

Inviting innovation

Leading meaningful change in schools

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Education in New Zealand (and indeed the world) is currently facing the greatest period of rapid change it has ever experienced. Challenges such as how to address chronic underachievement, what to do with ultra-fast broadband or mobile devices, the implementation of modern learning environments, developing inquiry or project-based learning, or even how to deliver an increased level of personalisation and student agency in learning, require schools to make significant changes to behaviours and norms that have endured for decades if not centuries. What is clear is that while “industrial-model” thinking may have served schools well during the industrial age, the 21st century requires a much more innovative, entrepreneurial approach to leading change if schools are to ensure that they are constantly evolving and adapting to best meet student, parent, whānau, and community needs in a rapidly changing world.

Change is often one of the most difficult things for people to cope with in life, but this rapid rate of progress both within and without schools means that change knowledge for educators is now a “forever proposition” (Fullan & Donnelly, 2013). Engaging with the change process as part of our daily existence is difficult, but it is vital if schools are to remain relevant in an increasingly unpredictable world.

So how do people in schools lead change effectively? Paying particular attention to change leadership literature, this article will:

- explore the nature of change and how people experience it
- outline the differences between change management and change leadership
- outline a set of design principles for implementing successful change.

To illustrate each of these points, three hypothetical case studies will be provided. Each deals with a different aspect of the change process and looks at how leaders might successfully guide school communities through transformations such as: developing more culturally responsive practice throughout a school; undertaking more team teaching and collaborative professional development; and moving to open, collaborative, modern learning environments.

A crucial part of successful change leadership is avoiding an approach which leads to change being “done to” people, and embracing an approach which empowers and enables people to contribute to, and to see themselves in, the change they are bringing about. This article will also explore how to involve and invest people in change processes.

Part 1: The nature of change

Change is complex and often multifaceted. One thing we can be sure of is that, depending on the nature of the change, no two schools are equally prepared to take that change on. Let’s consider why that is. When looking at the research into the way change affects different people, a range of different terms are used, but Heifetz, Grashow and Linsky (2009, p. 19) divide changes (or challenges) into two broad categories, based on the impact they have on people:

Technical [or first order] challenges—problems that can be pretty clearly defined and can be addressed with known solutions or ones that can be developed by a few technical experts. These fixes can usually be implemented using the organization’s current structures and procedures. No big impact on people here.

Adaptive [or second-order] challenges—these forces require significant (and often painful) shifts in people’s habits, status, role, identity, way of thinking, etc. For example, how do we change to put more decision authority in the hands of our front-line employees? Or, high-tech communications and teleworking are transforming us into a virtual company but people feel they are losing touch with one another and with the corporate centre.

To give practical examples, a technical (sometimes called first-order) challenge for a school might be that the school works to promote Māori achieving as Māori through the explicit inclusion of ako¹ in every unit of learning. Many teachers would find this change relatively straightforward, and be able to build on their existing practices to invite more reciprocity and student agency in learning. If the same school were to abandon traditional subjects or learning areas, and opt for a completely inquiry-based curriculum where students followed their own rich questions and made use of ako as part of the process, many teachers would need to abandon old ways of doing things and invent new solutions in order to feel comfortable and confident in the new environment. This second example would represent an adaptive (or second-order) challenge: something far more challenging for most people and schools than the first.

One of the first steps in supporting people with change is to identify whether they are experiencing that change as *technical* or *adaptive* because different support structures are required for each. It’s helpful to think of technical challenges as being those which are an extension of the past, sit within existing paradigms, are consistent with prevailing values and norms, and can be implemented with existing knowledge and skills. Adaptive challenges represent a break from the past, sit outside existing paradigms, conflict with prevailing values and norms and require new knowledge and skills to implement (Waters & Marzano 2006).

