When Change Has Legs

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Four key factors help determine whether change efforts will be sustained over time.

Initiatives to improve teaching and learning remind us of New Year's resolutions. They often launch at the beginning of the year—the school year. They commence with a cherished vision of possibility and a spirit of commitment. They begin with genuine progress.

But most New Year's resolutions fail. And similarly, many initiatives to improve teaching and learning prove shaky in the long term.

Both of us have been involved in improving teaching and learning for many years in diverse settings. We've seen the good, the bad, and, yes, the ugly. We've learned from friends and colleagues and the literature. Building on this experience, we'd like to explore a key question: What determines whether a change effort will eventually fizzle out or whether it will survive and thrive?

Efforts to improve teaching and learning frequently seem to follow an overly simple plan: make your goals clear, create learning opportunities, expand step-by-step, and expect that although some stakeholders will be reluctant, they'll eventually come around. The theory is that after a while, you'll achieve the targeted changes, and they'll stay in place. Following this simple path can work, but there are many common obstructions that often lead to serious missteps. By recognizing the complications, we can give change legs to overcome the challenges that arise along the way. To answer our key question at least partially, we might think of change as traveling on four legs: *frameworks, leaders, community*, and *institutionalization*.

Leg 1. Frameworks

Endeavors to improve teaching and learning are always journeys toward some holy grail—an aspirational framework or philosophy that offers a vision for more effective teaching and learning. Ideally, this framework provides teachers with a common

perspective and language while allowing adaptation to different subjects, levels, and students. (See "A Sampling of Powerful Frameworks".)

Most of our own experience reflects teaching-learning frameworks developed through our longtime association with Project Zero at the Harvard Graduate School of Education—for instance, Teaching for Understanding (Blythe, 1998; Wiske, 1998); Making Learning Whole (Perkins, 2009); and Visible Thinking (Ritchhart, Church, & Morrison, 2011). However, we're not favoring any particular framework here. Rather, our experience tells us that very different frameworks encounter very similar problems.

What seems to work best? By definition, significant change challenges existing practices and creates discomfort. The simple path expects teachers to comply and eventually get comfortable with the new practices, like getting used to a new suit. But it does not recognize how deeply teachers are committed to their own sense of craft, which they may have developed over many years. In our experience, teachers are more likely to warm to frameworks they can adapt to their personal styles and circumstances. It's not just adjusting yourself to the clothing, but also adjusting the clothing to yourself!

We've also noticed that teachers can often work effectively with two or three frameworks simultaneously, as long as the frameworks are not contradictory. For example, the Teaching for Understanding framework provides a common language that teachers across grade levels and subject areas can use not only when planning a curriculum—deciding what *really* is important to learn—but also when exploring areas in a curriculum where students sometimes struggle or where misconceptions get in the way. The Visible Thinking framework complements Teaching for Understanding by providing an effective tool kit for developing specific kinds of thinking that in turn foster understanding of content.

What can go wrong? Some frameworks are stiffer than others. They do not adjust well to teachers' individual needs and commitments. They are hard to make your own. If a school presents a rigid framework (or presents it in a rigid way), teachers often protest—or, more commonly, exercise passive resistance or participate halfheartedly. Although it's perfectly possible to meld two or three compatible frameworks, a different problem arises when a dozen change initiatives unfold in different parts of a school, each one with its own timetable and framework. Imagine a situation in which one

department or grade level is focusing on writing across the curriculum, another is concentrating on strengthening classroom management, and yet another is implementing project-based learning. Meanwhile, additional initiatives sprawl throughout the school, with many teachers not involved at all but expected to join something soon. In such a situation, there's no common language for sharing practice and building collegiality, and therefore no real community of innovation. Teachers frequently respond with initiative fatigue: Next year will bring another new thing … let's not try too hard.

What school leaders say? Allowing for individual implementation of the framework with frequent feedback from colleagues was a common theme among several leaders we surveyed.[1] We've seen remarkable staying power in a large international school that embarked on a major change effort with this emphasis more than a decade ago. The school balanced at least two frameworks that complemented each other.

The effort began with the school sending a few teachers each year to a summer institute where they learned about the initial framework. However, the school also took care to ensure alignment across the faculty. A school leader explained,

What helped us put the ideas we had learned about into practice was the year-long study group that was set up … all the participating teachers for that year were freed up at the same time in order to meet for several hours once a month. We read, we tried out, and we discussed.

Leg 2. Leaders

It's no surprise that leadership plays a central role in change. The literature in both education and the corporate world emphasizes the importance of leaders inspiring and guiding initiatives. However, a more nuanced perspective recognizes the need for effective leadership on two levels.

What seems to work best? Steady change thrives on the double influence of what we like to call a *political visiona*ry and a *practical visionary*. The political visionary, typically the principal, shows conspicuous commitment to the innovation, advocating it, making it a priority, defending it against critics, explaining it to parents, appearing for key events, and allocating resources.

