Leading and managing change: why is it so hard to do?
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Prof. Peter Earley
London Centre for Leadership in Learning
Institute of Education, University of London, United Kingdom

The focus of this paper is the leadership and management of change within organisations. How do we ensure change is led and managed successfully - what do we need to consider when leading and managing the change process? Stoll et al’s (2003) assertion of a decade ago - that to succeed in a world characterised by rapid change and increased complexity, it is vital that schools grow, develop, adapt creatively to, and take charge of change so that they can create their own preferable future - is still applicable today.

It is hoped that this paper will provide food for thought and establish a good basis for reflection and further discussion about what makes for successful change and why things may not always work out as planned. Questions (in boxes) are raised throughout the paper and may form the starting points for our on-line discussions. The paper aims to give you a better understanding of why leading and managing organisational change well is so hard to do but, perhaps more importantly, it also suggests how it might be made easier! There are no easy answers or ‘magic bullets’ but understanding the nature of change and how we react to it can help us manage and lead it more effectively. It begins by asking the simple question – what is change?

What is change?

Change is by definition a natural and perennial part of life – if we don’t adapt and change or develop then we are unlikely to survive. The Greek philosopher Heraclitus (535 - 475 BC) said that ‘change is the only constant’, whilst more recently it has been said that ‘the only constant factor in contemporary society is the exponential increase in the rate of change’ (anon). Few would disagree with the above statements: if there is one thing that can be said about change with certainty is that there will be more of it tomorrow!

The recognition of the difficulty in leading and managing change is also not new, for as Machiavelli remarked, – in that seminal leadership book, – *The Prince*:

> There is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things. (Machiavelli, 1532)

So what is change or that ‘new order of things’? Morrison (1998) in what is still one of the most comprehensive texts to discuss change and its management, defines change as:

> A dynamic and continuous process of development and growth that involves a reorganisation in response to ‘felt needs’. It is a process of transformation, a flow from one state to another, either initiated by internal factors or external forces,
involving individuals, groups or institutions, leading to a realignment of existing values, practices and outcomes (px).

On the other hand the related term, innovation, is ‘a matter of learning to do things differently in order to do them better’ (Hargreaves, 2003, p6).

Schools and colleges are continually changing and introducing innovations. Recent educational changes in your country have been extensive and affected all areas of school life and age groups. In most education systems three main sources of change will be found: change required or encouraged by central government policy and legislation; change resulting from external inspections and evaluations; and changes initiated by schools themselves, sometimes from the head/principal and senior team (top down), sometimes from teachers and other staff and increasingly from students (bottom up).

Changes affecting schools may therefore be initiated at any of the decision-making levels in the education system:

(a) central/national (e.g. Ministry or Department, funding bodies, inspection agencies)
(b) local education authority, district or municipality
(c) school (i.e. head/senior leadership team, governing body)
(d) faculty, department or sub-unit
(e) individual teacher(s)
(f) students or pupils.

Decision-makers at different levels within the system have differing ideologies and change agendas, based on differing perspectives on the goals of education and the means of bringing these about. This distinction between the origins of change is important and can affect its chances of success. An initiative that is adopted willingly, even though it may have arisen externally, is much more likely to be successful than one that is imposed externally or internally on unwilling staff.

There is a growing body of research which suggests that teachers in many schools perceive a lack of control and ownership over their work and although many welcome many change initiatives, concerns are often expressed about the pace and manner of change, insufficient support to meet these changes, and not being given the professional trust that they deserved. Also the number, speed and manner of implementation of change have added significantly to headteachers’ and teachers’ workload.

**Question 1:**

‘...we as teachers feel that we are constantly dealing with change, and yet, technology aside, we have much the same curriculum and classrooms as we had decades before’ (Breslin, 2011, p64).

Do we? Is it also true of schools’ structure, function, teaching and learning?

There are many different types of educational change: they may relate to the curriculum (academic or pastoral), pedagogy, the organisation of teaching and learning, organisational structure or culture. Whatever the changes, they may be implemented rapidly or slowly (incremental) and they may be fundamental (radical or core) or peripheral (marginal). Thinking about the intended *outcome* of the change in relation to the change *process* can
help assess how easy or difficult it will be to achieve. Figure 1 considers the types of change in relation to both outcome and process.

