

How to

Be an Effective Leader During Times of Change

Although some people see change as an exciting opportunity to try something new, others may find the uncertainty it brings utterly terrifying. When implementing massive change, leaders must act strategically, work collaboratively, and provide clear direction.

A time of immense change has arrived. The majority of states have adopted the Common Core State Standards; now comes the hard part: implementation. District and school leaders must rethink the curriculum, assess the current resources and identify gaps, build alliances, manage anxiety, and ensure that everyone is onboard and on the same page.

Large-scale change should be broken down into three parts: the what, the why, and the how. With regards to implementing the Common Core State Standards, leaders should address

- **The what:** What are the Common Core State Standards, what is the intent behind the standards, and what does implementation require?

- **The why:** Why are the standards needed and why should leaders, teachers, and staff embrace them?

- **The how:** How will the standards be implemented? How will leaders provide the support educators need to ensure successful implementation?

"These are big questions to answer," says Guadalupe Solis, assistant superintendent of instructional services for the Tulare County Office of Education (TCOE) in California.

"But a leader has to be able to say, 'We are going to build capacity with this initiative' and then do the necessary research. Without that, you can't get to the real understanding."

Connie Smith, administrator for early childhood education programs for TCOE, says, "To answer the 'how,' there must be intention, planning, focus, and strategy so that you can figure out what comes first, next, and so on."

Thoughtful leaders know to bring everyone—including parents, teachers, the school board, and community members—to the table to get the job done.

Ease Fears

Effectively managing a change process requires more than just planning tactical steps. In addition, leaders must provide strong and supportive leadership that seeks to ease staff's fears.

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"You have to create a culture of trust so that, once the initiative moves forward, people can build their own capacity to carry on the what, the why, and the how," Solis says. "The staff need to know that they will be supported and that there is trust both ways—bottom-up as well as top-down."

Patrick Larkin, assistant superintendent for learning at Burlington Public Schools in Massachusetts, adds that teachers need to have a certain level of comfort. "When we ask them to do something different, they want to know how it's going to impact them, whether it goes smoothly or not," Larkin says. "Make sure they know they won't be impacted negatively."

Larkin recalls when he taught English about 20 years ago and his school changed to a block schedule. "The first thing the principal did was to tell us that he wouldn't do formal evaluations that first year," Larkin says. "He came into our classrooms and worked with us, but we knew there wouldn't be any documentation if we tried something and it didn't work. That freedom helped a lot."

With a large-scale change like the Common Core State Standards, school leaders have the opportunity to rethink the way teachers teach and students learn. "We have the opportunity to focus on what good instruction looks like and on engaging students, rather than just teaching a large amount of standards," Larkin says.

Administrators should give teachers space to do what they know works best for their students.

"Don't just throw out a framework and expect your teachers to cover it all. Let your departments cover what they think is most important and go deep in those areas," Larkin says.

