



Leaders' ability to effectively manage change significantly impacts the success of improvement processes.

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FOCUS ON PRINCIPALS

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CHANGE MANAGEMENT HELPS EDUCATORS EMBRACE CONTINUOUS GROWTH

When I hear the word “pivoting” — as in the theme of this issue of *The Learning Professional* — I am instantly transported back to the tumultuous days at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Educators found ourselves in a constant state of flux, frequently adapting to evolving circumstances. For leaders of schools and districts, this meant thinking flexibly, communicating effectively, and making rapid decisions in the midst of challenges and confusion.

At the time, I was a principal and a member of the Learning Forward Academy, where coach Stacy Winslow introduced me and my academy peers to a helpful way of thinking about change and stress as we grappled with the realities

of life in schools during a pandemic. VUCA, which is an acronym for *volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity*, is a framework originally developed by the U.S. Army War College that offers a lens for understanding and responding to challenges in conditions of unexpected change and destabilization.

Volatility describes rapid, fluctuating conditions, while uncertainty reflects the lack of predictability and potential for surprises or shifts. Complexity recognizes the presence of a variety of interconnected factors at play, and ambiguity is a characteristic that gets at the lack of clarity or ability about how to interpret information (Bennis & Nanus, 1985).

The VUCA framework resonated deeply with my experience at the time. It helped to normalize the feelings and reactions I was having and provided a sense of validation, relief, and empowerment. It also gave me a way to talk about the challenges we were facing, and I began referring to it regularly with my school team.

For me, the pandemic highlighted the invaluable role of frameworks in helping leaders navigate complex circumstances and manage change effectively. Whether navigating a crisis like a global pandemic or a more predictable change like a shift in instructional practice or alterations to daily school operations, effective change management is a vital leadership competency. Change is constant and necessary to meet the goal at the core of educational leadership work — to serve and support all students — and leaders' ability to effectively manage the transitions significantly impacts the success of improvement processes. Grounding this work in a solid change management framework provides leaders with a resource and tools to guide their communities through changes of varied magnitude.

Principal supervisors can play an important role by modeling and supporting the use of relevant frameworks that enhance leaders' understanding of transition dynamics, providing tools for strategic planning, and providing guidance for effective communication and engagement with stakeholders. From my own experience, I advise principal supervisors to choose a favorite framework that helps you to understand and communicate about change processes and to explicitly and regularly use that framework in conversations with principals



about initiatives and improvement efforts.

While there are many models and frameworks available, one of my go-to resources has been Bridges' (2003) model for navigating transitions. Throughout my 14 years as a principal and now as a district leader, I've found it helpful to refer to the phases of transition it describes: *ending*, *neutral zone*, and *new beginning*. In the Bridges model, the ending phase is a stage when people identify and manage losses, followed by the neutral zone characterized by uncertainty and potential innovation. The final stage, new beginnings, is a time when people develop new identities and ways of being and, with renewed energy, have a revised sense of role and purpose.

An example from my district

illustrates how we applied the framework in practice. As we prepared to welcome a new superintendent, principals and central office staff referred to the phases as we discussed our hopes, fears, needs, and things we felt were important to share with the incoming district leader. It helped us to articulate these thoughts, validate the range of reactions, hopes, and concerns we had, and anticipate what future phases might feel like. As a principal supervisor, I continued to periodically reference the model as we navigated the first year with new leadership as a way of normalizing the experiences and emotions of principals during the transition.

In the dynamic field of education, we constantly face changes in response to new research, shifting societal expectations and needs, emerging

technologies, and myriad other factors. Our children deserve schools where educators at all levels are committed to addressing those changes by embracing continuous growth and improvement and resisting the comfort of what is known and familiar. Change management frameworks provide a lens through which we can anticipate, interpret, and respond to transitions so we can foster adaptive, responsive, and innovative school environments where all students thrive.

REFERENCES

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