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Transforming Teaching and Learning



Delivering Change:

*Vision without action is
just a daydream*



DELIVERING CHANGE: VISION WITHOUT ACTION IS JUST A DAYDREAM

By InnerDrive



WHY CHANGE?

Change is not just inevitable; it's essential. Because in a fast-moving world, standing still is falling behind. Whether it's adapting to new technologies, responding to shifting needs or improving outcomes, change is how schools grow, evolve and do the best for their staff and students.

For leaders, driving internal improvement or reacting to externally imposed change is not optional; it's core to the role. A central function of leadership is setting direction and taking people from where they are to where they could be. That means spotting opportunities, challenging the status quo and, most importantly, guiding others through the uncertainty and emotional friction associated with doing something new.

Done well, change brings innovation, engagement and improvement, but done poorly or not at all, it leads to stagnation, frustration, broken relationships and missed potential.

CHANGE MANAGEMENT THEORY

The roots of formal change theory can be traced back to the 1940s, when social psychologist Kurt Lewin introduced one of the earliest models. He proposed that change occurs in three stages: unfreezing current behaviours, introducing new ones and refreezing to stabilise the change. Lewin's work was groundbreaking because it recognised that change is not just structural; it's psychological.

In the decades that followed, the rise of systems thinking and organisational development in the 1960s and 70s brought a more holistic view. Researchers began to explore how culture, leadership and group dynamics influence change and the focus shifted from

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isolated interventions to long-term transformation. By the 1990s, change management became a formal discipline and John Kotter, a Harvard Business School professor, synthesised years of research to create his now famous and influential 8-step model, emphasising urgency, vision and leadership.

Over the past 10 years we have been blessed with specific research in educational change and a move towards continuous improvement and a greater focus on the conditions required for it to be effective. Notable contributions include guidance around systematic implementation from the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF, 2024) and the benefits of a bottom-up, contextually sound approach championed by Leaning and Lerner (2025).

Having a conceptual framework for how change unfolds is a great start but not the full story and with so many different approaches, it would be unwise for us to focus on any one in particular. So, instead we will look more deeply at implementation and something called a 'theory of change' (TOC).

BUILDING A THEORY OF CHANGE

A theory of change is a key component of a leader's toolkit and represents a clear, collaboratively created, evidence-informed explanation of how and why a desired change is expected to happen. Theories of change are specific to projects and often take the form of a flowchart which uses 'backward mapping' (Taplin et al., 2013) to identify the steps between actions and outcomes, showing the logic behind the strategy.

A well-articulated TOC helps clarify purpose, align stakeholders and evaluate impact by turning good intentions into a coherent plan whilst also making assumptions visible so they can be tested, refined or challenged. In this sense, a theory of change is not just a document; it's a reflective tool and to build one, leaders should complete the following steps:

1. **Outcomes** – Identify the outcomes of the change process starting with the end result and working backward through the intermediate stages. If 'D' is the outcome, then what are A, B and C?
2. **Interventions** – Identify the interventions, activities or strategies that will be put in place to successfully link outcomes together. What needs to happen to make $A = B$, $B = C$ and $C = D$?

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3. **Assumptions** – Explore the assumptions and blind spots associated with the interventions and the links between outcomes. What are you assuming will be seen, heard or done?

4. **Responses** – Design possible responses to mitigate each of the assumptions and increase the likelihood of interventions leading to outcomes. What could we do to ensure this intervention takes us from A to B?

Once you have a working theory of change for a project, the final and ongoing step is to review and refine it using theory of change analysis (TOCA) which involves the evaluation of its structure and plausibility.

THE IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS

Leaders need to focus their energy on the execution and implementation, not just their shiny new plan. Foundational to the sequential steps of explore, prepare, deliver and sustain set out in the research lie some more general guidance for leaders looking to implement effectively:

- **Engage stakeholders early** – Involve those affected by the change from the start and throughout the process, listening to concerns, building trust and co-creating solutions.
- **Communicate clearly and often** – Explain the why, what and how of the change, using multiple channels to connect with all stakeholders and repeating key messages regularly.
- **Build capacity** – Provide training, resources and support to ensure that people feel confident and equipped and that the change has the best chances of success.
- **Monitor and adapt** – Systematically use feedback and data to track progress and be ready to adjust your approach based on what you learn.
- **Celebrate wins** – Recognise and reward progress however small, celebrating successes and building momentum and morale.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Change is inevitably thrust upon educational leaders, but equally, maintaining excellence will require self-directed change. Implementing change, however, is not just about systems, models or checklists; it's about people. Great leaders recognise that it starts with helping others

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see a better future, to believe in it and then to work together to make it real. Great leaders don't just announce change; they co-construct robust theories of change that identify key outcomes, design interventions to bridge gaps and explore and mitigate any assumptions that might get in the way. They focus as much on implementation as they do on their ideas and plans, and thoughtfully and purposefully create the cultural and environmental foundations for success. Along the way they remain open to feedback and refinement, building trust with those involved and ensuring that when they do arrive at this shiny new place, the team has come with them.

REFERENCES

- Education Endowment Foundation. (2024). A school's guide to implementation: Guidance report. <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/guidance-reports/implementation>
- Lewin, K. (1947). Frontiers in group dynamics. *Human Relations*, 1(1), 5–41.
- Kotter, J. P. (1996). *Leading Change*. Harvard Business Review Press.
- Leaning, S., & Lerner, E. (2025). *Change starts here: What if everything your school needed was right in front of you?* Routledge.
- Taplin, D. H., Clark, H., Collins, E., & Colby, D. C. (2013). *Theory of Change: Technical Papers*. ActKnowledge.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Blogs

- What is Theory of Change? theoryofchange.org/what-is-theory-of-change/
- The 8 Steps for Leading Change kotterinc.com/methodology/8-steps/

Books

- Fullan, M. (2020). *Leading in a culture of change* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Mannion, J. (2025). *Making change stick: A practical guide to implementing school improvement*. Hachette Learning.

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