

# Who navigates change? A learner's view of change leadership

Home / 2016 / May / Leadership / Who navigates change? — A learner's view of change leadership



## WHAT IS CHANGING?

I have been thinking a lot lately about how people are supported when facing significant change in their lives, especially in the complex and ever-changing world of education. Research tells us that we can no longer prepare learners for the 21st century and beyond through industrial and content-driven models. We should be creating learning opportunities that harness and spark innovation, creativity, collaboration, digital literacy, and curiosity for the world around us. We should be encouraging educators to continually inquire into practice through a future-focused lens.

Lichtman (2014) states that, when a school is facing organisational or cultural changes, it can be very uncomfortable, cause displacement and even grief, but that all of this is OK, and that we should welcome the uncomfortable. He also unpacks the difference between 'hard' and 'uncomfortable'. Hard is where you are fighting against every odd and the chance of success is highly unlikely. But, uncomfortable is where we get to challenge and make some really tough decisions. I guess, that means that it is not impossible and can be achieved with the right support? At times of significant change, though, it can be very challenging to move out of the "this-is-just-too-hard" and into the "I-am-just-uncomfortable-but-will-get-through-it" frame of mind. Isn't it?

## CHANGE FROM THE UNCOMFORTABLE TO THE COMFORTABLE...

Hughes (2002) talks from his experience about how we all have our 'comfort zones' in aspects of our lives — those places and spaces that we operate in that are familiar, safe, and non-threatening. In our 'comfort zones' we can experience success and euphoria, and we know that when our thinking and schema is challenged or provoked, the 'comfort zone' will always be there to support us and be that security we need. It's a lot like that comfy pair of tracksuit pants that you just can't relinquish, or, the same road you always take, as it is the quickest, or has less traffic. But, what happens to us when the road we travel suddenly has a detour? We need direction and support to guide us through. Hughes (2002) also suggests creating conditions that are conducive to support change, because, when people recognise they need to change, they may, initially, tend to resort back to the comfort zone where they feel safe and in control. When we are in that comfort zone, what will motivate us to come out and test the waters of change? In my own personal experience, what made me change significantly in my teaching practice over the years is the support, guidance, and agency to innovate from an effective leader; a leader who is visionary, inclusive, and driven by one thing — to make a difference to learners.

## SO THEN, WHO NAVIGATES CHANGE?

Does leadership really make a difference?

Recently, I was in a really deep and meaningful discussion with a friend who is a new principal of a school. She told me that the school recently engaged in the process of rethinking a new school vision, explaining that it is proving to be more difficult than she thought it would be. Many of the staff expressed they are finding the process of changing the school vision quite challenging. She felt that, perhaps her approach of coming into the new school and starting with changing the school vision was potentially not the best decision to make. She discussed at length how her approach as a new leader may have needed to be more 'slowly, slowly', spending time on the relationships rather than trying to engage in change so soon. Therefore, was it the change that was challenging, or the way the change was led, and, how do we know? This situation gives us a clue at just how imperative effective leadership is in affecting change.

## LEADERS LEAD CHANGE?

Research clearly shows that leadership plays an integral part in the effect of transformation, strengthened by the ability to support people as they cope with change. But, what is effective leadership that will drive transformational change? How will leaders drive inclusive and culturally responsive practice? How will their leadership create opportunities for learner-centric structures and teaching and learning that is future focused in a digital age? According to Marion & Gonzales (2014), defining leadership is a complicated and elusive task, and true leadership is not about being 'in charge', but having influence on others to achieve common goals and create change in an organisation or group. The traits of what we know about effective leadership include:

- being a visionary
- having the ability to inspire and empower others
- having faith in themselves and their staff
- courage, humour, optimism
- being future focused and driven by pedagogy.

## **LEADERSHIP MAKES THE DIFFERENCE!**

Effective leaders are proactive in their approach to change. They initiate action, recognise need for support, and challenge the status quo. This characteristic of a leader aligns with that of a risk taker willing to step outside their 'comfort zone' to change and innovate for powerful teaching and learning. Leaders are often in the position to implement the start of change in a centre, school or kura, therefore, there needs to be a deep understanding and consideration of how to create the conditions and environments that support effective change for all.

The word 'change' brings out a variety of emotions in people. Therefore, the role of the leadership in a centre, school or kura is vital to creating the culture, conditions, and environment where risk-taking and change occurs successfully. I have been looking at the work of Michael Fullan recently. I liked how he states that true transformation occurs under the premise of eight key drivers for effective and lasting change:

1. Engaging people's moral purposes
2. Building capacity
3. Understanding the change process
4. Developing cultures for learning
5. Developing cultures of evaluation
6. Focusing on leadership for change
7. Fostering coherence making
8. Cultivating tri-level development

Another incredible resource that I have fallen in love with is 'Leadership Mindsets' by Linda Kaser and Judy Halbert. It clarified for me that every leader needs to have a growth and inquiry mindset in order to effect change in their school. These writers also suggest that change is a journey that cannot be achieved alone. Again, through the power that is collaboration, true change occurs.

This book has made me really focus on the shifting context on current education and whether or not the leaders who are responsible for 'leading' innovation have the mindset needed to affect change. This book explores the facets of leadership and determines whether a leader with intense moral purpose, who learns for a deeper understanding,

develops relational trust, has an evidence-seeking mindset, is a learner-oriented design thinker, and is networked, will have the greatest impact and effect on change that is innovative.

When leaders feel they are able to affect positive change in others, then I strongly believe they will create those supportive and safe pathways for everyone to travel. And if there were detours along the way, then we would be equipped to follow the detour and build the new pathway together.

---

#### References:

Fullan. M. (2009). *The Challenge of Change: Start School Improvement Now*, Second Edition. California, Corwin.

Hughes, M. (2002). *Tweak to Transform: Improving Teaching – A Practical Handbook for School Leaders*. London, Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd.

Kaser, L. & Halbert. (2009). *Leadership Mindsets: Innovation and learning in the transformation of schools*. Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, Routledge.

Marion. R. & Gonzales. L.D. (2014). *Leadership in Education: Organisation Theory for the Practitioner*. Long Grove, IL, Waveland Press Ltd.

Lichtman. G. (2014). *#EdJourney: A Roadmap to the Future of Education*. San Francisco, CA, Jossey-Bass. A Wiley Brand

Image source: [Who wants change-Crowd change management](#), by Alan O'Rourke from [audiencestack.com](#), under [CC](#).



#### Angela Vermeulen

Angela Vermeulen is a Learning with Digital Technologies Facilitator for CORE Education. She has a passion and drive to build collaborative practice for teachers and learners in schools and kura. Angela has a particular strength in harnessing digital technology to engage teachers and learners in powerful e-learning. Her use of design thinking and inquiry approach empowers leaders, teachers and clusters to be in the driving-seat of change in their context. "I love seeing the 'aha' moments for teachers and leaders when they are empowered to make a big difference to learners. And, in the end, that's why I do what I do! The learner is always at the heart!"