Planning Change: A Case Study on Cooperative Extension’s Contribution to Creating a Culture of Continuous Improvement in Educational Programs

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Introduction/Purpose/Conceptual Framework
Over the decades, the US Federal Government has invested billions of dollars, intellectual resources, and human capital to assist partners globally with addressing challenges related to development and human welfare. This support has reached across many sectors, including agricultural and food security, human rights and governance, health, water and sanitation, and education (USAID, 2018). Accordingly, federal agencies have sought efficient models for accomplishing the work in light of an increasing world population relying on finite resources.

The purpose of this case study is to present a framework employed by a team of Extension and Education Specialists to work with the US Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) instructional leaders to develop a process for continuous improvement within their schools spanning 9 states and US territories as well as 11 countries in Europe and Asia. The goal of this effort is to equip DoDEA educators with the knowledge and skills needed to effectively prepare students to enter the supply pipeline as skilled workers through a college and career readiness curriculum. The improvement planning framework emerged by drawing from a variety of leadership theories and practices that focus on change and improvement (Dufour, Dufour, Eaker, & Many, 2006; Forman, Stosich, & Bocala, 2017; Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2016; Park, Hironaka, Carver, and Nordstrum, 2013). The themes for the continuous improvement framework are: 1) a focus on purpose; 2) a recognition of change as a continuous and complex process; 3) utilizing data-based practices, structures, and systems; 4) capitalizing on relationships and professional collaboration; and 5) building capacity.

Project Methods
Guided by the five points of the continuous improvement framework, the project team, in close collaboration with DoDEA leadership, developed face-to-face and virtual professional learning activities and offered them over the course of a two-year period to instructional leaders that made up the three regional (i.e., Americas, Europe, and Pacific) Centers for Instructional Leadership (CILs), a newly developed instructional support structure for DoDEA school administrators. These activities included job-embedded learning, research-grounded implementation, follow-up support, and supplemental job-aids related to developing professional learning communities and implementing transformative coaching in order to create a culture of continuous improvement in schools. After implementation of the professional learning for CIL personnel, a content document analysis (Hodder, 2000) was conducted to evaluate the fidelity of implementation of
the continuous improvement framework. The documents used in the analysis were key procedural documents, meeting notes, and personal communications between the project team of specialists and DoDEA.

**Project Outcomes**

According to the documents analyzed, **purpose** is the driving force of the organization; it is the overarching goal that informs improvement initiatives. DoDEA developed and used Community Strategic Plans (CSPs) to coordinate and communicate their overarching purpose and initiatives towards that purpose throughout the organization. Additionally, the current CSP **focuses on change as a continuous and complex process** by highlighting the progress being made and explicit next steps in the change process, specifically related to **changes to the organization’s Vision and Core Values**.

In order to assist with this systemic process of change, the CILs have received professional learning on focused collaboration and transformative coaching, which they have begun to roll out **data-driven practices, structure and systems that support continuous improvement** globally based on the organization’s stated priorities, stakeholder needs, and assessment data. Additionally, the CILs help to create consistency with the implementation of strategic initiatives that **build capacity** of instructional leaders throughout the three regions by **capitalizing on relationships and professional collaboration** both internal and external to DoDEA.

**Implications**

While continuous improvement is not new to education or international development initiatives, implementing it with fidelity in various contexts remains difficult (Park et al., 2013). The 5-point framework presented in this case study is based on current literature in the field of leadership development and education and provides the necessary components that Extension Specialists can implement when planning and facilitating continuous improvement in international education and training programs. DoDEA serves as an adequate case to explore this framework because it operates schools worldwide and as a result of being exempted from the educational mandates of US public schools, has removed levels of regulation that often impact change and improvement efforts in those schools. To this end, we believe that the framework is readily transferable to a variety of different contexts making it a feasible innovative model for Extension Specialists to use in international settings to create a culture of continuous improvement.

**References**


