



Public Education Leadership Project at Harvard University

A JOINT INITIATIVE OF
THE HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
AND HARVARD BUSINESS SCHOOL

PEL-078
DECEMBER 13, 2016
ORIGINAL APRIL 2005

ROSABETH MOSS KANTER

Principals as Innovators: Identifying Fundamental Skills for Leadership of Change in Public Schools

Leadership is the bridge between strategy and implementation, policy and execution. Leaders not only envision change, they translate imperatives to change into effective actions that achieve goals. Without leadership for change, policies remain a set of empty pronouncements.

In public education, leadership often makes the difference in school performance, even under the same broad reform mandates. Federal, state, or local imperatives to improve public education and raise student achievement cannot succeed without effective leadership school by school – leadership that helps teachers teach and students learn. School principals shape motivational climates and structures for learning. Improvements in education rest on their ability to lead the process of change – e.g., to introduce better methods, develop or apply innovations, and implement new requirements effectively.

As an expert on innovation and leadership for change in the private sector, I have conducted systematic research on the process and behaviors involved in successful change, whether incremental continuous improvements or full-scale turnarounds and transformations of low-performing organizations into high-performing models. I began this stream of research by comparing innovators who have successfully moved new ideas into action with control groups of non-innovators.¹ Later, I have compared “pace-setter” organizations that are adept at introducing change effectively and tend to have the best and latest practices, with “laggards” that are slow to change, reactive in terms of innovations, and wasteful or ineffective in implementation.² Most recently, I have examined the differences between organizations that are perennially successful at achieving their goals (on “winning streaks”) with those caught in a decline spiral (on “losing streaks”).³

¹ R. M. Kanter, *The Change Masters*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983; R. M. Kanter, B. A. Stein, and T. D. Jick (eds.), *The Challenge of Organizational Change*, New York: Free Press, 1992.

² R. M. Kanter, *Evolve!: Succeeding in the Digital Culture of Tomorrow*, Boston: HBS Press, 2001.

³ R. M. Kanter, *Confidence: How Winning Streaks & Losing Streaks Begin & End*, New York: Crown, 2004.

Professor Rosabeth Moss Kanter and prepared this note as the basis for class discussion.

I have distilled the essence of these findings into tools that can be used by leaders from any sector to guide change successfully.⁴

To show how these lessons can support the process of education reform by improving the leadership of principals, I looked at the experiences of a small set of principals identified as innovators. My research group interviewed (in schools or by telephone) 30 principals in a diverse range of schools, in both large urban and smaller city districts in culturally-distinct regions of the United States.: K-5, K-6, K-8, middle, and high schools.⁵ Three principals headed experimental or pilot schools for which innovation was part of the mandate; the rest led schools that had improved dramatically, even if their students were not yet achieving at the highest levels.

The generic leadership skills used by principal-innovators match closely those used by leaders in other sectors. Of course, the specific issues to which those skills are applied, the incentives and tools available, and the barriers or supports for innovation are influenced by the unique characteristics of public education systems. Still, within public education, similarities in terms of leadership actions outweighed the differences between school types or locations. The principal-innovators we analyzed also put in place the foundations for success at their school, including the three main cornerstones of confidence established by leaders in every sector: accountability, collaboration, and initiative.⁶

Non-innovators frequently complain that change is impossible and the deck is stacked against principals, citing reasons emanating both from the top (centralized control of key decisions) or the bottom (difficult student populations lacking parent support). But the principal-innovators in this group of interviewees found ample areas of discretion in which their leadership can make a difference.

Principal-innovators generally do not control the curriculum, but they do control it is how implemented, including teacher training, motivation, and relationships among teachers. They can set the schedule. They can define data needs and determine use of the data collected by the district. They can add their own accountability standards, their own schedule for testing to provide information for timely interventions, or their own protocols for assessing student work, in addition to centrally-imposed requirements. They can shape the culture for learning, handling both discipline and opportunities for enrichment, perhaps through special courses or non-curricular activities. And they can encourage initiatives in any of these areas, such as teacher-led experiments with different instructional models, or teacher-developed orientation for new teachers.

Seven fundamental skills are common to leaders who support innovation and guide change. At each phase of a change process, successful leaders reflect these skills in their own actions, and they create a climate in which others can also use them.

