Leading Change in Your School – *How to Conquer Myths, Build Commitment, and Get Results*

Douglas Reeves

I have been reading a lot about change lately: **The Six Secrets of Change** by Michael Fullan **and Change Leadership – A Practical Guide to Transforming Our Schools** by Tom Wagner and Robert Kegan, and this latest by Reeves. What strikes me is that we so often talk about changing others and do not do enough work about changing ourselves. Eeekk….I am reminded of the Michael Jackson song "Man in the Mirror"! Remember, *"I'm startin' with the man in mirror."* I am also reminded of Ghandi: *"We must be the change we want to see in the world."* Leaders must understand and bring together the challenges of both **individual** and **organizational** change to successfully lead improvement processes in school and districts. We cannot even begin to do that until we look closely at our own behaviors and beliefs as we look deeply inside our organization and the people that make it what it is. Then, we have to look to where change dwells out beyond the horizon, beyond reach of what is known and comfortable. Reeves's big ideas might help you on your journey. *Enjoy*, *Melissa*

Big Ideas Worth Remembering

• Change is hard. Change can provoke an emotional reaction characterized by a sense of loss. The desire to change is frequently defeated by anxiety. Research demonstrates that the typical combination of evidence, authority, and fear is insufficient to lead the vast majority of people to make decisions about their behavior (like stop smoking, lose weight, stop drinking, etc.) that will save their own lives, gain years with their loved ones, and avoid painful and debilitating illness and eventual death.

• Change leadership may be the single greatest challenge for organizations, especially schools. Effective change leaders must reframe change from an overwhelming and pervasive threat, to a modification of practice within the broader picture affirming every colleague as a worthwhile professional and person. This is a profound leadership principle. Change leaders know that they do not change organizations without changing individual behavior, and they will not change individual behavior without affirming the people behind the behavior. It might sound like this: *"Before we talk about changes in our grading system, let's begin with some assurances. We'll still have transcripts, honor rolls, and individualized education plans. We'll still respect your judgment and hard work. We'll still value the thoughtful and constructive feedback that teachers provide every day. None of that will change."* The essential message of reframing is *"You are not broken and I am not here to fix you."* Rather, the message is *"You are so valuable and worthy, our mission so vital, and the future lives of our students so precious, that we have a joint responsibility to one another to be the best we can be."*

•Effective change leaders look at the qualities, values and stories that can be reaffirmed. Change leaders will review specific examples of kindness, caring and compassion that must be acknowledged and preserved. They will reaffirm the values of respect and fairness.

• Affirming and reframing do not eliminate cynicism and doubt of the skeptics, but can provide the leader with space and time to gain trust. Opposition to change remains inevitable. In fact, **if a proposed change does not engender opposition, then question whether or not what is being proposed really represents meaningful change.**

•Initiative fatigue (*using the same amount of time, money and emotional energy to accomplish more and more objectives*) can undermine change. The strategic leader must have a **"garden party"** to pull weeds before planting the flowers. Some school principals have a simple rule – they will not introduce a new program until they remove at least one or two existing activities, plans, units or other time consumers. A principal who wanted more time during faculty meetings for collaborative scoring of student work, stopped making announcements at these meetings and put such matters into administrative emails and written notes. A key step is to **involve teachers** in evaluating the garden and weeding process school wide and within their own classrooms and grade levels.

• Chapters 2 and 3 offer a Personal and Organizational Change Readiness Assessment. To complete the assessments you must reflect deeply upon personal and professional changes you have made in recent years. Then, by answering a series of question and rating readiness on a scale, you determine your individual change readiness. You are asked to consider the following in analyzing change readiness:

1) Planning – to what degree was there a clear, detailed plan that was effectively communicated?
2) Sense of urgency – to what degree was there a clear immediate need for the change?
3) Stakeholders – to what degree did employees, clients, community members, family/friends understand and support change?
4) Leadership Focus – to what degree did senior leadership make the change a clear and consistent focus long after the initiation?
5) Effect on Results – to what degree did the change have a measureable and significant impact on results.