Identifying whether a challenge is technical or adaptive for a school is useful, but it’s really only the first step in the process because, despite what this simple binary might suggest, the same challenge can be both technical and adaptive to different people within the same school. Just as our learners bring different levels of experience, prior knowledge, and attitudes to their learning, so too do each of us bring different attitudes and knowledge to change we’re experiencing. So in the example given above where a school might embrace a more culturally responsive pedagogy, there may be teachers who are Māori, who have taught in kura kaupapa Māori or in Te Kotahitanga schools, for whom this change represents only a technical challenge. Other teachers, including those who have mental models of education that place the teacher at the centre of the learning process, might find such a

change to be second-order and quite a challenge to come to grips with. It goes without saying that the concerns, preoccupations, and anxieties (and therefore support structures) of this latter group of teachers will be quite different from the former group.

When we recognise that adaptive change often requires people to stop using time-honoured strategies and approaches that have served the school well over the years, it’s easy to see why Linsky (2009) refers to adaptive change as “the distribution of loss”. If people have a lot of themselves invested in the old way of doing things, it’s understandable if they feel a sense of loss when that old way comes to an end. The more invested; the greater the loss. When guiding people and schools through this kind of change, it’s extremely important to understand the differences between them and to adjust the support provided to people, because as Heifetz et al. (2009) say: “The most common cause of failure in leadership is produced by treating adaptive challenges as if they were technical problems.”

TABLE 1. CHARACTERISTICS OF TECHNICAL AND ADAPTIVE CHANGE (WATERS & MARZANO, 2006)

Technical (or first-order) change	Adaptive (or second-order) change
An extension of the past.	A break from the past
Within existing paradigms	Outside existing paradigms
Consistent with prevailing values and norms	Conflicting with prevailing values and norms
Focused, bounded, incremental, linear	Emergent, unbounded, complex, non-linear
Marginal	A disturbance to all elements of a system
Implemented with existing knowledge and skills	Requires new knowledge and skills to implement
Problem and solution oriented	Neither problem nor solution oriented
Implemented by experts	Implemented by stakeholders

So the same change can be experienced in different ways by people within the same school, which means the nature of people’s experience (and their interpretation of change) should help to determine the support provided by those guiding the change. Change often leads to people feeling personally threatened because the skills and strengths for which they have been valued and respected in the old order may not be as important or valued in the new order. This acknowledgement is crucial for leading change because we know that if people are feeling threatened or unsafe, they are less likely to fully engage the rational, logical part of their brain. So while the change might sound perfectly well-reasoned, rational, and common-sense, this doesn’t guarantee that people will fully engage with it. Scenario 1 explores one school’s approach to shifting practice in order to raise Māori and Pasifika achievement. It illustrates the complex nature of change.

SCENARIO 1

School A has an increasing roll of Māori and Pasifika learners, many of whom are achieving at levels below the national averages for their gender and decile. The school convenes a working party to explore the potential causes of this underachievement, and this working group gradually evolves an understanding that one of the central causes is the pedagogical practices of their (well-intentioned, committed and hard-working) mostly Pākehā staff. The implementation of the Te Kotahitanga Effective Teacher Profile and a number of key aspects from the Pasifika Education Plan pushes many very experienced teachers out of their cultural comfort zone into embracing approaches such as whānau-based groupings, manaakitanga, wānanga, and ako, while acknowledging and celebrating Pasifika diversity and multiple world views. Teacher A, although Pākehā, is married to a Samoan and Fa'a Samoa is part of her world. While not fluent, she has a good understanding of Samoan language and culture, and for her, the embracing of Te Kotahitanga and the principles of the Pasifika Education Plan represent technical change. She spends time at the Tongan, Tokelau, and Cook Island stages at Polyfest to learn more about their stories and culture, and enrolls in several introductory Māori-language wānanga to deepen her understanding of te reo Māori. For her, *technical* support such as attending Polyfest and language workshops is entirely appropriate to help her meet a change that she is experiencing as technical. Teacher B, on the other hand, has only had limited experience with Maori and Pasifika learners, coming from a predominantly Pākehā community, and having taught in only two other schools, both of which were made up of mostly Pākehā learners and staff. Teacher B experiences the shift in school focus as adaptive change, or a significant departure from his past practice. He begins to question his own ability, becomes stressed, easily angered, and anxious to the point where he even considers resigning and taking a job at another school without an explicit strategic focus on raising Māori and Pasifika achievement.

