Embracing Agile Leadership for Learning – how leaders can create impact despite growing complexity

Dr Simon Breakspear, Executive Director, Agile Schools, Research Fellow, The Education University of Hong Kong

The need for a better 'how'

I remember being in a hotel foyer in beautiful Whistler a few years back, meeting with the conference committee to put the finishing touches on my contribution to a two-day retreat for a district in British Columbia, when a principal opened up the discussion to vent her frustration about her typical conference experiences: "Let me just open by saying we don't need to hear another out-of-town keynote speaker tell us about why education needs to change. I think if you start tomorrow telling us the world has changed and that education needs to shift we might just change our speaker before the coffee break! We know why we must change, and we even have a good idea of what we should focus on. Now we want to know how we can lead it."

I completely empathised with her point of view (and appreciated her vocalising it!). In the work that I had been doing with school and system leaders around the world I was hearing a common refrain: leaders don't want another what, they want a better how.

The expectations on school leaders to effectively lead improvement, innovation and change have never been greater. Schools are being asked to lift student achievement in literacy and numeracy, develop high-order capabilities, meet the needs of an ever-increasing diversity of learners, embrace research-informed practice, design innovation learning environments, create collaborative cultures, and harness rich data to evidence impact. There has never been a more exciting time to be involved in the work of educational change. Yet, coupled with the new opportunities, are growing levels of complexity, ambiguity and resistance. Working out how to meet these often competing demands in a context of continual change will require agile leaders of learning with the capabilities to improve learning and teaching, and navigate change, within the complex-relational environments of contemporary schools (Breakspear, 2016; Lichtenstein, *et al.*, 2006).

Complex and relational challenges

Leading meaningful and sustainable changes in teaching and learning are complex-relational problems not just complicated. The theoretical and practice difference between facing complicated and complex problems is critical (Snowden and Boone, 2007). When facing complicated problems leaders can map out the step-by-step response required from the start to finish before they begin. The improvement work is a process of analysis, identifying the evidence-based answer and then following the plan to implement the solution with fidelity. Traditional change leadership does this well. The leader tries to figure out the answer for everyone, and then tries to build buy-in so that they stick to the plan. Change is viewed as a simple, predictable and linear process. This approach works well when managing resources or ensuring a certain amount of instructional or professional learning time is accounted for. Budgeting and timetabling in a school can be a nightmare of a task, left to a poor deputy principal over a few late nights, but they are complicated problems not complex.

In contrast to complicated problems, changes in teaching practices and improvements in student learning across a range of valued outcomes are complex problems that require a process of continual experimentation, learning and refinement. There are no ready-made solutions that can simply 'plug-and-play' into a unique classroom and school context.

Whilst the growing educational research evidence base can support the design of

frameworks and interventions that synthesise 'what works best' (e.g. Hattie, 2008; EFF, 2016), the core challenge is to find ways to ensure that 'what works best' can actually work across the unique contexts of a diverse school system or classrooms (Durlak, DuPre, 2008; Lendrum, Humphrey, 2012). Any change in roles, relationships, workplace practices or organisational routines have ramifications for how people – students, staff and community – will need to engage in the teaching, learning and schooling process. In addition, leaders need to lead their people through a process of learning new values, beliefs and behaviours. This creates often overlooked complexities in our change work with the potential for unanticipated responses and consequences (Axelrod, Cohen, 1999; Miller, Page, 2007). As a consequence, models of simple, sequential improvement moving from analysis, to planning to implementation and then evaluation are bound to frustrate us.

