

The Change Process In A School Learning Community

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Initiating, effecting and institutionalizing change in a school learning community does not just happen. Success for all students and school improvement are continuous challenges that each school and district works toward achieving. Improving schools and developing school learning communities require change. The change process includes the acceptance, adaptation, and institutionalization of change by individuals, the school organization and the local school community. Change is not easy. Tradition and familiar routines and practices of schooling are easy to maintain and follow. The challenge for every principal is to bring about change in the school that is sustained and makes a real difference in the quality of learning and life for students, teachers, and the school learning community. Too often a principal is appointed to a school with the idea of implementing the principal's own ideas or vision as well as the agendas of the superintendent and board of education. Yet, in the final analysis, after several years of hard work, these ideas are not sustained and are not institutionalized in the school. Why?

In fact schools really have not changed much in the past one hundred years. Each attempt at educational innovation generally slips back into a traditional mode of educational operation that is safe and familiar. Why is it so difficult for schools to change? Visit any school and teachers will retrace the history of educational innovation and the educational-bandwagon programs that school personnel have joined in hopes of improving education for their students. But real change remains elusive. This article addresses the principal's role in the change process; it suggests ways to to sustain systemic change within the school. With sustainable, systemic change, school improvement survives the departure of the initiating principal and becomes part of the school community's culture.

Understanding The Lessons Learned About Educational Change

Seymour Sarason (1991) contends that the chronic failure of school reform is not in the ideas, but the implementation of ideas. According to Sarason, there is a true misunderstanding of how individuals and schools change. Educators, especially principals who have the responsibility for orchestrating change within their schools, must study the change process. Sarason (1991) makes three important points regarding change:

1. Outsiders and Insiders Must Be Involved in the Change Efforts:

Significant change requires that both insiders (teachers, staff, administrators within the school/district) and outsiders (parents, business, and the community) are involved in the change. Change can not to sustained unless all stakeholders are involved. Most change efforts start and stop within the school, involving only teachers and staff, never really generating input and help from the other important consistencies. The education community often uses token input from the outsiders, then goes ahead with what the insiders want. Thus, change fails because the outsiders can not understand the innovation, provide assistance with the innovation, or see the educational innovation as needed.

2. Power Relationships Must Shift:

Power relationships must shift if change is to take place within a school. The relation of power in and outside the school must change if educational innovations are to become institutionalized within the school. The principal, teachers, district administrators and board members can not be the only arbiters of what is best for students' education. Various individuals and organizations need to share the power and input into important educational decisions for change. Until these power shifts take place, educators (principals and teachers) only spin their wheels in hopes of institutionalizing changes within their school learning community. Parents and community members (outsiders) can block or influence educational change, especially when they have not been involved in the change process.

3. Working and Learning Conditions Must Change:

Working and learning conditions for teachers, students, and staff must change. Teachers, students, and staff must have time for thoughtful discussion and to learn about educational best practices. While in-service training, such as a workshop on cooperative education, may introduce concepts, change requires the opportunity of teachers discuss, modeling, practice,

coach, and support one another when they carry the concepts into the classroom.

The Change Process

Change is a process, not an event. It does not just happen one day. The concerns, blank stares, foot-dragging, and other subtle means of resistance to change can be seen in any school, district, or organization going through change. John Kenneth Galbraith (in Bridges 1991, ix) describes a typical reaction to change: "Faced with the choice between changing one's mind and proving that there is no need to do so, almost everybody gets busy on the proof."

