

Getting Reform Right: What Works and What Doesn't

Michael G. Fullan and Matthew B. Miles

PROPOSITIONS FOR SUCCESS

The seven basic themes or lessons derived from current knowledge of successful change form a set and must be contemplated in relation to one another. When it comes to reform, partial theories are not very useful. We can say flatly that reform will not be achieved until these seven orientations have been incorporated into the thinking and reflected in the actions of those involved in change efforts.

1. Change is learning—loaded with uncertainty.

Change is a process of coming to grips with new personal meaning, and so it is a learning process. Peter Marris states the problem this way:

When those who have the power to manipulate changes act as if they have only to explain, and when their explanations are not at once accepted, shrug off opposition as ignorance or prejudice, they express a profound contempt for the meaning of lives other than their own. For the reformers have already assimilated these changes to their purposes, and worked out a reformulation which makes sense to them, perhaps through months or years of analysis and debate. If they deny others the chance to do the same, they treat them as puppets dangling by the threads of their own conceptions.¹³

Even well-developed innovations represent new meaning and new learning for those who encounter them initially and require time to assimilate them. So many studies have documented this early period of difficulty that we have given it a label—“the implementation dip.”¹⁴ Even in cases where reform eventually succeeds, things will often go wrong before they go right. Michael Huberman and Matthew Miles found that the absence of early difficulty in a reform effort was usually a sign that not much was being attempted; superficial or trivial change was being substituted for substantial change.¹⁵

More complex reforms, such as restructuring, represent even greater uncertainty: first, because more is being attempted; second, because the solution is not known in advance. In short, anxiety, difficulties, and uncertainty are intrinsic to all successful change.

OWNERSHIP OF A REFORM CANNOT BE ACHIEVED *IN ADVANCE* OF LEARNING SOMETHING NEW.

One can see why a climate that encourages risk-taking is so critical. People will not venture into uncertainty unless there is an appreciation that difficulties encountered are a natural part of the process. And if people do not venture into uncertainty, no significant change will occur.

Understanding successful change as learning also puts ownership in perspective. In our view, ownership of a reform cannot be achieved in advance of learning something new. A deep sense of ownership comes only through learning. In this sense, ownership is stronger in the middle of a successful change process than at the beginning and stronger still at the end. Ownership is both a process and a state.

The first proposition for success, then, is to understand that all change involves learning and that all learning involves coming to understand and to be good at something new. Thus conditions that support learning must be part and parcel of any change effort. Such conditions are also necessary for the valid rejection of particular changes, because many people reject complex innovations prematurely, that is, before they are in a sound position to make such a judgment.

2. Change is a journey, not a blueprint. If change involved implementing single, well-developed, proven innovations one at a time, perhaps we could make blueprints for change. But school districts and schools are in the business of implementing a bewildering array of innovations and policies simultaneously. Moreover, reforms that aim at restructuring are so multifaceted and complex that solutions for any particular setting cannot be known in advance. If one tries to account for the complexity of the situation with an equally complex implementation plan, the process will become unwieldy, cumbersome, and usually unsuccessful.

There can be no blueprints for change, because rational planning models for complex social change (such as education reform) do not work. Rather, what is needed is a guided journey. Karen Seashore Louis and Matthew Miles provide a clear analysis of this evolutionary planning process in their study of urban high schools involved in major change efforts:

The evolutionary perspective rests on the assumption that the environment both inside and outside organizations is often chaotic. No specific plan can last for very long, because it will either

become outmoded due to changing external pressures, or because disagreement over priorities arises within the organization. Yet there is no reason to assume that the best response is to plan passively, relying on incremental decisions. Instead, the organization can cycle back and forth between efforts to gain normative consensus about what it may become, to plan strategies for getting there, and to carry out decentralized incremental experimentation that harnesses the creativity of all members to the change effort.... Strategy is viewed as a flexible tool, rather than a semi-permanent expansion of the mission.¹⁶

The message is not the traditional “Plan, then do,” but “Do, then plan . . . and do and plan some more.” Even the development of a shared vision that is central to reform is better thought of as a journey in which people’s sense of purpose is identified, considered, and continuously shaped and reshaped.