Take for example the implementation of a new research-based approach to early-years literacy. Whilst the development of an approach to literacy based on the best available research evidence is a complicated activity, the effective implementation of the program across diverse school contexts is truly complex (Meyers, Brandt, 2015). There is no clear recipe of steps that educational leaders can use to move through from beginning to end to ensure an improvement in literacy learning outcomes. The introduction of this program will involve substantial changes and learning by many teachers and students all of whom will need to engage in sustained behavioural and attitudinal change (Spillane, Reiser and Reimer, 2002). The classrooms themselves, even within the same school, will differ substantially depending on the diversity of student learning needs. Teachers will vary considerably in their background knowledge, pedagogical expertise and relationships with students (Coburn, 2004). Furthermore, instructional coaches and middle-level leaders tasked with the work of professional learning and development will have large variations in their capacity to build the knowledge, skills and motivation of staff to unlearn their old approaches to literacy and adopt the new approach (Blazar, Kraft, 2015). This is all complicated further by potential changeover of staff each year where the hard-won capacity which has been built is lost during the course of the implementation period. In my experience it is possible that at the end of a three-year implementation process none of the teachers from year one are still working in the same school or within the year groups of focus. As a consequence of these sources of variability in any school there is no clear, simple set of predictable steps to achieve the desired outcome that can be seen from the outset. It is a complex problem, and traditional approaches to leading change are unlikely to be effective in achieving the levels of student learning growth we desire.

Embracing agile approaches

Traditional change approaches push school leaders to employ a misguided decades-old formula for school improvement: write a detailed multi-year improvement plan, set broad objectives for improvement, define specific milestones for progress projected years into the future, announce changes to the entire staff and then implement with fidelity. At the end of the process, evaluate the impact and start the process again. The problem is that the challenges we now face in education don't really fit with this approach. More often than not we face situations where we are unsure about the problems we are trying to solve and the solutions that might work in our context.

The good news is, there are approaches to leading change – agile ways of working – that are more suited to the complex and deeply human dynamics of effective school change. The ability to be agile – responsive, quick to spot emerging problems or opportunities, and work in short-iterative cycles of adaptation, learning, and improvement – is a critical meta-capability for the future of school leadership at all levels.

Rather than engaging in efforts to create perfect, detailed plans and milestones and then implementing the strategy with fidelity, agile approaches embrace the inherent complexity and ambiguity of change processes in complex-relational environments. As complex challenges do not have a simple, neat plan that can be seen from the beginning, agile leaders must work with the knowledge they have, and remain open to the reality that new information and insights may lead them back to re-evaluate an earlier part of their work, including the very definition of the goals themselves. In agile approaches, it is assumed that you can never know everything from the beginning of the process, and much of what you think you do know may turn out to be wrong. To act under these circumstances educational leaders must increase what I have coined their *ambiguity tolerance*; to help their teams to get moving before they feel entirely ready, because that is the only way to become ready to attack the problem. In the past educational leaders often felt they needed to assert their credibility by knowing the answer and having a clear and detailed plan before they began the change work. Now they must lead by demonstrating the capacity and commitment to rapidly 'learn-by-doing'.

Evaluative thinking

Agile Leaders discipline their inquiry processes by seeking and harnessing evidence of impact throughout the change process, rather than waiting for a final evaluation. This evidence collection is used to steer and refine our efforts in the process of leading the change. The concept of 'evaluative thinking' provides a helpful framework for educational leaders to embrace this new approach to evidence and innovation. Earl and Timperley (2015) have described this process:

"Having a continuous cycle of generating hypotheses, collecting evidence, and reflecting on progress allows … opportunities to try things, experiment, make mistakes and consider where they are, what went right and what went wrong, through a fresh and independent review of the course and the effects of the innovation" (p. 8).

The collection and analysis of evidence is the engine room of learning in agile change and implementation. Leaders need to keep an open and inquiry stance in response to the evidence they are collecting. Rather than wanting to know whether the innovation worked or not in a final sense, they are interested in a more nuanced understanding of what is working now, for whom, when and under what conditions. This approach to evaluation is appropriate for agile, iterative work, as it is sensitive to the the realities that implementation work is an unfolding endeavour with the need for continual learning, and responsiveness to roadblocks and challenges. Each new cycle of evidence enables the formation of a new iteration of the approach with a higher likelihood of creating the desired impact on student learning.

