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LEADING COLLABORATIVE CHANGE IN AN EDUCATIONAL ORGANIZATION

Abstract

Organizations can effectively apply a variety of strategies for leading and accelerating desired change. As a practical illustration, this article evaluates an organizational change effort within the United States' Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA), analyzing the restructuring of its worldwide school system through Kotter's accelerators for leading change. A cornerstone of DoDEA's effort was the creation of three Centers for Instructional Leadership (CILs), whose mission is to improve student achievement by developing educational leadership and supporting instructional excellence. The development of DoDEA's CILs presents a valuable case for understanding the leadership necessary for successful organizational change, particularly in light of Kotter's model.

Introduction

Since a Nation at Risk was published in 1983, several waves of educational reform have surfaced (Berends, 2004), most recently with the 2015 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, named Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). ESSA challenges educators to rethink their roles in order to develop structures that encourage distributed leadership and support cross-curricular and cross-level collaborations. This paradigm shift takes full advantage of the growth mindset (Dweck, 2008), evaluating the outcomes of previous reforms and embracing the most promising strategies for school improvement.

In the field of leadership education, curricula often emphasize the importance of change as a product of the leadership process (Lamm, Lamm, Rodriguez, & Owens, 2016, p. 1). Indeed, Boylan and Turner (2017) argue, "developing organizations capable of adapting in a dynamic operating environment is an essential competency of organizational leaders and a critical function of successful organizations" (p. 194). In the context of public education, Woulfin and Weiner (2019) highlight the importance of school-level leaders as catalysts in the change process, yet capacity-building efforts must be framed appropriately. Unfortunately, though leadership scholars have long considered strategies for effective approaches to organizational change, the published literature has not kept pace with practical strategies (Wolf & Floyd, 2017). As a result, leadership practitioners have tended to "get stuck" in the process (Nash, Manning, & Heiser, 2019).

Among potential frameworks for application, Kotter's (1996) Eight-Stage Process for Leading Change has become highly recognized for its step-by-step guidance for leading organizational change

by-step guidance for leading organizational change (Appelbaum et al., 2012; Hughes, 2016). However, recognizing today's environment requires a never-ending approach to change, Kotter (2014) reframed his approach with accelerators for change (rather than stages). One of the merits of this framework is the alignment with motivation theory and improvement science in education. In fact, Kotter's framework was a key resource for explaining a recent evaluation of Professional Learning Communities supporting teacher collaboration and student achievement (Evens, 2019). Importantly, Kotter's (2014) accelerators focus on behavior, an outward expression of cognitive and emotional responses to the environment during the organizational change process (Deci & Ryan, 2012; Mitra, 2017; Oreg, Vakola, & Armenakis, 2011).

This paper describes the use of Kotter's (2014) eight accelerators for change in the organizational change process within United States' Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA). While DoDEA's change process is ongoing, a post-hoc analysis of early evaluation reports presented an opportunity to highlight key insights and share them with leadership educators.

DoDEA - The Educational Organization

DoDEA is an educational organization that operates accredited primary and secondary schools worldwide for the families of active duty military and Department of Defense civilian employees. Locations span 11 countries in Europe and Asia, seven states, and the U.S. territories of Guam and Puerto Rico (DoDEA, 2018a). As a result of its global reach and ability to implement context-specific best practices that are free from external mandate, DoDEA serves as a unique example of planning and structures for school improvement with implications that may be important to domestic and international school systems.

With the view to restructure the organization to focus on improved student achievement, in 2014, DoDEA's new director identified and announced the following two priorities for the organization:

- Priority 1: The development and implementation of a standards-based educational system that effectively aligns DoDEA's curriculum, instructional framework, and assessment system to DoDEA's more rigorous, college- and career-ready academic standards.