⁴ See www.reinventingeducation.org. This website, created in partnership with IBM and the Council of Chief State School Officers, with leadership by Dr. Barry Stein of Goodmeasure Inc. in Cambridge MA, is available free of charge to any K-12 public school system.

⁵ Thanks are due to Michelle Heskett (who conducted the bulk of the interviews), Kevin Morris, and Ryan Raffaelli. Tom Dretler was engaged in earlier phases of the research. Thanks also to the school superintendents and directors of state education leadership institutes who provided the list of innovators.

⁶ R. M. Kanter, *Confidence*.

Skill #1: Sensing Needs & Opportunities: Tuning in to the Environment

Innovation begins with someone being aware enough to sense a new need. Of course, being “smart enough” comes from focusing time and attention on things going on in the environment that send signals that it’s time for a change. Change masters are adept at anticipating the need for change as well as leading it. They sense new ideas or appetites emerging on the horizon – sometimes because they feel hungry themselves. They find many ways to monitor the external and internal environment. Change masters become idea scouts, attentive to early signs of discontinuity, disruption, threat, or opportunity. They are also idea sponges, soaking up new information and thinking about how to apply it to their situation. Their doors are open, and so are their minds.

Leaders for change are more likely to emerge in places already receptive to change. I call them “pace-setters,” in contrast to the “laggards” that resist anything new or different. It’s a self-reinforcing cycle; those already successful at change create the circumstances that make it easier for people to sense the need for the next changes, because they have opened minds and broken through walls. Pace-setter organizations produce more need-sensors because they value curiosity and open dialogue. They encourage encounters with organizations or people that provide insights into trends, best practices, or possibilities for productive new ideas.

The most innovative among the principal-innovators in my interview study tapped large numbers of sources of ideas outside their schools and districts. When asked where they found new concepts, they could rattle off long lists. They read widely, attended professional meetings, exchanged tips with colleagues, and attended management training or personal development workshops for general audiences, not just for educators. One high school principal called herself an “information junkie.” Principal-innovators also tapped large numbers of community partners, from local universities to non-profits that supplied services to children, such as after-school programs. These contacts served as additional mental stimuli.

The principal-innovators were likely to seek ideas bottom-up from within their school communities, as well as to react quickly to top-down directives for change. Most indicated that the biggest innovations or changes come from the district. But all of them felt that the best changes in terms of quality come from inside the school. Bottom-up ideas take hold faster with more ownership, principals said, and are best-suited to the specific situation the school faces.

Tuning into the environment within the school involved identifying opportunities from students as well as teachers by frequent observations and active listening. Several principal-innovators declared that teacher-initiated ideas are the most effective change ideas, but listening to students, discovering their needs, and encouraging them to voice their ideas is also productive. A high school principal noted disaffection among a growing Hispanic student population, so he convened an assembly of those students to hear their concerns. This generated a series of positive changes, which involved student input or leadership, such as a bilingual student newspaper and Latino music at school dances, which made the disaffected students feel more attached to school and improved their academic performance. In other schools, student ideas included a safety patrol, mock elections, fund-raising for tsunami relief efforts by elementary school students in a poor community, new clubs including a chess club, and student feedback about specific programs.

“Ideas from different sources can be equally valuable,” a primary school principal said. “If an idea comes from central, we pretty much know we must do it. Ideas from teachers, parents, students, take more work and attention to understand and evaluate them. But the impact from these ideas can be

greater than ideas that come from above.” Another primary school principal echoed that theme: “Top-down ideas score a 6 out of 10 on my scale of importance. Ideas from outside the school are a 7. Bottom-up scores a 10—these ideas are the most important ones.”

Principal-innovators were sufficiently tuned in to new developments that they were quick to support and lead change whatever the impetus. “The best thing a principal can do is to embrace the concept of change, and to work closely with staff to make it successful,” a primary school principal observed. Even though a great deal of change was imposed on schools top-down, by central administration directives, principal-innovators who got on board early could shape the change, gain experience with it, push back against ineffective parts, and get staff on board. One principal was quick to act on a new directive to form in-depth learning communities at the high school level, choosing to focus on areas particularly relevant to the population in her school, such as the arts and health care.

Skill #2: Kaleidoscope Thinking: Stimulating Breakthrough Ideas

It is just the first step to sense an opportunity or need for change on the horizon. An additional mental act of imagination is needed to find a creative new response to it. Change masters take all the input about needs and opportunities and use it to shake up reality a little, to get an exciting new idea of what’s possible, to break through the old pattern and invent a new one.