**Question 2: Change – its nature and origins**

- Why do we need to change?
- Where does educational change come from in your system?
- Who are the main drivers for change within your institution?
- What are the main types of change you are familiar with?
- Is change always an improvement?

**Figure 1: Types of change**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OUTCOME</th>
<th>PROCESS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transformation</td>
<td>Rapid Revolution</td>
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<tr>
<td>Readjustment</td>
<td>Reconstruction</td>
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<tr>
<td>Incremental</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Evolution</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adaptation</td>
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Different change management strategies will be used at different times depending on whether simple or transformational change is needed. A useful conceptual model developed in the business literature is Wilson’s (1990) who differentiates between types of change (simple or transformational) and approaches to change (cooperative and coercive) which give rise to four distinct categories: participative evolution, charismatic transformation, forced evolution and dictatorial transformation (see Figure 2).
Why managing change is complex

The leadership and management of change is about moving or transitioning people, teams and organisations to a preferred future state. Change is complex because it concerns people more than content and ‘successful management is about managing successful change’ (Morrison, 1998). This means leading and managing people and this can be difficult without the necessary skills and qualities. Successful leaders of change are resilient and resolute, they are intelligent: emotional, contextual, and strategic. They are strategic thinkers able to ‘read’ situations and people and act accordingly. They have a clear vision, communicate well, are good listeners and remain positive (Day et al, 2011; Fullan, 2011).

Morrison states that:

Whilst one can plan for change in a careful way, in practice the plan seldom unfolds in the ways anticipated. People change things! People respond to change in a variety of ways. Some will resist, some will adapt, some will adopt an innovation. People will respond to the way in which they perceive the change. (1998, p.15)

This raises important issues:

1. That it is hard to adopt a rational plan for change and see it through as planned, because people are unpredictable and can change things. Social reality is complex.
2. The way that people perceive change will affect the way that they respond. Therefore if they perceive that the change has been forced on them they may well resist it, particularly if they feel it is counter to their interests. It follows from this that it is important to ensure that people at least understand what the change involves and that ideally they should feel some involvement with, and ownership of, the change.

Managing change is a difficult and complex task for a number of reasons. Much organisational change is unplanned and unpredictable. Planned change needs to be balanced with continuity to maintain personal and organisational equilibrium. Most of the work of school managers is concerned with maintaining routine day-to-day activities, principally the teaching and learning programmes. Too much change leads to ‘initiative fatigue’ and ‘innovation overload’; too little leads to stagnation.

It is often assumed that planned change will be beneficial for those involved. Innovation, however, in altering existing arrangements, is both personally and organisationally threatening and brings losses as well as gains. Any change, however small, is likely to disadvantage one or more of those concerned.

Fullan (2001) talks about a number of concrete factors to keep in mind when considering change, for example, the use of resistance to good effect (redefining resistance so it’s seen in a positive and not negative light); the expectation of dips in the process; the requirement for reculturing; the need for pressure and support; that change takes time; and people need to understand the innovation and what it is trying to achieve. He puts complexity together with moral purpose and collaboration towards a common goal as his formula for successful change. As he noted in earlier work: ‘The crux of change is how individuals understand and experience the proposed change’ (1991). Those implementing change can often forget how others will feel as a result of it.

Leaders must try to empower staff by making explicit their own professional and educational values and sharing them. This way, an agreed collegiate culture can be created, encouraging a learning environment for all staff and pupils. Commitment and collegiality in others has to be developed, and leaders need to involve staff in decision making, allowing them to take ownership of their work, valuing them, and translating clear vision and purpose. The development of a collegiate culture or a culture of collaboration, consultation and shared decision-making is the most important factor for successful change. The process of change is as important as the change itself.

Question 3:

Fullan states that the process of change is as important as the change itself. Is it? Are there any exceptions to this rule?

