



District
Management
Group

SPOTLIGHT

Leading Change That Lasts

by Adam Anderson and David James

Originally published in the *District Management Journal*, v.28, Winter 2021

*Change sticks only when teachers and staff
no longer think of the new approach as
“the new way” but simply regard it as
“the way things are done in the district.”*

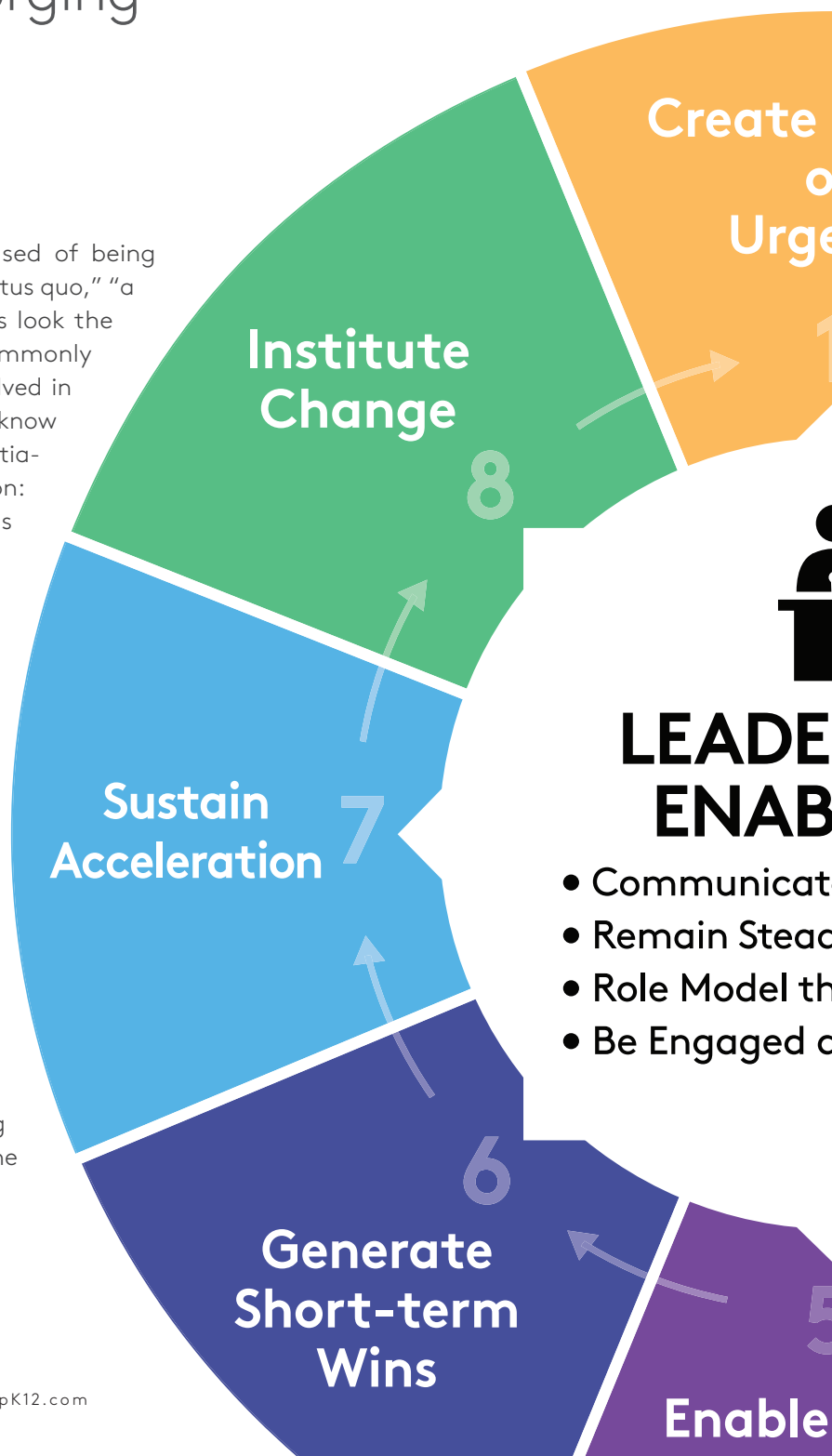
Leading Change

A Framework for Forging Change That Lasts

Adam Anderson and David James

Too often, public education is accused of being resistant to change. “Stuck in the status quo,” “a fully outdated system,” “classrooms look the same as they did 150 years ago” are commonly voiced criticisms. However, those of us involved in public school leadership and management know that there has been no shortage of change initiatives and innovative ideas in public education: Common Core, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), an increased focus on social emotional learning, the growth of educational technology, the expansion of charter schools, more equitable funding formulas, and dual enrollment programs are just a few in the long list of recent innovations and initiatives.

But successfully effecting change in public education has been challenging, whether the change efforts have been driven by new federal or state policies, a district’s own strategic agenda, or the need to respond to crises. The difficulty in effecting change is not unique to public education. In fact, the average success rate of organizational transformation across sectors is only 26%.¹ Effectively leading and managing lasting change is complex and nuanced – one of the



DMGroup Spotlight represents the thinking and approach of District Management Group.