By identifying that Teacher B is experiencing adaptive change, it's easier for the leaders implementing the change to see that what he needs is probably not a collection of vocabulary sheets of common English words in te reo Māori or Pasifika languages, or a book on the myths and legends of different iwi from throughout Aotearoa. What is of more use to him in the emotional, unsettling world of adaptive change is: an opportunity to talk about what's happening and his grief at having to give up tried and true practices from the past; an opportunity to acknowledge the fact that he may slip backwards in his practice as a teacher; the chance to receive collegial support from Māori and Pasifika teachers and parents; and reassurance that he still has a valuable contribution to make in helping to identify the kinds of support teachers need to implement the school's vision.

Part 2: Change management or change leadership?

An experienced school principal I know describes leadership as “the act of painting a picture of the future that is better than the current reality”, and I find this description helpful when beginning to explore the difference between *leadership* and what has traditionally been called *management*. Kotter (1996) describes leadership as something that “defines what the future should look like, aligns people with that vision, and

inspires them to make it happen despite the obstacles”, and it's this setting out of a compelling and motivating vision that something is not only desirable, but vital for a school's continued success, that gives urgency to change.

Despite this, organisations have historically displayed a bias toward management rather than leadership. Kotter (1996) suggests that as a result of the rapid increase in the number of complex organisations over the 20th century, the focus of organisations has necessarily been on keeping them running rather than rapid innovation. So if management is “a set of processes that can keep a complicated system of people and technology running smoothly”, (continuity), without *leadership* (change) these same systems run the risk of successfully maintaining approaches and processes designed to meet the needs of a world that ceased to exist years ago. Or to put it another way: all innovations need some form of support process and management if they are to be sustainable, but the processes we put in place to support innovation can ultimately stifle future development.

It is, however, possible to combine leadership and management in a way that is enabling but not constraining, as Scenario 2 indicates.

SCENARIO 2

School B is working to move away from their traditional approach to teacher professional learning and development (PLD), which has been to run whole-staff meetings on Monday afternoons, during which one of the senior leaders would facilitate a workshop or invite in an external speaker. The leadership team developed and clearly articulated a vision for all teachers to be more agentic and self-actualising in their PLD (the *leadership* part of the equation). This meant using repeated whole-staff sessions to discuss the importance of *teaching as inquiry* and of teachers being reflective researchers into their own practice. A worthy vision, but the senior leaders didn't have a good idea of the processes required to make this work in practice (the *management* side). Over the course of one year, groups researched and made recommendations around the way professional learning groups might operate in the school, centred around some research that suggested these groups are most likely to deliver benefit for students when they are characterised by: an intensive focus on the relationship between teaching and learning; and collective responsibility and accountability for student achievement and well-being (Robinson 2007a). Over time a system evolved that saw professional learning groups meet regularly (once a week on Wednesday mornings) and follow a work in progress meeting (a “WIP” meeting) whereby each member of the group would take it in turns to (a) update the rest of the group on progress made since the last meeting, and (b) ask for advice and seek feedback on any issues that had arisen. During the last week of each term, a wine and cheese evening would be held and two members of each professional learning group presented their findings and made one recommendation for a school-wide change in practice. Over the course of the year each staff member had to present at least one set of inquiry findings to the staff (which represented their leadership contribution) the quality of which was enhanced by the daily and weekly processes of the professional learning group (management processes).

As Scenario 2 suggests, it's possible to successfully combine apparently contradictory elements of leadership and management in a workable system that leads to both innovation and sustainability. So let's turn our attention to the final question we're going to explore: what are the design principles for implementing successful change in schools? Are there approaches that make change more likely to "stick", and are there approaches that should be avoided because they decrease the likelihood of success?