- Priority 2: The establishment of an organizational structure with the capacity to effectively manage, operate, and sustain a high-quality, worldwide, unified pre-K–12 school system. (DoDEA, 2018c, p. 4)

To support the restructuring effort, DoDEA created three Centers for Instructional Leadership (CILs), one for each region (Americas, Europe, and Pacific). Charged with carrying out the two organizational priorities, the CILs use the DoDEA Blueprint for Continuous Improvement to help inform their work. The Blueprint describes the main objective of the CIL:

> Regional hubs and field offices made up of a highly trained cadre of staff designed to increase capacity for district and school leadership and, ultimately, teacher leaders. The primary objective of the CIL is to ensure high academic achievement for DoDEA students by developing high-impact superintendents, principals, and Instructional Support Specialists (ISSs). (DoDEA, 2018b, p. 20)

Each CIL is headed by a Chief of Instructional Leadership Development (CILD) who is charged with establishing and maintaining networked improvement communities within their respective regions. A Networked Improvement Community

is a collective of human and technical resources brought together to focus attention on helping the community get better at getting better (Bryk et al., 2015). When developing a networked improvement community, creating a common language is an important step toward creating a shared understanding of a problem (Park et al., 2013). To aid in the development of these regional networked improvement communities and the common language for the continuous school improvement efforts, four functions for the CILs were communicated to all levels of the organization: (1) Systemic Leadership Development and Support, (2) Professional Development for Systemic Priorities, (3) Learning Networks, and (4) Innovative Best Practices (DoDEA, 2016).

Kotter's Model

Based on an updated understanding of the change process, Kotter (2014) identified eight accelerators to ensure purposeful, coordinated execution (Figure 1): (1) Create a sense of urgency, (2) Build a guiding coalition, (3) Form a strategic vision and initiatives, (4) Enlist a volunteer army, (5) Enable action by removing barriers, (6) Generate short-term wins, (7) Sustain acceleration, and (8) Institute change. Each of these accelerators must be framed around a "big opportunity." Further, Kotter (2014) reported that successful approaches to change distinguish between leadership and management, placing more emphasis on leadership to create an inseparable partnership between two systems: network and hierarchy. This approach is highly complementary with the vision from the DoDEA (2018b) Blueprint, which is to create "Excellence in Education for Every Student, Every Day, Everywhere." This vision informs the work of the CILs.

Figure 1. Kotter's 8 Accelerators for Leading Change. Reprinted with permission from Kotter International. Available at https://www.kotterinc.com/8-steps-process-for-leading-change/

In order to evaluate the change process, DoDEA partnered with a research university (i.e., Virginia Tech) to conduct document analyses of multiple data sources, including CIL quarterly reports, minutes from various meetings, and outcomes from a summer instructional leadership symposium. CIL quarterly reports included priorities, activities, and plans of each region, as well as feedback on professional learning sessions conducted by the CILs. Meetings held between the CILDs and Headquarters (HQ) highlighted both decisions and key considerations. Analyses also examined the learning outcomes from a summer instructional leadership symposium attended by CIL personnel and district superintendents. An additional source of data was meeting minutes from the Leadership Advisory Board (LAB), an advisory group to help the CIL leverage DoDEA's internal expertise and integrate field-based knowledge and practices.

Connecting CIL Activity with Kotter's Accelerators for Change

The expected outcome from the minutes of meetings held with the CILDs and HQ was categorized according to Kotter's (2014) accelerators for change initiatives. Comparing the findings from year one and two, a shift in the peak of activity occurs (Figure 2). In the first year, the CIL placed more emphasis on forming a strategic vision and initiatives; whereas in the second year, the CIL placed more emphasis on generating short-term wins. This shift not only depicts an overall growth mindset within the organization but also highlights the three CILDs' contributions in catalyzing such a positive change.
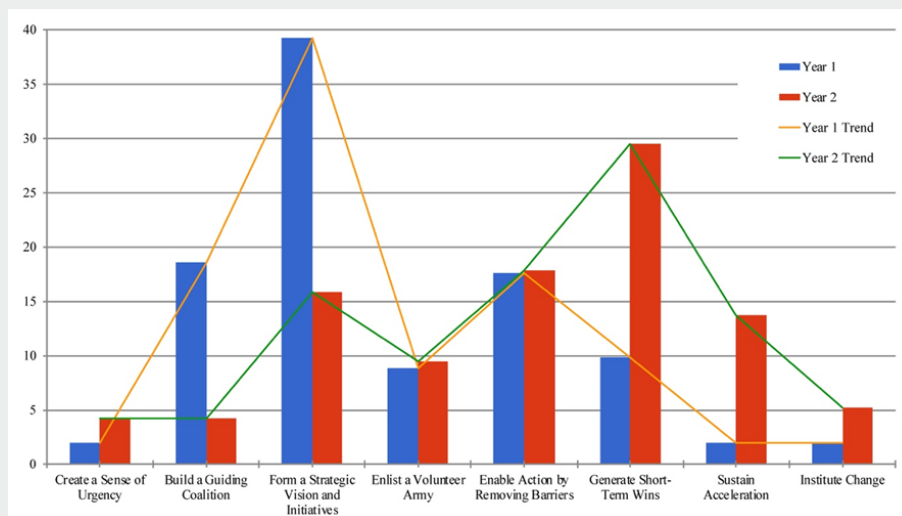