Developing psychological safety

The active development of relational trust and psychological safety is crucial to any sustainable educational change process. Leading change in schools is a social process; it requires winning

and sustaining the trust and discretionary effort of the educators and students who make up a school's culture and its daily practices (Bryk, Schneider, 2002; Moolenaar, Daly, 2012). The importance of trust in change processes cannot be over-stated. Google's data-based studies of leadership qualities in its own organisation found that high-impact managers were distinguished by the extent to which their teams saw them as consistent and trustworthy (Bock, 2015, pp. 187–195). These qualities are key for team members to feel that they have freedom to take risks and learn the new approaches. The work of Harvard academic Amy Edmondson has highlighted the critical importance of actively building 'psychological safety' when seeking to improve the performance of teams (Edmondson, 2012). In the context of schools it will be critical to attune middle-level leaders to the need to create team dynamics, where trialling (and often failing!) with new approaches is supported within a culture of professional learning.

Adopting an Agile Change Process

As outlined in Figure 1, agile change is a collective process of disciplined inquiry that moves through three phases:

1 Clarify
2 Incubate
3 Amplify.

1 Clarify – Pursuing less but better

Clarify is the first phase of an agile change process. Here leaders work with their teams to determine the smallest number of changes necessary to have the desired impact on learning. Schools have never been busier places and the lives of educators never more hectic. More initiatives, programs and 'next big ideas' enter our working lives, creating a state of low-impact exhaustion. The reality is that our schools and our staff have only so much time and human resources to devote to a new initiative. Financial and human capital are scarce. Educators already bear a high cognitive load in their day-to-day work. They are thus very sensitive to change fatigue and exhaustion (Figure 1).

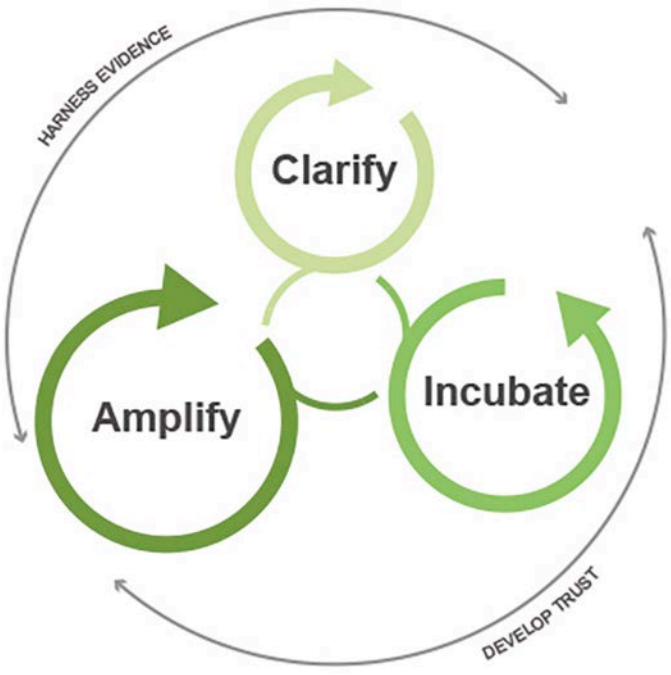

Figure 1: The three phases of agile change

Agile Leaders adopt a counter-intuitive approach of maximising their impact by focusing on the disciplined pursuit of less but better. Agile leaders know that by focusing their teams' limited time, energy and resources on the smallest number of high-leverage initiatives, they can actually achieve greater impact. Prioritising a small number of areas for improvement is crucial to achieving impact. Agile Leaders trade the low impact of doing too many things for the high impact of choosing to create tangible improvement in a few areas at a time. Prioritisation and selection of which areas to improve is a crucial process based on the evidence of current student learning, and the capacity of the team or organisation to respond. Unrealistic improvement plans cause serious pain and frustration and typically result in capitulation by staff halfway through the implementation process. Leaders work with their teams to generate 'good enough' answers to three critical questions:

1 What impact are we seeking to make and why?
2 What evidence-informed changes will we make?
3 How will we know if it is working?

