The Challenge of Change

The nature of change

One only has to look in a mirror to know that change is an inevitable, inescapable part of life. All living things change or they die. ‘Change is a process not an event,’ Hopkins observes. We learn; we respond; we adapt. Regardless of whether it involves persons, society, organisations, or a school, change is about the transformation of how things are to what things might or should be.

School improvement is fundamentally about change.

   Like any relationships, group or system, as people and processes work together, better ways of living and operating together emerge to help the system run more smoothly, effectively and efficiently. ²

In order to develop curriculum, to maximise student learning, and to increase the effectiveness of the school organisation, change is a necessary process involving the willing or unwilling participation of all. Sustainable planned growth and development of a school requires therefore an understanding and appreciation of the factors that impact on the change process. As Kimbrough and Burkett observe: ‘Change can be achieved without realising improvement, but it is impossible to have improvement with having change’. ³

Different kinds of change

Groups, individuals and organisations experience different kinds of change. Research conducted by Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) amongst others has established that:

   All organisations face change processes that are fundamentally different not because the organisations are fundamentally different (although they may be) but because there are distinctly different change processes. ²

Incremental change or what McREL describes as First Order Change⁴ is a normal aspect of the ordinary life of an organisation. It is the basic adjusting of current patterns of behaviour and action to address the ever-changing environment in which the organisation or school functions. For example, the teacher plans a unit of work that appears to be an appropriate, carefully
considered response to the learning needs of her students. However, as s/he engages the class in various tasks, she quickly discovers that many do not grasp some basic concepts. Without even thinking too much about what she is doing, she adapts her program to revisit prior learning events to reinforce and even reteach what she had originally assumed as gained knowledge. She has demonstrated flexibility in her pedagogy and approach in order to respond to the learning challenges of her students.

Educational systems and schools too engage in the incremental change process as they adapt policies and procedures in response to the changing needs of the internal or external environment. An example might be the changes that have taken place in curriculum design to take into account the growing technological advances available to support learning. Incremental change, therefore involves the processes that require schools to change the way they operate in order to thrive in an environment that differs from the past. It is continuous, draws from a base of sound knowledge, and utilizes skills that are already adequate for the process.

Fundamental change or Second Order Change is the ‘kind of change that typically involves altering the very essence or identity of a system — in other words, transforming the system’. It involves a radical shift in thinking, a re-visioning of the future and a departure from the comfort of the past. It requires that ‘people depart drastically from the status quo and often that they do so in a limited period of time’. This kind of change makes significant demands on the system, school or individual. Frequently, knowledge and understanding are lacking, current skills fall short of those required and potential outcomes are difficult to define. An example of fundamental or Second Order Change in Tasmanian schools might be the introduction of the Essential Learnings that require a radical shift in understanding of how students learn and subsequent changes in pedagogy. McREL warns:

One pitfall is to view fundamental change as ‘better’ or more worthwhile than incremental change ... In fact, incremental change can make a big difference in an organisation’s effectiveness, in relationships among staff, and in relationships with community members.

Adaptation to different challenges, different needs and a range of different environments requires different approaches to change. But, whilst the nature of the change may be determined to some degree by circumstances, it is even more determined by those who are engaged in the process.

The impact of change

Change involves people, their context and their experiences. Those who seek to implement change need to understand that it is neither neutral nor objective. It has an impact on people’s lives, stories, hopes and identity. As Stoll observes:
The human side of change is all too often ignored. Change is an intensely personal experience. The outcomes of a change process are inextricably connected to the impact that it has on the lives of those involved and the effectiveness of the process will be influenced to the degree that people understand the conditions that led to the need for change and their willingness to personally engage in the process. McREL’s view is that “a change is defined by the implications it has for the people expected to implement it and/or those who will be impacted by it.” In short, the impact of change and its successful implementation depend on the kind of change individuals or groups perceive it to be.