After responding to the various questions the individual leader and organization determine a location on the readiness scale, landing in one of four quadrants:

   Ready for Learning – there is a successful history of change and the organization can learn from the leader's personal and professional example. The

leader must attend to the learning needs of the organization through planning, and communicating the change. The organization needs to create a compelling case for the change and offer public displays of data to track the results of the change.

Ready for Resistance – In this case, neither the leader nor the organization has a history of change. Hence, resistance, anger, undermining, or simply ignoring the effort is likely.

Ready for Frustration – If the organization has a strong history of change and the leader is reluctant to engage in systemic change or lacks the personal capacity to do so, then the potential for frustration is strong. When the organization gets ahead of the leader, the change becomes less safe. The next leader will inherit an organization compromised in its change readiness.

Ready for Change – Here, both the leader and the organization have exceptional change capacity, and the organization is a model of resilience. This organization can adapt to environmental and cultural shifts and draw upon its resources to respond with innovation in an atmosphere of engagement and optimism.

**The Appendix offers the change matrix, excellent questions for a focus group looking at change, and several other pages that related to change readiness I found very powerful.

A few favorite *Assumptions Basic to Successful Educational Change* (p. 154) are:

•Do not assume that your version of what the change should be is the one that should or could be implemented.
•Assume that effective change takes time.
•Do not expect all or even most groups to change.
•Assume changing the culture of the institution is the real agenda, not implementing single innovations.

A few favorite *Questions to Ask Yourself as You Contemplate a Change Initiative* (p. 155) are:

•What skills will the people charged with implementing the change need? Do they have these skills? If not, how will they acquire them?
•How much training will be needed? Where will we get the training? How much will it cost? Where will we get the funding?
•Am I, as a change catalyst, prepared to stay here for the several years it is likely to take to embed this change in the culture?
•Are there skills that I, as the change catalyst, need to acquire before I attempt this change?

•It is critical to understand how truly ready you are for change before you try to lead change. This really does require some reflection. *"Know thy self,"* probably cannot be underestimated in this regard.

•To quote Reeves: *"If we have learned anything in the educational standards movement in the last decade, it is that policy change without cultural change is an exercise in futility and frustration."* This echoes of Margaret Wheatley's ***"Below the Green Line."*** Culture rules! So, after you *"Know thy self,"* you had better, get to *"Know thy culture."*

• Chapter 4 give us the **Four Imperatives of Cultural Change**. Changing the collective behaviors and beliefs of the complex organizations we call schools, leaders must apply the right combination of change tools, varying strategies to meet the changing needs of the system. What worked at one school will not necessarily work at another.
1) **Define what will not change.** You want to ensure change in the context of stability.
2) **Organizational culture will change with leadership actions.** Leaders speak most clearly with their actions – changes they make in decision-making (who has the authority to make what decisions), allocation of personal time (meeting accepted and canceled), and relationships (taking time to understand the personal stories of colleagues).
3) **Use the right change tools for your system.** Researchers have identified a variety of tools: **"cultural tools"** - rituals and traditions; **"power tools"** – threats and coercion; **"management tools"** – trainings, procedures, and measurement systems; **"leadership tools"** – role modeling and vision.
4) **Change leaders must be committed to doing the "scut work".** The "scut work" is the roll-up your sleeves kind of work that the leader exemplifies in personal examples and public actions.

• In Chapter 5, **Confronting the Myths of Change Leadership**, Reeves reminds us that some myths endure because they provide explanations for phenomenon that can be challenging and confusing. In the absence of rigorous inquiry, they tend to endure and take on a life of their own through repetition,

•**Myth #1 – Plan Your Way to Greatness** – Research has shown that plans will never substitute for action. Schools with plans that were judged best in format and presentation tended to have lower student achievement scores. He argues that leaders should establish clear vision and values, expressing who they are and who they are not. He says, *"If you can't write your mission and values on the back of your business card and you can't say them without reference to notes, then they are not influencing your daily reality."*

