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## Creating institutional change

We are living in an era of unprecedented institutional change. Not only has the pandemic required us to think about and approach schooling much differently than ever before, but we must also approach the fact that children, as well as adults, are dealing with a lot of personal loss at the same time. Fortunately, most school districts have risen to the challenge.

John P. Kotter, author of “The Heart of Change,” believes that creating successful institutional change is more about getting people to understand the need for change on an emotional level, than about proving the need for it with facts and statistics. He believes that change comes from seeing a truth, feeling it, and then changing it.

Chip and Dan Heath, authors of “Stick: How To Change Things When Change Is Hard,” agree that to really motivate people, you have to get them emotionally invested. “Babies are born every day to parents who, inexplicably, welcome the change. Think about the sheer magnitude of that change! Would anyone agree to work for a boss who’d wake you up twice a night, screaming, for trivial administrative duties? Yet people don’t resist this massive change — they volunteer for it.”

The silver lining to this terrible crisis is that schools have a lot of support for the changes that they need to make right now. Due to the current situation, people who might otherwise be resistant to change have accepted that change is necessary, if perhaps temporary. But that doesn’t mean that they’ll simply go along with whatever you suggest.

Kotter’s research showed that all successful occurrences of institutional change followed an eight-step process, whether they meant to or not. It’s a process that you can use as a blueprint as you plan to make changes in your organization.

### Step one: Increase urgency

This step is all about getting everyone on the same page that change needs to happen, and not just “someday,” but now. In our current climate, we have a jumpstart. Everyone is on the same page here, and the urgency is apparent to everyone.

### Step two: Build the guiding team

“When there is urgency, more people want to help provide leadership, even when there are personal risks,” says Kotter. Getting the right group of people is key. They need to be passionate about results, but they also need to be people who can get things done, meaning that the people they work with will follow their lead.

### Step three: Get the vision right

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This is possibly the most important step. The vision, your action plan, needs to be clear and actionable. This can be difficult when the change is in response to something like this pandemic, with information changing rapidly and the future murky.

Focus on bright spots. Are there places where the change you want to implement is already being implemented? What can you do to expand the success instead of focusing on the failures? Chip and Dan Heath say, “The bright spots give you an action plan.”

Who is already nailing this? What can we learn from them?

#### **Step four: Communicate for buy-in**

According to the Heath brothers, “what looks like resistance is often a lack of clarity. So provide crystal-clear direction.”

Communicating to people why change is needed, exactly what the change will require from them, and addressing their anxieties and concerns at the same time, creates a space for people to accept your vision.

The key to this communication is making sure that everything you do is in line with the new vision. Kotter says, “In highly successful change efforts, members of the guiding team help each other with this problem.” Check in with your team to make sure that your focus stays on the goal.

#### **Step five: Empower action**

Empowering action, more than anything, means removing the obstacles that stand in the way.

What is the use in getting dozens of schools fired up to make a change if your directors are against it? People want to be good at what they do. Part of your job is to get out of their way.

#### **Step six: Create short-term wins**

“Without sufficient wins that are visible, timely, and meaningful to others, change efforts inevitably run into serious problems,” says Kotter. As your team starts to succeed at making changes, pay close attention to where the successes are. They may not come from where you expect, but you have to be ready with rewards.

In successful change efforts, the leadership team focuses on tasks where they can achieve visible and meaningful achievements early, to spur people on to greater successes within the vision.

Wins have the power to take the air of the sails of the cynics, and give those who are working hard to achieve the vision and emotional uplift to keep up the good work. Everyone likes to be on a team that’s winning, right?

Wins also provide one more essential ingredient. According to the Heaths, “When you engineer early successes, what you’re really doing is engineering hope. Hope is precious to a change effort.” Hope is also something that all our institutions can use right now: hope that we can weather the storm, hope that we can come back as successful as we were before.

#### **Step seven: Don’t let up**

Now that you’ve started to see successes crop up, it’s important to keep the pressure on.

Many change efforts fail right at this stage, when an early success makes the leadership team relax in the belief that everything is going as planned.

In more normal times, the next step would be to start tackling bigger issues in pursuit of your vision. But be careful with the process and feel free to take it more slowly than normal. Again, people are feeling more vulnerable right now. It's not just students losing family members — your teachers and administrators are juggling work from home, family responsibilities and also deep personal losses at this time as well.

### **Step eight: Make change stick**

This step isn't going to be a problem in our current climate. We simply don't have the ability to go back to the way it was before — not right now. The difficulty may come in adjusting from the “new normal” back to regular life.

One thing you can do is keep an eye on the areas where things are actually working better than before. At some point the pandemic will be over, and regular school functions will resume, and it's possible to use the experience to improve things overall.

The United States Marine Corps has a saying, “Train how you fight.” What it means is that often during a war or other emergency, people will skip over unnecessary steps and just do what's important — they streamline the processes. The USMC looks at emergencies as great opportunities to see areas where they can streamline.

Are you finding that a multi-step process of getting permission from multiple parties via paper was replaced by a simple email confirmation? Is that a process that can continue in the future? Are you finding that more people attend staff meetings via video conference than ever attended in-person meetings? Maybe that's a meeting format that could become a permanent change.

Did you find that teachers who have been reluctant to move their coursework online have finally done so and are starting to improve their skills? Maybe that's something they can be encouraged to keep up with after things return to normal.

Those are just some possible areas where this situation might have a silver lining. The truth is that these are truly difficult and historic times we are living through. So, most of all, be generous of spirit with the people on your team. A little bit more kindness and thoughtfulness will make all of this change go down more smoothly.

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*Contributed by Megan J. Wilson, a Los Angeles-based freelance writer and communications consultant.*