Creativity is a lot like looking at the world through a kaleidoscope. In a kaleidoscope, a set of fragments form a pattern, but the pattern isn’t fixed. Twist it, shake it, change the angle of sight, and the same floating bits and pieces form an enticing new pattern. Innovators shake up their thinking as though their brain is a kaleidoscope, permitting an array of different possibilities out of the same bits of reality. Thus, innovators challenge prevailing wisdom. They start from the premise that there are many solutions to a problem. By changing the angle on the kaleidoscope, new possibilities emerge. Where other people would say, “That’s impossible; we’ve always done it this way,” they see another approach. Where others see only problems, they see possibilities.

Innovators reframe their interpretation of the situation, and reset the kaleidoscope on a new pattern which then becomes the convention for everyone else. Even in “me-too” changes, a leader has to shake up assumptions about existing routines. Laggard companies often claim limited capital for investment in new projects as a barrier to change. But their problem is not lack of money, it is lack of imagination.

“Schools get locked into old ways of doing things and don’t see the possibilities available to them,” declared a primary school principal. This principal had come from a district in which there had been five superintendents in seven years, so effective principal-innovators learned that if they wanted change, they had to do it themselves. “We always make decisions our own – for example, there may be a required math curriculum, but we can shape how it works. There is always a way to make the things you want happen – you don’t have to stay locked in.”

Another principal-innovator worked to challenge assumptions and eliminate excuses when she took on the task of fixing a failing K-8 school. She reported: “There was a lot of the ‘blame game’ being played—it’s the special ed. inclusion, or the poverty, or the language barriers that prevent change. We have no control over those things, but we do have control over the 6 hours these kids spend with us each day. So let’s focus on what is within our span of control.” A few twists of the kaleidoscope, and she stimulated creative new approaches that turned around the school. Other principal-innovators also challenged assumptions about what was possible by pushing the limits. “If you follow all the rules, you don’t have any discretion. Key is to try to be an effective gatekeeper to keep central satisfied

and still do what you need to do,” a middle school principal said. Another elementary school principal declared: “Anything is possible. The people most excited about urban public education are those who don’t see themselves limited by circumstances or resources given to them.”

Kaleidoscope thinking was in play at a K-8 inner city school that created breakthrough programs through creative use of funds. The principal led an “all funds” approach to budgeting, putting everything into one pot and discussing priorities with teachers and parents. Parents, teachers, and administrators each made a list of goals. In multiple rounds of voting, the leadership team discovered that the #1 priority among all groups was to reduce class size. With the all funds approach they were able to bring in an extra teacher at each grade level and add interns. They took funds generally earmarked for other purposes (such as remedial reading, or anti-drug speakers and posters) and allocated them for the extra teachers, at the same time finding creative ways to meet the reading and anti-drug needs. The solution was to partner with a local community health service and other non-profits and to contract with a behavior management specialist to put together a patchwork quilt of services that helped students, met all the requirements, yet freed funds for the high priority use which all stakeholders had identified.

Skill #3: Setting the Theme: Communicating Inspiring Visions

Creative but raw ideas that emerge from the kaleidoscope must be shaped into a theme that makes an idea come alive as part of a larger vision. Ideas don’t launch productive changes until they become a theme that sets the agenda for other changes, and a vision that raises aspirations.

“If you can dream it, you can do it,” the saying goes. Not exactly. There is a gap between dreaming and doing that is filled by the support of others. A vision remains just a dream unless it can inspire others to follow. Thus, the third skill for mastering change is to shape ideas into a theme that makes a compelling case for the value and direction of change. Leaders must wake people out of inertia. They must arouse excitement about something people might never have seen before, something that does not yet exist in tangible form in their own local area.

The theme provides the setting for a story that has to come to life, to raise aspirations and inspire action. A vision is not just a picture of what could be; it is an appeal to our better selves, a call to become something more. It reminds us that the future does not just descend like a stage set; we construct the future from our own history, desires, and decisions. And we have to stretch our imaginations just as we take on stretch goal. The aspiration must be so compelling that it is worth the extra time and effort to achieve. That means an appeal also to our pragmatic selves, addressing the classic first question of “What’s in it for me?” One answer might be that the hard work of change now will make life easier later. If the project is viewed as just another assignment, then either it’s so routine that it doesn’t produce much change, or skeptics and resisters (who are already too busy) have good reasons to slow it down.