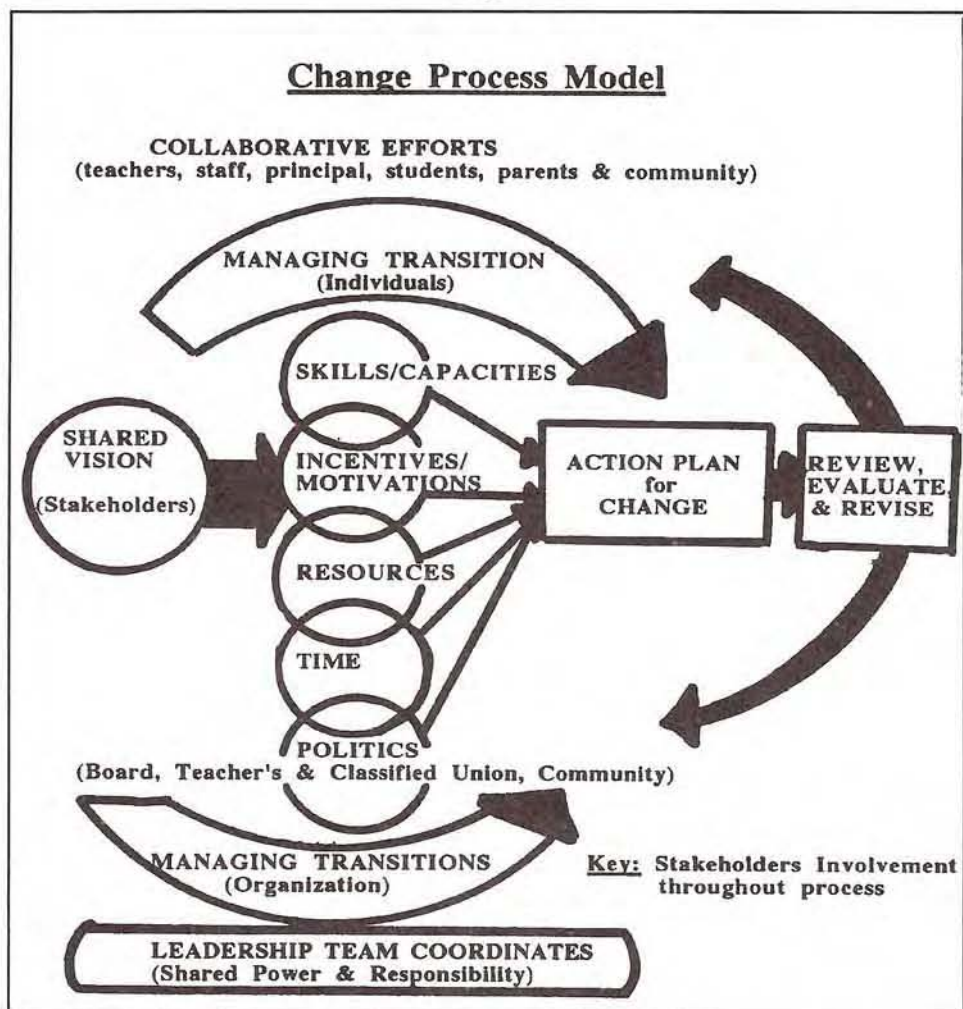
New and useful perspectives on the difficulties of implementing the change process are important to understand. "It is only by raising our consciousness and insights about the totality of educational change that we can do something about it" (Fullan 1993, 16) Without discussion of the change process, people involved in it do not understand the power and problems change creates. Understanding the dynamics and implications of change becomes a powerful means for the successful implementation of an educational innovation. Most schools study the issues surrounding the educational innovation (whole language, for example) without studying the change process itself and without understanding what happens to the school learning community and all of the people involved. In order for the change process to take place in a successful manner at a school the following key questions should be addressed:

Key Questions in the Change Process

- What is the school vision?
(collective vision of the school learning community)
- Who are the stakeholders?
- What are the skills/capacities needed to change?
- What are the incentives or motivations to change?
- What are resources available to change?
- What are the politics of change (board, teachers' and classified unions, community)?
- What is the action plan for change?
- How are transitions (individuals and organizational) managed during the change process?
- What modifications need to be made during the change process or implementation of the action plan?
- How will the action plan for change be reviewed, evaluated and revised?