The Point



The Challenge

Only about one in four change efforts across sectors is successful, and change is particularly challenging in public education. But school districts need to be able to effect change successfully to meet the changing needs of students and prepare them for the world that is rapidly evolving around us.

The Reason

Too often, change efforts are focused on the wrong change, are unstructured in their approach, or are simply too focused on the process — the series of steps required to implement change. While the process is important, it is not sufficient to make sure change happens — and lasts.

The Solution

Carefully selecting the right change effort, demonstrating specific leadership behaviors to drive change, strategically engaging people, and candidly assessing the organizational culture are all essential to incorporate into the work. Our change management framework can help district leaders lead change that lasts.

a Sense
f
ency

Build a Guiding Coalition

2

Form a Strategic Vision and Initiatives

3

Enlist a Volunteer Army

4

LEADERSHIP BEHAVIORS

and Motivate
Fast and Focused
Change
and Connected

Action

greatest tests of a leader's abilities. For leaders in education, leading and managing change is not simply a lofty, aspirational challenge — it is an urgent necessity. The needs of students and the futures they face are rapidly changing, and their futures and, indeed, the future of our nation are at stake. Leaders in education have an incredible opportunity to improve the futures of their students and communities if they can adopt a more comprehensive and effective approach to leading and managing change.

For this reason, District Management Group (DMGroup) has been thinking about processes and techniques to help public education leaders effect lasting change. Through our research on change management literature and our experience working with hundreds of districts, we have developed a change management framework that is specifically tailored to the unique challenges of districts and schools. We hope it will help district and school leaders manage through current challenges as well as embrace new opportunities to improve public education systems in the future.

The Challenge of Change in Public Education

Change management as a field has been studied for decades by many prominent thought leaders who have provided guidance on transformation — John Kotter’s “The 8-Step Process for Leading Change,” Jeanie Duck’s *Change Monster: The Human Forces That Fuel or Foil Corporate Transformation and Change*, and Kurt Lewin’s Three-Step Model of Change: Unfreezing, Changing, and Refreezing are but a few of the best-known methodologies.²

“Effecting change in this sector means leading an evolution of the mindsets and behaviors of many diverse individuals in addition to adapting structures, systems, policies, and processes.”

However, despite the wealth of guidance on how to effect change, most change efforts fail; the McKinsey & Company study cited above showed that 74% of transformation efforts in companies across a wide range of sectors were unsuccessful.

For public school districts, change is particularly challenging due to the unique and complex context in which they operate:

- **People-Based:** Education is a people-based business. Salaries account for approximately 80% of district expenses.³ And education is growing increasingly people-intensive; the pupil/teacher ratio has been steadily declining since the 1960s and the number of teachers has more than doubled in that time. Effecting change in this sector means leading an evolution of the mindsets and behaviors of many diverse individuals in addition to adapting structures, systems, policies, and processes.
- **Serve All:** Districts must serve every student who walks through their doors, inclusive of all backgrounds, learning needs, and socioeconomic statuses. And student populations continue to become increasingly diverse. For example, the number of students in the Free and Reduced Lunch Program (FRLP) increased nationally by 36% from 2000 to 2013 to 25.2 million students, while the English Language Learner (ELL) population increased 9% in the same period to 4.4 million students.⁴
- **Highly Regulated with Significant Accountability:** Districts must adhere to an often overwhelming set of local, state, and federal laws and guidelines. Accountability has been increasing and continually changing through the No Child Left Behind Act and the Every Student Succeeds Act.
- **Diverse Stakeholders:** Districts work with multiple stakeholders, including students, families, taxpayers, the business community, unions, and school board members. While most of the stakeholders mean well and want to contribute positively, coordination and alignment across these important groups requires significant leadership skill, time commitment, and mindshare.

All of these factors contribute to making change management in education particularly complex, but district and school leaders need to embrace change if they are to serve their students and communities effectively. They bear the awesome, and often daunting, responsibility of being entrusted with preparing our nation’s youth for their futures — in a world that is becoming increasingly hard to imagine. For example, the ever-increasing computing power has tremendous implications for industry and the jobs and careers of the future economy. For perspective, children who are starting kindergarten this fall will graduate high school in 2033. The ability of district and school leaders to anticipate the skills and competencies that will be required in the decades ahead and to lead the changes required in how we educate and prepare students for that future has never been more important. While the expectations for public education have never been higher or the challenges greater, the opportunities for educators to fulfill their mission may have never been more inspiring and important. With the privilege of being at the center of communities, district and school leaders are in the position to lead change efforts that can result in more equitable educational opportunities that will prepare all students to succeed and live fulfilling lives.

