

## Change Agency Leadership

BY PATRICK F. BASSETT

As observers of the educational landscape know, the environment in which schools exist is changing dramatically and quickly. The need for schools to adapt in order to equip students for the future is clear. What is unclear is *how* to change, *what* to change, and — for school leaders — *how* to lead the process of change.

What can independent school leaders do to engage their communities in the constructive process of meaningful change? As I learned years ago at a Kellogg National Leadership Program Seminar, there's a simple equation:  $D + V + F + S + S > R$ .

Here's what this means: institutional change requires **Dissatisfaction** with the status quo *plus* **Vision** of a better way *plus* **First** practical steps *plus* **Structure** built for lasting effect *plus* **Spirit** that helps people internalize the change — and all of these together must be *greater than* **Resistance** to change. Without *all* of the left side of the equation in place, efforts at innovations gather no momentum.

For schools, herein lies the rub: resistance to change appears to be so formidable in most school communities that school leaders sense that the left side of the equation needs to be monumental in scope and seriousness in order for any positive reactions to percolate.

Ironically, there is consensus, even among that most conservative of populations — school faculties — that for children to succeed in the 21st century (and, thus, for civilization to prosper), our schools must change and do so rather dramatically. Are schools really so much more change-averse and change-immune than other institutions in the culture (such as the military, the church, and those Fortune 500 companies that have survived and prospered in the last 20 years by embracing change)? One could speculate that, while the elemental bases for the general human aversion to change exist, they are exaggerated within school populations.

For instance, there are visceral and *biological roots* for our aversion to change. People feel threatened, sometimes almost literally ill, by the introduction of change; fear almost inevitably produces the adrenaline response of “fight or flight.” Witness, for example, the high anxiety level when a new principal or head of school enters the scene. It is the rare transition in school leadership that is not accompanied by some “fight” (active or passive-aggressive resistance to new initiatives) or “flight” (departures from the school). Institutional leaders and their boards should recognize and acknowledge that, upon the arrival of a new leader with a fresh vision, the level of fear will be palpable, and they should therefore create mechanisms to build trust and political capital quickly, *before* the change agenda is introduced.

There are also *political roots* for our aversion to change. Coretta Scott King spoke of transformational change leaders as those who “speak truth to power.” Those already in power, however, see truth very differently from those who challenge the current power base. What is unique about schools is that power is diffused among several constituencies: the board, the administration, the faculty, and the parent body. So, while the new head of school is the titular leader of an organization, speaking truth to power in a school means, among other things, that school leaders will inevitably have to confront the faculty (those who, in fact, are “in power” operationally) about the ways in which they operate. Such confrontation is often seen as a serious challenge to a faculty's integrity and identity, and may even be perceived as a personal and political attack. Leaders, therefore, should recognize and acknowledge that when they contemplate any change, even what they consider to be innocuous “procedural change,” it is often perceived by teachers as a much deeper “identity change.”

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community with fresh thinking and inundating it with a flood of unwelcome challenges. There is a strong “kill the messenger” instinct ready to emerge in schools at the slightest provocation. Mirroring the society at large, schools consist of competing power bases: the power elite (in society, the political and corporate leadership — in schools, the head and school board) vying with the cultural elite (in society, the intelligentsia and media — in schools, the faculty and parent network), and these power bases often see each other as adversaries rather than allies. There may be social status issues, with board members often assumed to be rich and powerful and therefore suspect from the perspective of the faculty and some within the parent body. Finding common social ground and bringing the opinion leaders from outside the power elite into the decision-making tent are impor-

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tant factors in addressing the social roots of resistance to change. Witness three decades of education reforms in the public schools, each one heralded by fanfare, none of which have really taken hold in order to transform school operations and school cultures.

In independent schools, the greatest impediment to any declaration of war is that peace and prosperity have, generally, prevailed. Since independent school graduates test better, on average, than public school students and are coveted by colleges, there is little evidence, from the teachers’ and parents’ perspective, that a revolution is called for. Yet, as noted earlier, they do see the need for change. The current conditions of the industry — as schools cope with the recession and a long-term and growing softness in many, if not most, independent school markets — have, in fact, been large factors in a recent thawing in many school communities willingness to change. Many independent schools have moved and continue to move,

noise? There are two strategies worth considering: (1) abstracting and personalizing change, and (2) betting on the fastest horses.

