

# Change Management for the Digital Leap





Over the past several decades, change has become faster and more profound than ever, and organizational change to keep up with that evolution has become increasingly complex. For school districts, the shifts to using digital technologies and changing instruction to become more student-centered involve that kind of complex change.

There are numerous change management frameworks available to help support organizational change, including the Deming Cycle, the Prosci ADKAR process, John Kotter's change management model, the CBAM model of change management, and McKinsey's change management framework. All are useful and each district can use a framework that best suits their circumstances, or even combine frameworks.

When districts implement change, it is easy to focus just on the block-and-tackle definition of what everyone needs to do, but that GANTT chart approach often leads to failed initiatives. Change management involves two elements: Project Management and Culture Management.

Project management includes things like identifying the change you want to make, creating a plan for implementing the change, measuring progress, and iteratively reviewing and refining the change. This is sufficient for what is called first order change, or change within an existing structure. An example would be changing to a new Learning Management System.

More challenging is second order change which requires a new way of seeing things completely, such as when implementing a technology-based, student-centered initiative like Project Based Learning with technology. This kind of implementation calls for a change in the mindset and beliefs of the people implementing it and therefore requires Culture Management.

Change management frameworks that address culture management talk about the need for

- People to understand the reason for the change
- People to develop a demand for the change
- People to have the skills to implement the change
- Removing barriers to change

Barriers to change may be operational, such as required pacing guides that prevent a shift to Project Based Learning or insufficient network bandwidth for students to all access the network when needed. Or the barriers may be cultural and lie with the unarticulated theories of change that teachers hold, such as the belief that all they need to do is cover the material and control the classroom, even though they may not be seeing the academic outcomes they are hoping for.

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# 1. Barriers to Change

Common barriers to change include:

- Culture  
Student centered initiatives, in particular, require teachers to teach in a way that allows students to take ownership of their learning and fosters intrinsic motivation. If the culture of the school is such that teachers themselves don't have the opportunity for ownership and intrinsic motivation, they will be less equipped to recognize and foster such a culture in their classrooms.
- Burnout - Districts may have numerous initiatives playing out in the classroom at once. Many of these play out over a year or so and are then replaced with something new. Teachers may come to ignore new initiatives because they don't see the value and don't believe they will be sustained.
- Evaluations - The evaluations for faculty and administrators may not support the changes that the district is trying to implement, instead focusing on more traditional state-mandated metrics.
- Locus of Control  
Taking the digital leap may mean changing the structure of the district from command-and-control to distributed leadership. District leaders may not be ready to relinquish control while principals and teachers may not be ready to take it up.
- Budget - Changing teaching and learning with technology requires professional development for teachers and money for digital resources. These may not be included in the initial planning for a digital leap.

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## Culture

There are three keys for changing culture. The first is to be very clear about the reasons for change. Before embarking on a digital leap, it is necessary to start by articulating your "Why" for doing it. (See CoSN's resource, *Starting With the Why*.) The second key is to ensure that all staff understand the "why" and can articulate it in their own words. The final key is that all stakeholders go beyond simple buy-in (which is fine for first order change) and take ownership of the change (which is necessary for second order change).

To articulate the "why" it is best practice to include representatives from all stakeholder groups: cabinet, principals, teachers, students, parents. It may take months to collect, refine, and review input but it is time well spent as the different perspectives will lead to a richer outcome than district leaders could develop in isolation, and all stakeholder groups will feel represented.

To ensure understanding, a great deal of conversation and over-communication is necessary. Stakeholders need to be involved in parsing out the "why" with each other, discussing what it means to them personally, and exploring what it means for everyday operations. With this kind of peer reflection, they can begin to internalize and understand the full implications of the "why."

To foster ownership is the hardest of the three keys. Ownership requires internal motivation on the part of teachers and principals and few districts have a culture that fosters internal motivation. Internal motivation occurs when teachers have the opportunity for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Shared development of the “why” can satisfy the need for relatedness. Autonomy and mastery are tied together in a virtuous cycle - as teachers experience more autonomy, they have the motivation to develop increased mastery, which then leads to them being prepared for more autonomy, and so on. The question is where to initiate the cycle. One possibility is to start by offering meaningful, job-embedded professional development followed by offering increased autonomy by letting teachers control the path and pace of their implementation.

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## Burnout

It is not uncommon for a district to have numerous initiatives in the classroom at the same time. Each of these is “one more thing” for teachers who are already squeezed for time to implement. It is not realistic to expect teachers to take ownership of each and every one of these changes.

Instead, when implementing a digital leap, it is critical to recognize that it changes everything - it is second order change that does not stay inside the existing structures. Part of making the digital leap is to look holistically at all the initiatives in the district and determine whether they align with the district’s “why.” Eliminating initiatives that don’t serve the shared vision of the school, or are left over from prior administrations and no longer make sense, makes the remaining initiatives easier to integrate and reduces the teacher workload. Teachers should be able to feel ownership over the “why” and have a clear understanding of how every initiative contributes to fulfilling the district vision. This eliminates the sense of initiatives being layered on top of initiatives and creates a single focus for teachers with many tools for fulfilling it.