Part 3: Design principles for implementing change successfully in schools

While change is often complex and multifaceted, there are some design principles we can employ to increase the likelihood change will succeed. One such principle is centred around where a leader's efforts are best directed. There is a growing body of evidence to suggest that *transformational* leadership, or leadership centred around garnering trust, respect, and admiration from followers (Bass, 1985) is less effective in raising achievement for students than *instructional* leadership, or "the work of improving learning and teaching" (Robinson, Lloyd & Rowe, 2008). What this research suggests is that if the goal is to raise student achievement, working alongside teachers to improve the quality of teaching offered to students has an effect size three times that of solely focusing on providing inspiration and motivation.

Lawson and Price (2003) offer further design principles that can support people through the type of change they often have difficulty with: cultural (or mindset) change. These four design principles are centred around offering people:

- a purpose to believe in
- the skills required to change
- reinforcement systems
- consistent role models.

A purpose to believe in

This is sometimes referred to as "a compelling story" (Aiken & Keller, 2009) and is most successfully grounded in a school's vision and core values with a strong connection to people's emotions and personal sense of mission. A rational understanding of why the change is required is not enough, and often doesn't result in a deep-seated, sustained effort. As Lawson and Price say, "[change] must mean something much deeper to [people], something that they know will have an effect on their personal growth" (Lawson & Price, 2003, p. 19). Essentially, the question people want to have answered is

"Why should I change?" As McGuire (2003, p. 5) puts it: "If I am not convinced at a deep level about why change is necessary, then I will not develop the willingness essential to supporting a new direction."

One of the best ways to help people come on board with a change process is to let them write their own story, rather than simply implement a story that has been written for them. Aiken and Keller (2009) recount the story of a famous behavioural experiment where people were randomly either given a lottery ticket or invited to write a number of their own choosing down on the piece of paper. Just before the lottery was drawn, the researchers offered to buy back the lottery tickets, finding:

no matter what geography or demographic environment the experiment has taken place in, researchers have always found that they have to pay at least five times more to those who came up with their own number. (p. 103)

This example speaks volumes of the powerful connection people have to a transformation story they have helped to write themselves. If all members of a school are involved in shaping the change strategy, they are far more likely to be emotionally invested in it and committed to ensuring it succeeds. If they can see, in part of the process, the idea that their table group came up with, they are more like to invest emotionally in the change.

The skills required to change

It would be extremely convenient for us to be able to wake up with all the knowledge and dispositions required to operate well in a new environment, but sadly learning doesn't quite work that way. We know that people experience change in different ways, and are all in a different state of readiness to progress, much like our students when we begin to explore their prior learning and previous experience with a topic. All of the knowledge and skill we bring to pedagogy when planning lessons for our classes needs to be brought to the pedagogy we use to help our adult learners (our colleagues and ourselves) develop the knowledge skills required by the new order.

Reinforcement systems

So much of what we do in schools bears the DNA of the industrial age, including the systems we use to give teachers feedback on how they are tracking. Even the fact that teachers most often work in an isolated fashion with a group of students (inside a single-cell classroom) with no colleagues around them means that it's difficult for them to get feedback on the progress they are making. One of the most commonly used reinforcement systems in schools is the appraisal process, whereby teachers are given feedback on what they are doing well, and areas in

which they can improve. If a school's appraisal process looks solely at individual teacher competence and their work with only the students in their class, it might act to undermine progress towards a more collaborative, team-based approach to learning, thereby stifling wide adoption of change.

Consistent role models

One of the remarkably humbling things about being an adult is the research that suggests that we (just like infants and children) model our behaviour on “significant others” in our lives (Lawson & Price, 2003). Lawson and Price also suggest that, in order to change behaviour consistently throughout an organisation, it isn't enough to ensure that people at the top are in line with the new ways of working; role models at every level must “walk the talk”. In schools, change is far more likely to be successful if people throughout the school see the principal, senior leaders, heads of department or syndicate leaders, classroom teachers, beginning teachers, and even students and parents, operating in a manner consistent with the values of the change. The importance of senior leadership themselves modelling the change they hope to see throughout the school is underlined by Aiken and Keller's (2009) observation that one of the reasons that only one in three transformations succeed is “that most executives don't count themselves among the ones who need to change” (p. 105). Grounded in what is known as “self-serving bias” (or our predilection to think we are better than we actually are) their supposition is that we often think is that change is something for *others* to embark upon.

