

Leading Change in Schools

A Practical Handbook

Sian Case

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Introduction

Why stay we on the earth except to grow?

Robert Browning

My daughter's favourite toy is a rabbit that can change sex halfway through a sentence. She was named Peter Rabbit very early upon her arrival at our house by a 21 month old who knew that this was the only possible name for a rabbit. As my daughter's understanding of gender issues developed, she decided that girls should only have girl animal toys, so Peter Rabbit was consistently referred to as 'she'. Because adults find it much harder to attach the name Peter to the feminine experience, we parents still refer to 'her' as 'him'. My daughter remains patient with us and cheerfully adapts to our language and helps us to adapt by literally assigning her/him both sexes in any one sentence. We only notice that this is an odd status for a rabbit when other families comment. It is fascinating how much change young people assimilate as they learn – an obvious truism for us to take for granted.

It is easy to forget how simple it once was to change. Every organization and job function in today's economy has experienced changes over recent years; we constantly hear about the need to predict and respond to change more effectively. Entire industries have evolved to support us in our stressful lives that were perhaps unimaginable 20 years ago, especially in the retail and leisure sectors. Education has managed change on a phenomenal scale over recent years. More still is being demanded of it and individual schools are starting to claim back greater control over that change through initiatives such as remodelling. Education professionals are currently used to change, even if they are not always comfortable with it. My experience of working with such people is that they demonstrate a constant drive to improve and innovate – no matter how high their current expectations, they will always try to do it better next time.

The most complex part of any change management process is to lead and involve your colleagues in adopting new behaviours. Anyone who can use a diary can manage a project; the key to success lies in your abilities to persuade, influence and inspire the people you work with. Increasingly, job holders from 'middle-management levels' are asked to lead projects that involve negotiating with or motivating their peers to achieve improvements in school processes, structures, curriculum or policies. If busy people do not report directly to you, it can be hard to encourage them to work on your priorities. Research demonstrates that whatever the context of change, effective change takes place only when individuals are committed to a vision of a new future that has meaningful roles for them. It has been suggested that most major change initiatives fail to achieve their intended objectives because staff unconsciously and consciously sabotage the change process when they feel excluded. Such exclusion from the final vision is not merely the preserve of industry – education can also fail to explain itself effectively to its key players. The existence of a huge, international diet industry proves that logic does not always result in changed behaviour; for example, science demonstrates that there is only one way to lose weight – eat less and exercise more. The much more complex and practical answer to effective weight loss lies in

engaging people's emotions, motives and beliefs to enable them to change their behaviours. Very few project management texts suggest how to deal with people's emotions. *Leading Change in School* will help you to identify clearly and correctly how to motivate each individual who can shape your change, persuade them to support you appropriately and harness their effort directly for the benefit of the whole school.

Academic libraries contain many shelves devoted to texts researching the management of change in organizations. With the notable exception of Michael Fullan, the Canadian writer and researcher in educational reform, most of these business works do not mention the school context. Readers may be familiar with the five components of change leadership recommended by Fullan (2001):

- 1 Moral purpose – acting with the intention of making a positive difference.
- 2 Understanding change – described as an 'elusive' process, effective change leaders 'have a healthy respect for the process of change'.
- 3 Building relationships – 'especially with people different from themselves'.
- 4 Creating and sharing knowledge.
- 5 Making coherence – by balancing ambiguity and creativity.

By the time I came across Fullan's ideas, I had already worked with a variety of schools dealing with imposed and self-induced change. I was impressed by how applicable his suggestions are. I was not using his language, but he certainly echoed my experiences of working in education, which I perceive to be in a permanent state of improvement because of the passionate need of education professionals to always do it better. The second of Fullan's components, understanding change, will be explored thoroughly in application in this book, especially the need to appreciate the early difficulties of trying something new and the importance of detailed but flexible planning for all stages of the change process.

A significant aspect of Fullan's work that I enthusiastically champion is the need for trust from and towards our change leaders as they enable us to accept the ambiguity inherent in all change processes. Change is rarely as smooth as planned and if you persist in 'papering over cracks' just to achieve a deadline plucked at random, the resulting chaos will always overwhelm your change project. This book will help you to plan for alternative results and to understand how best to encourage your colleagues to work with you to achieve them. It will also suggest how to fill the cracks on a more permanent basis. Most of the contributors to this book know the power of that 'eureka' moment when the clouds suddenly part and the learning of a school community moves up a gear. Once you have achieved that learning, it becomes very tempting to repeat the experience by looking for further improvement opportunities.

Currently we are privileged to be working in such exciting circumstances for schools. You may be reflecting right now on the implications for your school(s) of personalized learning, workforce remodelling, 'Every Child Matters', new children's services, shifting curriculum demands for Key Stages, changing a maths scheme, developing assembly content or planning how to increase the involvement of every parent within your school community. Whatever the size of your school(s) or scale of your change, the exercises and ideas from this book will benefit you.

The rate of change commonly experienced in schools is so fast that we often take for granted

the learning that we have accumulated to manage that change. More than most jobs, the teaching profession has some neatly divided chunks of time called terms that make splendid natural learning review points. As a nation, we are poor at learning from our successes and celebrating that learning. I would guarantee that everyone reading this book has more experience of dealing with change and is more skilled than they think. Try spending a few moments in your next half-term to ponder your recent change leadership learning and record it, using the exercise 'Learning from recent changes' shown overleaf. Simply writing down the learning will remind you of what you have already achieved and what more you could be capable of.

 *Nothing endures but change.*

Heraclitus

1 Why change?

Where there is no vision, the people perish.

Proverbs

When asked to play a simple word association exercise, most people respond to the word 'change' with adjectives indicating loss, uncertainty and even intimidation. Rarely will you hear positive or productive thoughts.

However, if prompted, most people could list many examples of positive change experienced in their personal and work lives; for example, becoming a parent, recognizing new learning with promotion or new roles, watching another person grow, develop or succeed, changing jobs or work environment, seeing an improvement in physical environments.

Humans are built for change; it is of course the driver of evolution and is stimulated by our innate desire to do better next time. On an objective level, it is easy to identify the many changes we benefit from as a result of 'man's inability to sit still in a room'. However, as Pascal wrote at the start of that quotation, the drive to interfere can result in misfortune. Frequently, the change we experience in our professional life is not of our own instigation and that loss of control feeds many fears, insecurities and, consequently, resistance to change.

When we are in charge of change that we passionately feel will benefit our school, we feel exhilarated, inspired and enthused. Does everyone else involved in your change feel the same way? How can you ensure that they do? This chapter will enable you to prepare a vision of your proposed future that clearly presents the benefits for all your audiences and also helps you to anticipate how and why people may find some aspects of the change difficult.

Benefits of change

All experienced leaders of change know, and everyone in education will be familiar with, the need to repeat information continuously before there are any signs that your words have been heard. So how do you arouse interest, or even passion, in the change you want to create?

Until you are clear of the benefits, no one else will be. Using Exercise 1.1 'Benefits of change' shown on pages 14–15, write down on your own all the benefits you can envisage for various members of the school community. I have offered some suggested headings, but do adapt them for your own situation as appropriate.

You may now find it helpful to ask an appropriate colleague to review this list or to present it at a key meeting to gather others' suggestions. This exercise will be the first step towards identifying the objectives of your change programme.