DMGroup's Change Management Framework for School Districts

In DMGroup's review of the literature on change management and our explorations into why change efforts often fail, one overarching theme emerges: change efforts often solely focus on process management. Process is important, of course, but it is crucial to prioritize the *people* and *culture* involved in the change. A holistic change management framework needs to complement process management with strategies that catalyze the people in the organization to action — with leaders serving as role models to help evolve the culture of the organization. When any organization embarks on a change effort of any scale, leaders tend to think that they are facing a set of operational tasks that will, if completed successfully, result in a new and better

state. But as Jeanie Duck, one of the experts on change management, makes clear, “changing an organization is inherently and inescapably an emotional human process.”⁵

Combining our research into the literature of change management with our experience working with school districts large and small across the country, DMGroup has adapted a framework to help district leaders manage change. Our framework draws heavily upon the work of John Kotter and his “8-Step Process for Leading Change.” It also incorporates ideas from Jeanie Duck's *The Change Monster*, Kurt Lewin's Three-Stage Model of Change, the Center for Creative Leadership, *Harvard Business Review*, McKinsey & Company, and others.⁶ The framework addresses the processes, the actions needed to engage people, and the leadership enablers required to drive real, lasting change (*Exhibit 1*).

Exhibit 1 DMGROUP'S CHANGE MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK



Adapted from John Kotter's "8-Step Process for Leading Change," with additional material from the Center for Creative Leadership, *Harvard Business Review*, McKinsey & Company, *The Change Monster* by Jeanie Duck, and Lewin's 3-Stage Model of Change

GOOD LEADERSHIP IS AT THE CORE

Leadership matters. Without good leadership, lasting change simply cannot happen. Therefore, at the very center of DMGroup's change management framework are leadership and the critical behaviors leaders must exhibit, known as leadership enablers.



So, what are the key leadership enablers needed to successfully lead change?

- Communicate and Motivate:** Leaders need to communicate their vision of the future with passion. They need to be able to communicate why change is needed, what specific change is required, and the implications of the change. Throughout the change journey, leaders need to continually share and reinforce the vision, the process, and the progress.
- Remain Steadfast and Focused:** Leaders need to stay focused on the change effort at hand. They cannot give a rousing speech, set people to work, and then move on to the next project. Leaders must demonstrate unrelenting and persistent commitment to the change so that the team feels supported in its work, and leaders must reinforce to the organization the message that the change is important and is definitely going to be led to completion.
- Model the Change:** Leaders need to model the required mindset and behavior changes and hold all senior leadership accountable to model the changes required as well. Modeling and accountability are accomplished not only through individual actions and behaviors, but also by addressing the systems, structures, and processes at the very top of the organization first and foremost.
- Be Engaged and Connected:** Leaders need to stay involved in strategy and execution from beginning to end. They can continue to provide support by keeping a pulse on change through informal channels, making adjustments when needed along the way, and seeking the support and commitment of key influencers.

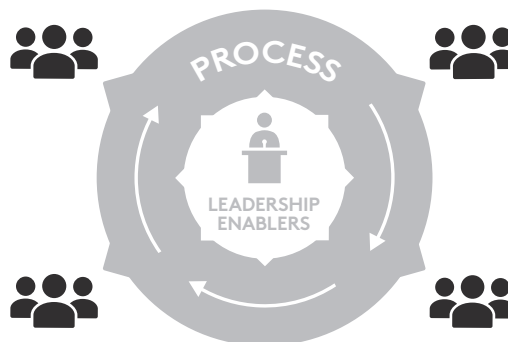
While these enablers may seem self-evident, they are not always easy to live out. Continually modeling the change, constantly communicating and staying connected, and exhibiting boldness and passion while attending to the rest of one's job is exhausting and, at times, overwhelming. District leaders need to remind themselves that their actions and persistence are vital to making sure that a change effort is successful, and must remember to fortify and recharge themselves so they are able to champion the change.

“*Changing an organization is inherently and inescapably an emotional human process.*”

– Jeanie Duck
Author, *The Change Monster*

PEOPLE

Understanding and addressing people's emotions and mindsets are essential to a successful change management process.



Pework: Defining the Keystone Change

Before district leaders dive into a very demanding change process, it is important to carefully select, consider, and define the keystone change. Any change effort requires resources and significant attention from leadership — this investment should not be wasted on low-impact initiatives or those that are destined to fail. Efforts need to be focused on bold moves that align to the district's priorities and will have significant impact. Equally important, the change must align with the leader's own passions and beliefs; to lead the change and create the needed buy-in, the leader must be able to convey genuine conviction and authentic energy that cannot be feigned.

A keystone change must

- Support a district-wide strategic priority
- Be core to the leader's passion and beliefs
- Require involvement from and transformation of multiple functions/departments
- Have buy-in from a significant majority of senior leaders
- Make significant impact on student outcomes, resource allocation, and/or operational efficiency

Selecting the right change effort in a district should result from deep deliberation and shared conviction among district leadership; it should not arise from the need to copy a peer district or to respond to a single, loud stakeholder group or to comply with the wishes of a forceful superintendent. The change effort must align with a compelling and broadly acknowledged priority within the district.⁷ Setting off on the wrong transformation journey can be a recipe for failure.

To demonstrate the application of our change management framework, we will be focusing on the change management journey of a district that sought to dramatically improve outcomes for its students with mild to moderate disabilities.

Example

Dramatically improve outcomes for students with mild to moderate disabilities

Pework: Defining the Keystone Change

For this district, this change opportunity met all of the requirements of a keystone change:

- It supported the district-wide priority to increase achievement for students
- It aligned with a passion of the district leader, who had been a special education teacher early in her career
- It required the involvement of the central office, special education staff, and classroom teachers
- It had been expressed as a priority by the senior leadership team based on recent achievement data
- It would have a significant impact on student outcomes
- It could potentially have a positive impact on resource allocation. The changes envisioned were expected to allow the district to do more for students without needing additional resources.

