

The Work of Change Leadership

Models, ideas and resources can help launch institutional change, but strong leadership is what makes it stick.



Jeffrey Shields, FASAE, CAE
NBOA President and CEO
jeff.shields@nboa.org
[@shieldsNBOA](https://twitter.com/shieldsNBOA)

To implement significant and lasting organizational change requires two essential elements: leadership and enterprise-wide work. This model may seem overly simple but rings true to me after reflecting on the many change management concepts I have appreciated throughout my career as a nonprofit leader.

Almost every day I observe school leaders that acknowledge the need for change but are confounded by how best to approach it. My greatest concern is that too often leaders look earnestly for solutions outside their schools, for a “silver bullet” that will allay their fears and quickly settle an issue. Whether it is the innovation du jour, a charismatic consultant, a pricey professional development program or even a new tool from your professional association, too often we spend our time and energy racing from solution to solution, desiring immediate gratification. These efforts turn out to be folly because real change requires leadership and work from within. Ideas and resources are the start of a potential solution for our schools, not the solutions themselves.

I have observed a few common characteristics instrumental to the success of change initiatives:

An optimistic mindset: First and foremost, leaders of change must wholly believe that things can and will improve. Even in a school that is enjoying tremendous success, leaders of change believe that things can be better. They have their antennae up for the right opportunity to advance their school, and they allow that idea to incubate

so that it has an optimal chance of success. I’ve seen it in a transformational leader, and I bet you have too.

Ability to communicate the positive impact of change: Too often we assume that key stakeholders understand the “why” behind a change. They often don’t. This mistake has the potential to stop any important change effort in its tracks. The status quo is strong in schools, and so clearly communicating desirable impacts to various stakeholders is critical. Critical too is considering which stakeholder groups have the most to gain — and perhaps the most to lose — and articulating the outcomes in a way that appeals to those audiences. You will never, ever get everyone on board, period, so don’t set that as a goal.

Openness to correct course as you plan implementation: Develop guideposts and incremental steps that advance the work, but don’t be restricted by them. Be open to questions without being questioned into paralysis. Be responsive and facilitate understanding, but don’t fall into the trap of responding to every possibility someone puts on the table. Good questions may lead to course corrections, which demonstrate that as a leader you are flexible and perhaps most importantly, a good listener. This will bring individuals along and optimize the opportunity for success.

Acknowledgment of success or lessons learned: You know all too well that in this fast-paced world of ours, taking the time to celebrate successes becomes increasingly difficult. Do it anyway. Find a moment to share what the team achieved and learned. Ask what we would do the same and what might we approach differently. When leaders exhibit humility and vulnerability, it creates an authenticity and human connection that engenders trust among the community down the road.

I have come to truly appreciate how the leadership role of affecting change is incumbent upon all of us. In fact, I believe the truest calling of leadership is not only to support the missions of our schools and nonprofit organizations, but to take those organizations to a better place than when we found them. **N**

TOP OF MIND WITH JEFF

Q What is your preferred change management model?

A The first is often the best. John Kotter’s 8-Step Process for Leading Change provides a clear roadmap for leaders. The points I find most compelling are the need for leaders to develop and communicate a vision for the change and plan for short-term wins. The model underscores that transformational change is rarely accomplished overnight but rather achieved over time.

(See “Game Changers” on page 16 for more on change management models and processes in independent schools.)

Q What is your favorite part of change management?

A The possibility of “what could be” is always energizing and exciting to me.