Change leadership and the transition to innovative learning environments

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Abstract

While considerable effort goes into getting the design elements right in an innovative learning environment (ILE), ultimately its success hinges on the teaching staff's ability to use the new spaces to full potential. Despite this, what school leaders can do to support teachers to transition their practice when moving into an ILE remains under-researched. This paper will explore a theoretical framework comprising three essential stages when leading staff through the process of transitioning into an ILE: (1) preparing for change; (2) implementing change; and (3) sustaining change. Without a clear understanding of how to lead change in teacher practice, many ILE implementations may be unsuccessful.

Keywords

Introduction

One of the primary challenges associated with implementing innovative learning environments (ILE) is the need to support teaching staff to transition from some of the values, beliefs, principles and practices they may have held and employed for a very long time. For instance, moving into an ILE may mean teachers need to move from believing that one teacher can best meet the needs of a group of students to believing that working as a team is the best approach; moving from enjoying high levels of autonomy when planning lesson to embracing a need to compromise and accommodate the wishes of all team members. This transition may also require considerable professional learning in areas such as collaboration, pedagogy and space, and flexible environments. These kinds of change, requiring not only shifts in individual mindsets, but also shifts in the culture of the organisation attempting to implement them, sit at the most challenging end of the change spectrum (Lawson & Price, 2003).

> Snapshot: "I'm an old dog- I've been around for a while. We went through all this back in the seventies. How is it going to be any different this time?". This question, right at the start of our meticulously planned design review session gave voice to what (apparently) a lot of the staff were thinking but not saying. The nodding heads, the murmured comments around the room made it clear that many staff didn't see a need for a new building design, let alone a need for them to be part of the design process. It also made it clear just how challenging the road ahead would be.

Waters, Marzano, and McNulty (2003) categorise change in relation to the significance or 'magnitude' of that change on the people experiencing it. First order change is that which has a definable problem/solution configuration, "can be implemented with existing knowledge and resources, and where agreement exists on what changes are needed and on how the changes should be implemented" (p. 5).

When experiencing second order change, people often feel that the change is making the situation worse rather than better. There are multiple 'wicked problems' occurring at once, they need to learn new approaches, and the change may conflict with prevailing values and norms. Second-order change is often much more difficult for people to implement and sustain because it disrupts "cooperation, a sense of wellbeing, and cohesion. It may also confront group identities, change working relationships, challenge expertise and competencies, and throw people into stages of "conscious incompetence" (Waters et al., 2003). The implementation of an ILE for many teachers represents second-order change.

Precisely how a school leader should support staff going through this kind of significant change is under-researched. Blackmore et al. (2001) remind us the research literature surrounding innovative learning environments is mostly concentrated in the design phase, with little attention paid to (among other things) "the organisational cultures and leadership that facilitate or impede innovative pedagogies in new spaces" (Blackmore, Bateman, Loughlin, O'Mara, & Aranda, 2011, p. v).

Methodology

As a consultant working in the field of change leadership and transitions into innovative learning environments, my work provides me with the unique opportunity to record and analyse the experiences of a community going through second-order change whilst also being a member of that community. Using analytic autoethnography I am analysing my own experiences (and those of co-participants) against a theoretical framework comprising principles of effective, sustainable change. I am drawing from internal data sources such as field notes, recollections, and memories ('snapshots'), as well as triangulating external data sources including interactive interviews with co-participants and a 'key informant', or trusted advisor who is a respected expert in the field.

Analytic autoethnography is an approach designed to avoid falling into the traps about which Allen warns budding autoethnographers: excessive focus on the self, and a lack of analysis and interpretation: "[You're] telling [your] story – and that's nice – but people do that on Oprah every day. Why is your story more valid than anyone else's? What makes your story more valid is that you are a researcher" (Allen, 2006, cited in Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, p. 276).