COVID-19: URGENT CHANGE REQUIRED

For nearly every district in the country, the rapid and widespread impact of COVID-19 this year created urgency to adapt instructional practices to a virtual environment and make myriad urgent changes. While crises provide clear urgency, changes under more normal circumstances require a more rigorous approach from the outset to address the inertia of the status quo. In this article, we are focusing on change efforts that are not driven by crises in order to demonstrate how the framework can be applied in any circumstance.

“Buy-in by anything less than 75% of senior leadership can cause serious challenges to change efforts later in the process.”

STEP 1: Create a Sense of Urgency

Building a sense of urgency is essential for driving change. Successful change efforts often begin with a compelling change story that is centered on why the current state is no longer appropriate or sustainable while simultaneously creating an exciting vision of the future state. Striking this balance is a challenge, and the right message will depend on the keystone change. In some cases, as Kotter notes, the status quo needs to seem more dangerous than launching into the unknown.⁸ Other times, the current state may not necessarily be bad, but a more exciting, impactful future vision is necessary. This vision should be aspirational and focused on what the future will look and feel like — inspiring support for the change and generating impatience to achieve the exciting future state.



District leaders can follow these practical tips for building a sense of urgency and gaining support:

- **Facts and Data:** Quantify the problem and the potential impact to make the importance of the work clearer.
- **Build compelling narratives:** Anonymized stories and quotes from students, teachers, staff, and other stakeholders make the need — and opportunity — more personal, real, and relatable.
- **Acknowledge past missteps:** District leaders need to be honest about why past efforts have failed and how these issues are being addressed to prevent a repeat of the past. Acknowledging past missteps and clearly sharing why this effort will be different helps minimize cynicism and builds credibility that this time actually may be different.

Appeal to Emotional and Rational Sides and Gain Leadership Commitment



People respond best to a call to action that engages their hearts as well as their minds, making them feel as if they are part of something important and meaningful. Securing the support of senior leadership at the outset is essential — a rule of thumb is that buy-in by anything less than 75% of senior leadership can cause serious challenges to change efforts later in the process.⁹ Beyond the senior leadership team, all messaging about the case for change needs to help all stakeholders understand why the change is important and energize them for the future.

Example

Dramatically improve outcomes for students with mild to moderate disabilities

Step 1: Create a Sense of Urgency

The superintendent began by meeting with senior staff and having them review the outcome data for their students with mild to moderate disabilities. They quantified the number of students and examined the outcome data in detail. They then gathered anonymized stories and quotes from students, teachers, staff, and other stakeholders, all of which helped them to create compelling narratives for why change was necessary. They acknowledged that their efforts in the past had been underfunded, top down, and unsuccessful, and they agreed that they needed to commit the resources and collective effort to achieve measurable results this time.

STEP 2: Build a Guiding Coalition



Major district change efforts often start with one or two people, such as a superintendent and a deputy directly responsible for the department that is the primary focus. But to really build support and momentum, district leaders must convene what Kotter calls a “guiding coalition” to champion change.¹⁰ Members of the guiding coalition should bring content expertise, diverse perspectives, the energy to effect change, and a growth mindset. It is important that those selected are well regarded and trusted by teachers, staff, community, and leadership, and exhibit a commitment to the reputation of their school and district. Also, the coalition must be given the time and space outside of their regular duties to meet and discuss change efforts.

Network the Change



In selecting members of this group, district leaders must go beyond the traditional hierarchy and roles to include individuals from all relevant levels and departments with positional or personal influence throughout the district, such as

- **Pride Builders:** those who are great at motivating others and inspiring them to take pride in their work
- **Trusted Nodes:** go-to people who are repositories of the district’s culture — the people that others seek out when they want to know what is really happening in the district
- **Change Ambassadors:** people who know, as if by instinct, how to *live* the change the organization is making and can serve as both exemplars and communicators.¹¹

Example

Dramatically improve outcomes for students with mild to moderate disabilities

Step 2: Build a Guiding Coalition

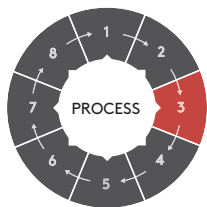
Determined to succeed, the superintendent and senior leaders built a guiding coalition of 20 individuals. The coalition included teachers, counselors, psychologists, special education staff, principals, social workers, and behaviorist specialists. In addition, it included a current student with a mild to moderate disability, a member of a respected advocacy group, a parent, a board member, and a local professor.

The coalition was responsible for providing content expertise, offering diverse perspectives based on each member’s experiences, and championing the change effort within the district. Perhaps most importantly, these individuals were well regarded and trusted by teachers, parents, and the community; took pride in the reputation of their schools; and had a learning mindset — a willingness to do the hard work to champion change.

“

District leaders and the guiding coalition must work together to balance ambition and pragmatism. Together they must craft a vision that is feasible and then identify the initiatives that they are confident can be executed to bring the vision into reality.