The vision might start with directives from the district – one principal-innovator felt that a system-wide vision extending from K-12 throughout the district is essential – but it must be refined and articulated school by school. Finding out what mattered to the teachers helped a principal shape a vision that would get them on board. The teachers wanted smaller classes and student teachers to help them, which required outreach to universities. That gave the principal the hook to connect to her vision of higher student achievement – which obviously had to be done anyway. But she then set the theme of professional development and articulated a vision of how the school could become a desirable place for universities to send their students.

Articulating a compelling vision brings local ownership of requirements imposed from outside the school, and it becomes a roadmap. A primary school principal agreed that the federal No Child Left Behind act and the state testing designed to meet its requirements have brought many accountability issues that could be seen as limiting the school's flexibility. But the principal chooses to focus on the value of the school's own site-based model. The schools' own school improvement plan is the center of a shared vision, which included how teachers teach the curriculum and the resources and materials they use. "We have followed the plan religiously for three years now," the principal said, "and each year we determine ourselves the steps and adjustments we will make."

Making the vision clear is also a way to create and maintain focus. Principals (and teachers) have so many things on their plate that they can easily lose sight of the big theme or the big goal in the daily press of activities. The theme and vision become a guidepost to refer to often when determining which ideas are mission-critical. A high school principal advised, "Decide what is most important and find ways to hold on to it when you go into lean times. For me, it is instruction. We had to give up some community field based staff to keep resources for instructional staff. We make sacrifices to preserve common planning time for teachers—for example, no teacher is assigned administrative duties (such as watching bathrooms or hallways). We just find the resources elsewhere."

Defining goals on paper or in a speech is not enough. It's important for change leaders to make sure that their passion matches their aspiration. Do they feel strongly about the need? Are they convinced that this can be accomplished? Can they convey infectious enthusiasm when talking about it? Are they committed to seeing this through, over the long haul? Personal passion helps the change leader do whatever it takes to get started, to demonstrate the value of the vision even when others cannot yet see it. A middle school principal reinforced this principle: "Make change because it is important to you. It's really about commitment. To be really effective, your heart has to be in it. The principal can make a big difference despite any limitations, if the leadership is there to drive the vision, to organize for a common purpose and support the staff."

Skill #4: Enlisting Backers & Supporters: Getting Buy-In, Building Coalitions

As every entrepreneur knows, a great idea is not enough. Even a great mandate from a powerful sponsor to "just do it" isn't enough. Potential change masters must sell the idea more widely: attract the right backers and supporters, entice investors and defenders, get buy-in from stakeholders in a position to help or harm the venture at later stages.

The newer the idea, the more critical is this coalition building. "To make anything successful, you must work a personal network," many successful innovators repeat. Without that network of contacts, identifying the people to ask for support can be challenging. That's why change masters are often more effective when they are insiders bringing a revolutionary new perspective. A foundation of community and a base of strong relationships inside large organizations can speed the change process; people already trust each other. Early in the change process, leaders need the support of power-holders – those who possess resources, information, and credibility that can be invested in the venture to get it moving. Resources can include people or technology as well as funds. Information includes political intelligence and savvy as well as data or expertise. Both are important, but they are often widely available. Equally important is the intangible asset of legitimacy. Powerful, well-connected sponsors make the idea credible, open doors, speak on behalf of the change master at meetings she does not attend, and quell opposition. Early coalition members help sell others. Union City, New Jersey, school superintendent Thomas Highton used Bell Atlantic (now Verizon) for credibility with New Jersey

officials when he wanted to buy an old parochial school and turn it into a technology showcase connecting home and school via the Internet.

Principal-innovators know that they must seek support for innovation. There are no blank checks nor blanket permissions. They must do their homework, and prepare to make their case to those people in key positions who can help them find the resources or legitimacy to get their ideas off the ground. A principal-innovator currently trying to get the school building improved, but finding it difficult to get support from central administrators, has started looking to politicians, the mayor, parents, either for direct support or for enough groundswell to get attention.

Parents can contribute to change within the school as well as in the public arena. Principal-innovators found ways to use parents' professional skills. These were sources of ideas (using skills #1 and #2) as well as backing and support. A mother who was a deputy sheriff raised a safety issue about who picks up kids, which led to the developed of laminated car IDs. A parent involved with a theater group brought invitations for classes to attend productions. In other cases, parents with appropriate skills taught art or music enrichment programs, which helped free funds for other uses. Parents could be deployed to lead community service projects, such as making lap quilts for people in hospitals or sending packages to soldiers overseas.