Figure 2. Year-wise comparison of CIL Chief/HQ meeting outcomes mapped to Kotter's model for leading and accelerating change

The following subsections highlight activities of the CILs as they relate to each of Kotter's (2014) accelerators for leading change. Each section begins with Kotter's framing of the accelerator. (Note: The quotes and human subjects data provided in this manuscript were obtained through human subjects research approved through the authors' Institutional Review Board.)

Creating a Sense of Urgency Around a Big Opportunity

> "Help others see the need for change through a bold, aspirational opportunity statement that communicates the importance of acting immediately." (Kotter, n.d.)

Kotter (2014) compared sufficient urgency to a "bedrock" that acts as a foundation for triggering the growth of a network as per organizational demand. This foundation keeps leaders focused on the upcoming opportunities. Part of creating a sense of urgency around a big opportunity is to identify an "urgency team" to keep the big opportunity in the forefront of the minds of employees in the organization (Kotter, 2014). The need for urgency was well communicated throughout DoDEA with the help of individuals at all hierarchical levels of the organization. An analysis of the minutes from meetings between the CILDs and HQ yielded the phrase "identify a timeline for the way forward" on several occasions.

Creating a sense of urgency occurred at both the organization and CIL level. DoDEA hosted a CIL/District Leadership Symposium to discuss big opportunities and create a sense of urgency. Accordingly, one of the learning outcomes for the symposium was to "understand the timeline and importance of integration." The CILs' planning efforts also reflected a sense of urgency exemplified by the Pacific CIL, which reported the following action: "Identified and resolved gaps in communication and awareness of systemic priorities and implementation." Further, to help organize and manage flurries of activity, the CILDs collaboratively developed and piloted a "Request for CIL Services" form. The process of developing the form helped the CIL personnel think through important details of various requests.

LAB members recognized the growing demand for CIL services, and they saw this increased demand as evidence of change in the daily behaviors and work functions of DoDEA's instructional leaders. The following quotes from LAB members depict requests for assistance and inclusion:

> "We're managing about a dozen active projects right now that are requests for services, and those are outside of the planned pieces of work that we're building."

> "We really see that the district leadership have expressed a need for our service, so much in the sense that we have to get them to … compromise on when we're going to be in one area as opposed to another area."

Building and Evolving a Guiding Coalition

> A volunteer army needs a coalition of effective people – born of its own ranks – to guide it, coordinate it, and communicate its activities." (Kotter, n.d.)

Kotter (2014) suggested avoiding the complexities associated with the transfer of information in a hierarchical organizational structure by developing a guiding coalition. This coalition provides opportunities for distributed leadership (Gunter et al., 2013) and stakeholder involvement in the decision-making process (Calegari et al., 2015). The CILs' effort toward hiring CIL personnel and orienting to various stakeholder relationships aligns with this accelerator by establishing the CILs as central components of the guiding coalition. Reported activities that exemplify building and evolving a coalition include "introduction of CIL Chief to community superintendents," "identification of 'potential' highly qualified and highly effective CIL staff," "weekly DSE Regional meetings," and "bi-weekly Superintendent/Community Superintendent VTC sessions to strengthen communication, relationships and ongoing support."

Among outcomes highlighted in the minutes of administrative meetings, ongoing collaboration received special attention. Furthermore, one of the professional learning sessions included the following

learner outcome: "Identify the connections and relationships that can help your team be effective." Comments from the LAB members reflect evidence of the CILs engaging in the work associated with a guiding coalition:

> "We see that the district leadership really reflects and sees that we are part of their improvement process, that we are all in this together, that we are one team, and they see us as a part of their team. And so that has really been exciting."

