

# MANAGING CHANGE IN EDUCATION

PRACTICAL STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE  
CHANGE OUTCOMES IN K-12

# CENTER FOR EDUCATION SERVICES

## RTI International

All children deserve access to a quality education that empowers them to thrive. Yet our teachers and administrators face environments with increasing complexity, constraint, and ambiguity. At RTI, we empower educators to design, plan, and implement action steps to better address those challenges.

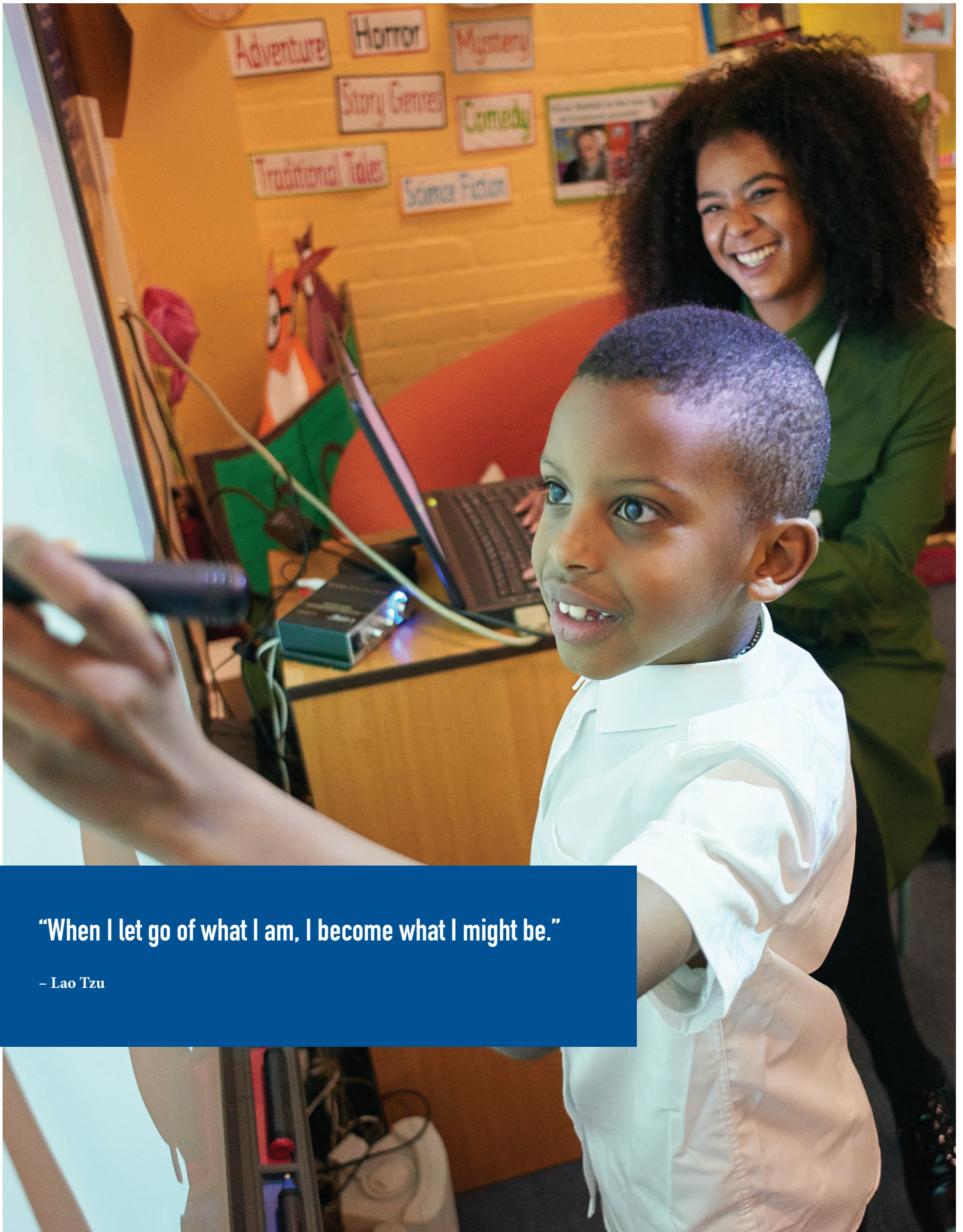
We partner with educators to promote thriving learning environments that facilitate success for all students. From the classroom to the board room, our work focuses on four areas that we believe are levers for change in education: strengthening instruction, developing leaders, improving organizational operations, and facilitating collaborative networks.

Learn more at [rti.org/education-services](http://rti.org/education-services).



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**“When I let go of what I am, I become what I might be.”**

– Lao Tzu

Managing change is a daily part of the human experience. From navigating a new phone software update to welcoming a new family member, change, both large and small, is constant. Though each of us has intimate experience with personal change, success at the organizational level is often elusive, with many studies citing typical success rates well below 50%.<sup>1</sup> The very nature of managing transformation may itself be changing faster than ever with increasing interconnectedness, social awareness, access to information, and technological innovation.

As a discipline, change management is a staple of leadership curricula. Well studied, the discipline benefits from decades of theory, dedicated research journals, and prevalence across all industries. Yet it is often difficult to identify direct connections to change management approaches in educator preparation programs.

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**DESPITE THIS, EDUCATORS OFTEN FIND THEMSELVES ON THE FRONT LINE OF LEADING TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE IN CLASSROOMS, SCHOOL SYSTEMS, AND BOARD ROOMS. RECOGNIZING TYPES OF CHANGE AND SELECTING CHANGE APPROACHES MATCHED TO THESE TYPES CAN LEAD TO MORE SUCCESSFUL AND SUSTAINABLE CHANGE.**

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# CHANGE IS DIFFERENT IN EDUCATION

Oftentimes, the very conditions that make education such an attractive career for passionate individuals seeking to make an impact also make it one of the most difficult industries within which to lead change. Few professions offer rewards greater than impacting the livelihood of the next generation. Even so, successful change efforts often face obstacles and resistance that are not common in other industries.