Getting support from top district leaders was essential for many school-led innovations. Principal-innovators felt they could find sponsors in districts in which top leaders tended to listen to ideas, were not overly concerned about uniformity (everyone doing exactly the same thing), would help principals find grants or sources of funds to continue promising programs, and offered resources that supported work in the classroom – e.g., reading, math coaches. Sample comments include:

- “Our most important support is a superintendent who won’t let the district stand in the way if a local school has a good idea they want to implement. And the central administration looks for ways to provide other resources, such as literacy coaches, reading specialists, kindergarten paraprofessionals, reading endorsement classes for teachers, etc.” – elementary school principal
- “We are blessed with support. No’s usually come from a budgetary standpoint. But the central administration is creative in going out and finding grants, and they do a lot of it. Two current examples: a math and technology grant and a facility improvement grant.” – middle school principal

Uniformity requirements (starting with the same curriculum but sometimes extending to other issues previously left to principal discretion) make finding high-level support essential for principal-innovators. One primary school principal who had to change an innovative schedule back to a “normal” one complained: “We don’t do anything the district doesn’t do. That’s hard to swallow; I’m accustomed to being more innovative. I understand that the pressures of testing are causing this approach, but it’s frustrating.” But another savvy principal-innovator heading a pilot high school indicated that being able to find sponsors and build coalitions is essential, that relationships make all the difference. “For the average principal, it could be tough to feel supported, because an urban school district is set up for mass production and it’s not really easy or clear how to deviate. But if you cultivate relationships with people in the central office, and get to know a lot of people, it can be much easier to float new ideas and be heard.”

Skill #5: Moving Ideas into Practice: Nurturing the Working Team

Once a coalition of backers is in place, change masters enlist others in turning the dream into reality. Too often executives announce a plan, launch a task force, and then simply hope that people find the answers--instead of offering a dream, stretching their horizons, and encouraging people to do the same. In contrast, the areas where people feel that they are in charge of creating the future always seem to hum with communication. People cluster to help each other over rough spots. There's a team identity, maybe a team name. The team has deadlines that are considered milestones whose accomplishment can be celebrated.

Leaders now shift their role in the drama of change from lead actor to producer-director. They bring on stage the rest of the improvisational actors who take on the task of translating an idea into implementation, a promise into a prototype. There are two parts of this job: team-building and team-nurturing. The first consists of encouraging the actors to feel like a team, with ownership of the goals and a team identity that motivates performance - like a sports team that wants to win. A working team that feels deep commitment and responsibility for delivering on deadlines and promises is the best way to ensure high performance at Internet speed. The second involves care and feeding of the team as it does its work - to support the team, provide coaching and resources, and patrol the boundaries within which the team can freely operate.

In schools, the tendency is for principals to be the initiators, teachers to be the implementers. Principal-innovators are likely to operate through shared leadership models in which teachers are heavily involved as members of teams that take responsibility for acting on the agenda, shaping ideas and putting them into practice. Sometimes teachers are the change leaders themselves, originating and selling ideas. Whoever initiated change, teamwork made it possible and effective. "We have 25 teacher-leaders in the building," a middle school principal said. "There are different criteria for becoming one, for example, pushing the envelope in some way, or becoming a professional development expert."

Principal-innovators are clear about their themes and visions and also about the culture in their schools, and that generally involves collaboration. At one school, the principal makes sure that new hires buy-in to that culture of teamwork from the start, which includes collaboration within the staff and with parents. Innovation and change were inhibited when they didn't stress this from the beginning. Another principal innovator from a high school, exclaimed, "Choose believers! The union has a lot of control, but the principal still can select." But even when principals might not be able to hire or fire because of union rules, making sure people understand teamwork is important. Even if they cannot always control who is on the staff, they can control how staff members relate to one another.

Principal-innovators are heavy users of teams. They turn to committees and task forces to participate in shaping changes. They work hard to involve parents and teachers as leaders on school improvement committees, turning those often-mandated bodies into active forces for change. They arrange the schedule to facilitate teamwork. Blocks of time are set aside for teacher collaboration - perhaps daily for grade-level planning, weekly for school-level initiatives. In a K-8 school, the principal changed the weekly shared block to a full day a month. In a middle school, the principal also set aside a monthly full day for a "design team" that could examine every aspect of the instructional side of school.