Change is a complex, long-term and non-linear process, not a simple one-off event. In-depth and lasting change involves alterations in people’s attitudes, values and beliefs, and hence in the culture of the school. Because of this, change is destabilising, often threatening for individuals and groups involved, and therefore frequently involves conflict. For these reasons rational models are inadequate for understanding and managing the change process, yet many ‘theories’ of change – and there is no shortage! - downplay this complexity and are little more than checklists.
**Question 4: Change theory – do you have a favourite?**

Explore the relevant literature or search the internet to locate a ‘theory’ of change (e.g. Fullan, 2001, 2011; Lewin, 1947, Kotter, 2002, 2006, Bridge, 2009, Egan, 2010, Beckhard and Harris, 1987). Consider the extent to which your chosen theory makes sense. Also, explain whether the theory is linear and rational or sufficiently nuanced to accommodate the complexity of the change process.

If leaders are to earn the respect of their colleagues, they need to provide clear direction which is based on educational ideologies and values that are shared by, or at least acceptable to, the majority. Without this they will fail to motivate staff or earn their trust.

The predominant leadership style set by the principal/headteacher and the senior team will be the key to the way in which change is managed. A number of change strategies and approaches will be called upon. A useful classification of change strategies was offered by Thurley and Wirdenius in the early 1970s: directive, expert, negotiating, educative and participative. Figure 3 outlines the main features of each as well as listing their advantages and disadvantages.

### Five change management strategies

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<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Advantages</th>
<th>Disadvantages</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DIRECTIVE</td>
<td>Relatively fast</td>
<td>Ignores the views of those affected by change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EXPERT</td>
<td>Use relevant expertise. Small groups required. Relatively fast to implement</td>
<td>Expertise may be challenged. Resistance of those not consulted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEGOTIATED</td>
<td>Change recipients have some say. Resistance to change likely to be reduced (or areas of disagreement highlighted)</td>
<td>May be relatively slow. Anticipated change may have to be modified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDUCATIVE</td>
<td>People committed to change</td>
<td>Relatively slow. Likely to require more resources and more costs involved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PARTICIPATIVE</td>
<td>Change more likely to be accepted. More people committed to change. More opportunities for individual and organisational learning</td>
<td>Relatively slow to implement. More complex to manage. Will require more resources. Increased costs</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Figure 3: Five change strategies (adapted from Thurley and Wirdenius, 1973)
We tend to look for instant results from change, but it may take many years before the results of large-scale change can be properly assessed, particularly where student outcomes are concerned. Our ‘maps of change are faulty’ (Fullan, 1993); they portray innovation as a simple, rational journey following a logical path from policy making to implementation. However, we can identify at least four main stages in the management of the change process: implementation; continuation or institutionalization; and outcomes.

The change process however is not a simple linear progression: it’s a two-way process and events at any stage may feed back to alter decisions made at a previous stage. Thus, in implementing a particular change there may prove to be unintended and unexpected consequences in practice, which lead us back to reconsider the original purposes of the innovation determined at the initiation stage. Similarly, the original purposes and plans for the innovation are interpreted and adapted by those putting it into practice, so the final outcomes may be very different from what was originally intended (e.g. Ball et al, 2012). There may be an ‘implementation gap’ between the intentions of policy makers at national level and what is actually implemented in schools and classrooms.

Change is thus a long-term process not a simple event. Significantly, many changes fail to progress beyond the planning or early implementation stage. Those managing change have to deal with multiple changes, each progressing through the various stages noted above. The changes interact and impact on each other and may not be mutually compatible. Wherever the change originated, it has to be managed and that means dealing with people, both as members of teams and individuals.

**Change and the individual**

Change involves both the organisation as a whole and the individuals and teams within the organisation. The leaders and managers of change need to be aware of the emotional costs involved with change and to ensure that people have full information, time and real opportunities to talk things through. In an organisation where power is shared and devolved and people have some ownership of change, it is likely that change will be handled more smoothly and successfully than in a hierarchical, mechanistic organisation. Change is more likely to be successful when it is seen to be in line with the key purposes of the organisation, when it is clearly understood and well communicated.

Individuals vary in terms of personality and motivation and may be more or less welcoming of change for a variety of reasons. People react differently to the introduction of new ideas and initiatives, some are open to change and keen to be involved, others are resisters and may act as blockers.
Figure 4: The process of transition (from the National College programme Leading from the Middle)

**Question 5:** Where do you stand in relation to change?

Look at Fidler’s typology below and locate where you are positioned. Is your predominant attitude to change an advocate, willing follower, resister or blocker?