**A challenge to beliefs and values**

Smith and Lovatt observe that “change is about challenging one’s beliefs, perceptions, traditional ways of working and long-held and established practices.” These are invariably not only central to the perception of the individual in relation to identity, purpose and role, but will be as strongly defended and protected as the degree of significance attributed by that individual. As such, change also powerfully impacts not only on individuals but also on the whole school culture. Teachers, whilst conscious of it or not, operate from the basis of a core philosophy of education, what it means, what it should achieve and how it is best provided for the good of their students. Their actions and behaviours are predicated on a core value system that influences their attitudes towards students, colleagues, parents, the system and community. For example, if their basic belief about the role of parents is that some interest is fine, but leave the work to the professionals, then a change in teaching and learning approaches that involves parent education and school/home partnership may appear to them to be an unnecessary and unwelcome intrusion rather than learning (and teaching) enrichment. Their affective response might in turn be negative, resistant and uncooperative, even as they give the outward impression of acceptance of and compliance to the changes. By contrast, there are some who seem to want to ‘throw out the baby with the bathwater’. They have a burst of enthusiasm and excitement for change that lacks reflection and critical judgement, but rush to embrace every new initiative as if each were of equal value or worth. In the first example, the teacher may grieve for the past; in the other, the good of the past is rejected in preference for the new. Deal’s viewpoint is that ‘either impulse creates problems for an organisation and threatens morale’.

**School culture**

The culture of the school is shaped by change. The individual perception and response of staff to the introduction of new ideas, new approaches and new responsibilities will shape the quality of relationships and collective identity. Vision and mission may need to be reviewed and revised. Structures, norms and organisation may require significant attention so that the school can adapt to the
changes required either by its internal needs or those of external authorities. New roles, for example, curriculum coordinator, may be established. New lines of community and authority might also be introduced, for example, team planning. Old concepts such as ‘leader’ might need to be redefined. There may even need to be a reassessment of what terms such as ‘learner’, ‘success’, ‘achievement’, ‘reward’ or ‘community’ mean in terms of school culture.

Change affects and is affected by individual skills and attitudes. Change alters and requires formal patterns of roles and relationships. Change attracts and stimulates issues of power and conflict. Change alters and is influenced by culture. It serves both instrumental and symbolic purposes.

The affective response to change

Change is ‘inescapably about feelings and perceptions’, especially fundamental or second-order change. Depending on how the individual or school defines the change, the reaction or response will be one of deep anxiety or excitement and enthusiasm. Frequently, we hear comments about the difficulty of ‘teaching old dogs, new tricks’ but age is not the central factor in how people respond. Rather, it is their perception of what the change will mean for them, especially in relation to their (often unconscious) individual capacity to learn and utilize unfamiliar knowledge and skills. Older teachers, for example, may experience some degree of anxiety or stress about integrating information technology in the classroom, but beginning teachers may feel some trepidation about the first parent interview in their careers. Each is encountering the challenge of change, but for different reasons. In general terms, the perceived impact of the change will determine whether it is incremental or fundamental and will consequently influence the kind of feelings different people experience. The more change the person or group encounters, the more they will experience feelings of stress and inadequacy. McREL research concludes that:

Precisely because deep change efforts are so unsettling, many prefer incremental change, even though this kind of relatively focused change may be insufficient in a given situation. Dealing with problems incrementally is much more familiar and, therefore, more comfortable for most people. A fundamental or discontinuous change, on the other hand, requires those involved to call forth and learn new ways of interacting with problems and the environment.

However, this should not motivate those implementing or leading change to fall back on incremental change over that which is fundamental. There are times when the change process should function in small incremental and, therefore, generally less threatening steps. Nevertheless, there are also circumstances when, for the sake of school improvement and student learning, fundamental change is necessary. The feelings are a given and need to be addressed, but
they cannot be the sole consideration to the exclusion of moving an education system or school in more productive directions.

