

Research into Practice. Marathon Changes

Article

My (Lucy's) first year of teaching high school choir, I took over a failing program. My mentor suggested I post a sign outside the chorus room that read: Under New Management. I learned that year that small changes are relatively easy to implement. It was easy to change the schedule, change fundraising companies, change my administrator's mind regarding the choir budget. Would you like to know the change that took years to nurture? *A change in the school's attitude toward the choral program*. There was an indifference and lack of investment in the fine arts threaded throughout the culture of that school. It affected my ability to recruit, to hold students accountable for attending performances, and to garner support from other classroom teachers.

Changing this apathy toward the choir program took more time, investment, effort, and leadership than all of those smaller changes combined. When I became a school librarian and once again walked into a program with a less than ideal collaborative culture, the experience in long-term change served me well. It reminded me that deep, cultural change, true *transformational* change, is a marathon and not a sprint.

Much of our professional conversations revolve around the concept of change—changing the way books are organized in a library or changing policy on checkouts and fines. These changes are exciting and oftentimes come with quick recognition and praise. But when we discuss changes in the way we collaborate with teachers or the way the school library program situates itself in the daily life of a school, frustrations mount, and our desire for silver-bullet solutions becomes evident. Differentiating the types of changes we seek may help us understand how to frame our expectations and set our professional goals.

According to *Organizational Transformation: Approaches, Strategies, Theories*, a foundational text on institutional change by Amir Levy and Uri Merry, organizational changes occur in two orders. First-order changes are "those minor improvements and adjustments that do not change the system's core, and occur as the system naturally grows and develops." Second-order changes are deep and meaningful changes in "underlying values or mission, culture, functioning processes, and structure of the organization" (1986, p. 5). By sticking to first-order changes, we implement *co-optative change strategies*. These strategies are "a rational-bureaucratic approach, that is managerial in nature, planned low-level change" (Aguirre & Martinez 2006, p. 56). Why is this a problem? If co-optative changes are the only changes implemented, they can actually hurt an organization's ability to transform. Adalberto Aguirre and Rubén Martínez warn us co-optative changes act "as buffers to protect organizational culture rather than to change it" (56).

Think back to my earlier example of an initial change I implemented in the choir program: a larger budget. While this was a good step forward, it served as a way for my principal to dismiss other concerns I had about the program, like my inability to limit student enrollment in the top choir by audition-only. His stance was that I now had the money to buy music I needed for this group, even if it included students who could not handle complicated works. The larger budget became a co-optative change that protected the school's apathy toward a selective fine arts schedule tied to student ability and learning needs.

This is why we must also pursue second-order changes for our school library programs. It is the second-order changes, called *transformational changes*, that deliver long-lasting results for our students, teachers, parents, and communities. Transformational change is time-consuming. Research tells us it's not only difficult to achieve, it's a challenge to maintain over a long period of time (Adserias, Charleston, and Jackson 2016). Because organizations and people are complex and unique, research identifies a relatively small number of successful transformational change examples (Kezar 2005).

One of the first steps identified in successful transformational change is the development of a shared vision that is championed by a leader (Eckel and Kezar 2003). This step alone can take several years to achieve since it includes your own journey toward professional leadership AND community buy-in to an organizational vision.

I (Michelle) interviewed about fifteen years ago for an elementary librarian position. During the interview, the principal mentioned he thought library instruction should be integrated with classroom content and taught for an authentic purpose, rather than at an arbitrary weekly time. This was the job I had been waiting for! To work in a district that saw library instruction as more than a weekly prep time for classroom teachers was rare. I landed the job and couldn't wait to get started in such a progressive school with a leader who understood the value of flexible scheduling. It seemed like transformational change had already occurred. To make the switch from fixed to flex go smoothly, the principal made flexible scheduling optional the first year, and let teachers know that everyone would switch the following year. This went well; most were willing to give flex a try right away.

Two things happened over the next year that put our schedule at risk. First, I didn't do a good job of connecting with each teacher to make sure their class was getting the instruction it deserved. I spent more time with classes whose teachers valued collaboration and only sporadically met with the rest of the classes. In other words, I did not foster a shared vision for flexible scheduling and embedded library instruction with all teachers in my building. Secondly, unbeknownst to me, the librarians at the other buildings weren't using a flexible schedule, so the classroom teachers there were receiving an extra thirty minutes of prep time each week. Teachers in my building eventually found out about this. One in particular thought it was unfair and approached the director of instruction about it, wanting our school to have a fixed schedule like the other

three. Things escalated and the superintendent became involved. My principal and I met with him to explain why flexible scheduling is best practice, but he ultimately decided we should return to a fixed schedule. I was devastated. What I thought was transformational change was only a co-optative change and not well received.

A few weeks later, in a district-wide school librarian meeting with the director of instruction, the topic of flex scheduling came up again and she offered a compromise. I could do flex scheduling for the standards in our curriculum that made sense to integrate with classroom content (e.g. using online sources to gather information) and fixed scheduling for the more traditional library skills that could be taught independently. Thus, our hybrid schedule was born. Eventually, because of continued collaborative projects, the teacher who was originally unhappy with flexible scheduling came to see the value in it, and eventually became an ally and a friend.

The time and investment required for transformational change is daunting. However, it does us no good to pretend to ourselves and others that changing a school library program's culture, a school's library schedule, or a school's attitude toward collaboration (for example), is a process comprised of easily implemented small, co-optative changes. If we know we are preparing for the marathon of a transformational change, we can adjust our expectations, build in time for rest and recovery, and pursue the resources and skills required for such an endeavor. We begin to realize that transformational change is the work of a career, not the work of an annual evaluation. As you lace up your running shoes and contemplate the changes your program should undergo in the next two, five, and ten years, ask yourself if these are first order, co-optative changes only. Lay out the second order transformational change goals you have in mind for your school library's community and then give yourself permission to take the first of many steps leading others on that journey.

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