SCENARIO 3

School C is a medium-sized Christchurch primary school that suffered significant damage to its buildings during the 2011 earthquakes. As part of the rebuild of their site, they are embarking on a move to more open, collaborative, modern learning environments. Over 18 months, the school will progressively replace the traditional corridor-and-single-cell style of architecture with larger, more open, flexible learning spaces, within which several teachers can teach concurrently. To prepare the staff for the kind of co-teaching possible in the new spaces, the senior leadership team worked for 6 months on a visioning process to align their approach to the new spaces with the school's vision of “Always together; always learning”. A group of teachers were particularly interested in the opportunities that the new spaces provided for the creation of a vertical learning community from Years 1 to 6 meaning students were more able to be challenged at a level appropriate to their stage rather than age. The decision to prototype this approach to the arrangement of learning arose out of conversations centred on the best way to achieve the school's vision. Immediately, the syndicate leaders identified the fact that most reinforcement systems—including appraisal and reporting against annual plan targets—were implemented on an individual teacher basis. A working group was established to see how appraisal could be adjusted to include individual and group goals, and all annual plan targets were aligned to this new “double bottom line”. An area of

uncertainty for the staff was how they were going to develop the skills required to operate in the new environment, so a decision was made to prototype the new spaces by removing walls between three existing classrooms. This small change to the structure of the existing buildings allowed three teachers from the junior, middle and senior syndicates to begin building a set of new practices, particularly around collaborative planning and the most effective way to use the new spaces. The teaching as inquiry cycle helped to guide them in the development of practices, and they shared their problem-finding and problem-solving with professional learning groups made up of teachers from across the school. The progress they make, the breakthroughs and the false starts are shared with the group, reflected upon and used to inform next steps. To make sure they had a good understanding of the nature of the change taking place, the principal and both deputy principals were allocated times across the week, during which they team-taught with the prototype team. The team also used classroom release time to visit the ECE across the road to observe the processes they used to team-teach across a range of different ages within the same room.

Leading change in schools is difficult. Putting aside long-held beliefs and well-honed practices often provokes resistance from individuals, and a sense of grief and loss for what has been left behind. There are, however, practices we can follow that help to guide people through the change process. By acknowledging everyone's unique response to change, by personalising the way we support people, and by offering the right mix of change leadership and change management, we can help people to adapt, enhance and embrace change. The three scenarios outlined in this article offer examples of:

- how to work with the different ways people experience change
- ways to combine management and leadership to support and not stifle innovation
- design principles to encourage broad-based, incremental, continuous innovation.

The lessons from the research that underpins these scenarios allow us to face up to many of the challenges outlined at the start of this article, and they allow every school to invite the kind of innovation we need to meet the challenges facing us in the future.

Discussion questions

To help schools reflect on the way they are supporting each other through change, I encourage both staff and leadership teams to answer these three reflective questions:

1. Can you list examples of first and second-order change taking place in your school at the moment?
2. Think of a change your school is currently undertaking. To ensure you have the balance of change *management* and change *leadership* right, write two lists: one for elements that should continue (the essential), and one

for elements that could change (the expendable). E.g., teamwork is essential and must continue; the lesson planning format we currently use can be improved and is therefore expendable.

3. Consider a second-order change your school has undertaken recently, or is undertaking now. Can you list the ways people have been provided, or have provided for themselves:
 - a purpose to believe in
 - the skills required to change
 - reinforcement systems
 - consistent role models.

Note

- 1 “The concept of ako describes a teaching and learning relationship, where the educator is also learning from the student and where educators’ practices are informed by the latest research and are both deliberate and reflective. Ako is grounded in the principle of reciprocity and also recognises that the learner and whānau cannot be separated.” (Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 20)

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