We have seen political visionaries take two somewhat different stances. Some principals use authority, insisting that all teachers participate to some degree. Other principals take a softer stance, repeatedly emphasizing the importance of the agenda, requiring new hires to receive some orientation to the innovation, and making it clear that over time most faculty are expected to get aboard, without a specific schedule. This might eventually evolve into a requirement.

The practical visionary is usually a teacher—sometimes a team of two or three teachers. This leader manages the program on the ground, organizing faculty groups and events and conducting some training and coaching. Although practical visionaries often teach as well, they have significant time formally allocated for the change process.

What can go wrong? Sometimes principals think friendliness toward the mission is enough: "Sounds good; let me know if I can help." We have seen many efforts evaporate in a year or two for lack of strong conspicuous support from the principal. We have seen initiatives undermined in a couple of hours simply because the principal did not show up at a key event. Faculty members notice! There are simply too many competing priorities in schools for an innovation to thrive without persistent, overt support.

A different hazard appears when principals think they can play a dual role as both the political and the practical visionary. It's a reasonable aspiration, because principals are considered leaders of teaching and learning! But in reality, principals, with their multiple responsibilities, rarely have the time (and often lack the expertise) to guide change initiatives day by day, week by week. Delegated responsibility and allocated time for practical visionaries are essential.

What school leaders say? The superintendent of a public school district in the U.S. Midwest learned an important lesson from an experience in another district. A change initiative met initial success when principals were required to learn a framework with teachers. The effort flagged, however, when their participation was no longer mandatory.

He took that experience to the new district when he became superintendent. He created opportunities for a yearlong exploration of the framework. School teams included a

principal and teacher leaders who participated voluntarily. If teams wanted to continue beyond the first year, they could widen their circle of school-based participants, but the principal had to remain part of the team. The superintendent told us that ensuring that school leaders understand and believe in the ideas has been key to the success of this initiative across the district. He wrote about his own role:

I am very intentional about my own behavior, what I attend to, how I talk, how I engage with others, and what I value. I try to build ownership not by mandate but by authenticity and consistency. I have seen as the superintendent of schools how this type of leadership expands the ideas. People know that this is not the "flavor of the month" or a "superintendent thing." People know that this is who we are, it is what we are about, and we are going to work together to make it a reality for our students.

Leg 3. Community

Any widespread innovation in a school involves a tapestry of interactions within the community of teachers, school leaders, and beyond. We have never seen all members of such a community energetically and uniformly invest themselves in a new change initiative. There are always skeptics alongside enthusiasts, late adopters alongside early adopters. How can one foster a community with nimble legs for the innovation?

What seems to work best? Broad institutional growth calls for a collegial culture. As mentioned earlier, this often involves teachers meeting regularly in small groups to discuss experiences as they try out the target framework. The practical visionary helps to form and facilitate these groups. The groups mature over time, as their activities evolve and members eventually assume facilitative roles in new groups.

Not everyone joins these groups right away. Those who feel ready jump in, constituting only one or two groups; others form new groups over two or three years.

Despite the small-scale start, keeping the initiative transparent and permeable is important. The school begins by ensuring that all teachers are broadly aware of the initiative and target framework—for instance, through a whole-school introductory workshop. It continues by keeping all faculty broadly aware of progress—for instance, through quick reports, posting student work on bulletin boards in classrooms and halls,

and yearly "fairs" in which participating teachers share their work. Moreover, anyone who is free can attend a group meeting. Anyone who wants to try something on a small scale is welcomed and supported by the practical visionary or others. There's room for degrees of participation—all-in, half-in, toe-in-the-water, bystander-for-now. This permeability allows for what the literature on communities of practice calls *legitimate peripheral participation* (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

What can go wrong? Often an innovation begins with a group of early adopters whose missionary zeal can be alienating. Other faculty members have minimal information about what's happening or why. A strong in-group and out-group polarization emerges. Similarly, lack of information among the school board, the parent community, or even students can generate opposition.

Deceptively, this may not seem to matter for a while. The early adopters make progress in their own classrooms. Over time, however, the polarization takes its toll, generating endless doubts, criticism, and a mix of token participation and outright refusal to participate by most of the faculty. Eventually, the initiative fails.

What school leaders say? Several schools we have worked with have held information evenings for parents and board members to learn about a new initiative, with teachers demonstrating the framework in action.

Recruiting teachers to share their experiences openly with colleagues has been a valuable tool. An Australian school official noted of the long-term change effort she led, "The inclusive nature of the project provided almost a kind of 'drip feed' mechanism, with dissemination of information and resources; voluntary intensive participation in regular meetings open to all; and regular whole-school seminars and conferences." The coordinator of a regional network of teachers in the U.S. South explained what has worked in that setting:

It is critical to identify risk takers and work with them on bringing new ideas to the classroom; then use their practice as a model. When a teacher volunteers to share her experience, we analyze things that went well versus things that didn't work. Teachers appreciate when you share failure and success because that is part of being a learner.