In focus group sessions, CIL personnel reflected on their efforts and progress toward systemic instructional leader development and support, professional learning for systemic priorities, facilitation of learning networks, and building capacity for innovative best practices. They agreed that in order to accomplish the aforementioned functions, developing rapport and open lines of communication with their stakeholders was important. The CILs have established trust and credibility by establishing clear communication, conveying consistency, and identifying mutual goals with stakeholders. As one CIL member shared:

> "The relationship has been established, the credibility has been established: the two-way communication, clear expectations, consistency—that's so critical, that they know that it's not, 'here today, gone tomorrow.' All of those factors have played a part in doors being open."

Clearly, the CILs have acknowledged the importance of their work as a guiding coalition, and they anticipate building upon this foundational work.

Forming a Change Vision and Strategic Initiatives

> "Clarify how the future will be different from the past and how you can make that future a reality through initiatives linked directly to the vision." (Kotter, n.d.)

Once a guiding coalition is formed, the next order of business is to develop a change vision for their work and a list of strategic initiatives (Kotter, 2014). The change vision for the CILs was:

> "... to ensure high academic achievement for all DoDEA students. The Centers for Instructional Leadership will systematically develop high-impact educational leaders in their pursuit of excellence and equity. Success is measured when all DoDEA schools ensure that every student is adequately prepared for success in college, careers and citizenship." (DoDEA, 2016)

Additionally, during the inaugural year, the CILs led two strategic initiatives. The first initiative was to help facilitate and establish Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), which DoDEA termed internally as Focused Collaboration. This approach is a powerful staff developmental strategy for school improvement. As DoDEA's partner, Virginia Tech supported the effort by providing professional learning to the CIL personnel on how to train and support instructional leaders within the schools with the rollout of the initiative. Professional learning topics included: (1) The Role of PLCs in Continuous Improvement, (2) Developing Capacity with PLCs, and (3) Implementing Change with PLCs.

The second initiative was to improve clarity and consistency around assessing teaching and learning in the classroom with the development of a common learning walkthrough protocol for use in all schools throughout DoDEA. Working from that common aim, the CILs sought to define excellent instruction and clarify key components of active learning. The work on a systemwide learning walkthrough process was refined throughout the year, culminating in consensus on the plan during a 2017 leadership symposium. Enthusiasm for this strategic and systemic initiative for a common learning walkthrough protocol was reflected in comments from a member of the LAB:

> "We've collected a lot of data, a lot of feedback, and we have narrowed our focus to the learning walkthrough.... A

consistent walkthrough... is something that DoDEA will have, and will be able to present and provide information to everyone for implementation for next school year."

Enlisting a Volunteer Army

"Large-scale change can only occur when massive numbers of people rally around a common opportunity. They must be bought-in and urgent to drive change – moving in the same direction." (Kotter, n.d.)

Kotter (2014) stated that in order to rollout the change vision and resulting initiatives to the entire organization, the guiding coalition must enlist a volunteer army through training, communication tools, and face-to-face conversations. These investments to build awareness, mutual respect, and trust are directly connected with fulfillment of the potential of distributed leadership (Liu et al., 2018). Several activities highlighted in the CIL quarterly reports and meeting minutes demonstrate the ways the CILs enlisted a volunteer army: "providing feedback on collaboration guidance and Regional Principal of the Year leadership opportunities"; "Collaborating with the teachers union to scope and define a mentoring and onboarding program for new teachers"; and "Identifying administrators who exhibit best practices in the Pacific for developing and presenting to their peers at the Pacific Leadership Summit in August." CIL personnel clearly articulated an eagerness to engage in the practical work of enhancing DoDEA's instructional leadership efforts. One CIL member shared:

"We're in the stages of the next level, now; we have built capacity and modeled for the community superintendents in the delivery of professional learning, the environment of the professional learning. Now, the principals are about to deliver the awareness session to the teachers. I think that the critical piece...

is that because of the modeling and the protocols we set in place, you see now community superintendents going out to make sure, starting with the basics, that their professional learning environment is established and conducive to learning."

The volunteer army includes teacher leaders as well. DoDEA's Teacher of the Year winner shared enthusiasm about the Teacher Advisory Board that had been established: "We have a large number of teachers... who now have an opportunity to inform the CIL as to what we need to have ongoing support from our leaders."

Enabling Action by Removing Barriers

"Removing barriers such as inefficient processes and hierarchies provides the freedom necessary to work across silos and generate real impact." (Kotter, n.d.)