3. Problems are our friends. School improvement is a problem-rich process. Change threatens existing interests and routines, heightens uncertainty, and increases complexity. The typical principal in the study of urban schools conducted by Louis and Miles mentioned three or four major problems (and several minor ones) with reform efforts. They ranged from poor coordination to staff polarization and from lack of needed skills to heart attacks suffered by key figures. Problems arise naturally from the demands of the change process itself, from the people involved, and from the structure and procedures of schools and districts. Some are easily solved; others are almost intractable.

It seems perverse to say that problems are our friends, but we cannot develop effective responses to complex situations unless we actively seek and confront real problems that are difficult to solve. Problems are our friends because only through immersing ourselves in problems can we come up with creative solutions. Problems are the route to deeper change and deeper satisfaction. In this sense, effective organizations “embrace problems” rather than avoid them.

Too often, change-related problems are ignored, denied, or treated as an occasion for blame and defense. Success in school reform efforts is much more likely when problems are treated as natural, expected phenomena. Only by tracking problems can we understand what we need to do next to get what we want. Problems must be taken seriously, not attributed to “resistance” or to the ignorance and wrongheadedness of others.

What to do about problems? In their study of urban schools, Louis and Miles classified coping styles, ranging from relatively shallow ones (doing nothing at all, procrastinating, “doing it the usual way,” easing off, or

increasing pressure) to deeper ones (building personal capacity through training, enhancing system capacity, comprehensive re-staffing, or system restructuring/redesign). They found that schools that were least successful at change always used shallow coping styles. Schools that were successful in changing could and did make structural changes in an effort to solve difficult problems. However, they were also willing to use Band-Aid solutions when a problem was judged to be minor. It’s important to note that successful schools did *not* have fewer problems than other schools—they just coped with them better.

SUCCESS IN SCHOOL REFORM EFFORTS IS MUCH MORE LIKELY WHEN PROBLEMS ARE TREATED AS NATURAL.

The enemies of good coping are passivity, denial, avoidance, conventionality, and fear of being “too radical.” Good coping is active, assertive, inventive. It goes to the root of the problem when that is needed.

We cannot cope better through being exhorted to do so. “Deep coping” —the key to solving difficult problems of reform—appears to be more likely when schools are working on a clear, shared vision of where they are heading and when they create an active coping structure (e.g., a coordinating committee or a steering group) that steadily and actively tracks problems and monitors the results of coping efforts. Such a structure benefits from empowerment, brings more resources to bear on problems, and keeps the energy for change focused. In short, the assertive pursuit of problems in the service of continuous improvement is the kind of accountability that can make a difference.

4. Change is resource-hungry. Even a moderate-sized school may spend a million dollars a year on salaries, maintenance, and materials. And that’s just for keeping schools as they are, not for changing them. Change demands additional resources for training, for substitutes, for new materials, for new space, and, above all, for time. Change is “resource-hungry” because of what it represents—developing solutions to complex problems, learning new skills, arriving at new insights, all carried out in a social setting already overloaded with demands. Such serious personal and collective development necessarily demands resources.

Every analysis of the problems of change efforts that we have seen in the last decade of research and practice has concluded that time is the salient issue. Most recently, the survey of urban high schools by Louis and Miles found that the average principal with a school-wide reform project spent 70 days a year on change management. That’s 32% of an administrator’s year. The teachers most closely engaged with the change effort spent some 23 days a year, or 13% of their time on reform. Since we have to keep school while we change school, such overloads are to be expected.

But time is energy. And success is likely only when the extra energy requirements of change are met through the

provision of released time or through a redesigned schedule that includes space for the extra work of change.