Also does ‘the process of transition’ (a variant of the well-known ‘change curve’) shown in Figure 4 make sense to you or your colleagues?

Figure 4 and similar models of the transition process such as the change curve (originally based on grief and bereavement counselling) enable you to recognise where you and your colleagues are on the change journey and to be reassured that feeling anxious or upset is a natural and necessary part of the change process.

Fidler (2002, p.93) has identified the following typology of people faced with a major change:

- **change drivers** – these people tend to like change in general
- **careerists** – they may see a change as something that will improve their career prospects
- **co-operatives** – who have good will towards change and are generally supportive
- **ambivalent** – can see the good and the bad potential
- **sceptical** – unsure about the change or how it affects their own personal interests
- **luddites** – who oppose any change on principle
- **resisters** – who oppose this particular change.
Rogers (1962) developed a model for the adoption of change and for the diffusion of innovation, arguing that only a small percentage of staff are ‘innovators’, with a further third ‘early adopters’ and one-in-six ‘laggards’. In a later edition Rogers (2003) discusses the factors that are likely to affect take up, such as the complexity of the change and its benefits or advantages over existing systems.

Change forces us to step outside our comfort zone; so perhaps resistance is a natural reaction. Are most people inherently conservative preferring the status quo to a ‘new order of things’?

**Question 6: Is resistance to change a natural response?**

- What are the main sources of resistance to change?
- What strategies can school leaders draw upon to help reduce or overcome any resistance?

Individuals faced with change may feel:

- loss of status and control
- fear of the unknown
- lack of clarity of purpose
- uncertainty and ambiguity
- feelings of vulnerability
- lack of clarity on the benefits of the change
- reluctance to let go of the present
- threats to expertise and established skills
- the feeling of having surprises sprung
- fear of failure and threats to self-esteem
- admission that the present situation is unsatisfactory
- concern about the ability to cope
- fear of loss of control
- stress
- increased workload.

The main sources of resistance to change include:

- Lack of trust – unsure about motives for change
- Belief that change is unnecessary or not feasible
- Economic threats
- Fear of failure or failure to understand the problem
- Loss of status and power – personal costs too high
- Rewards – insufficient gains
- Threats to values and ideals – not like the proposal
- Resentment of interference
- Anxiety – how will I cope!?

Strategies to help overcome resistance to change can include ensuring people are given sufficient information about the change and its desired effect; greater involvement in the design and implementation of the change; negotiating with staff if they feel they are going
to lose out; and being supportive, listening to any doubts and concerns people may have and providing training as needed.

Training and development plays a key role in the change process – and not only at the implementation stage. When trying to implement change, anxiety and worry will be reduced if additional training is provided through various mediums such as peer mentoring, observations, shadowing, research, courses, etc.

The role that the individual can play in welcoming or resisting change is considerable, and this is an important element in the introduction of any change. Attitude and overall motivation to change may be positively linked to staffs’ sense of their own professionalism. However, critics of educational policy have pointed out that this sense of professionalism is being undermined through government initiatives. This may be resented by teachers and make them more resistant to change and therefore more likely to oppose any changes seen by them as part of a government’s managerialist or performative agenda.

Managing resistance and conflict

Resistance is a natural response to feelings of ‘loss, anxiety and struggle’ (Busher and Harris, 2000, p.19). Change for many is synonymous with extra work, pressure and stress. Resistance should therefore be anticipated as a natural part of the change process. A major reason for the failure of change however is a lack of attention to the process of change. It is very important to think through the change process carefully in order to reduce the number of negative side effects. Remember too, resistance can be used to good effect; it gets you to think through your ideas and to ask yourself ‘are we on the right track?’

However, when intending to implement change one will almost certainly be confronted not only with resistance but also with some kind of conflict. The ability to handle conflict is a key factor in successful change management. Dealing with conflict can often create a sense of fear but it is important to remember however, that conflict, like resistance, is an inevitable part of implementing change and that one must therefore understand its source, show empathy where needed and have strategies to deal with it.