The voluntary nature of the study groups she coordinates avoids a top-down approach: "Since the teachers are not required by their immediate supervisor to attend these meetings, they come because they want to invest time and effort to grow."

Leg 4. Institutionalization

Once an innovation has proven effective over two or three years, it's easy to assume that the innovation is there to stay. However, innovations that seem solidly in place can prove remarkably fragile as circumstances change.

What seems to work well? Systematic efforts to stabilize a successful innovation for the long term are called *institutionalization*. The innovation gets written into the DNA of the school—into the mission statement, communications to students and parents, formal documents that describe the school's teaching and learning commitments, hiring practices for new teachers and even new principals, and staff positions such as the practical visionary. None of this means the school can't improve the innovation or ultimately swap it for something better. But such changes should occur thoughtfully, not because of haphazard events.

What can go wrong? An innovation may thrive for years. Then the principal leaves or retires and the new leader shows indifference to the innovation, or even antagonism. Another problematic scenario: practical visionaries or others who have carried the flag leave or retire, and there has been no succession planning. Within a year or two, the innovation loses momentum, particularly as new faculty unfamiliar with it arrive.

What school leaders say? Several school leaders told us that teachers seek positions at their school specifically because of an initiative. When a school becomes known for its commitment to an approach, that in itself helps institutionalize the initiative.

These schools promoted institutionalization by putting in place programs to give newly hired teachers early and meaningful exposure to the approach. They held regular yearly events to share practice. For example, the leader of an initiative from a school in the Netherlands commented,

Staff members know about the annual Gallery Walk held as a whole-school staff meeting. Everyone is invited to share—sometimes teachers do the talking, sometimes their students. It is inspiring for all of us, both old timers and new staff, to see what our colleagues are doing. I think that it is this ongoing opportunity to become involved, or become re-involved after a period away on maternity leave or after a change of grade, that allows everyone to feel part of the learning.

Conversations Worth Having

What does all this add up to? Certainly not a formula for secure change. Innovation is always a chancy enterprise, and all schools, principals, faculties, and communities come with their own individual circumstances. What's called for is not applying a formula but engaging in a conversation—indeed, four conversations—that seek contextually appropriate solutions to the problems that appear in situation after situation.

Conversations about frameworks. Whether you are a principal or a teacher who might participate in a change initiative, chances are you're in a position to initiate a conversation about the framework leg. Does the framework make room for individual teacher styles and commitments, so that most teachers can come to "own" it over time? If unrelated change initiatives and frameworks proliferate in the school, what can the school do to integrate them or shed some of them?

Conversations about leadership. One might think that the principal needs to be the person to bring matters of leadership into the conversation, but anyone can ask for a pattern of leadership they think would be helpful. Not every principal may recognize at first that he or she needs to emphatically, visibly promote the initiative and anoint the school's practical visionary. If, after exploratory conversations, a principal offers at best lukewarm support, this is a red flag.

Conversations about community. Whatever your role, you are a member of the community within and around the school. One excellent use of your voice is to advocate for a good community leg, calling for transparency, helping to create structures that allow many levels of participation, and honoring those who want to make a slower start than others.

Conversations about institutionalization. The principal is the natural person to spearhead steps toward institutionalization … but not necessarily the person to raise the issue. Don't take for granted that what has been accomplished will stay in place. Speak out and engage others in the quest for institutionalization.

All four of these conversations working together truly can give change legs, helping to create an enduring culture of thoughtful attention to teaching and learning. As one of the school leaders we surveyed put it,

It's the opportunity to learn from and with each other that is really powerful. There are not many things that unite our staff as clearly as approaches to teaching and learning. The main point is that teachers like talking about teaching. So with a shared language and a shared approach there is loads of room for talking. It brings teachers out of their classrooms, their grades and their departments, and creates a more collaborative school environment.

A Sampling of Powerful Frameworks

Teaching for Understanding, developed at Project Zero, and Understanding by Design, developed by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, share similar goals of providing a pedagogical framework for teachers to use in planning for deep, engaging, and meaningful learning experiences for their students.
Three related frameworks, all involving strategies for encouraging effective thinking in students and also developed at Project Zero, work compatibly both together and with the two"understanding" frameworks: Visible Thinking; Cultures of Thinking; and Artful Thinking.
Responsive Classroom is an approach to establishing a high-quality learning environment in which all children can thrive.
Expeditionary Learning promotes five core practices for effective teaching, learning, and leading in schools.

Making Learning Visible at Project Zero is an ongoing research project inspired by the practices of preschools in Reggio Emilia, Italy. It investigates how best to understand, document, and support individual and group learning for children and adults.
The 6+1 Traits of Writing framework provides a framework for recognizing and fostering characteristics of good writing.

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Endnote

[1] We appreciate the contribution of several longtime colleagues in leadership roles in K–12 education, whose thoughtful responses to a set of questions informed our thinking about the theme of this article.

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