

Building a Foundation for Change: Laying the Groundwork for Meaningful Improvement.

SAY WHAT?

When one builds or renovates a home structure, attention is provided to ensuring a solid foundation is laid before beginning the work. Much like constructing a “brick and mortar” establishment, schools need to initiate the change process by laying a strong foundation. Many times, however, changes in schools are unsuccessful as the process did not include the proper laying of groundwork. This entails creating a positive framework and establishing a project management plan.

SO WHAT?

Elements for Creating a Positive Framework

Prior to “change” being addressed, there are three elements that must be established in creating a positive framework. They are:

- Requiring **Open dialogue** which begins by setting clear expectations. Additionally, open dialogue includes stakeholders engaging in active listening and sharing of diverse perspectives on areas of concern.
- Building **Trust and Respect** through understanding that healthy conversations are part of the process and valuing the contributions of all stakeholders by modeling positive interactions and civil behavior towards each other.
- Endorsing **Teamwork** by encouraging a process whereby stakeholders collaborate to develop opportunities that can address the needs of the school successfully.



When intertwined, these three elements lay the foundation for building strong collaborative relationships for change.

Establishing a Project Management Plan

The leader's role is key in establishing and leading the change process and therefore, they must develop a project management plan to provide a structured overview related to the need. This plan involves:

- Defining methods and data to ensure the need for change is adequately vetted,
- A broad statement of the desired outcome(s),
- Creating a "toolbox" of techniques and resources to address the goal(s),
- Outlining strategies to assist in stakeholder management (if the process goes astray) to ensure a continuing positive culture, and
- Establishing timelines for completion of phases.

While a project management plan is key to guiding the work, it is also important to remember that the leader needs to be flexible in the process to account for "unknowns" that will arise.

Case Study

As a school administrator for over 32 years, I have engaged in the change process multiple times. Initially, my approach to "change" was unsuccessful as the elements previously outlined in this blog were missing. It is only when I ensured that the above elements were in place, I found the work to be effective, engaging, and successful in defining probable solutions..

To highlight the need for laying a strong foundation, I want to highlight two work situations prior to my involvement with Catalyst for Educational Change.

Example 1: In District A, much parent contention had been expressed to the Board of Education regarding the state of the Special Education Department in which students' parents and staff were at odds. Initially, a parent-staff group was established to discuss these needs. However, the meetings were quite contentious as a framework for these meetings had not been established. When an administrative change was made, there was a question as to the value of this group continuing. Seeing the detriment in discontinuing this group, a plan was made to change the way this group functioned so that it became result-oriented.

The group re-established themselves first, by working with a facilitator to create a positive framework by establishing norms and outlining communication, behavior, and collaboration techniques that would be used inside and outside of the sessions.

Once these frameworks were established, the group was ready to engage in actual work sessions (within the context of a project management plan) that resulted in collaborative changes within the school setting.





Example 2: In District B, based upon feedback from observations and conversations with administrators and special education teachers and the utilization of data, a special education curriculum committee was established. This committee had the task of creating a curriculum map for all grade levels and core content (reading, math, and writing) by spring so that the plan could garner Board of Education approval and materials and training could be planned for the following year.

A project management plan was created and the positive framework elements were laid out prior to the initiation of the task, so that the work could begin swiftly (due to the rigorous timelines).

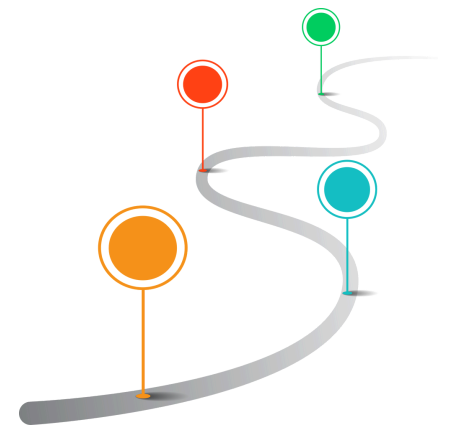
The committee engaged in the work collaboratively and was able to navigate the project management plan well to the point where the leader was the monitor/guider of the work as the group had assumed the facilitator role!

NOW WHAT?

Currently, there are six models for change that are widely accepted:

- Lewin's Model
- The McKinsey 7-S Framework
- Kotter's 8-Step Process
- The ADKAR Model
- The PDCA Cycle
- Nudge Theory

While they have their differences, they each espouse three phases - initiation, implementation, and institutionalization. Embedded in these phases are the key elements for creating a positive framework and establishing a project management plan. However, in order for change to be successful, these two components must be created and planned for prior to beginning the change process as it will set the tone and expectation on how the change process is to proceed.



Blog Authored by Dr. Lea Anne Frost

© Catalyst for Educational Change, 2025. All rights reserved.



**SYSTEM
CONTEXT**



STRUCTURES



CULTURE



POLICIES



DATA



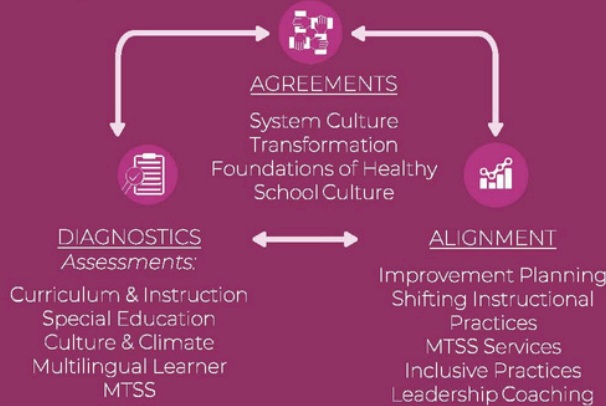
RESOURCES



COMMUNICATION



CAPACITY BUILDING INPUTS



MEASURABLE OUTCOMES



LONG-TERM OUTCOME:

Increased system capacity to orchestrate equitable, inclusive transformation to reach intended outcomes through large-scale organizational change.

© 2025 Catalyst for Educational Change™ All Rights Reserved. www.cecweb.org

When stakeholders work together around shared agreements...the unthinkable is possible. CEC's focus on the **System Agreements** in school reform efforts aim to realign the adult culture and dynamics. We know when systems cultivate healthy, values-based relationships within each school and classroom measurable outcomes are more likely. People matter. And people working together really matters in schools. Developing a strong adult culture as a foundation of a change agenda is what makes CEC stand apart.

CEC uses **System Alignment** to create collective efficacy on the agreed upon improvement aims of a school or district. Our tools and processes are designed to empower those closest to the issues to own the work. Our change management approach intentionally paces improvement through attainable short-term, mid-term, and long-term goals. It is the "secret sauce" of school improvement.

We invite you to explore the role our **Logic Model** might play in your system's large-scale improvement. Our website includes [FREE](#) resources that might be helpful in opening up dialogue with key stakeholders. Let's work together to turn ideas into action, so we can all see what's possible for our schools.