2 Incubate – Searching for solutions

Complex challenges aren't best solved by scaling up a ready-made solution from outside. Agile leaders need to be able to engage in a search and discovery journey of designing short, disciplined experiments in order to test and adapt solutions in their unique context. Rather than an 'implementation-as-delivery' approach, leaders should adopt a more responsive style of implementation-as-learning, where planning and 'doing' are linked through rapid iterative cycles of learning. As Tony Bryk and colleagues write in their work applying improvement science in education, "Deliberately learning our way to better outcomes is, in fact, how organisations improve quality and how interventions scale" (Bryk, *et al.*, 2015, p. 177).

During the Incubate phase, volunteer teams work through a systematic approach to develop, refine and test new approaches. They move through multiple design and test loops in order to learn how to gain improvement in their unique context. The key discipline here is to be willing to implement on a small scale, so that the team can more readily learn through real world development cycles. Early experiments can be simple, fast, cheap prototypes. Later on, as the evidence of effectiveness and useability increases, leaders can run more structured test cycles as they seek to prove that the approach can have a positive impact on a small scale within their school.

This incubation phase can help to de-risk the early phase of the innovation and improvement work, and ensure that leaders only scale-up across their schools what they have already proven to be effective. Furthermore, disciplined incubation can support the process of gaining buy-in from more sceptical colleagues, as they can see a working 'proof point' of the change within their own school context.

3 Amplify – Getting more of what is working

The capacity to amplify is critical for leaders who are working to move from a pocket of excellent or innovative activity towards a new common practice across the organisation. Amplifying is all about mastering the change dynamics needed to curate processes of social learning, behaviour change and the creation of

new organisational routines. Agile leaders pay close attention to simplifying the change required so that the new approaches are both more effective and easy to pick up and adopt. During this phase, leaders work hard to build capacity by curating opportunities for social learning between colleagues. They also set up the physical environment, timetable and incentives to support the easier adoption of the changes. The goal of amplification is to create new organisational routines and cultures that enable the new approach to become embedded. Amplification can take six to 18 months. But it is worth moving slowly in order to sustainably shift routines and habits of practice.

Better all the time

Leaders of learning are being asked to tackle learning challenges that are both important and complex. Unfortunately, the traditional education improvement planning and change management approaches provided to (or often forced on!) school leaders are not necessarily helping them with the pioneering change tasks in front of them. Default approaches to change are often too rigid, and built on inaccurate assumptions of simple linear change that can be planned and then delivered over a period of one to three years. Furthermore, they don't take into account the complexities of working with people nor the ambiguities of innovating in unfamiliar territory, beyond their current repertoire of available 'know-how'.

Agile Leadership offers a hopeful path forward with a new dynamic approach to the work of leading educational change. Agile leaders adopt a fundamental mindset of seeking to get *better all the time*. They don't expect rapid large-scale transformation whereby deep change happens through one big surge. Rather they aim to make small, critical changes that they can improve through disciplined action. Deep down agile leaders know and embrace the realisation that improvement is not an event, but rather a collective journey – of getting better all the time – with no true end. They embrace the quest, and have a sense that every month, every term, every year they can find new and better ways to improve student learning. So let's become agile to create greater impact!

This article is based on Dr Breakspear's forthcoming book called Agile Leadership, to be published by Corwin Press early in 2018. For more information about agile leadership and agile approaches to teacher learning visit www.agileschools.com

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About the author

Dr Simon Breakspear is a Research Fellow of the Asia Pacific Centre for Leadership and Change at The Education University of Hong Kong. His research focuses on international benchmarking of school system performance, leadership development and implementation science. Simon is also the executive director of Agile Schools, which works globally to develop the adaptive capacity of school leadership teams. Simon holds Bachelors degrees in Psychology and Teaching, a Masters of International and Comparative Education from the University of Oxford and a PhD in Education from the University of Cambridge. He has been both a Commonwealth and Gates Scholar.