Through storms to safe harbor:
LEADING CHANGE IN TURBULENT TIMES

BY JO BETH JIMERSON AND CARA JONES

For years, I (Jo Beth) had a photo of a ship in a storm tacked above my desk. On it was this quote: "Anyone can hold the helm when the sea is calm." This was a reminder that skilled leaders steer safely even through storms, and that is true today. The sea is

decidedly *not* calm: School leaders must lead change amid layers of increased social and political complexity.

In education, the concept of leading change winds through most, if not all, of a leader's job. But the nature of that change is, well, changing. Before COVID-19, leading through change

meant strategically navigating between typical transitions, such as between one program, policy, or practice to another.

This might have been technical, as with a curriculum shift; structural, as in the launch of a new campus; or personal, as when educators transition to new professional roles or adjust to

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new routines after a major life event. Though challenging and emotionally draining, these kinds of changes are not new.

However, now there exists a crucial difference in how people experience changes. In systems before COVID-19, various transitions affected some people indirectly, marginally, or not at all. Those less affected had the emotional capacity to hold space for others' burdens. During and after COVID-19, the spectrum of typical crises continued throughout a pandemic that left no one untouched. This left everyone with less capacity to weather and sustain change.

This evolving landscape led us to consider how leaders can function effectively in turbulent times with purpose and resilience while also honoring the humanity of others *and* not losing sight of leaders' own needs as part of the patchwork of a broader community. We asked: How can school leaders navigate change in tumultuous times without losing the best of themselves in the process?

In our work studying and supporting school and district leaders, we identified the following five principles for leading in turbulent times. These principles enhance the odds that change management is successful and sustainable.

1. Use an accurate map and a trustworthy compass.

For any change process, a trustworthy map is essential. Leaders need to have a clear vision for what a change requires, such as personnel, resources, and time, as well as where they hope the change will take the school — what outcomes are anticipated.

An aspiring leader recently analogized this concept to driving along a winding road in the rain: "You have to keep your focus on where you're going, but you also have to be mindful of possible hazards coming your way," she said. The context of change matters, and a vision without attention to sociocultural and political hazards that can appear at any moment can threaten the success of the journey.

Leaders also need an internal compass that guides ethical action (Starratt, 2012). Do they believe in the change being implemented? Can they authentically encourage others to do what needs to be done? Who will they be throughout this change process, and how will they treat others along the way? These are internal drivers, born of leaders' values, integrity, and sense of purpose.

Having a clear sense of identity — including personal motivators, values, and sources of self-worth — is

imperative for staying the course during a change initiative. Of course, all socially intense work carries emotional labor or the need to sometimes present a facade to others that does not perfectly match internal feelings in the moment — that's just a part of being professional during times of conflict (Hochschild, 2012). But having to constantly act in opposition to one's deeply held emotions and values is draining and increases burnout risk.

2. Attend to the social as much as the technical.

Change is "technically simple, but socially complex" (Fullan, 2016). What looks simple on paper is difficult in practice because schools are always nested in a socially complex, fast-paced, and dynamic context. Schools are people-dense and socially intense. Successful leaders center people and attune themselves to the social and emotional needs of others in these contexts. Here are ways to do that.

Communicate expectations and information related to the change. Do so frequently, transparently, and with authenticity. People need to know the why, the what, and the how of any change initiative.

Balance expectations with resources needed for success.

Employees tasked with change but denied the resources needed to be successful can become frustrated, resentful, or disillusioned. High expectations in a context that lacks adequate educator support is a recipe for a talent exodus.

Acknowledge that change often walks hand in hand with grief or loss. Adopting a new practice, policy, or way of being means letting go of programs, roles, and ways of being or doing that may be familiar and comfortable. Leaders must understand that people will have a range of responses to change. Some will embrace change enthusiastically, and some will be sad, angry, or hesitant. Trying to understand what people are losing — or what they perceive they are losing — is critical to a leader's ability to respond appropriately (Heifetz & Linsky, 2017).

3. Build a cohesive and diverse leadership team.

Any leader who operates in an echo chamber and makes divergent voices unwelcome risks making decisions on incomplete or inaccurate information. More information, from multiple perspectives, increases the odds of good decision-making (Khalifa, 2020).

Creating an atmosphere where diverse perspectives are not just welcome but are intentionally invited fosters trust and increases awareness of potential complications involved in any change initiative.

To lead change well, leaders must create teams that are inclusive and diverse. If a change affects students, parents, teachers, and community members, cultivating a culture where all those voices are included mitigates gaps in understanding and unwanted surprises. Here are strategies leaders can use to foster innovative and inclusive cultures.

Demonstrate vulnerability and authenticity. Change leaders sometimes need to act decisively but shouldn't pretend to have all the answers. Effective leaders acknowledge gaps in knowledge or insight and seek

out information to inform follow-up. "Let me think about that and get back to you" or "I want to give you accurate information, so let me make some calls first" are common parlance for self-confident, self-compassionate leaders navigating change.