These shared blocks of non-teaching time are used by working groups to get new things done. At a primary school, a multi-grade level teacher team wrote a grant proposal and brought in a significant

amount of money for that school, then felt so successful that they went on to submit another. In the turnaround of a middle school, teachers proposed team teaching themselves, wrote an accountability plan, and created the model. Teachers also created their own training program about the school's unique culture (noting that many veteran teachers were retiring); this was considered so important the principal agreed to hire substitute teachers for days that the program ran.

Relationship-building across classrooms facilitates teamwork, even when there is no joint teaching. Teachers might visit each other's classrooms, making it possible to share tips. But principal-innovators also ensure that there are informal ways for people to get to know one another. A primary school finds that the staff are friendly with one another because of a monthly "second cup of coffee" gathering before school, which is always full, and evening social gatherings for staff.

"Leaders are people who build teams and capacity," one principal-innovator said. In the successful changes that raised student achievement in her school, she was the initial bridge-builder, but there was always a team working on each activity. Her two biggest keys to shared leadership are to give the teachers plenty of resources, to make sure there are no secrets (an open door policy), and to encourage team leadership in not just surfacing problems but finding solutions.

Skill #6: Mastering the Difficult Middles: Persisting and Persevering

My personal law of management, if not of life, is that "Everything can look like a failure in the middle." Every new idea runs into trouble before it reaches fruition, and the possibilities for trouble increase with the number of ways the venture differs from current approaches. The more innovative, the more problems. The more problems, the greater the importance of skills in getting over the difficult middles.

One of the mistakes leaders make in change processes is to launch them and leave them. There are many ways a new approach or change initiative can get derailed. That tempts people to give up, forget it, and chase the next enticing rainbow. Stop the effort too soon, and by definition it will be a failure. Stay with it through its initial hurdles, make appropriate adjustments and mid-course corrections, and you are on the way to success. Of course, if the process takes too long, you have to return to the beginning--monitor the environment again, recheck assumptions, look at the way the theme is being played out, and reset the vision. Constant monitoring is important to keep ideas on track or to redirect them if circumstances change - and they often do. That's why leaders of change must persist and persevere - and be creative about getting over the obstacles.

Change leaders in schools need patience as well as persistence. Sometimes they must wait out negative influences, especially when they do not have the authority to remove people who resist change. Most of the principal-innovators said that resistance to change isn't common in their schools, except perhaps on the part of a few long-time teachers who become set in their ways. A small-city principal reported: "We had no choice about changing to the state curriculum, but there was still resistance. There were complaints that correlating what they're teaching to what is in the state curriculum 'takes too much time—we know what our kids need to know!' But, in reality, they were teaching what they wanted to teach, and the kids were being tested on state exams on some things those teachers hadn't even covered. This wasn't fair to the kids. Three teachers left the first year, 'ringleaders' who had been running things for a while. When the ringleaders left, it was a relief."

A more common issue in the middle of change is loss of momentum. If principals had to outwait resisters, resisters could also outwait the change process by dragging their feet and sliding into

passivity. Leaders must stay closely involved with the implementation process and keep the focus on the innovation, or things can move so slowly that new initiatives atrophy. A high school principal said that “Lack of follow-through is the culprit in initiatives that mirror the latest trend but then peter out for lack of dedication.” He also cited “the tyranny of the urgent” – that something always pops up that needs to be solved or addressed right away. “You must learn to respond without being hard-headed or blind to a new need, but still stay committed to the other things you are already trying to do.”

Perhaps the most significant problem in the middle of change stems from disruptions and sudden shifts of direction caused by change in the central administration. Numerous principals had to deal with new requirements or loss of resources and staff just as they were beginning to get results, because of district-level changes outside of their control, starting with turnover at the top. A new superintendent is appointed who doesn’t understand what innovators are doing, and the sales process has to start all over again or the principal risks having his or her change effort undermined or stopped. New administrations might question why a particular school needs extra funds, for example, when they see a process that seems to them established.