The questions can be translated into a Change Process Model (Diagram 1). The Change Process Model helps the principal visualize what must happen for change to take place in a successful way. Each question must be addressed by the people (principal and leadership team) given the responsibility of managing the change. "If schools are to become the responsive, renewing institutions that they must, the teachers in them must be purposefully engaged in the renewal process" John Goodlad (1990, 10). The principals must see that this happens. The principal must enlarge the circle of persons responsible for implementing change, certainly to include teachers but also to include the "outsider" constituencies, especially parents.

Diagram I



The Change Process Model (Diagram 1) starts with a thorough discussion of the school vision. Vision is the collective vision of the school learning community, developed over time to become the heart and passion of the school. Vision in a school learning community is not just the principal's personal vision of schooling. The collective school vision, with its principles, values, and underlying beliefs about students, should drive the need for the necessary skills/capacities needed to make the change, as well as the needed incentives/motivations and the needed resources to bring about change and sustain it.

An example of applying the Change Process Model might be the improvement of the school's reading instruction.

- What is the school's *vision* for improving reading instruction?
- How are the *stakeholders* being involved in the creation of the vision and the change process?
- What reading *skills* and *techniques* or what *capacities* are needed to teach reading to today's students, given the most recent research on effective teaching of reading?
- How can teachers be *motivated* or have an *incentive* to change their current ways of teaching reading?
- What *resources* are available for teachers who wish to change their techniques of teaching reading?
- What are the *politics* (board, teacher's and classified union, community) of change regarding reading instruction?
- How are *each* of the teachers *managing the transition* to the school's vision for reading instruction?
- How is the school learning community (the organization) *managing the transition* from the old ways of teaching reading to the new ways?
- What is the *Action Plan for Change* for the reading program at the school?
- How is the Action Plan for Change *reviewed, evaluated* and *revised* on a regular basis to make modifications that help the change process take place and become sustained within the school learning community? How will we know the new reading program is implemented and successful for students?

Fullan in *Change Forces* (1993) reminds us of the complexity of the change process:

Fullan's Basic Lessons of the New Paradigm of Change

1. You Can't Mandate What Matters (The more complex the change, the less you can force it.)

2. Change Is A Journey Not a Blueprint (Change is non-linear, loaded with uncertainty and excitement and sometimes perverse consequences.)
3. Problems Are Our Friends (Problems are inevitable and you can't learn without them.)
4. Vision and Strategic Planning Come Later (Premature visions and planning are blinding.)
5. Individualism and Collectivism Must Have Equal Power (There are no one-sided solutions to isolation and "groupthink.")
6. Neither Centralization Nor Decentralization Works (Both top-down and bottom-up strategies are necessary.)
7. Connection with the Wider Environment Is Critical For Success (The best organizations learn externally as well as internally.)
8. Every Person Is A Change Agent (Change is too important to leave to the experts; personal mind set and mastery are the ultimate protections.) (21-22)

Managing the Transitions of Change

The Change Process Model emphasizes the importance of helping individual teachers, staff, students, parents, and community members cope with change. Failure to personalize the change process, by managing the transition of each individual, will lead to personal and organizational disaster and no change. Personal issues must be addressed during the change process, so that each person is given time, so that there is a clear understanding of the effects of the change on each player in the process. Bridges (1991) states: "You will be unable to get the results you need without getting into 'that personal stuff'" (p. 5). Fullan (1993) reinforces the importance of the individual educator, as the critical starting point, because the leverage for change can be greater through the efforts of individuals, and each educator has some control over what he or she does. Each and every educator must strive to be an effective change agent.