STEP 3: Form a Strategic Vision and Initiatives



A successful change effort is driven by a strategic vision that is sensible, clear, simple, elevating, and situation-specific.¹² The vision must include a clear illustration of what the district is moving “from” and where it is moving “to.”

A good rule of thumb: a district is not yet done with this phase of the change process if its vision cannot be communicated concisely in three minutes or less to anyone in the community in a way that allows it to be fully understood and inspires interest. This statement of the strategic vision then needs to be accompanied by coordinated and targeted initiatives that describe how the vision will be achieved.

Collaborate, Validate, and Ensure Feasibility



The creation of a vision should be a collaborative process in which diverse feedback is incorporated. District leaders and the guiding coalition must work together to balance ambition and pragmatism. Together they must craft a vision that is feasible and then identify the initiatives that they are confident can be executed to bring the vision into reality. A common mistake at this stage is setting an unrealistic agenda. It is natural to get caught up in the excitement of the opportunity, but if the vision and initiatives are overly ambitious and unattainable, the effort may lose credibility immediately — or start to lose momentum as setbacks build up. As the vision and initiatives are developed, leaders and members of the guiding coalition need to involve stakeholders, solicit and incorporate feedback, and build broader engagement. At the end of this step, district leaders and the guiding coalition must feel ownership in and commitment to the vision as articulated.

Example

Dramatically improve outcomes for students with mild to moderate disabilities

Step 3: Form a Strategic Vision and Initiatives

The superintendent, senior leadership team, and guiding coalition worked together to create the following vision statement:

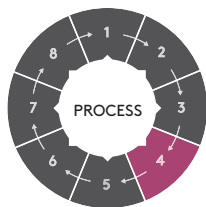
“If every student with a mild to moderate disability has increased access to high-quality general education and intervention supports, outcomes will improve.”

They then worked to determine how they would achieve this vision and decided upon the following initiatives — a set of actions they felt were ambitious but achievable:

- Provide general education teachers with focused coaching to support their development and ability to meet the needs of most students
- Provide intervention during extra time, and eliminate pulling students out from general education time
- Ensure all students have access to intervention taught by content experts
- Streamline meetings, paperwork, and processes to increase the time special education staff spend supporting students

With a strategic vision and set of initiatives drafted, the superintendent and senior leadership team held a series of “listen and learn” sessions with stakeholder groups, including teachers, central office staff, families, and community members. During these sessions, district leaders shared the draft vision and collected suggestions and feedback from participants. Later, the superintendent shared what was heard during the listen and learn sessions with the guiding coalition, who then helped to refine and finalize the vision and list of key initiatives.

STEP 4: Enlist a Volunteer Army



"Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much," said Helen Keller, the American political activist and first deaf-blind person to earn a bachelor of arts degree. For a major change effort to succeed, it needs to be supported throughout the district, so enlisting a "volunteer army" to help build this support is essential.¹³ Members of this volunteer army should include individuals who believe in the vision for change and are ready to take action to drive the shifts required. Teachers, school staff, and families tend to be deep repositories of knowledge about where potential glitches may occur, what technical and logistical issues need to be addressed, what past experiences may influence attitudes toward the proposed change, and how others may react to the changes over time. Although it may take longer in the beginning, ensuring broad involvement saves untold headaches later on.¹⁴

How big does the volunteer army need to be? DMGroup's work in districts across the country suggests that 15% of affected staff being supportive and involved is usually sufficient to begin to catalyze large-scale change.

Be Genuine and Targeted



District leaders and the guiding coalition need to create conditions that result in people "wanting" to be involved in the change process rather than "having" to be involved. One of the most important ways to create such conditions is to communicate the vision for change clearly, regularly, and with genuine conviction. District leaders must tirelessly help others understand what is either dangerous about the status quo or beneficial about the future state. District leaders who communicate well incorporate key messages about transformation efforts into their hour-by-hour activities, continually making connections between their activities and the aspiration and vision of the change effort.

Keep in mind that district leaders communicate in both words and actions, and the latter often sends a stronger signal to district staff. In fact, when senior leaders model



When senior leaders model the behavior changes they are asking district staff to make, transformations are 5.3 times more likely to succeed.

the behavior changes they are asking district staff to make — spending time with the students who are the focus of an initiative, participating in appropriate trainings themselves, publicly supporting teachers and other staff leading the efforts, using consistent language and messaging, etc. — transformations are 5.3 times more likely to succeed.¹⁵ Staying connected with the volunteer army is also important to allow leaders to gather informal feedback on what is working and what needs to be modified. In addition, district leaders should regularly recognize and acknowledge this group's efforts in order to reinforce the importance of the work and maintain a high level of energy and commitment.

Example

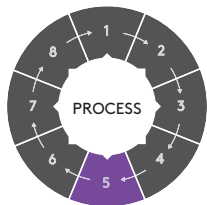
Dramatically improve outcomes for students with mild to moderate disabilities

Step 4: Enlist a Volunteer Army

To begin to build its army of volunteers, the district encouraged participation by offering teachers early access to opt-in coaching, stipends for experts to teach intervention periods, and access to tools and technology. The district also included teachers and special education staff in the development of updated guidelines for supporting students. By encouraging participation and not demanding it, the superintendent, senior staff, and guiding coalition were able to build support and enthusiasm from special education staff and teachers.