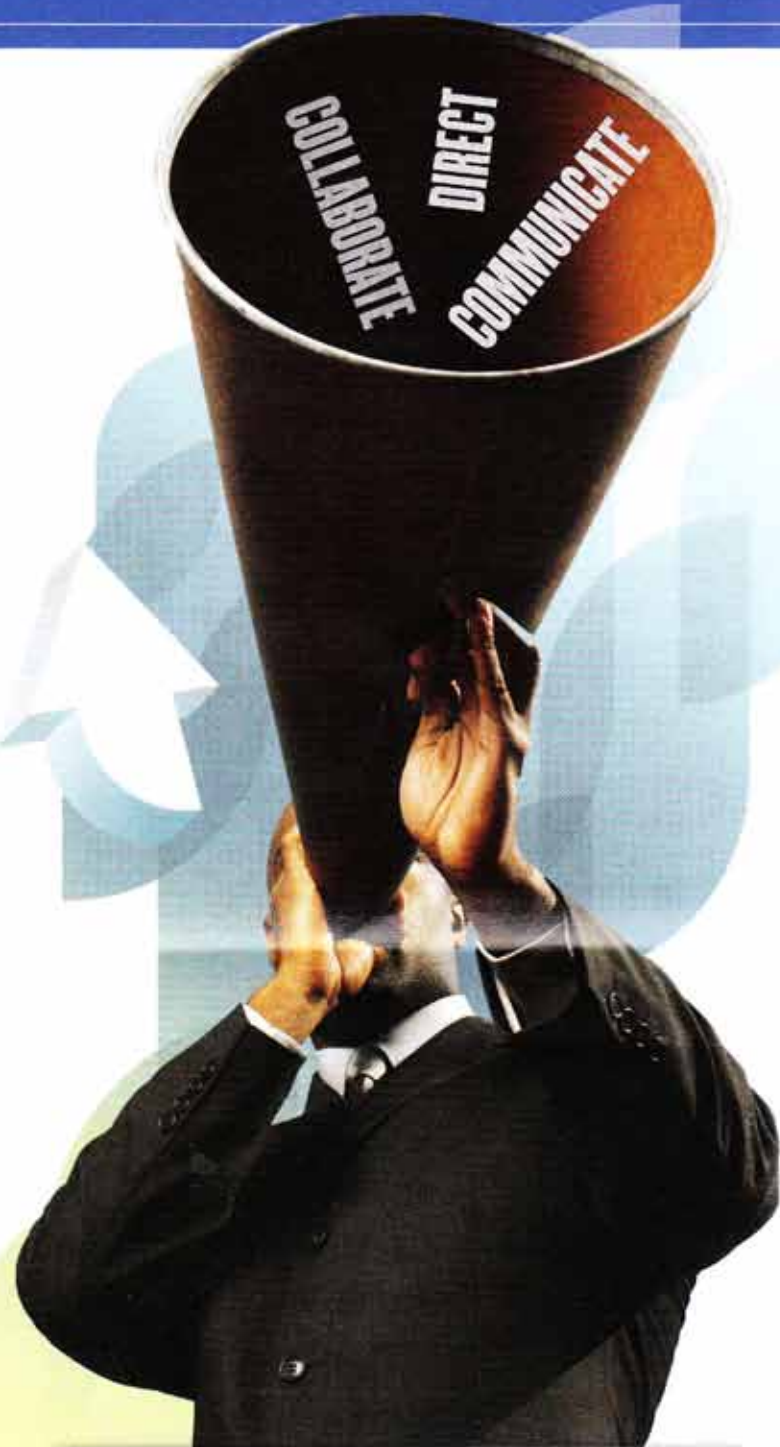
Communicate and Collaborate

Once the change is in progress, leaders must be absolutely certain to communicate the right message and check to see that everyone understands it.

"Sometimes we put something out there and assume that everyone's following it," Solis says. "Instead, we need to check in, look over shoulders, and continually ask, 'Does this make sense?'" Staff need to know that they can ask questions and that those questions will be answered.

The most effective leaders monitor their teams, continually checking in to see if they need to revise anything. Experts recommend breaking down long-term goals into more manageable, bite-size chunks, such as 90-day goals.

"With any change, it is critically important that your team clearly understands the goals and objectives to be accomplished," says Jean Desrvaives, chief executive officer of New



Leaders, a nonprofit organization that develops school leaders and designs leadership policies and practices for school systems. "Be very clear, using quantifiable and qualitative data to lay out your vision."

Never forget that people will be apprehensive, Desrvaines says. One way to combat that is to, in his words, overcommunicate. "Everyone needs to hear from you directly and continuously," he says. "And be sure to give people an opportunity to provide feedback."

Cheryl Dunkle, author of *Leading the Common Core State Standards: From Common Sense to Common Practice* and a professional development associate with the Leadership and Learning Center in Englewood, Colo., believes that having a small contingency of willing people invested in the change is crucial to its success.

Once that group commits and shares the benefits of the change with their colleagues, the others will change their behaviors and, as a result, their beliefs. It can be as little as 20 percent of the group, as long as they are dedicated to

learning, making mistakes, and being honest and open about their progress.

The way to get that essential buy-in, according to the experts, is to be transparent and collaborative.

"Typically, with something as comprehensive as the common core, we roll out one person's plan, but it needs to be done collaboratively," Larkin says. "It needs to be discussed and written down as a school- or district-wide vision. To do it well, you need a lot of voices to be involved."

In the end, however, perhaps the most important thing a leader can do in a time of change is be supportive.

"What I've found is that a leader must, in her heart, embrace the opportunity so that she can convey it to others," says Joel Rose, cofounder and chief executive officer of New Classrooms, a nonprofit organization that collaborates with schools to enable personalized learning. "When you're leading through a time of transition, it's an opportunity to reimagine all the things you wish you could change." EU

—ELLEN ULLMAN

Quick Tips for Leading Successful Change

Collaborate. "Everyone talks about communication—and listening is critical—but collaboration is where it's at. Collaboration doesn't have to be done face-to-face in a group. We can collaborate over Google Apps. Just be sure to get people talking and working together to discuss and solve issues."

—Salvador Contes Jr., assistant principal at Poughkeepsie High School, N.Y.

"Take the time to ask, "What else should we think about while we do this?"

—Joel Rose, cofounder and chief executive officer of New Classrooms

Determine where you are and where you want to go. "Take inventory of what is already in place and make sure what you're doing is aligned with where you're going. Sometimes we hold on to sacred practices that are not aligned with the new direction. We often skip this step, but taking that inventory is huge."

—Charlene Stringham, student academic services administrator for Tulare County Office of Education

Be patient. "Never forget that these kinds of changes take time and have bumps. In our impatience to get it all right, we often forget that it's not a smooth process; it involves risks."

—Cheryl Dunkle, author of *Leading the Common Core State Standards: From Common Sense to Common Practice*



Stay focused. "Change demands [that we] focus. Don't just hope for the best! Be deliberate. Provide what your teachers need to be successful, and convince folks they can implement the change. And make sure to celebrate small wins along the way."

—Cheryl Dunkle

Provide professional development. "Good leaders need to think about the professional development that is going to be needed. Align the funding so that you can afford the training to go with the new tools."

—Connie Smith, administrator for early childhood education programs for Tulare County Office of Education

Provide strong leadership. "Know that at some point you'll hit roadblocks and get major pushback. Be prepared for that and be courageous, flexible, and open to the feedback. If you've laid the course clearly and outlined the goals, visions, decision points, and milestones that need to be hit and the pushback is legitimate, be open to reassessment and recalibration. But if it's just typical pushback, be steadfast. Strong leaders can't waiver."

—Jean Desrvaines, chief executive officer of New Leaders