When managed effectively, conflict and resistance, can be quite positive. As noted by Gold and Evans:

...well managed conflict can be productive and creative and can move a group of people or an organisation on to a far more productive phase than the one it was ‘stuck’ in before (1998, p.43).

Managing conflict is often synonymous with managing difficult people (Trapnell, 2012). Mismanaging those members of our team who create problems for it can impede change, but more drastically, impede development for that individual. When dealing with difficult people, Gold and Evans (1998, p.44) suggest that we should:

- Acknowledge uncomfortable feelings aroused in you by different persons, put them aside and work objectively
- Separate person from problem
- Take time – do not react immediately. Think about your next action to make it proactive
- Plan your actions carefully – rehearse what you are going to say.
It is also important to ensure that we do not allow ourselves to become manipulative or aggressive.

**Can change be managed successfully?**

There are numerous ways to approach the leadership and management of change and the number of variables affecting it are endless but there are models, strategies and techniques which will help. This is no space to go into these tools in any detail here but a few are mentioned which can easily be followed up on the internet.

At its simplest managing change means recognizing the four Ps: purpose, picture, plan and part. The basic purpose for the change has to be clear and people need to understand why the change is needed. A picture needs to be painted of the outcomes of the change and this is part of the vision building process. We need to encourage ownership of the change or ‘buy in’. It is also necessary to produce and discuss an outline plan which should be included in the development or improvement plan. It will need to be modified during implementation. Finally, each person should be given a part to play in both the plan and the outcome itself – they need to know how they can contribute and participate.

Other tools and techniques that can be drawn upon that may help ensure a greater chance of success include diagnostic windows for identifying problems, commitment planning, SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analyses, force-field analysis (a diagnostic reality check on whether you can change a situation) and readiness, commitment and capability mapping. The Change Curve and the Change Equation are also helpful tools, the latter seeing successful change as made up of five components - vision, skills, incentives, resources and action plans - the omission of any one likely to lead to implementation difficulties.

Using such tools and techniques will help but they are no guarantee of success – after all we are dealing with people!

**Conclusion**

Educational leaders influence teams to work collaboratively, to share vision, to be motivated and to perform well. Leaders must try to empower staff by making public their own professional educational values and sharing them. This way, an agreed collegiate culture can be created, encouraging a learning environment for all staff and pupils (Bubb and Earley, 2010; Earley, 2013). Commitment and collegiality in others has to be developed, and educational leaders need to involve staff in decision making, allowing them to take ownership of their work, valuing them, and translating clear vision and purpose. The development of a collegiate culture or a culture of collaboration, consultation and shared decision-making is the most important factor for successful change. Trust, empowerment and engagement are key components of such cultures where change is not seen as a threat or indeed as part of everyday practise.
It must be emphasised that change is a complex, long-term and non-linear process, not a simple one-off event and that the process is as important as the change itself. In-depth and lasting change involves alterations in people’s attitudes, values and beliefs, and hence in the culture of the organisation. Because of this change is destabilising, often threatening for individuals and groups involved, and therefore frequently involves conflict. For these reasons rational models are inadequate for understanding and managing the change process.

Finally, as Furnham (2005) states, re-working a well-known statement from the bible:

Organisations (and their leaders) must have the courage to change things they can change, the tolerance and adaptability to leave unchanged the things they cannot change, and the wisdom to know the difference. (p675)

This paper hopefully contributes to the gaining of that wisdom – the wisdom to lead and manage change successfully!
References


**Further reading and resources**


Darking, L. (2013) *Dealing with change*


England’s National College has some very practical resources about leading and dealing with change in the College’s ‘Good Practice’ resources. You might want to look at these:

How to lead a change initiative
http://www.nationalcollege.org.uk/index/interactiveinfo.htm?id=303578

Top tips for leading change
http://www.nationalcollege.org.uk/index/interactiveinfo?id=151722

Leading change self-assessment questionnaire
http://www.nationalcollege.org.uk/index/interactiveinfo?id=145925

Also for the 'change curve' see: http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newPPM_96.htm

The use of the Bridge Change Leadership Framework is found in the National College’s (2009) *Change Facilitators Handbook* available on their website.