Collaborative Professionalism

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Embracing an Agile Mindset

by Dr. Simon Breakspear

How leaders can learn to harness change and intelligently adapt as they seek to create continuously better student learning.

The need for a better ‘how’

I remember being in a hotel foyer in Whistler, meeting with the conference committee to put the finishing touches on my contribution to a two-day retreat for district and school leaders across Canada, when a principal pulled me aside to vent her frustration. “Let me just open by saying we don’t need to hear another out-of-town keynote speaker tell us about why education needs to change. I think if you start tomorrow telling us the world has changed and that education needs to shift we might just change our speaker before the coffee break! We know we must change. We get it. Now we want practical advice on how we can lead it.”

For educational leaders the case for change in education is old news. The real challenge is how we can lead it.

Leading meaningful progress in learning and teaching is not an easy task. Educational leaders face ever-increasing complexity and growing expectations. School leaders must: i) ensure the growth of higher-order capabilities for an ever-increasing diversity of learners; ii) adopt and embrace evidenced-informed pedagogical approaches and new technologies and; iii) manage divergent interests and pressures from staff, parents and bureaucratic systems.

Default change processes aren’t working

Faced with the gap between our aspirations for learning and what our schools can consistently achieve, leaders have often initiated a misguided, decades-old formula for school improvement: Write a detailed three-year improvement plan, set specific and broad goals and milestones for improvement, announce changes to the entire staff, seek buy-in, import professional learning on the topic through large-group workshops, expect changes in practice, and a few years later... Repeat the cycle again. Yet, if we are honest with ourselves, while this approach has resulted in new language for our common room discussions, in reality little has sustainably shifted in the day-to-day work of teaching practice.

This default approach to leading improvement would work well if leaders were working with clear and simple solutions to well-known problems in standardized contexts. But that’s not the task facing educational leaders in today’s world. We work in conditions of complexity and ambiguity where the problems and solutions are not clear, and there are no ready-made solutions that can simply ‘plug-and-play’ in our unique school contexts.
Furthermore, our organizations are people-filled, where change involves working to enable the key actors—students, teachers and parents—to shift their daily behaviors and attitudes around learning and teaching. This creates often-overlooked complexities in our change work especially with the potential for unanticipated responses and consequences. In simple terms: the school keeps changing as we are seeking to change it.

Faced with these complexities, school leaders need to be equipped with the capabilities to tolerate ambiguity, adaptively respond to change as it happens, and solve the most important student learning challenges in their context. In short, we need leaders to develop greater agility.

### Embracing agile

An alternative to linear, traditional change approaches can be found in the field of agile development and improvement. Rather than engaging in efforts to create perfect detailed plans and milestones and then implementing the strategy with fidelity, agile approaches embrace the inherent complexity and ambiguity of change processes in complex-adaptive systems.

Agile leaders adopt a fundamental mindset of seeking to get better all the time. They don’t expect rapid large-scale transformation whereby deep change happens through one big surge. Rather they aim to make small, critical changes that they can improve through disciplined action. Every week, every term, every year, agile leaders seek to find creative ways to ensure students make progress in their learning.

### Continuously learn

The capacity to continuous learn-by-doing is crucial to becoming agile. Agile leaders typically seek to get better all the time by following the maxim: start small, learn fast and fail well. They start small because they respect the complexity of the challenges that they face in improving learning. By carving out small slices of the problem, and focusing on specific target outcomes, they make the work of educational improvement more open to disciplined, iterative improvement work.

Agile leaders learn fast and fail well, by keeping an open and curious stance on the nature of the problem and the design of the solution. Agile leaders don’t celebrate failure itself, but the learning and new insights that come from their efforts not yet resulting in their desired outcomes.

They know improvement in complex people-filled systems isn’t linear so they work with the knowledge they have, and remain open to the reality that new information and insights may lead them back to re-evaluate an earlier part of their work, including the very definition of the goals themselves. Agile leaders are obsessed with generating and using evidence to evaluate the impact of improvement efforts, and are willing to reflect, adapt and ‘pivot’ in response to what they are learning about what is working, for whom, and under what conditions.

Agile leaders know that they must work through the school that they have, and take their people on a journey of long-term behavioural and cultural change. They pursue a path of radical incremental change. It is incremental because it grows out of the current strengths of the organization. Agile leaders are continually working out how to create powerful learning approaches that build on and leverage the best of the past. But it can also be radical, in that small high-leverage shifts can add up to quite radical changes in school and pedagogical designs over time.

The evolution of the car is a great example of radical incrementalism: Every year car designers make improvements to car models—whether that improvement is slight or dramatic. From the Model T to the Tesla, the best of the old has been retained. Car models get better every year building on the best of the past but relentlessly improving. In a similar way, agile leaders have a relentless pragmatism in finding ways to get better all the time. They are continually asking four key questions: What can stay the same? What needs to be removed? What can be tweaked? And every now and again, what needs to be radically redesigned?

### Never stop learning

The agile mindset is crucial to the work of leading learning improvement, innovation and change. Deep down agile leaders know and embrace the realization that improvement is not an event, but rather a collective journey—of getting better all the time—with no true end. They embrace the quest, and have a sense that every month, every term, every year, they can find new and better ways to improve student learning. So let’s become agile to create greater impact!

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This article is based on Dr. Simon Breakspear’s forthcoming book called Agile Leadership, to be published by Corwin Press later in 2016. For more information visit www.agileschools.com