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## Evaluations

Evaluations for teachers and administrators are often state-mandated and do not include metrics for the success of the new, holistic approach to the digital leap. The hands of leaders are tied when it comes to these evaluations, and they force administrators to send mixed messages. All the understanding of the new initiative in the world won’t compensate for the message that performance reviews send implying it is not important. This undermines teachers’ ability to take ownership of the digital leap.

However, the hands of the leadership are not tied when it comes to giving other kinds of feedback. Even though the formal evaluation process is constrained, it is possible to offer the kind of authentic recognition of great work that employees crave in addition to the formal process. Districts can engage stakeholders in developing a rubric for excellence in the digital leap transformation and use that for informal coaching of all staff.

If the formal review process is seen as reasonably fair, this kind of informal coaching and private or public recognition can be far more motivational and support teachers in taking ownership. Note that teacher evaluation should continue to be instructionally focused, not technology focused, and indicating how technology is used to supporting instructional goals.

## Locus of Control

In order to shift to a student-centered approach to teaching and learning that is supported by technology, it is critical to shift the school to supporting teacher agency. Teachers need to experience ownership, agency, and intrinsic motivation to know what those really look like and feel like first hand, in order to foster them in their students.

Moving from a top-down command-and-control culture to a culture of distributed leadership improves decision making by having decisions made by those who are closest to the issue. At the same time it supports internal motivation, agency, and ownership for teachers.

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## Budget

It is important to see the digital leap as an investment and that it is important not to look at it as an overall cost-savings program, as some districts do. The investment is in improving teaching and learning and student outcomes and must look both at the value of the new investment [See CoSN's Value of Investment] as well as the cost savings potential of the digital shift.

Nevertheless, money spent in some areas can sometimes be offset by savings in other areas. One key to freeing up money is to identify the things the district will no longer do as it takes the digital leap. Examples may include the elimination of inclement weather make-up days, eliminating site-based summer school in order to do it virtually, not buying textbooks and eliminating copiers.

But developing a budget for the digital leap goes beyond looking at line items. It involves taking a holistic view from scratch of everything the district needs to do in order to function after the digital leap. When looking at an existing budget for places to reduce spending, there will always be sacred cows that are difficult to imagine eliminating. By building a new budget from scratch, it will be more easily seen which programs and line items are necessary, and which are simply organizational habits.

## 2. Operationalizing Your Why

One way to think about change management is that it is the place where the rubber meets the road in turning your "why" into the day-to-day practice of your administrators and teachers. In order for everyone to understand how to implement the "why" it is necessary to establish concrete goals and metrics. In a culture of distributed leadership, they provide the guidance necessary in day-to-day decision making to ensure that everyone is pulling in the same direction. Tracking the metrics makes it possible for all stakeholders to receive feedback on the efficacy of their efforts.

As the digital leap involves transformational change, every part of the district will have goals associated with achieving the "why." Some examples include:

## Finance

- Budgets developed by looking at the new needs holistically to ensure they are aligned with the district's vision and direction
- Line items which are no longer necessary are ruthlessly eliminated

## Instruction

- Milestones for the rollout and implementation of new instructional approaches
- Student outcomes identified and measured beyond simple test scores. Examples may include:
  - Academic Outcomes - Deeper Learning
  - Workforce Skills Outcomes
  - Student Agency

## Technology

- Milestones for the rollout of new technology
- Proactiveness of bandwidth management
- Responsiveness to teacher needs
- Alignment to instructional goals

Clear goals and metrics are what make a district vision understandable to those who need to implement it and make it possible to evolve the program as circumstances change or new issues are uncovered.

# 3. Iterating Toward Success

Change management frameworks tend to be depicted as a series of phases, but it is important to recognize that the process actually cycles through the framework repeatedly, that is, it is a process of continuous improvement. For instance, as the digital leap is implemented, it may become clear that some aspects of the "why" were left out which means that the process does a more lightweight iteration back to the "defining the change" phase of the implementation.

In the process of implementing it is possible, even likely, to uncover that in several schools the real understanding of the change hasn't filtered down to all the stakeholders and that the communication phase of the implementation will need to be revisited.

This iterative approach is essential to the program as a whole as well. As metrics are gathered it will become clear what parts of the implementation are working and where there are delays or obstacles. Sometimes a given approach to achieving a goal will need to be scrapped and replaced with a different approach. Sometimes a small change is all that is necessary.

The key is to monitor metrics closely and to use that data to continually iterate on the design of the implementation for continual improvement. Over time, the district can embrace a culture of improvement which means that even though the initial goals are met, new goals will arise and the district will readily adapt to achieving them.

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## 4. Making the Change

Regardless of which change management framework you choose, or which obstacles you run in to, change management is one of the most challenging tasks of taking the digital leap. This is because the human challenges are so much more pernicious than the technical ones. For a successful transition, consider the following takeaways:

- **Always begin with the “why”**
- Foster understanding and ownership with all stakeholders
- Implement the digital leap holistically, looking at the full suite of initiatives from the bottom up
- Measure progress and iterate for continual improvement

## Resources

Empowered Superintendents: [Starting With the Why](#)  
Empowered Superintendents: [Technology Planning and Investment](#)  
Leadership for Mobile Learning: [Starting With the Why](#)

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