CONDITION	Education is a shared, generational experience	Many varied stakeholders must be considered	Changes (good or bad) impact the future of children	Traditional approaches to education can be isolating
IMPACT	<p>Pressure is often increased to maintain the status quo due to a localized sense of tradition. Nearly everyone has experience in schools in some capacity, making it easier to make assumptions about what is needed.</p> <p><i>“It was good enough for us when we were in school.”</i></p>	<p>Education systems impact students, parents, staff, administration, employers, policy-makers, and community members at large. Change momentum can be difficult to create and maintain due to the need to establish commitment from so many groups as well as the opportunity for diffusion of energy and capacity across too many stakeholders.</p> <p><i>“We’re all invested in education.”</i></p>	<p>The stakes are high. Changes tend to impact <i>people</i>, not goods or products. Similar to healthcare, those who are often most impacted by change efforts (in this case students and teachers) are often far removed from the process of operational change.</p> <p><i>“We can’t afford to take risks with our children’s future.”</i></p>	<p>Teaching and leading in education can be very isolating, particularly in traditional settings. Change efforts may fall flat due to difficulty in building collaborative momentum.</p> <p><i>“That’s a nice idea, but once I close my door it’s just me and my students.”</i></p>
IMPLICATION	<p>Change efforts must present sufficient rationale to overcome a status quo that may be culturally embedded.</p>	<p>Change efforts must be sufficiently organized and supported to overcome a lack of consensus among stakeholders. Further, leaders must persistently communicate to all interested parties, often through differentiated messaging.</p>	<p>Change efforts must draw sufficient connection to the impact that will be realized by students, the ultimate beneficiary of education reform.</p>	<p>Change efforts must build strong commitment to overcome the tendency to maintain what may be a comfortable status quo if change ideas are not routinely reinforced by an interactive peer group.</p>

CONDITION	Outcomes often take months (or years) to achieve meaningful impacts	Frequency of Initiatives can become overwhelming	Leadership turnover can be frequent	Public education serves all
IMPACT	<p>There is a less acute immediate penalty for failure. In other sectors, making a change often results in a very quick market response, leading to a more natural adoption of “fail fast, learn fast” approaches. This is seldom the case in education, where changes can take months or years<sup>2</sup> to manifest in tangible outcomes, making it easier to abandon change midstream.</p> <p><i>“You can’t expect change to happen overnight.”</i></p>	<p>Changing initiatives can feel like a near constant in education settings. Many teachers may feel reluctant to fully commit based on the expectation that there will be another “thing” next year.</p> <p><i>“We can wait this [thing] out.”</i></p>	<p>Though not an issue everywhere, urban school districts often face challenges with leadership longevity at the superintendent level.<sup>3</sup> When senior leadership tenure averages less than four years, larger change initiatives may flounder.</p> <p><i>“We can wait this [person] out.”</i></p>	<p>Serving <i>all</i> means that variability can be incredibly high in public education. Just as ambulance teams must be prepared to respond to any emergency situation, educators must also be prepared to adapt instruction to best match the needs of individual students.</p> <p><i>“We serve all.”</i></p>
IMPLICATION	<p>Change efforts must include opportunities for rapid adaptation and quick wins (and losses) in order to guard against stagnation.</p>	<p>Change efforts must address and honor contextual conditions while persistently reinforcing the change rationale.</p>	<p>Change efforts must be vertically integrated (classroom-school-district-system) to ensure they are not wholly dependent on any single leader.</p>	<p>Change efforts must be adaptable to accommodate variability. Finding the appropriate balance of efficiency versus effectiveness should be a deliberate effort when pursuing transformation.</p>





# CLASSIFYING CHANGE

The success or failure of a given change initiative is often a function of the relationship between the contextual conditions and the type of change that is sought. There are many ways to classify change; a few are highlighted to identify appropriate change strategies based on *origin* of the change, *execution* approach to realize the change, and the *scale* of the change.

## By Origin

A 2002 review of organizational change suggests that change<sup>4</sup> can be classified based on how it comes about.

### PLANNED

Change is a deliberate effort based on three fundamental steps: “unfreeze, change, and refreeze.”<sup>5</sup> This kind of change is typically pushed by a core group of centralized and influential change agents and tends to assume that previous behaviors or structures must be discarded to make room for new approaches.

- **Pros:** successful history of effectiveness, common and easily understood approach, controlled and premeditated change
- **Cons:** does not provide rapid transformation, does not account well for high variability in conditions, not well suited for crisis situations where more directive change management approaches may be required<sup>6</sup>

### EMERGENT

Change is a continuous, open-ended process of adaptation to evolving circumstances and conditions.<sup>6</sup> Adaptations for readiness, communication, and process facilitation are more important than specific preplanned steps.

- **Pros:** better suited for unpredictability and rapidly changing conditions, better aligned to concepts of continuous improvement
- **Cons:** less-controlled change, characterized by higher levels of ambiguity

### RESPONSE

Also referred to as “contingency,” this type of change results from a situational condition that requires action, often a crisis. Typically, this is more directive than collaborative, and managers have little control or influence over situational variables.

- **Pros:** generally easier to achieve collective will for change, can have a catalytic change effect fostering faster transformation
- **Cons:** potentially short-lived change outcomes, higher risk of overcorrection or imprecise solution



## By Execution

Another change classification focuses on the underlying theories of what drives the change when it is executed. Under this schema, two prominent types can be generally summarized as *structural* and *cultural*.<sup>7</sup>

### STRUCTURAL

Sometimes referred to as “Theory E” change, or “hard” change, this approach tends to emphasize execution focused on the structures, systems, and processes associated with the desired results. In some cases, this form of change presents as drastic and is typically imposed rather than invited.<sup>8</sup>

- **Pros:** emphasizes the specific systemic, structural, and operational changes needed, simpler to organize and execute, results oriented, may be faster to accomplish
- **Cons:** can be too drastic to gain acceptance, often executed as top down rather than inclusive, sometimes too “program” specific to affect lasting behavioral change

### CULTURAL

Sometimes referred to as “Theory O” change, or “soft” change, cultural change tends to reinforce trust, commitment, and capability. Bottom-up engagement is a hallmark of execution, as is the expectation that change will require experimentation and adaptation.

- **Pros:** encourages participation, typically focuses on the way people think rather than what they do, often generates greater buy-in to the change effort
- **Cons:** may be too unspecific to be actionable, process is less clear and therefore easier to derail or manipulate, requires more time than structural change

In virtually every case, change management authors who emphasize structural and cultural change suggest that the most effective approach to change is, in fact, one that balances elements of both approaches.

