula worked in each company. A logo was changed and the bottom line went up.

Unfortunately the connection between changing logos and increased productivity and profitability was not causal. When the economic crash of 1987 arrived it became clear that it was a strategy that only worked in boom times. A new logo strategy was not recession proof.

Change agents are different from agitators, their role is to assist in the management of the change process and assist in the overall execution of the change agenda. In the case of the HSC Reform the Board of Studies confronted a curriculum and assessment change management task greater in magnitude than it had ever experienced in its existence as a statutory body.

Clearly managing some 88 separate syllabus projects simultaneously with a narrow time frame for implementation required major process re-engineering. To assist both the board and its office an academic with experience in change processes from the AGSM at the University of New South Wales was appointed to review and advise us.

Our consultant's approach assured us that we could manage the reform by implementing significant changes to our processes. By working closely with each level of management within the organization he assisted us to see how we could solve the problems confronting us. We were fortunate: not all external consultants are successful.

If you are not in a position to recruit change agents from outside, choose your internal agents carefully. Those who volunteer for the role may not be those with the leadership characteristics to make the change work. They should have a track-record of leadership and have a clear focus on data-driven decision making.

5. Build support among like-minded people however they are recruited

For successful change to occur it is essential to build social consensus among those affected by the change. This means paying careful attention to getting those who are most agreeable to the direction of the change on side and then using this base to expand the numbers on side. There needs to be clear communication of the objectives of the change and agreement to resolve issues identified in the consensus building process.

Among change industry consultants there is a common assertion that a clean slate is needed if real change is to occur. The advantage of this is that with new staff it ought to be possible for everyone to approach the task of change from the same perspective. Even if this is a real option, it is not necessarily successful. There are plenty of case studies in industry where a completely new management team has been disastrous.

The new broom approach with talk about 'new starts' can be rather distressing to those who may perceive the change as an end to their careers. While it can be an effective strategy when losing existing staff is a necessary element of the change needed the consequences can be very unsettling to the staff as a whole. Sometimes the most valuable staff are those who feel most threatened by the new broom approach while the ones that were targeted for departure develop strategies to remain.

Every organization has a history and it is important to not lose the insights such history can bring to an understanding of the way change needs to be handled. Bringing the old hands on board the change process can aid success.

6. Identify those opposed to change and try to neutralize them.

Those opposed to change should not be allowed to appropriate basic issues. Remember that the old hands can claim history and tradition is on their side. It is vital to engage them in early discussion so that issues that will need to be addressed can be identified early.

Critics of the proposed change should not be isolated from the process. If they are, then they can rightly claim privileged experience and can gain power to disrupt. It is very wise to listen to critics carefully. There are two reasons for this. To begin with there may be some important truth in their criticism that may have been overlooked in the initial enthusiasm for change. Knowing this up front can avoid unnecessary problems with the proposed change and the advice can be incorporated to improve the process. Alternatively if the criticism is not valid then in dealing with the critic one can rehearse the communication message that will need to be honed for successful agreement to the change.

If no effort is made to identify the critics and neutralize them they can grow in influence and have more success in sabotaging the pathway to change.

7. Avoid future shock

Setting time frames for change is an important part of the planning process. Many plans for change are unrealistically future-oriented. There may be contexts in which such future orientation is intentional and purposeful. When organizations are facing financial or operational difficulties long-term time frames can have an aspirational value and move thinking beyond the immediate problems. Perhaps the greatest value in longer time frames is a sense of direction that allows individuals to see what the future holds.

However the future rarely turns out as predicted. We have become aware of the future shock effect where discontinuities occur because of some major change in policy and direction. If the horizon is too far into the future there are fewer objective criteria against which to measure alternative solutions. Moreover the longer time frame provides more opportunity for opponents to build support.

With the introduction of the changes to the HSC in 2000-1 there were calls for delay in implementation by union leadership. Eventually these calls were unheeded because of the large-scale involvement of teachers in the process and because it was realized that delay would undermine the extraordinary effort that had been put into keeping to deadlines. When change is planned there is an expectation that the disruption caused by the change has a time limit. Continuing uncertainty about the future is very disabling to the efficient operation of an organization.

Conclusion

Leading change is a risky business and challenging. Not leading change is even riskier because change is a necessary factor in management of all contemporary organizations. Education often receives the frontal attack of change forces because it is so central to developments in public policy.

This central focus is generating an environment where the assumptions driving change need to be constantly examined so that meaningful results can flow from the planned change. The change generators need to consider applying their own criteria to themselves. In advising the Victorian Department of Education in its quest to become ‘the best education system in the world’ Richard Elmore was recently quoted as saying:

“Everybody’s practice should be subject to analysis and reflection. Ask yourselves ... whether the knowledge that is produced by those tasks is knowledge you would defend against a definition of what students would be required to know in a changing economy” (Corben, 2006, p 11).

Analysis and reflection should lead us to some caution in accepting his proposed criterion for the knowledge to be produced. It hardly acts to simplify the difficult exercise of curriculum specification. Certainly it is extremely doubtful that there will be any uncontested definition of what students would be required to know in a *changing* economy. Indeed it is in times of greatest pressure for change that we perhaps need serious debate and more careful consideration in planning our response to the forces of change.

Hopefully what I have ambitiously dubbed ‘principles’ for assisting the leadership of change will be of use in the on-going discussion of how to lead sustainable change in education.

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