“The biggest obstacles to a change effort need to be identified, confronted, and removed as early as possible in the change process. Action is essential — both to empower others and to maintain the credibility of the change effort and of those leading it.”

STEP 5: Enable Action by Removing Barriers



With a strong contingent of district staff supporting the change effort, district leadership and the guiding coalition must focus on removing barriers in order to enable action. This may mean changing systems that seriously undermine the new vision, such as narrow job descriptions or misaligned performance-assessment systems. It may involve thoughtfully addressing managers who are slow to change, if not outright opposed to the change effort, to support them in the process ... or help them move on. The biggest obstacles to a change effort need to be identified, confronted, and removed as early as possible in the change process. Action is essential — both to empower others and to maintain the credibility of the change effort and of those leading it.

Empower and Respond



Real voice and power must be given to the guiding coalition and other members of the volunteer army by actively driving the changes they say are necessary to allow initiatives to take hold. Doing so not only propels change, but also builds morale and buy-in from those involved in the effort, generating additional energy that will continue to spread throughout the district more broadly.

Example

Dramatically improve outcomes for students with mild to moderate disabilities

Step 5: Enable Action by Removing Barriers

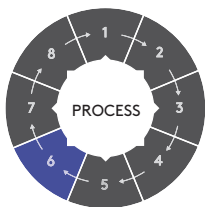
In seeking to put their initiatives into action, the guiding coalition identified a number of barriers to change. For example, the initiative to “provide intervention during extra time, and eliminate pulling students out from general education time” required making changes to schedules. Another initiative to “streamline meetings, paperwork, and processes to increase the time special education staff spend supporting students” required significant review of processes and forms.

After listening carefully to the issues raised by the guiding coalition, the superintendent and senior leaders debated and prioritized the actions needed. They quickly pushed forward to do the following:

- Adapt guidelines on instructional minutes and scheduling as needed
- Collaboratively negotiate labor agreement adjustments and gain waivers
- Use tools and technology to support scheduling and process management

Their quick action to remove barriers demonstrated the commitment to effecting change and empowered and energized those involved in the change effort to move forward.

STEP 6: Generate Short-Term Wins



Real transformation does not happen overnight. Effecting significant, lasting change takes time and persistence. Therefore, generating short-term wins is essential to help energize the team, motivate the volunteer army, and inspire others to join the effort. Without short-term wins, momentum slows and staff may give up on the change effort to join the ranks of those resisting the change.

Experienced leaders of change set initial targets that are achievable early in the process in order to boost the credibility of the change process. While the goals should be purposefully designed to generate focus and build momentum, these cannot be made-up successes that exaggerate the progress or take credit for something that was already underway, nor should the bar be set too low for an “easy” win. Actively planning for short-term wins is about finding ways to set realistic goals early and often, and then recognizing when genuine progress is achieved.

“ Actively planning for short-term wins is about finding ways to set realistic goals early and often, and then recognizing when genuine progress is achieved. ”

Recognize Wins but Don't Celebrate Too Much



Small wins must be actively identified and highlighted by district leaders to keep stakeholders energized and motivated. These wins should be unambiguous, visible to many, and closely related to the change effort. But leaders should be careful to recognize the wins without celebrating too much because these small wins are not a vision achieved; they should be used to build credibility, confidence, and the excitement to tackle even bigger challenges.

Example

Dramatically improve outcomes for students with mild to moderate disabilities

Step 6: Generate Short-Term Wins

The leadership team and guiding coalition quickly identified some concrete short-term goals that they believed were achievable and could be highlighted as early wins:

- Quantifying the additional number of instructional minutes students are receiving as a result of a schedule change
- Sharing the number of teachers who opted in to partner with an instructional coach and the number of coaching sessions completed to date
- Highlighting student outcome improvements as measured by formative assessments
- Communicating the increase in the amount and proportion of time special education staff spend supporting students as a result of new instructional guidelines
- Sharing anonymized testimonials from teachers, students, and parents who were benefiting from the changes to complement data with a human element

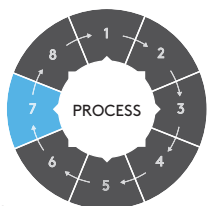
When these early successes were achieved, leadership highlighted the progress and shared the news across the district. The early wins were used to reinforce that improvement is achievable – students were already starting to benefit – and to propel the work forward.



Frequently, after a few initial wins, some team members will feel that what has been achieved is “good enough,” so it is crucial for district leaders to balance recognizing progress with the need to see the change through to reach the ultimate vision.

STEP 7: Sustain Acceleration

Maintaining urgency and a commitment to effecting change over months, if not years, is one of the most difficult challenges associated with change management. Strong leaders of change will make sure the team continues to feel discomfort with the current state even as progress starts to be made, and will continue to hold high expectations about the focus and commitment required to accelerate change. In this phase of the process, leaders need to build momentum by consolidating accomplished gains, highlighting them as stepping stones to greater wins, and enabling staff to continue to work toward the larger goal. This may include reassessing the current state relative to the vision and evolving the change story and process to maintain urgency. Frequently, after a few initial wins, some team members will feel that what has been achieved is “good enough,” so it is crucial for district leaders to balance recognizing progress with the need to see the change through to reach the ultimate vision.



stakeholder base, while also highlighting remaining needs. Sometimes the change story may need to be recalibrated and evolved to make sure that the effort is not abandoned and that lasting change can be realized. Most importantly, district leadership must not waiver in their own commitment to and enthusiasm for achieving the vision, while expressing empathy and understanding for the wide range of human emotions that emerge during change.

