

How to guide your school through change

It isn't enough for you to tell staff they need to change. You need to help them actually do it.

But how? Here are some ways you can actively guide your team through the next MinoEd initiative, merger, cost-cutting initiative, strategic shift or other major change your school district faces:



1. Repeat and reinforce key change messages — and tie them to concrete behaviours.

If you announce a school-wide change and subsequently drop the issue, your team probably will, too. But if you weave key messages about the change into your regular communications and describe how they affect your staff's behaviours and actions in concrete, tangible terms, it will stay top-of-mind — and, over time, become part of staff's day-to-day work.

For example, let's say your school district's leaders announce an initiative to become more parent-centric. You could:

- Add a recurring agenda item related to the initiative, such as a review of parent requests and feedback, to staff meetings and/or 1-on-1s with your lead teachers.
- Tie feedback (both reinforcing and redirecting) to staff's behaviour or mind-set toward parents — and, when you do, specifically mention the initiative.
- Explain how the initiative relates to both old and new ways of connecting with parents.

2. Walk the talk.

Staff are always watching their administrators closely, but your behaviour will likely be scrutinized even more during times of change, simply because people may be trying to figure out what the change really means and how to respond.

With this in mind, think about how your actions — not just your words — could be perceived. Why should your staff prioritize using new student assessment software if you keep scheduling meetings that conflict with the software trainings? Or why should your staff believe the school district is going to diversify its workforce if you only promote “mini-me's”?

3. Help your staff handle the additional stress.

Change brings uncertainty, and uncertainty often means anxiety. Principals who downplay change (i.e., treat large, disruptive changes as business as usual) or, on the other hand, overreact to it (i.e., pile on additional drama) can make things worse.

Instead, try to balance an attitude of calm confidence with heightened awareness of team members' stress levels. Some specific actions you can take:

- *Don't play the victim card.* Blaming and bad-mouthing “others” for changes might be a way to let yourself off the hook, but it can contribute to feelings of victimhood and disempowerment that only heighten your staff's stress.
- *Give timely, frequent updates.* People tend to crave information during periods of uncertainty; without it, they assume the worst. Overcommunicate by sharing what you know — and even what you don't know — to reduce anxiety and keep the rumour mill in check.
- *Be an active and empathetic listener and observer.* Proactively seeking your staff's feedback and then hearing people out (for example in 1-on-1s) sends the message that you care and want to help. And remember that silence doesn't necessarily mean everything's OK — watch for nonverbal cues and initiate difficult conversations if you sense something's off.
- *Expect and forgive emotional outbursts.* It's normal for people to get emotional about changes, even long after they're first announced (for example, anger that it's taking a while to get information). Administrators who get rattled by signs of emotion may inadvertently encourage their staff's to hide what they're really feeling.

For more tips, see our article [Are your direct reports on the road to burnout? Some signs they may be and ways to prevent it.](#)

4. Tailor or create an implementation plan — and get your staff involved.

“Plans are immensely reassuring to most people, not just because they contain information but because they exist,” writes management expert William Bridges in *Managing Transitions*. He has a point. The absence of a plan implies that principal's have called for a change without thinking through the reality of implementation, which isn't exactly comforting. You don't want your staff to feel that way.

For some changes — like staff moves or a shift to a new technology — school district leaders will advise you of an implementation plan, which you'll tailor to your staff's perspective. In other situations — maybe a school district sets a new directive to become more focused on vulnerable learners — you may get the opportunity to devise your own plan.

Regardless of whether you're tailoring or creating a plan, it's a good idea to involve your staff by soliciting ideas (e.g., “*Here's what's changing — how can we apply this to our school?*”) rather than locking yourself in your office, then unveiling your plan (e.g., “*Here's*

what's changing, and here's what we're going to do"). When it comes to driving change, as McKinsey consultants [Carolyn Aiken and Scott Keller](#) point out, "[W]hen we choose for ourselves, we are far more committed to the outcome (almost by a factor of five to one)."

5. Reset and/or reprioritize expectations and goals at both the staff and individual level.

One of the best ways to make change actionable is to revisit and revamp the expectations and goals you've set. This is something you can do explicitly and implicitly, independently and collaboratively, and for the whole staff as well as each person on it — depending on your leadership style, the nature of the change you're dealing with, the grade level or subject your staff works with and other factors.