## CHANGE CLASSIFICATIONS

### BY ORIGIN

PLANNED

EMERGENT

RESPONSE

### BY EXECUTION

STRUCTURAL

CULTURAL

### BY SCALE

FINE TUNING

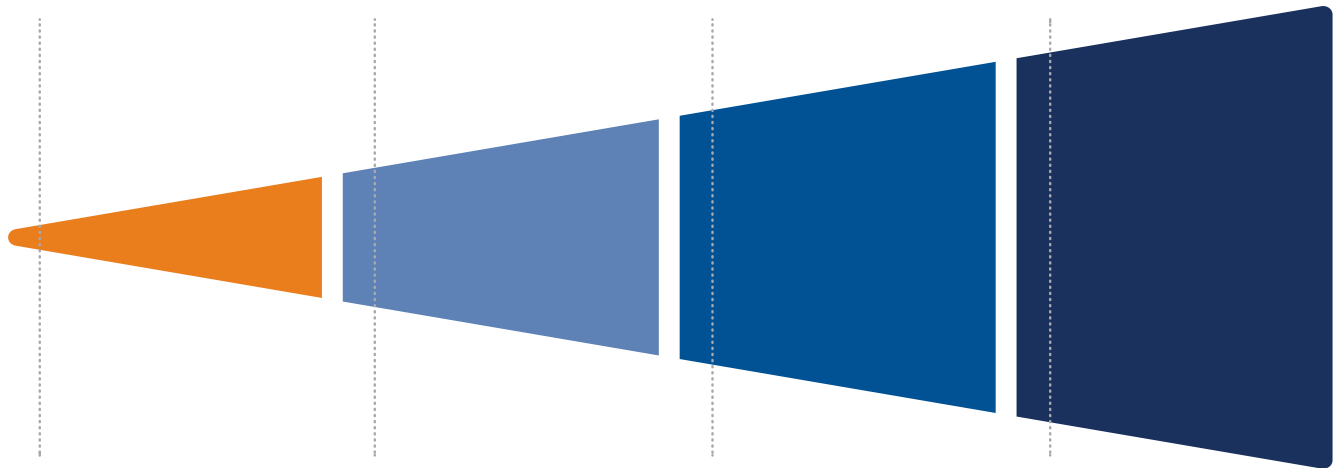
INCREMENTAL  
ADJUSTMENT

MODULAR  
TRANSFORMATION

SYSTEM  
TRANSFORMATION

## By Scale

A final factor notable to change classification is the scale of the effort. Change may range from fine tuning to system transformation.<sup>9</sup>



### FINE TUNING

Small, ongoing adaptation to strategy or policy

### INCREMENTAL ADJUSTMENT

Distinct modifications to processes and strategies, but not radical change

### MODULAR TRANSFORMATION

Major shifts in one or more groups or departments; may include radical change but only in part of an organization

### SYSTEM TRANSFORMATION

Focuses on the whole organization, typically radical alterations (e.g., re-organization, change to interaction patterns, etc.)

The strategies presented in this white paper do not differentiate based on scale, although it is safe to assume that a larger-scale change may require a larger-scale management effort. When navigating system transformation, influential variables tend to multiply.

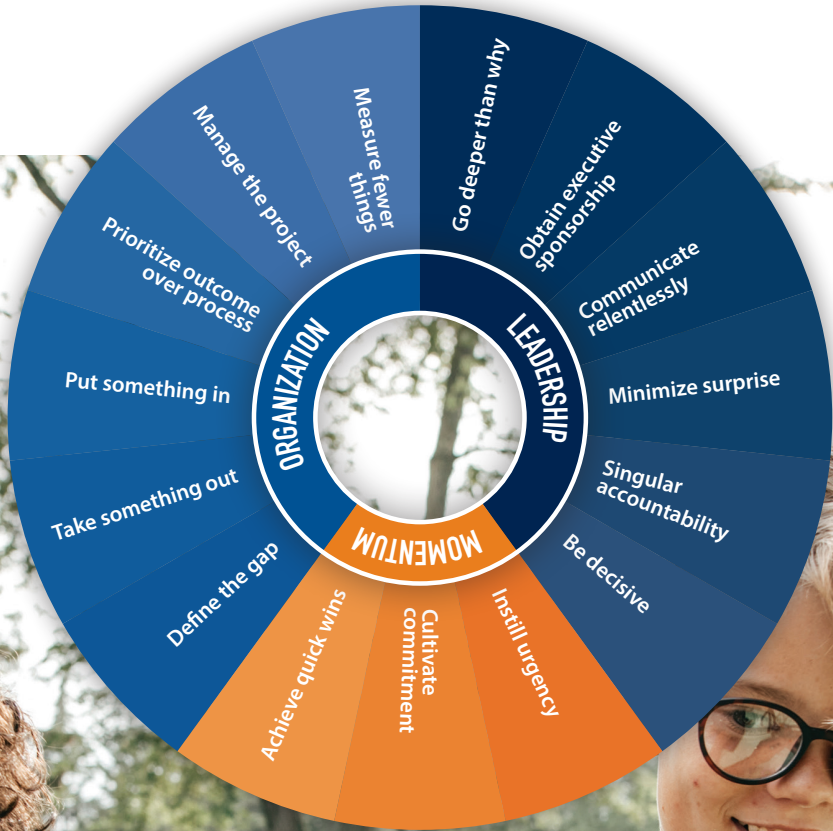
**However, even in the largest of transformations, no change effort in education should be divorced from a direct connection to student instruction.<sup>10</sup>**

Most seasoned educators will have experienced each of these forms of change. All can be effective when appropriately matched to organizational culture, context, and engagement strategies.

Each of these classifications, how change comes about, how it is executed, and the scale of the change sought, have a meaningful impact on the approach to facilitating and managing the change successfully. Identifying the dominant change taxonomy from each category can offer insights for change leaders about appropriate strategies and potential blind spots.

# CHANGE STRATEGIES

There are many approaches, models, processes, and theories about effective change implementation. This review features fifteen change strategies that are grounded in a review of academic and practitioner-based change management literature.





Selected change strategies are presented here in three categories:



## Leadership

Communicating, inspiring, and removing barriers to success. Emphasizes *who* is driving the change.

