



Developing readiness for change

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The regeneration of schools and infrastructure

Following the 2011 earthquakes in Christchurch, the New Zealand government embarked on an ambitious plan to regenerate 115 schools with an overall investment of NZ\$1.1 billion. The Greater Christchurch Renewal program provided the opportunity to rebuild the schools not as they were, but as 'modern learning environments', featuring more open, flexible and interconnected learning spaces. With this opportunity has come challenges; principally that of transitioning the teaching workforce from industrial-era classrooms into more agile and adaptable spaces for collaborative teaching and learning.

With the renewal programme likely to stretch across more than six years, many school and sector leaders are preparing their teachers, students and communities for significant change in the way education is enacted/delivered. The regeneration of the Christchurch school network is a classic example of disruptive, transformative change. Given that two thirds of transformative change fails (Vakola 2013), it seems that the odds are stacked against the sector making a smooth transition to collaborative teaching and learning practices. So what can leaders do to grow individual and organisational readiness for change and achieve the desired outcomes?

Ready for change?

Readiness for change was defined by Armenakis, Harris and Mossholder (1993 p681-682) as 'the cognitive precursor to the behaviour of either resistance to, or support for, a change effort'. In other words, it is the lead-up that counts with respect to a person deciding whether they are going to support a change or resist it. There is reasonable consensus in the literature that three things increase a person's readiness for change; and therefore the likelihood they will commit to a change. These include:

1. A belief that change is needed
2. A belief that the proposed change is appropriate for the challenge at hand
3. A belief that the organisation has the capacity to implement the change.

Each of these conditions is explored in more detail below.

Is change needed?

The first condition, 'a belief that change is needed', centres on establishing a 'why' for change (also called 'a sense of urgency'). This often involves leaders seeking data and other forms of evidence that highlight discrepancies between the current situation (reality) and the desired future state (vision). For example, if an organisation wants to achieve a vision of every students being able to follow their passions, a leader might examine the socio-spatial learning environment in a way that helps staff to question whether every student is actually able to achieve this. If they cannot say this is true for all students, then the group might agree that change is needed.

The articulation of a clear, shared, aspirational vision statement is central to the process of comparing current realities with desired futures. Good schools often build success around inspiring vision statements, like 'every child; every opportunity', but great learning organisations relentlessly work towards achieving new successes by exploring the discrepancies between what they say they do and what they actual do.

This discrepancy, or dissonance, can be uncomfortable; due to our awareness that what we say we do does not always translate into what we actually do. Cognitive dissonance theory tells us that people often seek to resolve dissonance in two ways: (1) they change their beliefs, and (2) they change their behaviours (Festinger 1957). Referring to the example given above, to change the beliefs of a school community would require a school to adjust its vision statement to something like 'every opportunity, but only for some', which would be unacceptable to most people. This leaves the second strategy for resolving

dissonance: changing behaviour. This is where momentum for change can come from.

Organisations can also develop awareness that change is needed by exploring what will be lost if they continue with current ways of doing things. Leaders wishing to explore such issues often ask things like: 'If we're still doing what we're currently doing in five

years' time, what opportunities will we have missed out on?' Essentially they are asking, 'What is the opportunity cost of maintaining the status quo?'

With respect to new learning environments and new pedagogies, practical examples of how schools can build change readiness by analysing the risks associated with the status quo include:

1. Convening discussions about the 'cost' of retaining industrial-era classrooms in a world where multi-modal learning and teacher collaboration are increasingly important.
2. Exploring the limitations on student creativity and problem-solving associated with horizontal (within year-level) vs. vertical (between-year-level) social groupings and the impacts of both forms of social organisation on collaboration.

Building consensus that change is needed can contribute to a sense that the change is legitimate and not simply the current whim of leadership, or this month's passing fad. Such work is critical if people are to commit to change (Holt et al. 2007).

Is the proposed change appropriate for the challenge at hand?