•**Myth #2 – Just a Little Bit Better is Good Enough** – Nope….research tells us that for many change initiatives, implementation that was occasional or moderate was

no better than implementation that was completely absent. Only **deep implementation** had the desired effect on student achievement. "Just a little bit" is appealing because it doesn't mean so much change for those who do adopt the new approach and let's others completely off the hook. The reality is deep and sustainable change requires changes in behavior among those who don't want to change. Remember, too, behavior precedes belief – that is, most people must engage in a new behavior before they accept that it is beneficial; then they see the results, and then they believe it is the right thing to do. Bottom line **– *implementation precedes buy-in; it does not follow it.***

•**Myth #3 – We Want You to Change Us....*Really*** – Nope…change can mean loss for many if not most (you may have heard of the "rollercoaster of change"). The stages of loss include: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. Think of how an academic department greets a new textbook adoption! You may recall our discussion in Module 2 of first and second order change from Marzano's work. What is first order to some is second order to others. The measure of a change's impact lies in the individual and the leader's job is to gauge that as accurately as possible in order to respond appropriately.

•**Myth #4 – People Love to Collaborate** – There is a difference between congeniality (works well in the lunch room) and collegiality. Congeniality is social glue that helps people work under stressful circumstances as colleagues try to solve problems and learn together. Collaboration has to prove to be effective. Collaboration meetings should have defined results: *"If this meeting is successful, then we should be able to _____."* Reeves is a believer in collaborative scoring of student work. He couches such work with these words, *"This will be difficult and challenging work. It's going to take time and practice. But if you hang in there with me, we will not only improve the quality and consistency of our feedback to students, but we will also save time by dramatically accelerating the speed with which we can collaboratively score student work."*

•**Myth #5 – Hierarchy Changes Systems** – Networks of teachers and administrators offer a powerful and fast method of communication, sharing effective practice, and providing insights in a way that administrative hierarchies cannot do. Think of Fullan's secret – connect peers with purpose – and his notion of loose-tight coupling. There is a need for top down leadership to some degree (tight); however, it must be balanced from leadership and relationships that emanates throughout all levels of the system (loose).

•**Myth #6 – Volume Equals VOLUME** – Opposition to change is inevitable and the search for universal buy-in is an illusion. This doesn't give the leader permission to run roughshod over opposition, but is a call to keep it in perspective. For some teachers, consistency with colleagues, implementing a common curriculum with formative assessments and uniform grading practices, means lowering their standards, for example. In these cases, the goal of the leader is not to ask the faculty members to enjoy collaboration but to cooperate with collaborative efforts. Reeves

found in his research on change initiatives that, generally, 17 percent of teachers were willing to lead the effort or assist in professional learning; 53 percent were willing to model the change in their classrooms; 28 percent were "fence sitters" who were aware of the change but had not yet implemented it. Just <u>2 percent</u> were actively opposed to the initiatives. While the **VOLUME** of this 2 percent may sound strong, the numbers are not! So, fearless leaders, put your energy and appreciation with the large majority of your faculty ready to learn, grow and change.

•**Myth #7 – The Leader Is the Perfect Composite of Every Trait** - Certainly the actions of the leader are critical. However, in the end, change leadership is so complex that it requires a team that exhibits leadership traits and exercises leadership responsibilities beyond what any single individual could do.

A Few More Points to Remember and Areas to Leverage (Chapter 6 and Beyond)

•*Leverage Point – Teacher Placement*: The most important resource any educational leader allocates is teachers. Ask yourself: *"Does every student in my school have an equal opportunity to receive an education from the best teachers and take the most advanced classes we can offer?"* The pattern common in schools is highly qualified and skilled teachers teach the most motivated and self-directed students. Reeves points to districts, such as Whittier Union High School District, that have challenged this pattern and reaped the benefit of increased student achievement. Leaders should consider strategies to induce the best-qualified teachers to take the toughest classes. He suggestions lower class sizes, more planning time, more professional development, and greater levels of self-direction as incentives. In addition, these teachers' personal safety and professional respect must be held in high regard as they make change and navigate the culture of a new student population.