- Especially important for *Response* change



## Momentum

Cultivating the will for change while nurturing motivation to complete the effort. Emphasizes *what* is being accomplished.

- Especially important for *Emergent* and *Cultural* change



## Organization

Setting the effort up for success, enabling and empowering those who are engaged. Emphasizes *how* the change is being accomplished.

- Especially important for *Structural* and *Planned* change

Like any tool, each of the presented strategies may be more or less suited to the task at hand. These approaches are mutually reinforcing and should not be perceived as a “one or the other” trade-off when time and resources are available.



## Strategy: Go deeper than why (what's wrong with the status quo?)

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**What is the vision of the ideal future? Why is this change meaningful?  
What is wrong with the way things are?"**



**Especially important for *Planned, Structural,*  
and *Modular or System Transformation* changes**

Simply sharing a vision for the future is often not enough to motivate change. Oftentimes, change efforts require leaders to present a compelling future and establish an authentic dissatisfaction with the status quo.<sup>11</sup> One way to craft such a message borrows from Clayton Christensen's jobs-to-be-done theory of pains and gains.<sup>12</sup> Consider the following questions:

- What gains might the desired change elicit?
- What about the current state may be falling short? Fostering greater risk? Contributing to poor outcomes?
- What pains might the change resolve?
- What new pains might it create? How will these be addressed?
- What will be the functional differences after the change (how the change will impact day-to-day work)?
- What will be the emotional differences after the change (how we feel about the change)?
- What will be the social differences after the change (how others perceive the change)?

The way a vision is framed can have a great impact on motivation. Consider the cognitive principle of *loss aversion*, which states that, when given a choice, we tend to strongly prefer avoiding losses to making equivalent gains.<sup>13</sup> For example, generally we prefer to not lose \$100 than to gain \$100. Further, *prospect theory* tells us that, in general, we make *less* risky decisions concerning *gains* and *more* risky decisions concerning *losses*.<sup>14</sup> For example, if a district administrator must decide between a high-risk/high-reward and a low-risk/low-reward school consolidation scenario, social science tells us that the administrator will generally opt for the higher-risk scenario if it is framed as “avoiding job loss” versus “saving jobs.”

Because change often represents a risk, it is important for those involved to understand both what they stand to gain and what opportunities might be lost as a result of maintaining the status quo. Understanding the psychology of change messaging can be a powerful tool to strengthen motivation.



**“The status quo is known, structured, proven, certain, familiar, while the change is unknown, unstructured, unproved, uncertain”**


Jason Clarke, TEDx – Embracing Change

Jason Clarke suggests using a “4-Doors” analysis approach to assessing and discussing change<sup>23</sup>:

- |  |   |  |   |
|--|---|--|---|
| <p><b>1.</b><br/>Things we used to be able to do and still can</p> | <p><b>2.</b><br/>Things we couldn't do before and still can't now</p> | <p><b>3.</b><br/>Things we used to be able to do but can't now</p> | <p><b>4.</b><br/>Things we couldn't do before but can now</p> |
|--|---|--|---|

## Strategy: Obtain executive sponsorship

**“Who will champion this effort at the highest levels of leadership in our school/district/organization? How will this person be engaged in the change effort? How can we effectively engage leadership at every level?”**

 **Especially important for *Planned, Structural, and Modular or System Transformation* changes**

A classic tenet of any change effort, gaining support from organizational executives can help clear the path for change to happen. The process to maintain or gain executive sponsorship will also provide an indication of whether the change process is aligned with the priorities of the organization, district, or school.

A caution in this strategy is to clearly establish expectations for leadership engagement, information sharing, and goal setting at the outset. In certain change

situations, it may be advantageous to have the executive sponsor heavily engaged in the change process, e.g., in a structural change, while in other efforts it may be advantageous to keep the executive visibility more minimal, e.g., in an emergent change. This variance in approach is based on the idea that some forms of change are better served by a highly visible, top-down approach, while others generate greater commitment from a more bottom-up, grassroots identity. As with any change approach, the application of the strategy should be matched to the context.



## Strategy: Communicate relentlessly

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**“What information can I share that stakeholders need to know? What information can I share that stakeholders want to know? What information might we be taking for granted?”**

 **Especially important for all change types**

Perhaps the most obvious change strategy is simple, consistent, and relentless communication. Clear and aligned communication structures should represent a large part of the overall change plan. Here again, tailoring to the context is critical. In some cases, such as a response scenario, centralized messaging is imperative. In a cultural change effort, those involved should be empowered to spread word about progress, challenges, and outcomes. No matter the context, the person who is accountable for the change will be viewed as the ultimate champion and should regularly author or present communication about change progress and directives.


How communication (written and verbal) is crafted is another opportunity for building momentum. Messages should be<sup>15</sup>

- Delivered consistently
- Targeted to the intended audience
- Focused on simple and repeatable points
- Appealing to emotion, such as through the use of stories
- Offered in clear terms that the audience can relate to and understand

## Strategy: Minimize surprise

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**“Who will be surprised by what I am sharing? How can I avoid that surprise?”**

 **Especially important for *Planned, Structural, and Modular* or *System Transformation* changes**

A theme throughout many of the recommended change strategies, reducing surprise (particularly public surprise) can waylay detractors and reinforce trust. Furthermore, sharing “bad” news early can create opportunities to rectify or prepare for potentially negative issues, leading to the notion that “bad news early is good news.” An often-cited example is that of a pilot sharing word before a flight that turbulence is expected. The information is not required and does not change the outcome for passengers, yet it can reduce anxiety by eliminating surprise through early awareness (an element of building commitment).

One way to address concerns about surprise is to deliberately share information with individuals or small groups before a public announcement. Similar to the concept of secret shoppers, presenting change ideas and plans to a trusted group of expected allies (as well as detractors) in advance is a powerful way to demonstrate trust, offer opportunities for input, minimize surprise, and create change leaders to bolster communication.





## Strategy: Instill singular accountability, with shared responsibility for execution

“Who is accountable if the change effort fails? Who should wake up each day thinking about how to effectively implement the elements of the change?”