Time is also money. And Louis and Miles discovered that serious change in big-city high schools requires an annual investment of between \$50,000 and \$100,000. They also found some schools spending five times that much with little to show for it. The key seemed to be whether the money simply went for new jobs and expensive equipment or was spent for local capacity-building (acquiring external assistance, training trainers, leveraging other add-on funds, and so on). Nevertheless, some minimum level of funding is always needed.

Assistance itself can be a major resource for change. It may include training, consulting, coaching, coordination, and capacity-building. Many studies have suggested that good assistance to schools is strong, sustained over years, closely responsive to local needs, and focused on building local capacity. Louis and Miles found that at least 30 days a year of external assistance—with more than that provided internally—was essential for success.

We can also think of educational “content resources” — such big ideas as effective schools, teaching for understanding, empowerment, and school-based management—that guide and energize the work of change. In addition, there are psycho-social resources, such as support, commitment, influence, and power. They’re supposedly intangible, but they are critical for success.

The work of change requires attention not just to resources, but to “resourcing.” The actions required are those of scanning the school and its environment for resources and matching them to existing needs; acquiring resources (buying, negotiating, or just plain grabbing); reworking them for a better fit to the situation; creating time through schedule changes and other arrangements; and building local capacity through the development of such structures as steering groups, coordinating committees, and cadres of local trainers.

Good resourcing requires facing up to the need for funds and abjuring any false pride about self-sufficiency. Above all, it takes willingness to invent, to go outside the frame in garnering and reworking resources. (We are reminded of the principal who used money for the heating system to pay for desperately needed repainting and renovation, saying, “I knew that, if the boiler broke, they’d have to fix it anyway.”) The stance is one of steady and tenacious searching for and judicious use of the extra resources that any change requires. Asking for assistance and seeking other resources are signs of strength, not weakness.

5. Change requires the power to manage it. Change initiatives do not run themselves. They require that substantial effort be devoted to such tasks as monitoring implementation, keeping everyone informed of what’s happening, linking multiple change projects (typical in most schools), locating unsolved problems, and taking clear coping action. In Louis and Miles’ study, such efforts occurred literally 10 times more frequently in successfully changing schools than in unchanging ones.

There appear to be several essential ingredients in the successful management of change. First, the management of change goes best when it is carried out by a *cross-role group* (say, teachers, department heads, administrators, and—often—students and parents). In such a group different worlds collide, more learning occurs, and change is realistically managed. There is much evidence that steering a change effort in this way results in substantially increased teacher commitment.

Second, such a cross-role group needs *legitimacy*—i.e., a clear license to steer. It needs an explicit contract, widely understood in the school, as to what kinds of decisions it can make and what money it can spend. Such legitimacy is partly conferred at the front end and partly earned through the hard work of decision making and action. Most such groups do encounter staff polarization; they may be seen by others as an unfairly privileged elite; or they may be opposed on ideological grounds. Such polarization—often a sign that empowerment of a steering group is working—can be dealt with through open access to meetings, rotation of membership, and scrupulous reporting.

THE MANAGEMENT OF CHANGE GOES BEST WHEN IT IS CARRIED OUT BY A CROSSROLE GROUP.

Third, even empowerment has its problems, and cooperation is required to solve them. Everyone has to learn to take the initiative instead of complaining, to trust colleagues, to live with ambiguity, to face the fact that shared decisions mean conflict. Principals have to rise above the fear of losing control, and they have to hone new skills: initiating actions firmly without being seen as “controlling,” supporting others without taking over for them. All these stances and skills are learnable, but they take time. Kenneth Benne remarked 40 years ago that the skills of cooperative work should be “part of the general education of our people.”¹⁷ They haven’t been, so far. But the technology for teaching these skills exists. It is up to steering groups to learn to work well together, using whatever assistance is required.

Fourth, the power to manage change does not stop at the schoolhouse door. Successful change efforts are most likely when the local district office is closely engaged with the changing school in a collaborative, supportive way and places few bureaucratic restrictions in the path of reform.