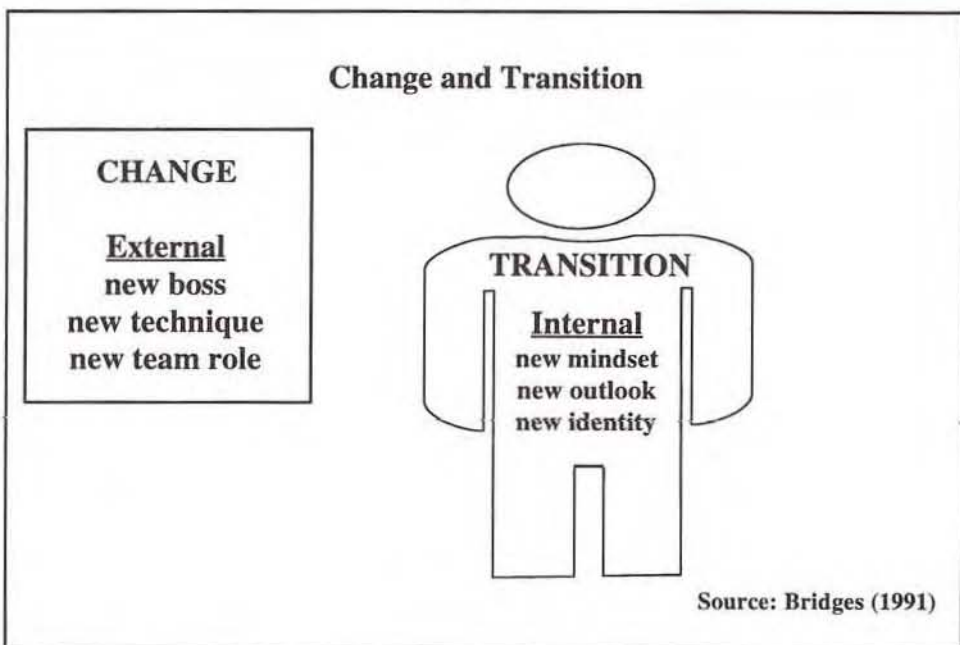
If change is to take place, real people must stop doing things the old way and start doing things a new way. There is no way to do that impersonally (Bridges 1991). According to Bridges, dealing with the *transition*, the internal psychological reorientation of an individual coming to terms with change is key. Transition management is a way of understanding the internal turmoil every person experiences with a change event and helping each person feel more comfortable with change and the process of change. Transition management is about helping each individual, within the school, develop a reorientation. Individuals need to develop new mindsets, new outlooks, and new identities when dealing with a change. The old ways of doing things must end, and the new must take hold, if the change is to be permanent. Only through a managed transition from the old to the new will change be sus-

tained.

Transition is the personal, internal, psychological reorientation that an individual goes through in coping with change, whereas *change* is the external event—the new reading techniques, the new policy, the new teaming roles, the new school site, the new principal or superintendent (Diagram 2). Unless a transition takes place at the individual level, change will not work.

School learning communities can not deal with change without seriously studying and implementing a change process model. As members of school learning communities, individuals know the road to change is difficult, but not impossible, especially if there is a clearer understanding of change and the transition to the new is accommodated by each individual. Change should not be attempted for the sake of change. It should be planned and well thought out educationally for the individuals and the school.

Diagram 2



How to Manage the Transitions as a Part of the Change Process

It isn't the changes that do you in, it's the transitions. Change is not the same as transition. *Change* is situational: the new site, the new boss, the new team roles, the new policy. *Transition* is the psychological process people go through to come to terms with the new situation. Change is external, transition is internal (Bridges 1991, 3).

Transition is the internal psychological process people will need to go through to come to terms with the new situation (whole language instruction, multi-graded classes, or thematic integrated instruction). Transition management is one of the most important techniques a principal can apply in implementing any change within a school learning community. Unless transition occurs, the change will not work. The French have a saying about change: "The more things change, the more they stay the same." Why is this true? Translating the meaning of this saying to the change process highlights the fact that there can be any number of changes, but unless there are personal transitions of the individuals involved, nothing will be different when the dust clears. People need to go through a transition, within the change process, to come to terms with new ideas that bring about the change.

Transition management is the starting point, not the outcome of change. Transition starts with the ending that must be made to leave the old situation behind. Bridges (1991) states that situational change hinges on new things, but psychological transition depends on letting go of the old reality and the old identity. Nothing undermines a school organizational change as much as the failure to think through who will have to let go of what when change occurs.