Especially important for *Response, Planned,* and *Structural* changes

Accountability should be identifiable to be meaningful. Diffusing accountability across too many individuals can result in *social loafing*. That is, sharing accountability too broadly results in no one taking responsibility for action and effort diminishing. For example, in scientific trials where people are asked to exert physical effort, such as shouting, people shout louder and longer when they are alone versus in groups.<sup>16</sup> Whenever possible, singular accountability with shared responsibility for executing components of the change is a reliable approach.<sup>17</sup>

Accountability is perhaps most relevant when the time comes to make critical decisions about the change effort. A clear decision-making process is a necessary element of any change effort. The process might range from unilateral decision making to a completely collaborative and mutually agreed upon decision approach. The nature of the selected approach will be heavily informed by the required speed, implications, and context of the decision. Regardless of these conditions, establishing clear

accountability and an approach to decision making at the outset of the change process is an important early step.<sup>18</sup> No external accountability scheme can be successful in the absence of internal accountability.<sup>19</sup>

One way to organize decision making is through the use of a responsibility matrix such as the RACI: Responsible, Accountable, Consulted, Informed. In the RACI chart, high-level tasks are listed vertically, and project team members are listed horizontally. Assignments are made according to role on the effort:

- R:** **Responsible** for doing the work to complete the task
- A:** **Accountable** for the work (approves work that R provides); final decision-making authority
- C:** Those **consulted**; two-way communication
- I:** Those **informed**; one-way communication

Notably, for each task, there should be no more than one “A,” although there may be multiple Rs, Cs, and Is.

### RACI CHART EXAMPLE

ACTIVITY	PERSON				
	Anna	Kathy	De	Carlos	Owen
Prepare project plan	A	R	C	I	I
Interview students	I	C	A	R	R
Select curriculum	I	C	A	R	I
Design course guide	I	C	A R	C	C



## Strategy: Be decisive, avoid letting indecision linger

“What might indecision signal to stakeholders? In what circumstances is a delay in decision making warranted?”

! Especially important for *Response, Planned,* and *Structural* changes

*Be right or be wrong but be decided.* Decisiveness is important to any change effort, particularly when it comes to momentum. It is important to note that inaction and indecision are not the same thing. The unwillingness or discomfort with deciding is, in itself, a passive decision to maintain the status quo. Change leaders should be cognizant of this reality and strive to be *active* in decision making, even if the decision is simply to acknowledge the decision to maintain things as they are. In contrast, inaction can be strategic and in sync with a broader change strategy.

The emphasis of this strategy is on *reducing uncertainty* that can undermine engagement. One approach to this is to take large decisions with great implications and break them into smaller decisions to provide an avenue for testing and validation. Being clear about the hypothesis and rationale is critical for maintaining buy-in during change.

Decisiveness does not always mean a fast decision, which can lead to missteps.

At times, it will be necessary to make changes along the way that may be counter to previous decisions. This is, in fact, *essential* for continuous improvement and adaptation. However, if decisions are overridden too often, the effort can begin to feel rudderless and shake the confidence of stakeholders. Striking the appropriate balance is often a challenging feat but can be navigated by carefully considering the change type and context. The scale of change is particularly relevant in this case: smaller tuning efforts can generally accommodate a more flexible decision agenda, while larger transformational changes can be plagued by the downstream effects of too much inconsistency.



## Strategy: Instill urgency

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### “Why does this change need to happen now?”

#### Especially important for all change types

Urgency is a powerful motivator for change. In conditions that are characterized by consistency and routine (often found in traditional education settings), instilling urgency can require the introduction of artificial pressure. Oftentimes, allowing too much time to complete a task can result in a lethargic approach that can undermine engagement.<sup>20</sup> Be ambitious when implementing change to maintain momentum. An outside-of-education

example of this concept is the *Agile* approach to project management. Common in software development, this approach to development features an element called a “sprint,” where teams make trade-offs to prioritize intensity of effort over a short period of time rather than spread the work over a long duration.<sup>21</sup> In education, this might look like an instructional team spending three intense weeks over a summer redesigning curriculum guides rather than doing this through monthly checkpoints throughout a school year.

## Strategy: Cultivate commitment

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### “Why should people support this change?”

#### Especially important for all change types

Establishing commitment or buy-in for a change idea is nearly unanimous in change management literature. Some specific approaches to cultivating buy-in include<sup>22</sup>

- Provide a clear vision for change
- Increase early awareness among those impacted by the change
- Involve stakeholders in the change design
- Initially focus on people with open attitudes
- Acknowledge reasons for resistance
- Engage in a local planning process, driven by insiders
- Maintain cultural relevance to ensure the change fits the context

- Share leadership responsibilities
- Share a common set of objectives
- Empower with authorship instead of simple ownership (e.g., instead of “this is the change we are seeking and this is how to do it,” identify opportunities for “this is the change we are seeking, how are we going to do it together?”)<sup>23</sup>

Another way to build commitment is to develop a vanguard of change champions who are key influencers at multiple levels.<sup>24</sup> Maintaining a strong coalition of pioneers in diverse roles across the organization or school is a likely requisite for successful change.



Using incentives can also increase commitment. Direct reward systems are a common element in many change models, and leveraging extrinsic incentives should not be discounted as an effective motivation tactic. However, particularly in education where it can be very difficult to link change outcomes to specific and singular behaviors of individuals, incentive systems should be approached with great care.

Because change in education often comes about due to a concert of influences, extrinsic incentives may undermine change efforts if they are viewed as unfair. Wielded carelessly, incentives can also serve to hamper teamwork,

commitment, and shared learning. Thoughtfully deployed, incentives can be effective, especially when both individual and team contributions are addressed. However, in general, extrinsic incentives are rarely cited as *essential* to success in change efforts.<sup>25</sup> In a 2008 study, incentives were cited as the least important of 10 change factors.<sup>26</sup> When used, incentives should reinforce change rather than drive it. For example, using financial bonuses to improve school performance may be a “pulling” force for change, yet effectiveness may increase when it is coupled with a “pushing” force grounded in support for specific and sustainable changes in instructional practice.

## Strategy: Achieve quick wins

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### “What can we knock out of the park in the first 60 days?”



**Especially important for *Planned, Emergent, and Cultural* changes**

Particularly early in a change process, achieving quick wins is critical to building and maintaining momentum.<sup>27</sup> When planning any change process, consider what 30-, 60-, and 90-day tasks can be completed with a high likelihood of success and quality. In some cases, it may

be prudent to break apart larger tasks into component milestones to ensure that visible progress can be maintained to support continued engagement.

