

10-2015

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## eCommons Citation

Dolph, David Alan, "SBOs as Leaders of Change" (2015). *Educational Leadership Faculty Publications*. 213.  
[https://ecommons.udayton.edu/eda\\_fac\\_pub/213](https://ecommons.udayton.edu/eda_fac_pub/213)

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# SBOs as Leaders of Change

*Effective change models are important elements of successful leadership in a changing world.*

By David Dolph, Ph.D.



**F**ederal and state education mandates have prompted more changes in PreK–12 education in the past several years than during any other time in American education history. The sheer volume of changes and their complexity have put school business officials to the test as never before.

Among the more challenging issues for school business officials are the budgetary implications of the Affordable Care Act, special-education regulations, new food-service mandates, and safety and environmental regulations.

School business officials and other education leaders must lead the district and the community through the changes brought on by those mandates. How do they do that effectively? Many models for leading change are

available, such as Kotter’s Eight-Step Change Model (Kotter 2007), which breaks change leadership into eight steps:

- Create a sense of urgency.
- Form a powerful coalition.
- Create a vision for change.
- Communicate the vision.
- Remove obstacles.
- Create short-term wins.
- Build on the change.
- Anchor the changes in the organizational culture.

Other models are less specific, and some are more complex. District leaders should use a model for leading change that is consistent with their district’s organizational norms and behaviors.

## Considerations when Leading Change

Regardless of the change model they use, school district leaders should do the following as they formulate their strategy:

**1. Have a clear understanding of the proposed change, and ensure that people understand the relevance of the proposed change.** This point is important whether it's a new accounting procedure or new food-service requirements that will affect the budget. Clearly identify and communicate why there is a need to change, and explain how the change will lead to increased organizational and individual success and satisfaction.

The best way to emphasize the relevance or importance of the upcoming change is through ongoing communication. Effective communication is a two-way process of providing and gathering information; therefore, district leaders should hone their skills in active listening so they can gauge attitudes and perceptions about the intended changes and react accordingly.

**2. Consider potential reactions to the change.** Whether a relatively simple procedure, such as modifying lunch schedules in schools, or a more complex process, such as transitioning from one school information management system to another, a change can affect people's attitudes, their relationships with others, and the culture and climate of the organization. Changes can make people feel insecure, incompetent, threatened, afraid, confused, or angry. Or they can prompt a sense of excitement and eager anticipation. Be prepared for a wide range of emotions and reactions.

**3. Consider the relationship between the impending change and the overall mission, vision, long-range plans, and goals of the school system.** School systems have little or no voice in federal or state government mandates. Nevertheless, if the change or the process of leading the change is compatible with the existing organizational culture, chances for success increase.

Changes that run counter to the current culture can be difficult to implement. Therefore, it's important to have a clear understanding of organizational culture and norms and to modify the leadership strategy as needed.

**4. Ensure that resources are sufficient for the implementation.** New procedures or processes often require additional resources. Determine what resources are needed and explore options for procuring them.

**5. Involve those who will be most affected by the change.** Communicating the need for the change, listening to individual and group concerns and ideas, and providing opportunities for genuine feedback and involvement will go a long way toward creating buy-in and developing a coalition of supporters within the district who can dramatically improve the climate and the chance for success.

As much as possible, involve stakeholders in the planning and implementation of the change. School business officials who are willing to share the decision making will be in a better position to lead change successfully.

**6. Adhere to the original plan to implement the change, yet be flexible.** Sometimes, new requirements or regulations require rapid action. Even so, when possible, allocate sufficient time to implement the changes, giving employees time to learn and adapt to different processes and procedures.

## School business officials who are willing to share the decision making will be in a better position to lead change successfully.

Adjust plans as needed, which can be difficult. On the one hand, there is a natural tendency to be assertive and stay the course. On the other hand, if the ultimate goal is to implement and sustain change, and if a strategy needs to be altered to accomplish that goal, it is wise to adopt a more contingency-based approach and accommodate changing circumstances.

Timely and appropriate adjustments to original plans can win a great deal of employee support if a trusting relationship with those most affected by the change already exists.

**7. Provide sufficient opportunities for ongoing professional development associated with the change.** Asking employees to adapt to new ways of behavior without providing appropriate training and allowing for feedback sets the district up for failure. Employee morale will suffer, trust will evaporate, and change may falter if people are not adequately trained in the new processes or procedures.

## Creating a Foundation

Because change is inevitable, school business officials must know how to lead and facilitate change effectively. It begins with an understanding of the change process and a model for leading change that considers the culture and climate of the district. With that foundation, school district leaders increase their chances for success.

## Reference

Kotter, J. P. 2007. Leading change: Why transformation efforts fail. *Harvard Business Review*, January 2007, pp. 96–103. <https://hbr.org/2007/01/leading-change-why-transformation-efforts-fail/ar/1>.

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