The ‘chaos theory’

One outcome of change is a climate of unpredictability. As roles, responsibilities and ways of working change, people frequently experience a sense of uncertainty about their present conditions and future implications of new initiatives. The findings of the research conducted by such organisations as McREL point to a disruption in the smooth operation of the school:

During periods of fundamental change, however, just about everything about the system can come into question, including reporting relationships, people’s roles and basic operating principles.\(^\text{12}\)

The introduction of one change can give rise to unexpected outcomes and consequences. The change process is never one that can be predicted with any certainty, especially given that ‘schools do not change in a linear fashion; they are loosely coupled, improve slowly and unpredictably and often change capriciously’\(^\text{13}\). The impact of change may bring to the surface needs, difficulties and challenges that have previously been unappreciated, leading in turn to complications in change management. The internal capacity of the school is often more difficult to diagnose than might first appear. People who might have been expected to support the change might in reality, prove to be threatened by and resistant to it.

It is highly likely that some conflict will arise as conditions and expectations change. As Deal observes: ‘Change always will have its winners and losers, its contests and conflicts, its exchanges of power’\(^\text{10}\). Change managers might well be advised to expect conflict and address it when it inevitably occurs. They need also to be aware of the consequences of their own role, as Kimbrough and Burkett note: ‘Those who choose to be change agents must suffer the consequences from those who fear and dread change’\(^\text{3}\).

Managing change

School culture

Changing structures is necessary but not sufficient for sustainable change. Changing the professional culture is the key.\(^\text{14}\)

School culture is organic and dynamic, influenced by its history, core philosophy and values, the unique contribution of each of its members and its demographic social context. Each culture is a mix of strengths, limitations and constraints arising from the amalgam of its collective and individual characteristics. A change
process that does not take these contextual factors into consideration will quickly find that will and intent are not enough to bring about improvement.

We need to think about the complex interplay among different aspects of an organisation before, during and after implementation of new policies and programs. Even more important, we need to recognise the value of a strong cohesive identity to a school’s productivity and image. School improvement ought to emphasize building from within... our primary role is to help people see the power that they themselves have to make things better. The school culture that operates from a reliance on the status quo and exists within its own carefully nurtured comfort zone is likely to resist even the acknowledgement of the need for improvement, never mind engage with it. In such schools, all change may very well be defined as fundamental or Second Order. McREL research\(^4\) has found that the power of school culture is such that it is the most significant factor in obstructing the change process.

It is important, therefore, that leaders of change critically reflect on and examine the features of their unique school culture and work to build a community that has enough self-confidence and belief in its own goodness to take the risks inherent in implementing new initiatives and directions.

One of the most important aspects of developing effective change in schools is to foster strategies that will result in collaboration, cooperation, communication and understanding that can build group cohesion.\(^1^6\)

**Ownership of change**

Change is about managing people more than managing things, and is a process, not a product. It is most successful when the participants own and control the change process since it is individuals themselves who are the agents for their own change and of the necessary modification of beliefs, perceptions and actions that are central to the change process.\(^1^7\)

Change cannot be imposed; those involved need to be confident in their own minds of the reasons for the change and convinced of the benefits that are expected to arise as a result of it.

People resist change, especially radical change. Persuasion research indicates that choosing to comply, rather than being forced into it, leads to longer adherence to change... this occurs then employees actually believe in the need for change and are therefore willing to relinquish old modes of working in favour of long-term new ones.\(^7\)

It is vital therefore that change managers promote open dialogue amongst those upon whom the change will impact. They need to be willing to listen to concerns and address these authentically. If imposed through the exercise of power and
authority by virtue of superior position, some change may occur but it will not endure. Even when people have accepted the need for change, "employees must be encouraged to continue the change even in the face of occasional obstacles". Only by working cooperatively, facing problems and issues together with a spirit of goodwill and honesty will sustainable, effective change take place.