The bottom line is that the development of second-order changes in the culture of schools and in the capacity of teachers, principals, and communities to make a difference *requires* the power to manage the change at the local school level. We do not advocate handing over all decisions to the school. Schools and their environments must have an interactive and negotiated relationship. But complex problems cannot be solved from a distance; the steady growth of the power to manage change must be part of the solution.

6. Change is systemic. Political pressures combine with the segmented, uncoordinated nature of educational organizations to produce a “project mentality.”¹⁸ A steady stream of episodic innovations—cooperative learning,

effective schools research, classroom management, assessment schemes, career ladders, peer coaching, etc., etc. —come and go. Not only do they fail to leave much of a trace, but they also leave teachers and the public with a growing cynicism that innovation is marginal and politically motivated.

What does it mean to work systemically? There are two aspects: 1) reform must focus on the development and interrelationships of all the main *components* of the system simultaneously—curriculum, teaching and teacher development, community, student support systems, and so on, and 2) reform must focus not just on structure, policy, and regulations but on deeper issues of the *culture* of the system. Fulfilling both requirements is a tall order. But it is possible.

WISHFUL THINKING AND LEGISLATION HAVE POOR RECORDS AS TOOLS FOR SOCIAL BETTERMENT.

This duality of reform (the need to deal with system components and system culture) must be attended to at both the state and district/school levels. It involves both restructuring and “reculturing.”¹⁹ Marshall Smith and Jennifer O’Day have mapped out a comprehensive plan for systemic reform at the state level that illustrates the kind of thinking and strategies involved.²⁰ At the school/district level, we see in the Toronto region’s Learning Consortium a rather clear example of systemic reform in action.²¹ Schools, supported by their districts, avoid ad hoc innovations and focus on a variety of coordinated short-term and mid- to long-term strategies. The short-term activities include inservice professional development on selected and interrelated themes; mid- to long-term strategies include vision building, initial teacher preparation, selection and induction, promotion procedures and criteria, school-based planning in a system context, curriculum reorganization, and the development of assessments. There is an explicit emphasis on new cultural norms for collaborative work and on the pursuit of continuous improvement.

Systemic reform is complex. Practically speaking, traditional approaches to innovation and reform in education have not been successful in bringing about lasting improvement. Systemic reform looks to be both more efficient and more effective, even though this proposition is less proven empirically than our other six. However, both conceptually and practically, it does seem to be on the right track.²²

7. All large-scale change is implemented locally. Change cannot be accomplished from afar. This cardinal rule crystallizes the previous six propositions. The ideas that change is learning, change is a journey, problems are our friends, change is resource-hungry, change requires the power to manage, and change is systemic all embody the fact that local implementation by everyday teachers, principals, parents, and students is the only way that change happens.

This observation has both an obvious and a less obvious meaning. The former reminds us all that any

interest in system-wide reform must be accompanied by a preoccupation with how it plays itself out locally. The less obvious implication can be stated as a caution: we should not assume that only the local level counts and hand everything over to the individual school. A careful reading of the seven propositions together shows that extra-local agencies have critical—though decidedly not traditional—roles to play. Most fundamentally, their role is to help bring the seven propositions to life at the local level.

Modern societies are facing terrible problems, and education reform is seen as a major source of hope for solving them. But wishful thinking and legislation have deservedly poor track records as tools for social betterment. As educators increasingly acknowledge that the “change process is crucial,” they ought to know what that means at the level at which change actually takes place. Whether we are on the receiving or initiating end of change (as all of us are at one time or another), we need to understand why education reform frequently fails, and we need to internalize and live out valid propositions for its success. Living out the seven propositions for successful change means not only making the change process more explicit within our own minds and actions, but also contributing to the knowledge of change on the part of those with whom we interact. Being knowledgeable about the change process may be both the best defense and the best offense we have in achieving substantial education reform.

MICHAEL G. FULLAN *is dean of the Faculty of Education at the University of Toronto.* MATTHEW B. MILES *is a senior research associate with the Center for Policy Research, New York, N.Y.*