ANALYTIC FRAMEWORK

Change is often a complex, non-linear, dynamic process that is difficult to sustain over the long term, with some researchers maintaining that around 60-70% of significant change efforts fail (Cartwright & Schoenberg, 2006; Washington & Hacker, 2005). So, what separates the successful from the unsuccessful? What are the feature of successful change initiatives? They often have a similar set of features:

- They are closely aligned to the values of the organisation. These 'high cultural-fit' changes often use employees' values and commitment to the organisation to drive behaviour (Canato, Ravasi, & Phillips, 2013).
- They are participatory. Employee participation or involvement in decision making related to change is positively related to openness or commitment to change and negatively related to cynicism about, or resistance to organizational change (Choi, 2011, p. 492).
- They are incremental. "Large-scale change happens only in steps" (Lawson & Price, 2003, p. 34). When practitioners have the chance to explore, in relative safety, over time, new ways of operating, their confidence increases, while their uncertainty about, and unfamiliarity with, new approaches decreases (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2013).

In addition to having these features, successful change initiatives also support people through three key phases in the lifespan of a change.

PHASE ONE: PREPARING FOR CHANGE

The notion of *change readiness* centres on ensuring people see a particular change initiative as being "...[an] idea whose time has come" (Aimard, 1861, p. 57), and are therefore more willing to embrace that change. Readiness for change is high when people believe that change is needed; that it is a good fit for both the organisation and the challenge at hand; is beneficial to both the individual and the group; and is able to be successfully implemented (Choi, 2011).

Readiness is also closely linked to the level of adaptive capacity within an organisation, or its ability to cope with disruptive, ongoing change. Organisations that are able to "engage in problem-defining and problem-solving work in the midst of adaptive pressures and the resulting disequilibrium" are said to have high adaptive capacity and are more likely to be able to sustain a change over time (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009, p. 12).

> *Snapshot: My work with one sceptical teacher took a big leap forward when over a holiday break he worked with a nationally recognised expert in indigenous education, an area this teacher was passionate about. The realisation that made the difference for him was that the flexibility inherent in an ILE might offer him more opportunity to meet the needs of his students rather than less. He came to see an alignment with his values and believed that the move to an ILE was appropriate for the challenge he was facing. Having made this connection for himself his readiness for change was increased and he was therefore more open to explore possibilities.*

Developing a sense of urgency around change is also seen as a crucial early step when undertaking any kind of significant transition (Kotter, 1996; Lawson & Price, 2003). As Kotter (1996) puts it: "by far the biggest mistake people make when trying to change organizations is to plunge ahead without establishing a high enough sense of urgency in fellow managers and employees" (p. 4). With a high degree of urgency within an organisation people are more likely to commit to change.

This sense of urgency for change is useful in overcoming status quo bias. Bias towards the status quo can often be attributed to two factors: the uncertainty represented by a new way of doing things (compared to the asymmetrical certainty of remaining with current practice, or 'the devil you know'); and the cost of the change (both in terms of the cost to transition to the new way of operating and the sunk costs (time, effort and resource) already invested in the current way of operating (Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1988, p. 33).

School leaders can counter the pull of the status quo by doing two things:

1. Removing as much of the uncertainty associated with change as possible. By basing the change on evidence-based, well-researched approaches rather than asking people to change behaviour in the hope that some kind of benefit might be gained.
2. Providing visible proof of benefits by encouraging smart risk-taking and establishing and supporting small prototypes, each of which has less to lose than a few larger ones. As Pascale & Sternin (2005) observe, "seeing is believing". Small, safe prototypes provide 'social proof' to observers, but also minimise what people stand to lose. The greater the potential for loss; the greater pull of the status quo: "what people resist is not change per se, but loss" (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 10).

PHASE TWO: IMPLEMENTING CHANGE

Leaders can support teachers to implement change by providing them with simple, easy-to-undertake 'first steps'. A low-risk first step helps to overcome the 'knowing-doing gap', or the situation where participants know what they *should* be doing but nevertheless persist with what they've always done. (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2013). A key

to overcoming the knowing-doing gap is that people should make some kind of start, no matter how modest. Pfeffer & Sutton (1999) argue that "action counts more than elegant plans and concepts", and that "knowing comes from doing and teaching others how" (p. 251).

As people begin to operate in a new environment, they will often engage in 'sense-making' or the process of "structuring the unknown" (Waterman, 1990 cited in Weick, 1995). Weick asserts that when people engage in sense-making they (consciously or unconsciously) ask 'what's the story here?' and 'now what should I do?' Left to themselves when structuring the unknown, Kotter (1995) warns people can sometimes create very inaccurate links. To avoid this, school leaders can engage in what is known as 'sense-giving' or offering a "preferred interpretive scheme" for what is occurring, or a viable interpretation of the new reality and to influence stakeholders and constituents to adopt it as their own" (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991, p. 443).

