Lifting All Leaders
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6 keys to successful change management

The most common reason many ed tech projects fail is that district leaders pay too little attention to the need for change management. From time invested in understanding a project's needs, to being realistic about how much can be accomplished in a certain time frame, here are six strategies that are critical for any initiative's success.

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Six Keys to Successful Change Management

Pete Just

During the annual conference of the Consortium for School Networking, an association for K–12 chief information officers, we hold an event known as "Fail Fest." It's a chance for edtech leaders to come together and learn from one another's mistakes.

Each speaker during Fail Fest has five minutes to tell a story about an edtech project gone wrong. It can be cathartic to bare your soul to colleagues, share a laugh about your missteps, and know that you're not alone. We can all relate to such errors in our working lives.

Two key themes have emerged from these annual Fail Fests. First, leading an edtech project can involve unforeseen challenges. Introducing change of any kind often makes people uncomfortable and can be fraught with difficulties. Second, the biggest reason many edtech projects go awry is that leaders underestimate these challenges and don't pay enough attention to change management.

Change management is the process of transitioning employees and organizations to new ways of doing things. At the Metropolitan School District of Wayne Township in Indiana, our work in adopting a new platform for transforming curriculum, assessment, and instruction has shown us how important change management is to ensuring success. We took six key steps to help the change process succeed in our district.

Step 1: Understand Needs

Before we began our instructional transformation project, we spent a year communicating with staff to discover and understand what their needs were. For instance, we learned that teachers wanted a platform that could tie together curriculum resources, assessment, and instruction within a single easy-to-use system, while extending students' learning beyond school hours and encouraging them to think more deeply. This information was essential for delivering a solution that would meet those needs.

Never assume you know what your teachers need. Good communication isn't just about telling people what you plan to do; it's a two-way feedback loop. And it shouldn't start with telling people anything. Rather, it should start with asking questions.

The kind of questions you ask depends on the culture of your school district and the relationships between the curriculum and IT departments. But you need to develop those relationships; otherwise, IT leaders can't understand what teachers need. And I don't want to deliver something I *think* will work; I want to deliver a spot-on solution.

Step 2: Choose the Right Solution

Based on our conversations with teachers, we knew we needed a technology platform for managing the entire K–12 learning process within a single easy-to-use system. We also knew the kinds of activities teachers wanted to do with this system to support their instruction. So we began evaluating learning-management systems to find one that could accommodate those needs.

The features of an edtech solution are important, but the flexibility and responsiveness of the provider are just as critical. Some edtech providers only offer a boilerplate solution that should work for most schools. We needed a full *partner*, prepared to work closely with us to help us make this core instructional platform what our staff and students expected.

Step 3: Form a Plan

Once you've chosen the right solution, it's important to have a detailed implementation plan. Your plan should define the steps involved in the transition and clarify who is responsible for completing each step. It should also include a timeline for the project and milestone markers to measure progress.

It's important to name a project leader who will manage the process. We have two project leaders for our implementation of the Wayne Learning Hub: one leader on the curriculum, instruction, and assessment side and another on the e-learning side. These individuals are responsible for directing the work and communicating with stakeholders. I'm the executive sponsor, and my role is to oversee the entire transition process and monitor our progress.

In forming your plan, you'll have to answer several operational questions. For our Wayne Learning Hub project, the questions we needed to address included: How would we transfer information from our legacy systems into the new system? Who would be the first staff members to use the system, and how would we pilot it to make sure it worked and met everyone's needs? How would we move our courses and content to the new system? How would we integrate the Learning Hub with our student information system and other software programs? We had to answer all those questions before we could begin the implementation process.

Step 4: Ensure Buy-In

If you've been communicating with your staff and understand their needs, you shouldn't have any problems getting them to buy in to the change. But it also helps if you choose a solution that's easy to use and simplifies their jobs—while empowering them to do their jobs more effectively. Teachers should be spending their time teaching, not learning some complex system we've designed for them. Typically, teachers use different systems, each with its own login, to find instructional resources, design and deliver assessments, and look at student data. That's too complicated. Now, we'll be able to house all our resources within the Wayne Learning Hub, and teachers will be able to use a single login for their digital resources, curriculum, lessons, and assessments. That's huge. It allows busy educators to be more efficient and productive in the limited time they have.

In making things easier for teachers, it's important to consider which processes and technologies you're willing to eliminate. Adding more systems or responsibilities without removing others isn't a realistic model for success. In moving to a single platform for curriculum, assessment, and instruction, we've identified some legacy systems we can strategically abandon as we introduce our new system. We'll be moving away from a separate curriculum repository; we'll require less professional development for each separate system, because those will be centralized; and we'll get rid of legacy resources that no longer have the value they once did. All told, we took six months prior to launch to modify and move our Course Curricular standards into the Hub.

To ensure buy-in, it also helps to give teachers some "easy wins." In other words, show them how they can immediately influence student learning with a few simple steps. An example of an easy win is allowing teachers to codevelop courses in a common space in our Learning Hub. This will enable them to share the load and feel the pride of contributing to a shared instructional resource. Being able to do, say, 10 percent of the work and have a product that is 100 percent ready and customized for your lessons is a big win for minimal effort. If you make teachers' lives easier and give them easy wins, the system will sell itself—and you'll have less trouble getting teachers to adopt it.

Step 5: Train Staff

Because we have different types of users, we've designed different levels of professional development tailored for each of these groups. Our online teachers were the first ones to learn the new system last fall because they needed more time to adapt their courses and make sure everything worked as expected. This spring, we're training the bulk of our "brick and mortar" teachers. We've offered the professional development opportunities online so that teachers can take them at their convenience, but we also have an on-site facilitator to help as needed.