Recalibrate and Persist

While we are laying out a step-by-step framework, the reality is that transformation is not linear — it is a dynamic process, with ups and downs during the journey. Inevitably, there will be moments when determination will wane, or a crisis will occur. One way for district leaders to sustain the work is to collect and share endorsements and validating quotes from a diverse



Example

Dramatically improve outcomes for students with mild to moderate disabilities

Step 7: Sustain Acceleration

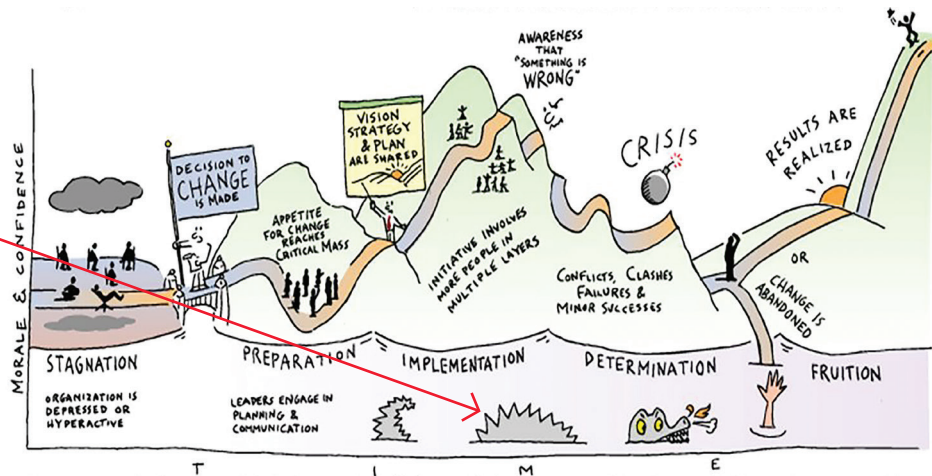
Tactics that the district used to sustain acceleration included the following:

- Recognizing increases in student outcomes as the data became available
- Continuing to scale up coaching, process improvements, and technology integration
- Highlighting success stories and remaining needs to show that more students continued to need support
- Collecting and sharing endorsements and validating quotes from a diverse stakeholder base
- Using the natural attrition of paraprofessionals over time in order to redirect resources to hire additional content experts

Watch Out for the Change Monster



Source: Jeanie Duck, *The Change Monster*, illustration by Gene Mackles

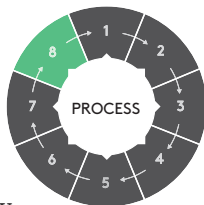


Jeanie Duck's change curve, shown above, outlines the five common phases of change any organization experiences: stagnation, preparation, implementation, determination, and finally fruition. Lurking at the bottom of this visual is the "change monster" — all of the human issues associated with change, such as fear, curiosity, exhaustion, loyalty, paranoia, depression, optimism, rage, and delight.¹⁶ Managing the monster requires a heightened sensitivity to the emotional and behavioral issues staff face during a change process, and district leadership's willingness to address them.

Nearly all district leaders will encounter the "change monster" in some form at some point during a change effort. District leaders need to identify potential challenge points (in advance, if possible); they need to anticipate emotional responses to the process and be prepared to rally their team to push through. While the framework for a change process makes it appear as if a district can move seamlessly from one step to the next, the reality is that leaders will likely face multiple "crises" along the way. The aim is to take the path where "Results are realized" and not the path where "Change is abandoned."

STEP 8: Institute Change

Change sticks only when teachers and staff no longer think of the new approach as "the new way" but simply regard it as "the way things are done in the district." To institute change means ensuring that the organizational structures, management systems, processes, and norms are all in place to maintain this "new normal." Getting to this point of real transformation takes time, but once achieved it ensures lasting change.



Celebrate and Embed Talent Management

At this point in the process, district leaders should celebrate the change and recognize and reward those who have contributed to effecting it. This is the time to ensure that changes are embedded in the district's talent management systems. Roles, performance management, promotions, and rewards all need to support the new normal so that the successes achieved will be sustained.



Example

Dramatically improve outcomes for students with mild to moderate disabilities

Step 8: Institute Change

To embed the change achieved, the superintendent, senior management, and guiding coalition took the following steps:

- Embedded resource allocations into ongoing budget priorities
- Formalized updated roles and responsibilities, instructional minute and scheduling guidelines, and a model intervention plan
- Codified enhanced staff screening and hiring processes to focus on content expertise and the updated roles and responsibilities

The real key to lasting change lies in changing the district culture itself, through consistency of action over time.

“Change sticks only when teachers and staff no longer think of the new approach as “the new way” but simply regard it as “the way things are done in the district.”