Let's say leaders at your organization give principals a new directive to "do more with less." (seems to occur daily) Here are some steps you might take and examples of how you might apply that directive to expectations and goals:

- *Map out new or revised staff goals based on the change.* For example, if you have a new curriculum that needs to be implemented you may want to reschedule or cancel a weekly staff meeting so that staff have more time to review the new curriculum. You may also want to allocate release time to bring teams of staff together so they collaborate on the implementation of the new curriculum.
- *Help staff align their individual growth plans with the new school growth plan.* For example, to help your staff be more efficient dedicate a staff meeting to review the current school growth plan. Then have staff discuss changes to the school growth plan and then to their own personal growth plan. . For more tips, see our article [How to create an action plan](#).
- *Consider staff's growth plans.* You could also use 1-on-1 time to talk through how the new directive might impact your staff's growth plans. Will there still be budget for staff to attend that new student assessment software conference? Can Sonja continue to devote time to learning new software and become the staff expert? If not, what can you do instead to help them learn and grow? Try asking your senior managers for support and time as you look for ways to support your staff through change.
- *Identify behaviours to reinforce and redirect.* When staff members exemplify getting report cards in on time, finding ways to connect with students and parents — are you [give reinforcing feedback](#) and share their accomplishments with the rest of the staff? Conversely, when someone does something that undermines the directive, are you [give redirecting feedback](#) (usually better done in private)? This approach sends a message that you expect behaviours central to the new initiative's success.
- *Integrate change messages into delegation.* When [delegating tasks](#), you ask staff members to aim for the "depth rather than breadth" version, rather than the more cursory version they're accustomed to doing — and explain that this is a reflection of the school district's new focus on mastery of skills.

- *Identify and proactively preserve what shouldn't change.* For example, you remind the staff of a key part of your school's culture — collaborating instead of competing against one another — by saying, “*We all need to make sure that the increased pressure on us doesn't result in fighting over resources.*”

6. Build opportunities for quick wins into the change process — and celebrate them.

Big changes usually take time, and you don't want to lose your staff's buy-in. Your staff will need to see regular signs of progress — for example, higher parent survey results in the fall following an initiative to improve parent engagement — if the change is going to remain urgent, or even just *remain*.

Why leave such change motivators to chance? Organizational change guru [John Kotter](#) [recommends](#) you take a more proactive approach: “Creating short-term wins is different from hoping for short-term wins ... In a successful transformation, managers actively look for ways to obtain clear performance improvements, establish goals in the yearly planning system, achieve the objectives, and reward the people involved.”

What short-term wins could you steer your staff toward to help them feel a sense of progress and momentum? And what kind of celebrations might your team enjoy most?

7. Remove any roadblocks that are making the change difficult for your staff.

While you might not be able to identify and remove every roadblock, it's your job to try — and to keep your team apprised of what happens so they know you've got their back.

What kind of roadblocks should you anticipate? They can be psychological, social or related to more concrete things like budget. Here are a few common examples:

- *A competing commitment that's keeping a team member from mentally making the change.* For example, someone who loves technology might appear to be on board with learning a new assessment software program — but he or she keeps blowing off the training sessions. This seems illogical, but what if the person's sense of self-worth is wrapped up in being viewed as an expert on the legacy assessment software your school is moving away from? See this [Harvard Business Review](#) article for more on how to surface competing commitments.
- *A celebration program that rewards old behaviours over new ones.* If a change runs counter to the system that determines your student's success, you may need to better align celebrations with the behaviours you want to see more of.
- *A lack of authority, access, or budget.* Some changes take more than sweat. Maybe your staff needs help from someone the School Board Office to bust through layers of red tape, a bigger budget or a critical review.

- *Operational problems that leaders need to know about.* Your staff may spot ground-level snags that principals haven't anticipated — for example, outdated technical tools that make collaboration with a school outside your district nearly impossible. Depending on the urgency and impact of the issue, you may need to communicate these roadblocks up the ranks, ideally with some suggestions for solving the problem.
- *A toxic change-resister.* Resistance to change is normal. But if a staff member's resistance persists or intensifies to the point where he or she chronically complains about it and poisons others' view of it (or even tries to derail it), you'll need to take action.