Beyond building momentum, quick wins build trust—trust that the initiative will be successful and trust that the leader(s) are committed to and adept at driving toward success.

## Strategy: Define the gap

“Where are we now? Where do we want to be? How can we characterize the gap between the current-state and future-state?”

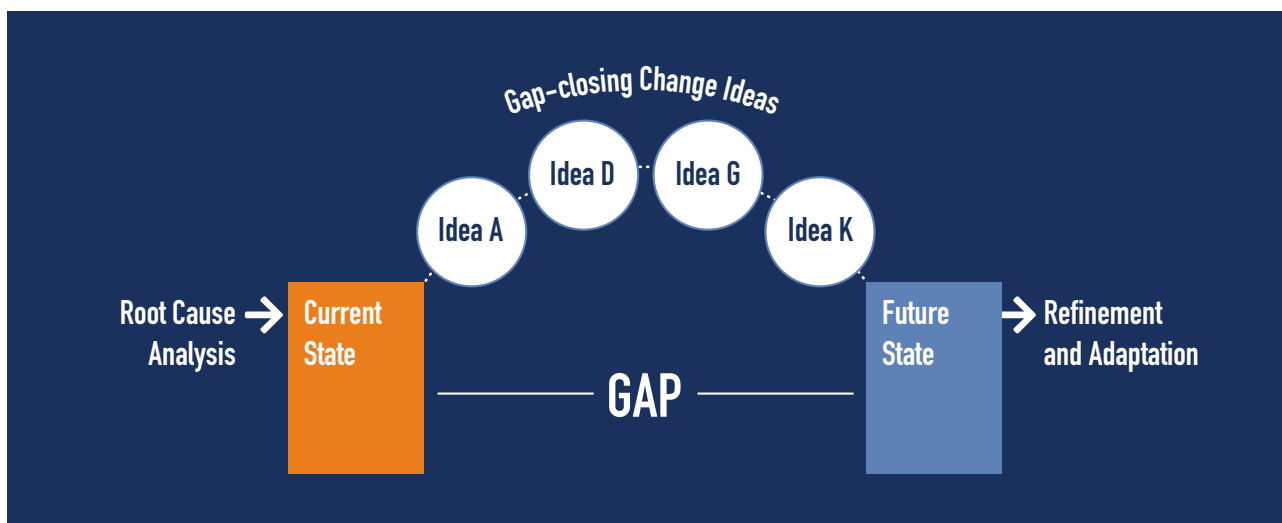
**!** Especially important for all change types

It is important to be clear about both the current state and the desired future state. The gap between the two represents an opportunity to clearly describe the challenge of the transformation. Defining this gap in specific and measurable terms lays the foundation for discipline in the change process and creates a blueprint for the change hypothesis as the process encounters inevitable diversions. The process of defining the gap may also inform an analysis process to determine root causes of current-state conditions and inform hypotheses about gap-closing change initiatives.

Assessing root cause is perhaps the most meaningful action to reflective practice. Many resources and tools exist to support root cause analysis, ranging from a simple “5 whys” protocol to detailed “fishbone” diagrams

that identify the many possible causes of a particular outcome. By using a gap analysis to inform action design, change leaders embody a *reflective* action approach that is associated with effective transformation.<sup>28</sup>

Mapping this gap also requires that a baseline be established. In some cases, this can be a difficult task given time constraints and lack of easily identifiable and measurable indicators. In these situations, a simple qualitative description of the baseline or current state is preferable to only detailing the desired future state without clearly describing the current situation. For example, a school might want to assess the current level of staff commitment to an instructional strategy. Because it is difficult to quantify commitment, a simple perception survey may provide sufficient baseline data to inform the gap analysis.





## Strategy: Take something out

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“What can be removed from the current conditions or workload to make room for the effort needed to successfully enable change?”



**Especially important for *Planned, Emergent, and Cultural* changes**

Perhaps the most common cause of challenge in change efforts is the assumption that they can be fit into the existing workload of those who are responsible for executing.<sup>29</sup> This phenomenon is particularly pervasive in education, where capacity for change is often perceived as a luxury. However, to quote strategy guru Michael Porter, “the essence of strategy is choosing what not to do.”<sup>30</sup> Even

if little can be removed, the act of removing *something* sends a powerful signal that the change initiative is a priority. Change leaders should take a critical view of both expectations of and capacity for change if nothing can be removed to create room for the effort. In certain cases, this can also represent a powerful leading indicator of the long-term sustainability of the change: new behaviors are unlikely to galvanize if they are expected in addition to already-full workloads.

## Strategy: Put something in

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“What can be added to the current conditions or situation to enable the change?”



**Especially important for *Planned, Emergent, and Cultural* changes**

In tandem with the need to take something out, change also requires that something new be infused to enable the change or eliminate barriers.<sup>31</sup> This may come in the form of time, resources, processes, tools, incentives, or other support. For example, in the situation of implementing an instructional rounds structure at a school, preparing streamlined templates to make the process less time consuming and more consistent may be a productive way to add direct value to the change effort.

Building capacity or increasing the collective effectiveness of a group to raise the bar and close the gap of student learning is another way to put something in.<sup>32</sup> When engaging in capacity-building efforts, practicality is paramount. Growing new knowledge and capabilities is largely a function of learning to do new things in settings where you work.

**In this way, learning in context actually changes the very context itself.<sup>33</sup>**

-Richard Elmore



## Strategy: Prioritize outcome over process during planning

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**“What is the outcome we are seeking? Who will define the outcome?  
What are our non-negotiables?”**

 **Especially important for *Emergent* and *Cultural* changes**

Focusing on results over activities sends the message that the change process can be flexible, a key element of generating buy-in.<sup>34</sup> Outcomes and desired results should not be as flexible as process. By emphasizing outcomes over specific steps, the change process can adapt to unexpected variables without losing momentum.<sup>35</sup> Establishing sustainable change requires ownership, and ownership is cultivated, in part, through creativity and engagement—both can be squelched by an overly predetermined process.

Notably, this approach should not diminish the importance of effective processes; quite the contrary, it should be wielded to generate ingenuity in the approach.