Shifts of district direction also disrupt innovations. Principal-innovators reported that agendas and priorities change too often. There might be a reading push followed by a math emphasis, or instructions to teach reading this way, then that way. In one case, the district introduced a model that involved grouping students by learning level across classrooms. The school showed tremendous improvement in student achievement using the new structure. But then the district decided that children should stay in their own classrooms. The school had to start over again to find ways to lift student performance.

A middle school principal reported: “Sometimes you get into one program or push and then suddenly have to modify it because of resources. For example, there was a big push to promote an accelerated reader program, but then priorities switched to math and they had to back off of the former.” An elementary school principal described a similar situation: “The school was using a direct instruction math program that was really good, and we lost it to a district decision on the math curriculum. In our opinion the new math curriculum is weaker.” Furthermore, many principals from diverse districts echoed the observation of another middle school principal, who complained that it was hard to get support for anything not on the agenda-of-the-moment, even if necessary to make the change process work. She said, “Some problems are not from things that are introduced, as much as from things that aren’t a priority or that have been ignored, such as facilities.”

Shifts of direction are even more disruptive when they come as a surprise. In one school in a large city, there was no money for science supplies, then all of a sudden (it seemed to the principal) the district issued an imperative to order as much as possible for science classrooms to tap a new source of funds before they ran out. In another district, a middle school principal reported that “Sometimes the district receives money and holds on to it until the last moment. Then they will ask schools to do last minute things that distract us from what the school is focusing on.”

It was easier for principal-innovators to keep their own projects moving while facing new requirements from above when district officials were thoughtful about providing advance warning and ample assistance with transitions. A principal who felt that her district was both effective and supportive praised officials who offered training well in advance of rollout when they introduced a new standards-based grading system. This helped the school maintain momentum on other improvements; they could determine how to fit this approach into other initiatives explain the change to parents.

Principal-innovators can get through the difficulties of implementation by their success at using the earlier skills. They can remind people of the larger vision and rally support for the goal. They can continue to sell their ideas to backers and supporters or enlarge the coalition of those who will be advocates. And if the working team has taken ownership, then they will want to find ways around the obstacles in order to keep the change process thriving. This is demonstrated by the story of how a middle school persevered to keep an innovation alive and bring it to fruition as an established practice.

The middle school program stemmed from a vision of high student achievement in a failing school, by creating a deeper and more motivating learning community with a longer school day and school on Saturday mornings. Extra funding for the project – including paying teacher for the longer hours – initially came from the state Department of Education. But within a year or two, the extra funds were built into the regular budget rather than handled as a special item. Officials outside of the project started asking about the extra money these schools were receiving, and the money started to evaporate from the annual budgets. After an economic downturn, the city could no longer afford the program, and it was threatened with dissolution.

The school really did not want to let go of this initiative that had been so successful for them. The principal and others met with the Mayor and with City Councilors to see if anything could be done. Eventually they wound up asking if they could go ahead with the program if they could raise the money for it themselves. From March-June that year, the school—administration, staff, parents, students—worked on a fund-raising campaign. By June they had come up with pledges for several hundred thousand dollars, enough to fund another year. They approached city and school district officials with the news, and worked with them on a three-year plan and a non-profit arm (legally a 501(c)(3) organization that could accept charitable donations). The city agreed to match funds raised for years 2 and 3. Over a million dollars were raised to continue and refine the program, so that it could reach its potential and raise student achievement. The principal observed: “The initiative has been tough, like another full-time job as a development officer. But it has had a strong impact on staff and parents. A negative turned into an opportunity – to show parents what a great thing they have and that it’s their responsibility to support it. We have to work as a village.”

When district officials support innovators and are willing to allow local flexibility, they can also help principal-innovators weather the difficult middles. A K-8 principal reported that top leaders in his district were receptive to his attempts to persuade them to allow the school to keep their own assessments, when the district introduced new methods, because he could demonstrate that the school’s own tests had support and were beginning to work. In another case, a middle school principal felt supported because “the district respects administrators who are cantankerous, who protect the boundaries and work hard in their schools with their staff. The deputy superintendent I work with believes in schools as change agents (which is great).”

Skill #7: Celebrating Accomplishment: Making Everyone a Hero

Remembering to recognize, reward, and celebrate accomplishments is the final critical leadership skill. Organizations that desire initiative and innovation thrive on celebration. Creative organizations, with their spirit of fun, are likely to celebrate everything in sight, including just the fact that it’s Friday afternoon. In traditional organizations, recognition is probably the most underutilized motivational tool. Some are better than others at publicizing the accomplishments that give change leaders and their team members that warm glow that comes from being recognized by other members of their community. Recognition is important not only for its motivational pat on the back but for its publicity

value; the whole organization and maybe the whole world now knows what is possible, who has done it, and what talents reside in the community gene pool.