TheodoreSizer expresses in *Horace's School* (1991) some of the types of reactions to change and the need for a clear transition management plan to bring about the educational change.

... their criticism, even when offered lovingly, is often greeted paradoxically: responsible people agree with it, but also agree to do little to address the failings. Reform is for someone else's school. We're happy with the one we have, and we are skeptical of any effort to alter it. It is no wonder that there has been so little change (10-11).

Paradoxically, transition starts with an ending. The new beginning of educational change must start with endings. It is important to remember that people do not like endings. It is the principal and other key teachers, staff, parents, and community members involved in planning the educational change that must manage the transition so the changes do not become unmanageable. The principal, as the leader of the school, with the help of the school leadership team, must plan how to end what used to be. Teachers may fear the loss of familiar turf within the classroom and school, their sense of self, and many of their regular routines. It will not be the change to the new curriculum, instructional strategy, or procedure itself that the individuals resist. It is the losses and endings that each individual experiences and the transition that individuals are resisting. It does no good to talk about the wonderful outcomes of the educational change when dealing with transition of individuals to the change. It is the time to deal directly with the losses and endings individuals will feel, as the transition takes place to the new educational ideas. What steps need to be taken to help with the losses and endings so the transition can be made to the new educational ideas? Following are questions that can generate a plan for dealing with the important transition of individuals to the change.

Questions to Answer in Managing Transitions:

1. What will end because of the change?
2. Who will lose what with the change?
3. How do individuals accept the reality and importance of their losses due to the change?
4. How does a leadership team recognize individual and group losses to help the transition?
5. How can leaders help individuals not overreact to change?
6. Do individuals understand the proposed change?
7. How will information be communicated during the transition and change?
8. What plan is there to celebrate progress in the change transition?

It is important to plan the answers to the change transition questions because it will clarify for the principal, the leadership team and constituents what the change really is and how the transition process will work. It is through this process that individuals within the school community come to understand, develop common values, goals, and plans. It is important to note that the change plan evolves, as it moves along, and allows for the utilization of many individual talents. Change plans can not be solidified, but must be fluid to allow for adaptations that the school learning community sees arise. "Change will become more of a way of life for teachers and less a planned occasion" (Sergiovanni 1991, 167).

Change must take place to keep the school vital and responsive to its constituents' needs. Planning and carrying out the change needs to be done as a whole. "The single biggest reason organizational changes fail is that no one thought about endings or planned to manage their impact on people" (Bridges 1991, 32).

Through a school learning community, continuous change and transitions can take place which becomes institutionalized within the school. Principals need to heed the warning of McLaughlin and Talbert (1993):

Effecting and enabling the teacher learning required by systemic reform cannot be accomplished through traditional staff development models—episodic, decontextualized injections of "knowledge" and technique. The path to change in the classroom core lies within and through teachers' professional communities: learning communities which generate knowledge, craft new norms of practice, and sustain participants in their efforts to reflect, examine, experiment and change (18).

Developing a transition process for change that involves teachers, staff, students, parents and the community through a developing learning community holds promise for real reform in schools.

Important Facts About Change to Remember

Here are some simple facts for a principal to remember about change when dealing with the school learning community.

- Change is a process, not an event. Change takes time.
- Change is accomplished by individuals.
- Change is a highly-personal experience for each individual.
- Change involves developmental growth for each individual allowing an internal transition.
- Change should focus on individuals, innovations and the context.

Summary

Change to a new educational idea is the destination, but helping individuals see the need for change makes change possible. Deliberate planning for change with the individuals involved will make the difference in the implementation of the change and will help sustain the efforts. The Change Process Model is a helpful guide for looking at change. The school learning

community will sustain the innovation/change through this process rather than abandoning the innovation. Further, through the change process the entire school learning community continues to investigate and grow together.

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