It is not only important to establish an army of volunteers to help with initiatives, but to also identify barriers to progress and remove them (Kotter, 2014). Multiple sources of data indicate that DoDEA and the CILs enable actions that remove barriers. Through the establishment of the LAB, the CIL created additional communication channels. Analysis of the CILDs and HQ meeting minutes revealed priorities to "provide support to instructional leaders to plan/implement District Improvement Plans" and "enabling action by removing barriers." Similarly, the CIL quarterly reports included a variety of activities that reflect this Accelerator. For example: "District Leadership implemented the CIL Request for Services to communicate with above school level leadership regarding professional learning plans…"; "Facilitate the development and selection of tools and resources for district-wide systemic implementation of Focused Collaboration"; and "Provided targeted coaching, assistance, and mentoring to administrators and ISSs in all three districts."

Professional learning opportunities help to remove barriers by building the capacity of the learner. One

CIL member wrote in a post-module assessment of professional learning: "My questions and concerns were address[ed], and now I just need practice… lots of it." A stakeholder stated in a focus group of the professional learning delivered by CIL personnel: "We're learning, and we're working, and we're growing stronger.… We just need to be able to replicate these opportunities, whether virtual or face-to-face."

Another way to remove barriers is to work on eliminating silos. The CILs have been at the forefront of mitigating the gaps across regions by working together to create "One DoDEA." A meaningful, albeit small, example is the CILDs' collaborative work to craft newsletter statements that reflect the work of all three CILs. Additionally, the CILDs have committed to regular cross-regional meetings where they share ideas and considerations related to the ongoing work.

Generating (and Celebrating) Short-term Wins

> "Wins are the molecules of results. They must be recognized, collected and communicated – early and often – to track progress and energize volunteers to persist." (Kotter, n.d.)

In order to maintain credibility of a strategic initiative, it is important to highlight its success stories, including short-term wins (Kotter, 2014). A number of activities in CIL quarterly reports highlight efforts to celebrate short-term wins. Examples include: "Facilitated mid-year progress check"; "Discussion of current projects and status of CIL outcomes"; and "Collaborated with the Public Affairs office to design and create a new look for the Pacific Leadership Summit." Promotional videos from the Pacific Leadership Summit conveyed enthusiasm for the work of the CILs, including a video (https://tinyurl.com/y7fjnbry) highlighting the new learning walkthrough tool.

The LAB group shared short-term wins related to building awareness and trust around the CILs. Fulfilling expressed needs for services created opportunities for positive interactions and future partnerships. In response to professional learning led by the CIL, school leaders have found significant value in the sessions. One individual from HQ stated: "From two different districts, we've received responses back like, 'This has been the best professional learning I've received in DoDEA.'"

One new collaborative network has been the creation of a Teacher Advisory Board (TAB), consisting of the Teachers of the Year; and this community provides an additional communication channel for teacher voices to be heard. Feedback regarding this initiative has been positive, and members of the TAB look forward to ongoing contributions.

LAB members identified growing demand for CIL services, and they saw that as evidence of changes in the daily behaviors and work functions of DoDEA's instructional leaders:

> "We also know, from research, that leadership really matters in schools. And instructional leadership matters, yet principals struggle to spend their time on things that matter most for instruction.… [CILs are] seeing an increase in requests for our services as people understand what we're about."

Sustain Acceleration

> "Press harder after the first successes. Your increasing credibility can improve systems, structures and policies. Be relentless with initiating change after change until the vision is a reality." (Kotter, n.d.)

Kotter (2014) stated that success boosts credibility and accelerates progress, which encourages more people to join the change effort, show leadership, become proactive, and not give up in the face of barriers. The CILs' efforts to sustain acceleration are reflected in the CIL quarterly reports that included references to "continued coaching and mentoring work with various building administrators," as well as broader approaches, such as the following reported

activity:

> "CIL Team continued networking meetings with the Instructional Systems Specialists/ Professional Development Specialists at Headquarters and other CILS to reinforce a common vision and message throughout unified projects and support plans."

The sustained investment with constituents was displayed through formal and informal networks, which emerged from professional learning activities. Through expanded communication channels, data-informed processes contributed to decisions about ongoing professional learning opportunities. District administrators have begun to consider the CILs as extensions of their team. As one CIL member shared:

> "We see that the district leadership really reflects and sees that we are part of their improvement process, that we are all in this together, that we are one team, and they see us as a part of their team. And so that has really been exciting."