Include students where appropriate and possible. Students are often the most affected by change throughout schools and the least likely to be brought into the decision-making process. Children have important perspectives to offer and should have the right to be a part of processes that influence their lives (Bourke & Loveridge, 2018). Leaders should also be intentional in creating teams that have a diverse set of voices that span racial, gender, age, ability, and power lines.

Consider how groupthink can result from "grouplook." If everyone at the table looks the same, attends the same religious communities or activities, participates in the same social, community, and civic circles, the team may be vulnerable to groupthink. This reinforces echo chambers — which is never helpful when facing complex challenges (Smith, 2022). Leaders should be intentional about broadening the voices invited to the problem-solving process and pay attention to who has been intentionally or unintentionally left out.

4. Create anchors and safe harbors.

Too much change is overwhelming. Human beings can only juggle so much at once in terms of cognitive load, which can be thought of as the total demand on one's working memory, or as the "noise" one can endure and still think and act calmly and with intentionality (Hammond, 2018).

Change turns up the volume of the noise that teachers, staff, families, and students navigate as they process information. Too many distractors inhibit the ability to notice events or needs that seem blatantly obvious to others (Chabris et al., 2011). When

people are working in contexts where too much change is happening at once, it's difficult to focus and accomplish challenging work.

Leaders can reduce the cognitive noise in the workplace and support healthy working conditions by creating safe harbors — aspects of the workplace that are held constant. Keeping some routines, practices, and personnel assignments stable mitigates a sense of chaos and creates cognitive space for creativity and complex work. For example, if curriculum materials and testing calendars are changing, maybe shuffling the duty roster or classroom assignments can wait.

One way to think about this is with the children's game of "the floor is lava," where the challenge is to hop from one safe spot to the next. The game can't work if there are no safe landing spaces. Adults need safe landing spots, too. People need spaces, routines, and practices they can count on being consistent when everything else seems awry.

Effective leaders embrace change, but they also create safe harbors for themselves and others. This allows teams to recharge if they need it and move forward secure in the knowledge that, while they may encounter rough waters, there will be predictable spaces of calm for respite along the way.

5. Refresh and refuel.

Change requires focus, energy, time, and effort, but leading change is not sustainable unless school leaders invest in themselves. Just as school leaders should support teachers and staff in prioritizing well-being or risk losing talented teachers to burnout, school leaders need to keep themselves healthy and energized so they are capable of doing the work and staying the course. This is often easier said than done, given the passion and purpose many school leaders bring to their work and the fact that educational work never ends.

Practicing self-compassion is important in mental health and

wellness efforts (Neff, 2022). Being human means making mistakes. Leading change inevitably involves making mistakes, but effective leaders give themselves permission to try, make mistakes and learn from them, and try again. In fact, leaders should practice embracing and learning from mistakes as part of the human experience, rather than perseverating on minor fouls or imperfections.

Accepting criticism and adjusting course where warranted, but *depersonalizing criticism* and distancing where appropriate, can help leaders manage the emotional burdens that can accompany change leadership. Change often invites criticism, and leaders today find themselves sometimes facing vociferous — even uncivil and hostile — critics. Heifetz and Linsky (2017) remind us that while criticism may feel personal, it is often lodged at the position, not the person. If someone else were filling the leader's role and making similar decisions, critics would instead target that person.

Effective leaders *pay attention to and manage stress levels*. Heather Forbes writes, "Each one of us has a certain level of stress from where we operate, as well as a point at which we reach complete overwhelm, where we essentially 'blow' " (2012).

Forbes referred to this as a "window of stress tolerance," though thinking of stress limits in terms of a drinking glass provides an accessible visual. Every leader starts each day with a glass. The glass is filled to a level that represents the stressors — personal and professional — the leader is carrying. For some, the glass is nearly empty. For others, it's already nearing the brim.

For those near the brim, there's not much space left for dealing with unanticipated or emotion-laden problems before they become overwhelmed and risk responding to others in ways that are uncharacteristic, unproductive, or unprofessional.

Leaders need to create space in their glass because with each day comes new stressors as challenges, questions, and problems pop up. Exercise, sleep, hydrating and eating well, engaging with a network of positive colleagues, mindfulness or meditation, faith practices, and other hobbies or disciplines help establish balance, mitigating chronic stress that threatens to push great leaders out of schools.

MOVING FORWARD

Though leading change may feel at times like clinging to the helm of a ship in a storm, school leaders can influence the success of the journey. Attending to these five evidence-based principles can help school leaders successfully navigate change and sustain themselves and others along the way, even at times when clouds gather on the horizon. There are better days and calmer seas just ahead, and school leaders play a substantial role in getting us there together and safely.

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