

WHAT LEADERS CAN DO TO NURTURE CHANGE

Q&A with MONICA HIGGINS



BY SUZANNE BOUFFARD

Monica Higgins is the Kathleen McCartney Professor of Education Leadership at the Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE), where her research and teaching focus on leadership development and organizational change.

Drawing on a background that combines organizational behavior, business, and education, she works with senior education leaders engaged in large-scale change. She runs HGSE's Scaling for Impact initiative and previously co-led the Public Education Leadership Project.

She served as an appointee for U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan from 2009 to 2016, has taught in

leadership programs for The Broad Foundation and New Leaders for New Schools, and was a professor at Harvard Business School for 11 years.

Q: Learning is a process of change, whether we're talking about students developing knowledge, administrators restructuring a district, or curriculum developers improving materials. According to your research on organizational change, what are some of the most effective drivers of change in schools?

A: Organizational culture is often looked at as one of many

levers of change, but I think it is underappreciated. My work suggests it is an outsized lever. I think one reason [it is overlooked] is that it feels amorphous and hard to get your hands around. It's easy for central office to say, "Oh, we need to become a culture in which other people's ideas are valued." But how do you actually do that?

I try to demystify culture. It is something you can actually shape and mold. My work shows the connections among three aspects of building culture: task design, composition, and the systems and structures to develop people.

The way you design a task is powerful. Consider, for example,

something as simple as where people sit. Long-standing social psychology research shows that where you locate people affects the extent to which they talk and share ideas. I recently worked with a large urban district that is restructuring its central office from a design perspective so that it will be easier for people to collaborate.

Another lever is group composition. In education, we often talk about getting the right people on the bus. But from a developmental lens, it's not just about *getting* the right people but *developing* people. So the third lever is the systems and structures to develop people. Professional learning can really help shape the culture of a school system.

Q: Educators have been talking a lot about school culture as it is experienced by and related to students. Do you find a link between adult and student culture?

A: Isn't it interesting that we focus on the student piece of culture more than the adult piece? In my research, I have compared educators' reports of the culture and climate of their schools with students' reports in the same schools. I find that if you make the environment psychologically safe for teachers to speak up, ask questions, etc. — guess what? — the same happens for students.

In education, we focus, rightly, on

the instructional core. But we don't spend enough time thinking about the pieces that surround and support the core. One of those pieces is a work environment that allows teachers to learn, grow, and improve without fear.

Q: Frequent turnover among leaders and teachers is a fact of life in school systems. How do you get traction for change in an environment that is constantly shifting?

A: When you assume leadership in a new system or a new role, one thing that's obvious but people don't think enough about is how people in the system are feeling.

I remember one superintendent who described coming into a "wounded" community. Those feelings can arise for many reasons — for example, maybe people in the system invested a lot of energy and time in a new initiative and then the superintendent left and the initiative fizzled out.

If people are feeling wounded, they are not ready for change. In fact, in that case, the new leader is not actually starting out at baseline but with a deficit.

I think we underestimate the importance of beginnings. How you enter a community and how you take charge matters. Listening is one important strategy. Another is focusing on assets and avoiding shame and blame. If you come in to fix things,

people in a wounded state can perceive your actions as blaming, even if you don't intend them that way.

To limit the risk of this, take an asset-based approach. Find the jewels that are there and bring them forward. Another strategy I have seen leaders in other sectors use is to depersonalize the problems. Instead of talking about how an organization isn't meeting metrics or standards, they generalize the problem as one faced by the field or the nation or a geographic region.

That makes it much easier for people to listen. Afterwards, you'll often find people saying, "Yes, I have seen that pattern," where they might have felt defensive if the conversation was immediately about them.

There is some interesting research suggesting that it can also be helpful to maintain certain rituals, routines, or traditions across transitions. For a long time, we thought it was important to just start fresh and bring in new blood, especially when there have been problems or, say, a founder has been forced out. But now we are seeing the importance of enabling some of the positive aspects of the organization to continue so that there is a through-line for staff members.

Q: You studied organizational change in business before focusing on education. What can we learn — and not learn — about change from the business world?

“When I shifted my focus to education, one big difference that struck me is that, in schools, you can’t choose your customer as you can in many businesses like manufacturing.”

A: From my background, I have learned that organizations are organizations, whether they are biotech firms or hospitals or symphonies or schools. There is a lot that applies across sectors. But there are some important differences.

When I shifted my focus to education, one big difference that struck me is that, in schools, you can’t choose your customer as you can in many businesses like manufacturing. Schools are more like hospital environments or service industries. You need to pay very close attention to who is walking in your school building and the best ways to serve them.

The second difference is that education leaders often have to exercise authority over others for whom they have little or no formal control. School boards and parents, for example, are key stakeholders who need to be engaged but do not formally report to principals or superintendents.

When you can’t use top-down formal controls, you need to pay attention to informal power. You need to be cognizant about how you bring people into the problem-solving process. But this is not the way schools traditionally work. Education is wildly hierarchical — far more so than businesses tend to be.

Q: How do you recommend school systems cultivate informal power?

A: Districts I work with are trying to figure out how to bring in more teacher voice. One promising thing districts are doing is figuring out a strategic agenda around a specific problem

of practice, then creating functional teams composed of the people closest to the problem, including teachers and department heads.

This requires some relinquishing of control and can feel a little bit inside out, but this kind of teaming is incredibly important. It’s not just involvement for the sake of involvement, but generating a diversity of ideas from the people who know the customer best and really understand the problem. The approach should be about finding the best ideas.

One of the projects I lead, Scaling for Impact, takes this approach to the question, “How do we scale ideas we know work?” We invite people to apply to a program we run with a specific problem of practice and to bring a function-specific team of no more than eight people.

In the mornings, we provide some concepts and frameworks. In the afternoons, teams work on their problems of practice. I’m encouraged to see more of this approach happening at the university and elsewhere.

Q: In your research and teaching, you frequently use case studies as a learning tool. Why are case studies effective and how could they be used for educator professional learning?

A: We know stories are sticky, and we want ideas to stick when we are trying to teach or make change. Cases are even more likely to be sticky than other kinds of stories because they contain a puzzle and an action that needs to be taken. If you can put people in the shoes of a decision-maker, they have to

do thoughtful diagnosis, planning, and decision-making for action.

Cases are helpful for facilitators’ learning as well as for students’. As the person facilitating the case discussion, you have to actively listen and draw connections, rather than speaking *at* people. You have to move out beyond what you want to say to what other people have to offer. So if you are the one leading the learning, you learn, too.

It takes skill to do this facilitation well. You have to know where you are going because you want the story to emerge, but you also want to arrive at some central aha at the end. This kind of teaching and learning is inductive, and most of us were trained to think deductively, so it can be a little uncomfortable and a little exhausting. But it’s also very exciting.

Interestingly, people tell me that this method of case teaching also helps them create the conditions for people to learn leadership skills. As a case teacher, you are not teaching leadership directly, but teaching in a way that models it and creates the conditions for developing it, because you are drawing in diverse perspectives to move the conversation forward in a collective way.

I believe this approach applies to professional learning in education not just about leadership but more generally. Everyone can benefit from finding ways to create the conditions for a productive, positive, psychologically safe environment for adult learning.

•
Suzanne Bouffard (suzanne.bouffard@learningforward.org) is editor of *The Learning Professional*. ■