Principals might not control salaries and might have no financial incentives to offer, but they can enhance reputations. If they can't fatten paychecks, they can still help their staff swell with pride – and gain the professional or career benefits of awards and publicity for accomplishments. There is no limit to how much recognition you can provide, and it is often free. Recognition brings the change cycle to its logical conclusion, but is also motivates people to attempt change again. So many people get involved in and contribute to changing the way an organization does things that it's important to share the credit. Change is an ongoing issue, and you can't afford to lose the talents, skills, or energies of those who can help make it happen.

One principal-innovator who introduced many high-impact school improvements reported that the biggest help she received from the district was recognition. Like other good change leaders, she passed it on by creating numerous awards for teachers for their contributions to school-level change. As one leader said, "We can't go so fast that we forget to celebrate. It helps us the next time – when we ask people to do it again."

Implications for Education Officials

The seven skill areas identified here can be helpful to principals, but they also suggest an action agenda for state and district education officials.

- Support leadership development. This means more than just the usual professional development, although many among the innovators would like to have more of any kind of development. The focus should be on the skills that help principals introduce productive change faster and more effectively. And to enlarge their sources of new ideas, they should be exposed to best practices and best leaders in other sectors. The change toolkit at www.reinventingeducation.org can be a useful source of frameworks, tactics, diagnostics, and action steps.
- Seek continuity. Stick to one agenda, and keep reinforcing it. Avoid lurching from one set of requirements to others that appear to undercut ongoing activities. Understand the difference between approaches that have failed to prove their failure or that people are implementing poorly and those that simply need sufficient time to become embedded and prove their value. If there is turnover at the top, ensure that there is sufficient continuity among other leaders that principal-innovators at the school level don't have to start all over again in pressing the case for their approaches.
- Be flexible. Understand local differences and value them when they work. Uniformity might be important in areas such as the curriculum (especially because of the high rates of student mobility in urban schools), but there are many other areas where local discretion can be increased with benefits and without costs to achievement of overall goals. Make flexibility or increased autonomy a reward for the best and most effective principals and schools. But make sure that principal-innovators truly make the case that their school deserves different treatment.
- Avoid adding requirements without providing resources to meet them. The problems stemming from unfunded federal mandates do not have to be exacerbated at the state and local levels, and there are ways to manage change that can ease the burden on already-overloaded principals and teachers. It is important to provide advance warning about new requirements. Training can be

front-loaded, to give extra assistance at the beginning, when it is most needed. Put a priority on identifying resources or grants that principals can seek, and support them in arguing their case for those resources.

- Encourage involvement by partners outside the schools. Publicize the fact that the schools are open to partners – of many kinds, from all sectors, including a range of non-profits, such as cultural or civic organizations, and businesses of all sizes. Make it appealing to partners to be involved. As the principal-innovators show, creative use of partners, whether parents or community members/organization, can not only augment school programs but also free resources for use in the central changes that support classrooms and learning.
- Offer abundant recognition, and do it frequently. But be sure to recognize the process of leadership that brought the accomplishments. Recognition is a way to identify role models that others want to emulate. To do that, it is important that not just the results are highlighted but also the way the results were achieved. Understanding the process of change, the development and implementation of innovations, is just as important to effective leadership as adopting someone else's answer. And implementers of innovation need to be praised and recognized for their important contributions.

In the world of public education, where the temptation is to chase the next promising “magic bullet” rather than implementing fully and deeply the effective concepts and programs that principals are leading, it is critical to recognize excellent of execution. Principal-innovators are the ones who manage to get things done not because they have the best ideas, but because they are the best implementers who can ensure that ideas work to improve student achievement.

---**Rosabeth Moss Kanter** holds the Ernest L. Arbuckle Professorship at Harvard Business School. She is the author of 19 books, including her bestseller, *Confidence: How Winning Streaks & Losing Streaks Begin & End*, published by Crown. She has received 24 honorary doctoral degrees, numerous leadership awards, and the Academy of Management's Distinguished Career Award for scholarly contributions to management, and she has been in the top 10 on international lists of the 50 most influential business thinkers in the world.