One pitfall of an overemphasis on outcome is the possibility of little concrete direction about *what* to do, which can foster frustration. Particularly at the outset of a change effort, it is important to provide concrete answers to questions of “what” and “how.” This specific direction can be gradually released as momentum is built and distributed ownership over process takes hold.

The degree of intensity for this strategy is heavily influenced by the type of change being pursued. In an emergent or cultural change situation, this approach represents a critical element and may be effectively led by those with firm commitments yet flexible means.<sup>36</sup> In a structural, planned, or response change, process may be more heavily defined. Regardless of the change context, using this strategy should always be considered, even in small amounts.

## Strategy: Manage the project

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**“How will we ensure the project is effectively and efficiently organized and orchestrated?”**

 **Especially important for all change types**

Often an undiscovered art in education, effective project management is essential to organizing and executing change initiatives. Traditional project management tools such as Gantt charts, work-breakdown structures, and

project charters can all be low-effort high-return activities that enable clarity and reduce risk in the process.<sup>37</sup>

Any change initiative should have a designated project manager who focuses on keeping the components of the effort organized and on-track.



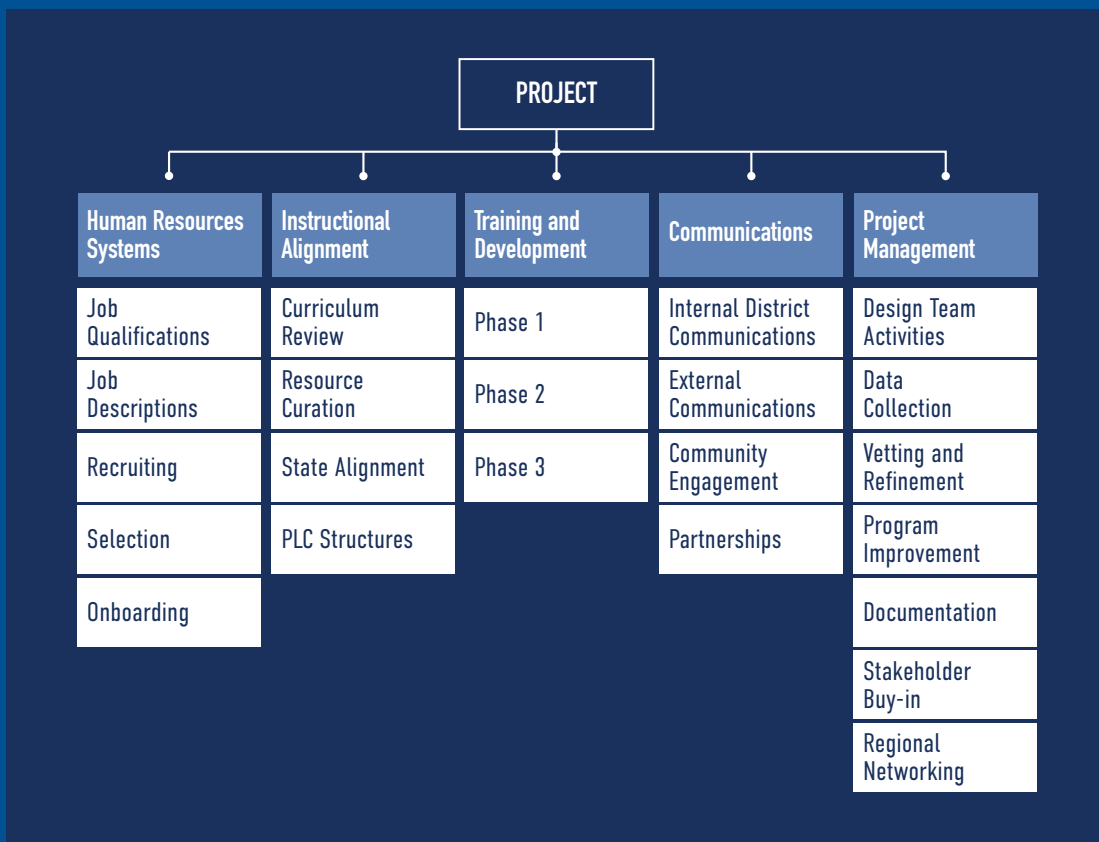
## SAMPLE TOOL: WORK-BREAKDOWN STRUCTURE

A work-breakdown structure (WBS) is a tool to organize projects into smaller, more manageable sections that maintain alignment to the ultimate objective. This simple tool can help address

- Becoming overwhelmed with where to start
- Straying from what is needed to complete the project’s objective (“scope creep”)
- Lack of shared understanding about what is needed to accomplish the objective

**How to use:** Beginning with the ultimate goal, develop a “tree” diagram to break the project down into its component parts to inform necessary task development and inform the project plan.

### EXAMPLE







## Strategy: Measure fewer things but make them highly visible

“What is the most important and influenceable indicator of progress?”

 Especially important for *Planned, Emergent, and Cultural changes*

Progress data are critical to track, analyze, and use to make meaning. However, measures and metrics can be overdone. The more we focus on, the less attention we can devote to the implications of the data. Consider only a few measures that best provide evidence of progress and make them highly visible to those engaged in the change

process. When selecting these 1–3 measures, be sure to filter between what might reflect *motion* (*completing tasks*) and what reflects *progress* (*achieving meaningful objectives*). “Don’t confuse motion and progress. A rocking horse keeps moving but doesn’t make any progress.”<sup>38</sup> Using a simple measures “dashboard” as a part of regular change communication is a straightforward way to integrate a shared awareness of progress and learning.



# MATCHING CHANGE STRATEGIES TO CHANGE CLASSIFICATIONS

The effectiveness of each of these strategies is heavily influenced by the context within which they are applied. For example, a situation characterized by a *response* change that seeks *response, structural, modular* transformation (e.g., responding to a bullying incident by revising a school’s social media policy) will require one combination of change strategies, while an *emergent, cultural, fine tuning* transformation (e.g., working to improve mathematics outcomes by modifying a professional learning communities structure) may benefit from a very different approach.

Although each of the presented approaches to change has relevance to any change scenario, it is not always practical to do everything. Change leaders should always prioritize the strategies based on the context and culture of the change. Deliberate trade-offs are typically necessary to create conditions for transformation.

