The challenge of leading change

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I have recently returned to the role of Director of HertsCam having taken a back seat in 2020-21 to concentrate on writing a book. At the beginning of this term, I returned to the Managing Group to find that my colleagues had embraced a new way of communicating and file sharing – Google Workspaces. Learning how to use this technology for me has been painful; it reminded me of reading, many years ago, Michael Fullan's book about the 'meaning of change' (Fullan, 1982; 2007). I was a young teacher at the time and very enthusiastic about initiating change. What that book taught me was that change for some threatens to render their skill set redundant which leads to anxiety and disorientation. That was what I have been feeling about this Google thing. Change can make you feel stupid and out of step; you might be tempted to think that colleagues who have already mastered the new practice are looking on you as a dimwit or a luddite. HertsCam is a network for change agents so understanding what change feels like is of great interest to us; it is crucial in determining how to navigate a process of development.

The complexity of change

In schools, change is not just about new materials or new strategies (Fullan, 1993). These may have been prepared and packaged to a high standard, but invariably they require a new skill set and considerable practise before expertise and competence is achieved. It is however more complicated because what underpins competence is a set of values and proposals for change will inevitably challenge the values held by individuals and those that underpin established practice. Take for example the idea of using small group work in the classroom. If you want to develop the use of this strategy in a school where it is not used very much you are likely to find that some colleagues will resist the change. They will find it difficult to learn how to use this strategy, not because they are unable to master the skill or remember the steps in the strategy. The real problem is that the proposal will challenge colleagues' underlying values and beliefs about students and the nature of learning.

If change requires a new approach to materials, competence and values, the implication for practice is that the change agent needs to analyse the professional culture within which the change is envisaged (Deal & Peterson, 2009; Prosser, 1999). This might reveal something about the obstacles and opportunities and help us to see where the work has to be done. We might ask questions such as:

What are the dominant beliefs and values here?
What are the normal ways of teaching and learning here?
What are my beliefs and values about this or that practice?
What is the gap between my values and beliefs and the practice I see around me?

Clearly, the change agent needs to assess the way that the nature of the school as an organisation produces both affordances and hindrances to change. My reading early on in my career included a paper about the 'myth of the hero innovator'.

> ... you can produce, by training, a knight in shining armour who, loins girded with new technology and beliefs, will assault his organisational fortress and institute changes both in himself and other at a stroke. Such a view is ingenuous. The fact of the matter is that organisations such as schools and hospitals will, like dragons, eat hero-innovators for breakfast.
>
> (Georgiades & Phillimore, 1975)

This helpful contribution to the debate forty-six years ago still resonates today.

Resistance to change

Whenever teachers engage in discussion about the challenge of leading change, the subject of 'resistance' is likely to arise. In relation to the pace at which change can occur, there are many categorisations available (e.g. Rogers, 2003) which tell us that innovations always have their 'early adopters', 'laggards' and so on; information which some people might find reassuring. However, it is perhaps more useful to think about why colleagues might resist change. One reason, as I exemplified in the opening paragraph, is that change can undermine colleagues' confidence and self-efficacy.

Resistance to change might also be explained by applying the 'micro-politics' perspective (Ball, 1987; Hoyle, 1986). In any organisation people have their own sense of ownership and a need to feel in control. They are likely to be invested in a familiar way of working and have a power base that may be threatened by a proposal for change. Perhaps the following vignette illustrates this:

> Joanna is a teacher with a role of responsibility for special educational needs and has built up over time a wealth of resources in a special room where pupils are sent to have additional support in small groups. This 'special needs room' has become Joanna's exclusive domain and she also retains control over the ways in which she works and has become very comfortable with these. Along comes a new teacher, Jasleen, who is concerned about the effect of this withdrawal approach on the pupils in her class. She suspects that it reinforces their own limited view of their own efficacy. She asks colleagues if they would like to meet with her to discuss this concern. Joanna is upset by this. She goes to see the Headteacher and says that Jasleen has no right to call such a meeting because the subject matter is her business. Joanna tries to put pressure on the Head "How could you undermine my position? What does this Jasleen know about special needs?" etc etc.

The lesson here is that, if we want to manage change and make it stick, we have to take account of the web of vested interest and the distribution of power that has formed over many years. There is also a lesson here for anyone contemplating first steps in a process of development work. Change agents need to have a high degree of micro-political awareness.

Implementation – antithetical to innovation

The term innovation has been used within industrial and commercial settings for many years, but should we use it as a noun – *an innovation* – or should we use it to refer to a process? In his pamphlet about innovation networks, David Hargreaves said this:

> The text-book definition is that innovation is *the exploitation of a new idea that through practical action adds value to a product, process or service*. In education, of course, we rarely create a new product: but teachers constantly make process innovations (the way they teach or design lessons, the school day or year) and services (the way they advise and support students and parents). Under the umbrella of *school transformation*, it might be simpler to say that for teachers innovation is mainly a matter of *learning to do things differently in order to do them better*. For teachers, most innovation is the creation of new professional knowledge about their work.

> (Hargreaves, 2008)

The use of the term innovation as a noun reflects what is in my view an unhelpful reification. It is convenient for policy makers to think that changes to practice can be designed by experts, disseminated and implemented at the school or classroom level, but this approach is deeply flawed. The concept of implementation seems to me to be antithetical to innovation because it neglects consideration of the context, its complexity and antecedents.

When Michael Fullan put down the slogan: 'Change is a journey not a blueprint' (Fullan, 1993) he was arguing that change is not about implementing a pre-designed, pre-fabricated, finished practice. Rather it is about initiating a process that will be to some extent unpredictable.

The process of development

The idea of change as a journey or a process of development is a key feature of HertsCam programmes in which we use the term *development work* to refer to a process which involves the following:

> …strategic, focused and deliberate action intended to bring about improvements in professional practice. It takes the form of collaborative processes featuring activities such as consultation, negotiation, reflection, self-evaluation and deliberation which take place in planned sequence.
> (Frost, Ball, Hill, & Lightfoot, 2018: 10)

Development work is clearly a process which takes time and is relatively unpredictable, but the investment pays off. The process of development necessarily involves consultation and collaboration which means that, while the process of change may be slow, it is sure. This is because colleagues are able to contribute to and shape the process. They are therefore able to develop a sense of ownership and commitment to the innovation which increases its chance of survival.

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