### Abstracting and Personalizing Change

Since schools are learning communities and since teachers actually like to extemporize about intellectual issues, why don’t we abstract and personalize change: *i.e.*, *teach about change* (predictable stages to anticipate) before we actually try to *implement change*. One means of teaching about change is to demonstrate the predictable patterns and stages of change by having individuals in small groups track major change events in their own lives, such as marriage, onset of middle age, birth or death of a family member, loss of a job, etc. Small-group processing on these topics often turns out to be quite engaging for faculty. They learn much more about themselves and their colleagues, and, most important, they learn to objectify and understand the resistance to change they are feeling — to see change as part of a larger pattern and process but one they can identify with rather than resist.

And while we’re on the topic of “the psychology of change,” making Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey’s book, *Immunity to Change*, required summer reading for the faculty could surface the hidden drivers (fears) that make us “immune to change.” Understanding the drivers can help us challenge the assumptions behind those drivers and, thus, make it possible to develop a plan to experiment in order to see whether those assumptions are, in fact, true. One example I would offer, because I see it so often, is this one: Some teachers say, “While it does make sense from a student-engagement/student-learning perspective to try [fill in the blank], we can’t because the secondary schools [or colleges] won’t like it.” So, the “good intentions” driver of the Kegan/Lahey rubric (“Yes, I know we should study and implement what brain research tells us about student motivation”) is confounded by a counter-driver (“making a million excuses

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why we shouldn't do such a thing"). If, however, we uncover the hidden drivers that cause us to act in the opposite fashion that we intend (in this case, perhaps, anxiety that the new method will run afoul of expectations at the next stage of schooling), then we may see a way we can test those assumptions and prove them wrong.

## Betting on the Fastest Horses

A second, complementary strategy for lowering the anxiety about change is to evaluate which change is more efficiently effected by large buy-in (*i.e.*, the consensus model) and which change is more efficiently effected by more targeted buy-in via modeling (*i.e.*, betting on the fastest horses who then create the momentum for others to join the race). Schools, deeply vested in the collegial model of consensus-building, too often are paralyzed into inaction because, without dire crisis, consensus is often difficult to reach, given the naturally discursive and disputative nature of faculties. Thus, we are often pretty good at process (including everyone in the conversation), but pretty bad at outcome (actually getting to the decision point of making a universal and comprehensive change).

Sometimes, to effect change, one has to start with a handful of folks who are excited about the initiative and let the masses retire to the sidelines to observe what happens. As Margaret Mead reminds us, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

The introduction of technology into the classroom is a classic example of the competing models: Some schools created a crisis by top-down directives to faculty (learn or leave) — a strategy that worked well in some places and failed in others. Other schools adopted the "fast horse" strategy of placing their bets (*i.e.*, investing their resources) on the handful of risk-takers eager to experiment with the new technologies — a strategy that more gradually and less threateningly worked by osmosis to generate buy-

in as other teachers saw the demonstrated advantages of using the new technologies in their own professional and personal lives. With the advent of a vast landscape of exciting programmatic and pedagogical innovations emerging (flip teaching, project-based learning, distance learning, expeditionary learning, robotics, and the like), the time is ripe to identify and bet on the "fast horses."

A blending of the models can be the most effective of all. Seek general consensus on the vision and goals for a change, but stock the stable of an implementation task force with the fast horses who will lead the rest of us around the track.

In short, as school leaders, when it comes to change, we need to change how we think about leading. And we need to take care not to spark the revolution that causes too much collateral damage but rather seed and grow the evolution that must come.

*Patrick F. Bassett is president of NAIS. An earlier version of this article was published in the NAIS Leadership Forum newsletter, Fall 1998, under the title "Effecting Change." A longer version appears in the NAIS Trendbook 2011-2012.*

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