We also gave teachers a "sandbox" environment so that they could experiment with the new system and build courses, and then delete them. Our teachers love having that opportunity. They want to get in and put their hands on it, but they don't want to mess anything up as they're learning the system. The sandbox environment gives them that freedom to try new things.

Step 6: Be Realistic

We didn't think we could accomplish our instructional transformation in just a few months. That wouldn't have been realistic. The plan we came up with gave us plenty of time to assess our needs, choose the right solution, complete all the integrations, train staff, and implement the system effectively before flipping the switch. Too many districts rush to complete edtech projects or underestimate how long the change-over process will take—and that's where they fail.

I'm excited for the next school year. We're building so many powerful learning resources into the Hub for our teachers to manage the instructional process and reach kids in new and profound ways. And that's what I live for—providing great resources so that great learning can happen.

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Ten Dimensions of Holistic Leadership

Robin M. Bevan

At Southend High School for Boys, in England, we have learned to recognize the importance of our behavior as leaders in securing a climate for growth, excellence, and job satisfaction. Our state-funded school is located on the outskirts of London, serves an economically and socially diverse community, caters to 1,200 students ages 11–18, and has a national reputation for success in academic outcomes and sports. We know that sustaining the right climate—through holistic leadership—improves a school's reputation and effectiveness and secures greater efficiency, fewer absences, and reduced staff turnover (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2008).

All leaders in the school are evaluated annually by their team members using, in part, 10 dimensions of holistic leadership. It's an unusual and pioneering approach, but the behaviors we seek to adopt are the same we demand from others. Our understanding of holistic leadership involves all staff working together to

1. Eliminate unnecessary tasks and unproductive ways of working. "If there's a better way, share it!"

2. Provide mutual support for colleagues across the school. Everyone needs a trusted friend.
3. Recognize and avoid unprofessional negativity. If something's not right, say it first to the person who needs to hear it.
4. Assist struggling colleagues before they become swamped. Keep an eye out, offer a hand, and encourage efficient working practices.
5. Watch out for the vicious cycle of excess workload leading to reduced productivity and a snowballing workload. We do what needs to be done, we do our best, we plan to make it happen, we stop when it's too much (and if we feel we cannot stop, we talk with our manager), and we fit the task to the time.
6. Ensure that all colleagues are sustaining a healthy lifestyle and encouraging one another to pursue interests and activities that provide genuine relaxation, physical fitness, cultural stimulation, challenges, and rewards out of school.
7. Make sure instructions for all tasks are clear, simple, and consistent. Clarity takes longer than confusion but ultimately saves time and reduces anxiety.
8. Consider how we promote empathy as well as excellence and efficiency as well as effectiveness.
9. Examine how we respond under pressure. We learn the signs of pressure in ourselves and in our colleagues and practice the tools to manage pressure before it overflows.
10. Identify barriers to becoming more effective. We provide permission and trust for colleagues to develop their professionalism in the workplace.

Figure 1 illustrates the importance of each of the 10 dimensions. This single-page summary of these ideas explicitly states the benefits of each facet of holistic leadership and identifies unproductive leadership habits. It is an excellent tool for self-evaluation. Even better, you can use it as a tool for team reflections and ask your staff how, together, you might improve.

Figure 1. Ten Dimensions of Holistic Leadership

Dimension	Effectively deployed if colleagues …	Unproductive if colleagues …
Clarity	can fulfill their roles knowing exactly what is needed and when, with tools and resources readily available.	provide a level and detail of instruction that is out of proportion to the task or becomes micromanagement or include explanations that don't need to be part of the message.
Assertion	are confident about communicating clearly with the relevant person about issues within their work environment.	make statements that disallow alternative views, afford no time for reasonable responses, or offer commentary on another colleague's competence.
Openness	are ready to listen and consider alternatives (from any source) and willing to contribute freely to improvements (in any area).	present positive suggestions as critical evaluation, take the rejection of an idea as a personal slight, or make further suggestions unwelcome.
Trust	are assumed to understand and be able to fulfill their responsibilities and recognize the need for	confuse trust with a lack of support, use trust to justify a lack of clarity or resources, or perceive monitoring and evaluation as interference and criticism.

	monitoring and evaluating approaches and outcomes.	
Permission	know the extent to which they have flexibility to make decisions about their work practices and are free to make responsible choices.	use the freedom to adopt individual working patterns as an excuse to do less, or make judgements about other colleagues' dedication or diligence based on their choices.
Professionalism	apply the highest standards of integrity and judgement within their role.	confuse professional status or position with superiority, or apply standards to others that are not reflected in their own conduct.
Self-responsibility	can regulate their own workload, manage their own pressures, plan for known demands, and accommodate unexpected demands.	allow the opportunity to take responsibility for oneself to become an excuse for allowing others to flounder.
Regard for others	are mindful of the well-being of others, don't escalate pressure or conflict, ease the way to be managed by others, and help others follow when being led.	show an intrusive concern for others, gossip about others' welfare, allow passivity to prevent progress, or tolerate underperformance.
Appreciation	recognize the efforts and contributions of those around them, even when the task or role is routine; say "thank you."	express thanks only in recognition of public or special efforts or use appreciation to flatter the recipient into accepting further demands.
Positivity	respond to challenges with a "can do" ethos, differentiate between what they can change and what is inevitable, and help others do the same.	don't notice or support abnormal pressures or don't identify or act upon key issues of difficulty.

Reference

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