Institute Change

> "Articulate the connections between the new behaviors and organizational success, making sure they continue until they become strong enough to replace old habits." (Kotter, n.d.)

The final step of the Kotter's (2014) model emphasizes the integration of change into policies and procedures in order to ensure that the changes are sustained over time. As the CILs concluded their inaugural year, they demonstrated awareness for the importance of instituting change. For example, one CIL quarterly report highlighted the following activity: "Began documenting all of the logistical steps, tasks, and persons responsible for successfully hosting a leadership summit for future years." Also, the minutes of the administrative meetings celebrated the approval of the Learning Walkthrough memo, which outlined the plan to implement the Common Learning Walkthrough worldwide.

DoDEA has made progress toward fulfilling the five strategic goals: student excellence, school excellence, talent excellence, organizational excellence, and outreach excellence. Although the effort for institutional change through capacity building is ongoing, DoDEA's (2018c) strategic plan closeout report highlights the following structural changes in support of student achievement:

1. Establishing system-wide standardization. Create one school system with consistent policy, quality educational programs, and effective/ efficient business functions.

2. Increasing organization accountability. Manage, measure, and assess DoDEA's performance (e.g., school, personnel, initiatives) to ensure organization accountability.

3. Maximizing workforce capacity. Enhance DoDEA's ability to develop and manage its workforce effectively.

4. Streamlining command and control. Minimize reporting layers and standardize reporting structure to decrease variance.

5. Prioritizing and rebalancing resources to reflect organization's mission and priorities. Prioritize and dedicate resources to mission functions (e.g., curriculum and instruction, accountability, performance, professional development).

6. Redefining echelon roles. Establish consistency by clarifying roles and responsibilities, and by centralizing the planning function at one echelon to reduce variation across districts.

7. Effectively managing geographic footprint. Maintain a geographic presence, but limit that presence to those functions whose customers require timely responses or whose work requires understanding of host

country environment.

8. Enhancing service support to schools. Provide consistent, comprehensive support to schools, across both educational and operational functions. (DoDEA, 2018c, p. 14)

Conclusion

Using a networked improvement community approach to facilitating change (Bryk et al., 2015), DoDEA established a vision and purpose and put into practice a series of activities that provide a model for how to implement Kotter's (2014) accelerators for change. DoDEA's creation of the three CILs yielded a structure that could effectively implement change. In fact, in response to DoDEA's efforts, Chief Learning Officer magazine honored DoDEA's Director with "the Innovation Award (Bronze/Division 1), reserved for learning executives who have marshaled resources and applied innovative practices, processes and/ or technologies in a new and groundbreaking way to address a significant business or organizational opportunity" (Ramsey, 2016, para 3). Additional honors include the Training Officers Consortium's 2016 "Change Management Award which is presented each year to an individual, team, or agency that has made significant accomplishments through training or facilitating a program or agency through a change management process" (O'Gara, 2016, para 1). The Association of Leadership Educators (ALE) also recognized part of the effort through the "Outstanding Innovative Practice Paper" award at the 2019 ALE conference.

Looking at DoDEA's own documentation, a year-to-year comparison demonstrated a prominent shift in focus of their work. The organization identified gaps and areas that required more attention and attached specific timelines, creating a sense of urgency around a big opportunity. The creation of a guiding coalition aided in establishing transparency, awareness, trust, consistency in implementation across the organization, and professional learning support. CILs have made several efforts to enable action by removing barriers and reinforce a common vision by establishing advisory boards, providing professional learning for instructional leaders, and supporting these leaders through targeted coaching. This shift not only depicts an overall growth mindset within the organization, but also highlights the need for an appropriate implementation structure that utilizes distributed leadership to facilitate collaborative change.

Accordingly, we recommend leadership scholars promote change initiatives that promote broad engagement among all stakeholders. More specifically, we recommend instructional leaders consider the following strategies when implementing collaborative change in their systems: (1) clearly define organizational priorities that are data-driven, such as improving student achievement; (2) develop a common language that will be used to articulate the plan at all levels of the organization; (3) establish a team of high functioning leaders with clearly defined roles/functions for facilitating the change, such as the CIL; (4) create a sense of urgency for change throughout the organization, such as a change vision; and (5) accelerate a plan for implementing systemwide change using Kotter's (2014) model. Furthermore, leadership educators can better serve students by sharing these strategies and encouraging case studies of organizational change.

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