Once there is some consensus that change is needed, the next condition that needs to be satisfied for change to be achieved is for people to believe that the proposed change is appropriate for the challenge at hand. There are two key elements here: (1) the level of fit with the organisation, and (2) the likelihood that 'this' change is right for 'this' challenge. Imagine the widespread frustration in an organisation that knows it must change but has no idea how to go about it.

The level of cultural fit, or congruence between a change initiative and an organisation's vision, is important because trying to adopt a change initiative that runs counter to an organisation's culture seldom finds success, even in cases where the same change has been successful in a similar setting. For instance, if a proposed change centres on empowering leaders to make quick, unilateral decisions, but an organisation has a strong culture of participatory decision-making, the change would be viewed as being of 'low-cultural fit' and not appropriate within the culture of that particular organisation.

Leaders can also increase peoples' sense that a given change is appropriate by making transparent the decision making process. By making visible the pros and



cons that guided the choice of a given change others can see the reasoning at work.

Can we successfully implement this change?

A belief that the organisation has the capability and capacity to successfully implement the proposed change is the third component of change readiness. Imagine an organisation that knows change is needed, believes that the proposed change is the right one, but is so disillusioned by prior attempts at change that they remain cynical that any attempts at change are going to fail. But fear not, there are a number of things that leaders can do to increase an organisation's sense of self-efficacy when it comes to implementing change. These include:

- Ensuring that every change is well-considered, thoroughly researched and carefully implemented.
- Providing timely and adequate information about the change, including keeping staff, students and community informed about 'big picture' considerations and 'small picture' details. This might include using websites, public meetings, focus groups, social media and printed communication.
- Establishing participatory decision-making processes that involve participants in problem-finding as well as the problem-solving.
- Prototyping wherever possible, especially with respect to new learning environments, where change readiness can be promoted by prototyping new spatial settings/arrangements and associated curriculum design, pedagogies, and assessment practices.

Implications

The key challenge associated with building change readiness is that it is difficult to achieve quickly, especially if an organisation doesn't have a sense of urgency about change. Similarly, if individuals are disillusioned about the failure of previous change initiatives, it

takes time for their self-confidence to return. A clear implication for leaders of change is that readiness for change needs to be developed well before change is needed. Paradoxically, by the time change is upon you, it may already be too late.

Research suggests that despite the level of organisational change readiness, it is the level of change readiness of individuals that will determine the success or failure of a change program (Vakola 2013). Further, individuals' attitudes towards change are shaped by group membership, so the attitudes of key team members toward change can influence those around them (Vakola 2013).

Schools can maximise the likelihood that staff, students and community members will support changes to physical learning environments and associated practices by:

1. Clearly articulating the educational objectives they hope to achieve through redesigning their learning spaces, for example, raising achievement levels, increasing higher-order thinking skills and fostering innovation. Such communication should be ongoing and use a range of different communication strategies, including face-to-face meetings and social media.
2. Helping staff, students and other members of the school community understand the research that sits behind collaborative teaching and the affordances of innovative learning spaces. For messages to be believable, they should be based on sound research, but also be presented in an approachable way.
3. Building a sense of self-efficacy around change by celebrating the successes achieved through smaller changes. Showcasing such gains made due to the actions of teachers and other staff can contribute to an increased sense of self-efficacy around change. In the context of learning spaces, this might include inviting team members to share changes made to the selection,

configuration and use of furniture, or the sharing of resources to support co-teaching and collaborative practice.

Given the many challenges associated with renewing the school network in Christchurch, school leaders can shift the odds in favour of successfully regenerating schools and school infrastructure by implementing some of or all of the strategies outlined above. In particular, it is important that school communities believe that (1) change is needed, (2) the proposed change is appropriate for the challenge at hand, and (3) that the school has the ability to successfully implement the change. While these three strategies will not guarantee success, they will certainly shift the odds in favour of it.

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Photo courtesy of Mark Osborne.

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