**Motivation and cooperation**

It is a fact of organisational life that many teachers operate in isolation with high levels of autonomy in relation to what happens in the classroom. Indeed, research suggests that in contrast to other organisations and professions, the most difficult context to change is that of the individual classroom. If the school culture operates within this model, then bringing about change (however convincing the argument) within that school will subsequently prove to be difficult. As Hopkins relates: 

> It is very difficult to change education — even in a single classroom — without also changing the school as an organisation; the cooperation of fellow teachers and the endorsement of the heartache are usually necessary too.\(^1\)

In other words, to change the school, there is a need to change the culture; to change the culture, there is a need to change the teacher, his/her thinking and then, his/her practice. Then, and only then, will there be any success change in the classroom.

One of the most fundamental principles of effective change was realized: those who are going to be responsible for implementing the change must be participants in deciding the nature and extent of the change and the development of the process of change.\(^1^8\)

For such changes to happen, the individual and the group need to be respected as professionals and also challenged as such. Where high levels of trust have been nurtured within the school culture (particularly in the staffroom), the change process is more likely to succeed. "Trust allows people to proceed on a path of change even though precise directions might not be clear."\(^1^9\)

**Skills and learning for teachers**

Each school, each teacher needs to have a readiness and capacity for change. It cannot be assumed that all have the knowledge and skills essential for the implementation of a new initiative or change of direction. Moffet is critical of change processes that fail to take into account the internal capacity for change within the school.

We attempt to implement new instructional innovations, yet fail to provide
teachers with the time to study, reflect on and apply new research and to learn new skills.20

An analysis of internal capacity needs to be undertaken prior to the introduction of any change and resources set aside to ensure that professional learning is available as part of the change infrastructure. As Wylie and Mitchell observe: ‘Teachers need good reason to change their practice.’21 Appropriate and relevant professional development provides a knowledge base from which teachers are better equipped to make the judgements that are essential for their willing participation as classroom change agents. However:

The value of teacher development and teacher collaboration must ultimately be judged by whether these changes make teachers better for their students in ways that teachers themselves can see.22

Professional learning for staff is only one part of the resource package. Teachers also need adequate time for planning and implementation followed by opportunities to engage together in critical evaluation of progress.

Planning and process

Sustainable and successful change needs to be carefully planned. Strategies need to be identified founded on careful analysis of the internal and external factors that impact on the school. It is important that a long-term view guides the process, with steps or stages that lead to effective implementation carefully adjusted to take all apparent variables into account. Hopkins reminds us that ‘school improvement is a carefully planned and managed process that takes place over a period of several years’.1

Schools cannot accomplish everything at once. ‘Organisations cannot sustain an infinite number of change initiatives’.23 To attempt too many initiatives too quickly and too soon will only result in overload of the very people essential for the successful implementation of the change. Hopkins argues that a consequence of overload is a feeling of being out of control, leading to a dependency that is created by the continual bombardment of new tasks and results in one’s action being predominantly shaped by the events, actions or directions of others.24 It is better for each school to make changes in response to its own identified needs, using an approach characterised by small, clearly defined, measured and carefully planned steps. Not only does this inspire higher levels of risk-taking and innovation, but it also opens up the potential for a collective experience of initial success that becomes another positive motivator for ongoing change. Moffet provides a timely caution about overload:

When educators feel overwhelmed and fragmented because of policies and mandates, reform stops dead in its tracks?25
In the light of the above, it could be argued that small skips across puddles are ultimately more effective than large leaps across the sea!

**Conclusion**

People respond to change in ways that are unique as their individual personalities, character and circumstances. The school leader as change agent needs to be comfortable with and skilled in dealing with complexities and uncertainties. Harris and Lambert remind the school leader that changing a school culture and empowering its members to embrace a shared commitment to improvement is 'the territory of shared values, social cohesion, trust, well-being, moral purpose, involvement, care, valuing and being valued, which is the operational field of leadership'\(^2\).

In brief, leading change is not for the faint-hearted!

**References**

5. McREL, op. cit, 2000, p. 5.
11. Ibid, p. 120.
25. Moffet, op. cit., p. 3.

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