•*Leverage Point – Administrator Coaching*: Reeves is an advocate of coaching for administrators. He says effective coaching focuses on changing performance. Coaching is appropriate when the administrator or teacher wants to improve student performance, is committed a learning and performance agenda, and desires feedback.

•*Leverage Point – Systematic Monitoring*: There is a need for consistent and frequent (at least monthly) analysis of student performance, teaching strategies and leadership practices. Systematic Monitoring is sustained through inquiry. When reviewing programs, initiatives and strategies the relentless question is: *"Is it working?"* If something is not working, schools with superior evaluation systems stop that effort.

•*Leverage Point – Look Inward*: Schools that excel in "inquiry" **attribute the cause of student achievement to teachers and leaders** rather than student demographic characteristics. You might remember the 1968 research conducted by Rosenthal and Jacobson that revealed the "Pygmalion effect." Teachers were told

that their students were either fast or slow learners, although in fact there was little difference among the student groups. Within a single school year, students lived up to – and down to – teacher expectations, rendering the relationship between teacher belief systems and student achievement a self-fulfilling prophecy. New research reaffirms the conclusions of the 1968 study.

•*Leverage Point – Simplicity*: Can you put the essence of your school plan on a single plan? Reeves shared a plan for an assistant superintendent of instruction from Freeport, Illinois. The entire plan is on a single page. The "plan on page" identifies four key areas: student performance, human resources, partnerships, and equity. For each area, the plan lists between two and five goals and measures. Each goal has a clear statement of actions to be accomplished. The plan is included the book's appendix.

•*Leverage Point – Focus*: When it comes to implementing change too many goals destroys implementation before it starts. Remember to weed your garden!

•*Leverage Point – "No Failure"* - Chapter 11 focuses on an exemplary high school: Ben Davis High School in Indianapolis, Indiana. They used a "no failure" campaign to dramatically impact student achievement and address grading practices that lead to failing grades. They largely eliminated the use of the zero and using grades as a punishment. They also set up a system to support and hold students accountable for doing their work.   The plan had other elements, to be sure, but the focus on these few was very powerful. Reeves maintained that one high leverage area to begin the change process is effective versus ineffective grading. He suggests selecting 30 students with course failures from the last semester and determining the cause of failure. Two common causes are missing homework and poor performance on a single major assignment – a term paper, a lab, or a project.   What would it mean to your school if you could reduce the number of failing grades resulting solely from uncompleted homework? **This section of the book (pages 94-106) is really quite powerful, particularly if this is an area you may want to pursue!

•*Leverage Point – Literacy*: Chapter 13 looks at "*Defining Change: Lessons from Literacy*" - Here we may find among the strongest leverage points to affect student achievement.   Administrators can walk marathons through the hallways and classrooms of a school and accomplish nothing if they do not begin with a clear and consistent idea of what effective instruction looks like and have the ability to communicate the elements of effective instruction in clear and unmistakable terms. Reeves maintained we should start with reading instruction. He says we must make the case for consistency in reading instruction. Leaders and faculty must review the research, define best practice and then clearly define what good teaching really means in each practice. He says best way is to create a scoring guide or rubric that defines practice or elements of instruction from novice to progressing to proficient to expert.

A final thought –

My takeaways from this book are quite simple for a topic as complex as change:
1) As an educational leader, I must be keenly aware of my own assets and limitations to experience and orchestrate change. I must be committed to my mission and vision yet sensitive and attuned to the "change-ability" of those I lead.
2) Assurance of what is good and what will not change is essential.
3) Be cautious of my own gullibility where the myths surrounding change are concerned.
4) The vision or mission on the back of the business card and one-page plan are tools I must use more efficiently.
5) There are two leverage points that really call out to me: 1) the need to clearly define effective instruction – as it relates to reading and an instructional framework ala Madeline Hunter and Marzano – is absolutely critical. We cannot assume good teaching was learned in college or comes from common sense. 2) Ineffective grading practices are costing our students more than we have the courage to realize. These practices must be addressed if we are ever to truly promote motivation and achievement.

Take a moment to write your takeaways and how those ideas will impact the actions you take tomorrow!