> *Snapshot: During a meeting with an architect, she and I pored over feedback scribbled by teachers directly onto a copy of some early plans for their school. As we tried to make sense of the (at times brutally honest) feedback it became clear that the principal's decision to put a copy of the plans on a table in the staffroom and inviting teachers to 'give feedback' hadn't really worked. What was clear from the comments was that the process hadn't provided them with enough 'sense-giving' to provide quality feedback. It appeared that they didn't really understand what they were looking at, nor where they were in the design process.*

How leaders work with resistance to change is also crucial in ensuring a change initiative is successful. While providing participants with opportunities to shape and contribute to the change process will likely minimise resistance to change, the presence of resistance should not necessarily be seen as bad. The traditional characterisation of resistance has been "overwhelmingly negative", and interpretations of it have been "decidedly one sided, in favor [sic] of change agents and their sponsors" (Ford, Ford, & D'Amelio, 2008, p. 362). Resistors are often labelled 'laggards' or 'squeaky wheels' with people asserting the best approach is 'don't water the rocks' or ignore resistance entirely.

Recent research tends to paint a more nuanced picture suggesting that concepts essential to ongoing improvement such as 'positive deviance' (and innovation in general) should be viewed as positive forms of resistance to the dominant narratives within organisations. They are both forms of healthy disobedience that question the status quo and take the organisation closer to achieving its goals.

While resistance to change can be "irrational and self-serving" (Ford, Ford, & D'Amelio, 2008, p. 100), how a leader responds to it is crucial for two key reasons. Firstly if 'resistors' to change are treated unfairly or unjustly in the process of 'stamping out' their resistance, change agents risk damaging the likely success of the change by violating observers' notions of fairness and justice (Aiken & Keller, 2009). Secondly, if change leaders don't view resistance as feedback, they may miss opportunities to reflect on how their own actions and inactions may have contributed to the occurrence of the resistance itself. Heifetz & Linsky (2002) suggest that change leaders may want to consider the absence of conflict or resistance to change as a sign of disengagement and a "harbinger of future problems resulting from unthinking acceptance" (Wegener, Petty, Smoak, & Fabrigar, 2004).

Having done the hard work of implementing a change and supporting shifts in practice, many leaders may feel tempted to believe the trickiest part is over, and that the change will continue without much effort. They may "[declare] victory too soon" as Kotter says (1995, p. 66). Until change sinks down deeply into the culture of an organisation, new approaches are "fragile and subject to regression" (Kotter, 1996, p. 13). In fact, one of the most well-known adages about organisational culture is that it 'eats strategy for breakfast'. No matter how well planned and executed a change (or any other) strategy is, the culture of the organisation will determine whether a change is adopted, adapted or abandoned.

> *Snapshot: Working with a leadership team to review their reinforcement systems, we realised that the job descriptions they were using to hire new staff hadn't been updated since the change initiative began. What was going into newspapers and out onto the web were advertisements seeking people with the skills required for the old way of working, not the new. They were filling their organisation with people who were skilled at the practices they were trying to leave behind.*

Organisational culture can be defined as "a complex pattern of norms, attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, values, ceremonies, traditions, and myths that are deeply ingrained in the very core of the organization" (Barth, 2002, p. 6). Put more simply, culture is "the way we do things around here" (Barth, 2002, p. 6). In order to ensure that a change is not 'fragile and subject to regression' leaders can make practices part of the culture of their organisation by employing what Barth (2002) calls "embedding mechanisms". These can include:

* What leaders pay attention to, measure, and control on a regular basis
* How leaders allocate resources
* Deliberate role modeling, teaching, and coaching
* How leaders allocate rewards and status
* How leaders recruit, select, promote, and excommunicate.

Conclusion

When moving through the stages of a significant change implementation such as a transition to ILEs, school leaders should ensure that these essential elements of a successful change process are in place. Without ensuring the change is well supported, a project may have a well-designed facility but not the people who are capable of using that facility to its full potential.

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