## RECOMMENDED CHANGE STRATEGIES TO USE BASED ON THE CLASSIFICATION OF THE CHANGE TYPE.

### Origin

### Execution

PLANNED	EMERGENT	RESPONSE	STRUCTURAL	CULTURAL
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>☑ Go deeper than why</li> <li>☑ Obtain executive sponsorship</li> <li>☑ Communicate relentlessly</li> <li>☑ Minimize surprise</li> <li>☑ Instill singular accountability</li> <li>☑ Be decisive</li> <li>☑ Instill urgency</li> <li>☑ Cultivate commitment</li> <li>☑ Achieve quick wins</li> <li>☑ Define the gap</li> <li>☑ Take something out</li> <li>☑ Put something in</li> <li>☑ Manage the project</li> <li>☑ Measure fewer things</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>☑ Communicate relentlessly</li> <li>☑ Instill urgency</li> <li>☑ Cultivate commitment</li> <li>☑ Achieve quick wins</li> <li>☑ Define the gap</li> <li>☑ Take something out</li> <li>☑ Put something in</li> <li>☑ Prioritize outcome over process</li> <li>☑ Manage the project</li> <li>☑ Measure fewer things</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>☑ Communicate relentlessly</li> <li>☑ Instill singular accountability</li> <li>☑ Be decisive</li> <li>☑ Instill urgency</li> <li>☑ Cultivate commitment</li> <li>☑ Define the gap</li> <li>☑ Manage the project</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>☑ Go deeper than why</li> <li>☑ Obtain executive sponsorship</li> <li>☑ Communicate relentlessly</li> <li>☑ Minimize surprise</li> <li>☑ Instill singular accountability</li> <li>☑ Be decisive</li> <li>☑ Instill urgency</li> <li>☑ Cultivate commitment</li> <li>☑ Define the gap</li> <li>☑ Manage the project</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>☑ Communicate relentlessly</li> <li>☑ Instill urgency</li> <li>☑ Cultivate commitment</li> <li>☑ Achieve quick wins</li> <li>☑ Define the gap</li> <li>☑ Take something out</li> <li>☑ Put something in</li> <li>☑ Prioritize outcome over process</li> <li>☑ Manage the project</li> <li>☑ Measure fewer things</li> </ul>



## Scale

SYSTEM TRANSFORMATION	MODULAR TRANSFORMATION	INCREMENTAL ADJUSTMENT	FINE TUNING
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>☑ Go deeper than why</li> <li>☑ Obtain executive sponsorship</li> <li>☑ Communicate relentlessly</li> <li>☑ Minimize surprise</li> <li>☑ Instill urgency</li> <li>☑ Cultivate commitment</li> <li>☑ Define the gap</li> <li>☑ Manage the project</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>☑ Go deeper than why</li> <li>☑ Obtain executive sponsorship</li> <li>☑ Communicate relentlessly</li> <li>☑ Minimize surprise</li> <li>☑ Instill urgency</li> <li>☑ Cultivate commitment</li> <li>☑ Define the gap</li> <li>☑ Manage the project</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>☑ Communicate relentlessly</li> <li>☑ Instill urgency</li> <li>☑ Cultivate commitment</li> <li>☑ Define the gap</li> <li>☑ Manage the project</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>☑ Communicate relentlessly</li> <li>☑ Instill urgency</li> <li>☑ Cultivate commitment</li> <li>☑ Define the gap</li> <li>☑ Manage the project</li> </ul>

# CHANGE DERAILERS

At the most basic level, change requires that we modify behaviors and structures to align to a new set of desired outcomes. Oftentimes, the need to change routines, both individual and organizational, can present the greatest challenge. Routines tend to be both self-reinforcing and resilient. Novelty, the perception that current circumstances are truly different from previous ones, is one of the most potent forces for dislodging routines.<sup>39</sup>

David Garvin and Michael Roberto build on the concept of dislodging routines in their 2005 article “Change Through Persuasion.” They offer six common change derailers, all very relevant to education, that leaders should guard against:

## A culture of no:

Characterized by organizational cultures that allow critics and cynics to dominate, resulting in a persistent perception that there is no good reason for change.

- If this is the case, try focusing on **Go deeper than why; Define the gap; Cultivate commitment.**

## The dog and pony show must go on:

Characterized by overweighing the process elements rather than the substance of the work. Easy to spot when the way you present a change proposal is more important than what is actually presented.

- If this is the case, try focusing on **Prioritize outcome over process during planning.**

## The grass is always greener:

Characterized by pursuing many initiatives at once. Creates a self-imposed busyness that may reinforce avoidance of core issues.

- If this is the case, try focusing on **Take something out; Define the gap.**

**“It is difficult to commit the amount of time, energy, and attention necessary to facilitate and sustain change appropriately, so there’s always a risk that change management is set to auto-pilot . . . which is terminal to the effort.”**

-Principal in rural school district reflecting about barriers to change

## After the meeting ends, the debate begins:

Characterized by resistance being covert rather than operating through established forums. The result is often a culture characterized by politics and meddling.

- If this is the case, try focusing on **Obtain executive sponsorship.**

## Ready, aim, aim:

Characterized by inability to settle on a definitive course of action. Common in cultures where failure is strongly punished.

- If this is the case, try focusing on **Be decisive, avoid letting indecision linger; Cultivate commitment; Achieve quick wins.**

### **This too shall pass:**

Characterized by a culture that has become jaded by change due to too many repeated change attempts with little outcome.

- If this is the case, try focusing on **Go deeper than why;** **Achieve quick wins.**

### **We don't challenge our leaders:**

Characterized by a culture that rarely offers pushback to stated assumptions, especially when presented by leaders. For example, resource deficits may be accepted as unchangeable without fully exploring reallocation options.

- If this is the case, try focusing on **Define the gap;** **Go deeper than why.**

## **MAKING CHANGE WORK**

Successfully achieving meaningful change in education is seldom a simple feat. Given the variables, stakeholders, and implications that educators face, it can be difficult to know where to begin and how to map an adaptable path forward. By starting with an understanding of the type of change that is sought, change leaders create a blueprint for what will be required to catalyze action. By thoughtfully crafting a plan that matches strategies of leadership, momentum, and organization with signals of local context, culture, and conditions, these change leaders can enable effective, lasting transformation.



What are you learning about making change work in education? We'd love to hear from you. [educationservices@rti.org](mailto:educationservices@rti.org)

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