Conclusion

We all know that change is challenging but necessary. Leaders across all organizations are charged with driving change in an increasingly complex world and fail more often than they succeed. Nowhere is change more difficult than in public education, where the unique context creates a complex set of challenges. But the opportunity and imperative to lead change in public education is a noble charge and one that is critical to the future of our society. Current and future students deserve nothing less than a high-quality education that allows them to live fulfilling lives and be positioned to take part in the economy of the future.

Too often, leaders take the wrong approach to change: they choose the wrong change, try to drive change through top-down management, lose focus, or fail to use a comprehensive and rigorous change strategy. Change efforts are inevitably about the people and culture of an organization as much as they are about the initiatives and process that drive the change. Even successful change efforts are messy and full of surprises, requiring confidence, energy, and persistence to see them through.

District leaders attempting to lead a change effort should consider using DMGroup's change management framework. It starts by making sure the right changes are prioritized, and then integrates change processes, staff needs and emotional responses, and associated leadership behaviors required to identify and achieve lasting change. While any meaningful change process is time-consuming, complex, and filled with challenges, it can also be the most rewarding, rigorous, and engaging work district leaders undertake. ♦

NOTES

- ¹ David Jacquemont, Dana Maor, and Angelika Reich, “How to Beat the Transformation Odds,” McKinsey & Company, April 1, 2015, <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/how-to-beat-the-transformation-odds>.
- ² See John Kotter, “8-Step Process [for Leading Change],” Kotter, accessed October 1, 2020, <https://www.kotterinc.com/8-steps-process-for-leading-change/>, and Jeanie Daniel Duck, *The Change Monster: The Human Forces That Fuel or Foil Corporate Transformation and Change* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001). For a summary of Lewin's model, see Mind Tools Comment Team, “Lewin's Change Management Model: Understanding the Three Stages of Change,” MindTools.com, 2019, https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newPPM_94.htm.
- ³ “The Condition of Education: Public School Expenditures,” National Center for Education Statistics, last updated April 2020, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cmb.asp.
- ⁴ “Fast Facts: English Language Learners,” National Center for Education Statistics, 2020, <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=96>.
- ⁵ Duck, *The Change Monster*, 9.
- ⁶ In addition to the sources cited in other notes, we drew upon the following sources in our literature review: Ron Ashkenas, “Change Management Needs to Change,” *Harvard Business Review* (April 2013), <https://hbr.org/2013/04/change-management-needs-to-change/>; Amanda Athuraliya, “8 Vital Change Management Tools for Effectively Managing Change,” *Creately* blog, January 29, 2019, <https://creately.com/blog/diagrams/change-management-tools-list/>; Ron Carucci, “Leading Change in a Company That's Historically Bad at It,” *Harvard Business Review* (August 2019), <https://hbr.org/2019/08/leading-change-in-a-company-thats-historically-bad-at-it/>; Jeanie Daniel Duck, “The Change Monster,” BCG (Boston Consulting Group), April 15, 2001, <https://www.bcg.com/en-us/publications/2001/change-monster-human-forces-fuel-foil-corporate-transformation-change.aspx>; Jeanie Daniel Duck, “Lessons from Three Decades with the Change Monster,” BCG, July 2008, <https://www.bcg.com/publications/2008/lessons-from-three-decades-change-monster.aspx>; Shannon Muhly Bendixen, Michael Campbell, Corey Criswell, and Roland Smith, “Change-Capable Leadership: The Real Power Propelling Successful Change,” Center for Creative Leadership, 2017, <https://www.ccl.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Change-Capable-Leadership.pdf>; and Greg Satell, “Change Management: 4 Tips for Managing Organizational Change,” *Harvard Business Review* (August 2019), https://hbr.org/2019/08/4-tips-for-managing-organizational-change?referral=03759&cm_vc=rr_item_page.bottom.
- ⁷ N. Anand and Jean-Louis Barsoux, “What Everyone Gets Wrong About Change Management,” *Harvard Business Review* (November–December 2017), https://hbr.org/2017/11/what-everyone-gets-wrong-about-change-management?referral=03759&cm_vc=rr_item_page.bottom.
- ⁸ John P. Kotter, “Leading Change: Why Transformation Efforts Fail,” *Harvard Business Review* (May–June 1995), <https://hbr.org/1995/05/leading-change-why-transformation-efforts-fail-2>.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ This phrase and all of the steps illustrated in the inner circle in Exhibit 1 are from Kotter's “8-Step Process [for Leading Change].”
- ¹¹ DeAnne Aguirre and Micah Alpern, “10 Principles of Leading Change Management,” *Strategy + Business* 75 (June 2014), <https://www.strategy-business.com/article/00255>.
- ¹² Marcel van Assen, Gerben van den Berg, and Paul Pietersma, *Key Management Models: The 60+ Models Every Manager Needs to Know* (Harlow, UK: Financial Times/Prentice Hall, 2010).
- ¹³ Kotter, “8-Step Process.”
- ¹⁴ Aguirre and Alpern, “10 Principles of Leading Change Management.”
- ¹⁵ Jacquemont, Maor, and Reich, “How to Beat the Transformation Odds.”
- ¹⁶ Duck, *The Change Monster*.