Not sure what kind of roadblocks your staff might be facing — or even if there are any? Don't assume all is well. In a calm, curious tone, ask, *"Is there anything I'm not aware of that could be keeping you from making this change?"*

8. Coach staff members on skills related to the change.

Going in a new direction might require your staff to learn or refine their skills. And helping someone build skills usually takes a lot more than signing the person up for a workshop or mentioning he or she should set aside time to practice. Instead, it takes coaching.

Block out time to sit down with your lead staff members, set learning goals together and explore ways to get there. You can then do things like pair them with potential mentors, give feedback on progress and delegate tasks that will allow them to try out new skills at school.

For more details, check out our articles [How to coach someone](#) and [A direct report is struggling to learn a skill](#).

9. Expect and even thank people for change-related mistakes.

Who thanks people for mistakes? Smart administrators who understand the nature of change —that's who. Change requires trying new things, and when people attempt something out of their comfort zone, they're bound to make mistakes. If you fail to accept this reality with grace and good humor, and come down hard on staff, why should they try it again?

A smile, compassionate tone of voice and acknowledgment of the person's effort can go a long way:

"Thanks for trying the new consultative approach we talked about at the staff meeting. I really appreciate your willingness to give it a shot. Can I give you some feedback for next time?"

10. Recognize staff members who adapt and excel in the new environment.

Recognizing strong staff members is a critical part of every administrator's job, but it takes on heightened significance when changes are under way. If your staff sees that behaviours related to a change get recognized and rewarded, they'll know that you're not just giving the change lip service.

For more, see our articles [How to give reinforcing feedback](#) and [10 ways to motivate](#).

11. Address chronic resistance and regression head-on — without lumping all resistance together.

Dealing with staffs' resistance to a change takes a lot of finesse and good judgment, because resistance isn't a cut-and-dried behaviour. Plus, if you gloss over what people might be losing because of a change, you may never get to the true cause of their non-compliance.

When deciding how to handle resistance, ask yourself:

- Is the resistance just a phase in the person's change process, or a deep, intractable mind-set?
- Is the person a concerned staff member with valid complaints, or an unreasonable agitator?
- Is the person a highly engaged and/or high-performing employee? Interestingly, it's common for those who have thrived in an old culture or environment to resist, feeling like they have the most to lose from a change.
- Is the resistance direct and overt (this is typically healthier) or covert (this may be an indicator that you haven't created an optimal, open [feedback culture](#) on your staff)?

If you do have a legitimate resistance problem (or aren't sure), don't sit around hoping it goes away. Take action to help resolve it.

12. Pace yourself by scheduling reminders to measure and communicate the value of the change over time.

Most school changes are a marathon, not a sprint; by km 10 or 12, questions about the change's efficacy could start to pop up, or your staff's behaviour may slip back to the old way out of habit.

To guard against backsliding:

- Be clear about time frames — realistic optimism (*"Changing our strategic focus is a smart move, but this kind of thing doesn't happen overnight, so we need to pace ourselves"*) usually beats out naive zealotry (*"Buckle your seat belts — this is going to be awesome!"*).

- Establish a system to remind your staff of how far you've come. For example, you could schedule a bimonthly reminder in your calendar to assess how team members are doing and share progress reports.

13. Build the change into your staff's culture (and future).

To really make a change to endure over time, you'll probably need to integrate it with your staff's culture. Culture is often an abstract thing, but there are two concrete steps you can take:

- *Talk regularly about beneficial results of the change.* This helps show team members the importance of sustaining change-related behaviours, and can lead to those behaviours becoming the new normal.
- *Take the change into account in hiring.* What competencies does the change require? You can proactively factor in those things whenever you make a people-related decision that will affect your staff's and school's future. For example, if you want your staff at your school to teach interdisciplinary, —you could specifically select for staff who are adaptable, open-minded, culturally aware and/or experienced in interdisciplinary studies.

For more on building school culture, see **Leading a Culture of Learning on the BCPVPA website.** <https://bit.ly/3BkBP6y>