Moving from Talk to Action in Professional Learning

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Knowing the stages teachers tend to go through as they implement a new approach makes it easier to support them.

Learning and internalizing something new, like a coaching skill or a teaching strategy, is —like most of life —more complex than it first appears . In most cases, we do not go to a workshop or watch a webinar and suddenly find ourselves acting in completely new ways. Change takes time, and the movement toward proficiency is often messy and unpredictable.

For that reason, those of us who support educ   ators who are implementing innovations   1 will provide much better support when we understand what   the journey to proficient implementation really entails. To that end, I describe here a model for understanding stages of implementation and suggestions for principals and professional developers like coaches to consider as they support teachers moving fr om one stage to the next.

The Stages of Implementation

Two teams of researchers have especially shaped the way I understand the stages people move through as they learn and change. I've been influenced by Prochaska, Norcross, and DiClemente (1994), who des cribe change as involving non -linear movement through six stages (pre   - contemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, maintenance, and termination), and Gene Hall and Shirley Hord's (2015) eight "Levels of Use," part of their 2019 Concerns   -Based Adoptio n Model (non -use, orientation, preparation, mechanical use, routine use, refinement, integration, and renewal).

To develop my own understanding of implementation, I've found it helpful to combine my experience studying change with these models. In the process, I've come up with my own five stages of implementation: (1) Non-Use, (2) Awareness, (3) Mechanical, (4) Routine, and (5) Proficient. A clearer understanding of these stages of implementation, especially what hinders and helps people as they move from one stage to the next, should lead to better professional development—leading to better teaching practice and, consequently, better learning and lives for students.

Non -Use

People are in this stage when they are not carrying out an innovation because they're either unable or unwilling to implement it. They may be unable to implement an innovation simply because they don't know about it, having missed the workshop or skipped the webinar. Educators can also be in the non -use stage because they either actively or passively resist the new learning. Individuals who actively resist learning are very clear that they choose to not implement something that's been suggested for them, perhaps because it conflicts with their professional goals or values. Those who passively resist quietly choose not to implement a strategy for reasons they choose not to articulate.

Awareness

People are at the awareness stage when they know something about an innovation, are not resistant, but also aren't implementing it. Often, educators in this stage have a little knowledge about an innovation but are unclear how to put that new knowledge into practice. And the longer people go without implementing a strategy, the less likely they are to ever implement it. For example, teachers might att end a workshop on restorative justice and be excited about implementing it in their classroom. But as time passes, they will remember less and less about the approach and consequently be less likely to implement it.

Workshops help people develop an awarene ss of an innovation, but they sometimes provide too much abstract information and too little detailed, practical guidance on how to implement the new practice. In my experience, it only takes about three days to forget most of what was learned in a worksho p. However it happens, during the awareness stage, people *talk* about change, but don't do anything differently.

Mechanical

During the mechanical stage, people start to implement an innovation, but they often feel awkward carrying it out because they have to remember a lot of new information in order to change what they're doing. The mechanical stage can feel like walking through a field of deep, wet snow: messy, slow, uncomfortable, and tiring. A teacher who is implementing Fisher and Frey's gradual release model (2008), for example, may struggle with the focus lesson when they model their thinking. They may tell students what they are doing rather than transparently demonstrate their thinking, or they may involve students in discussion too quickly before they have finished modeling. Additionally, the first time we implement an innovation is usually not our best performance, and it might not immediately yield the desired results. Since the new strategy may not improve student learning or well-being at first, and since implementing something new can feel clumsy, it's not surprising educators often decide to return to their old, comfortable ways of teaching.

Routine

During the routine stage of implementation, people start to become comfortable with aspects of the new strategy or skill they are learning. This can feel reassuring after the struggles of the mechanical stage. Feeling comfortable, people may be tempted to implement the innovation in a structured, quick, and easy to remember way. Once they are confident of some aspect of what they are learning, such as using the identify questions from the impact cycle (Knight, 2017), teachers may be hesitant to move beyond their comfortable, routine use ("I've just gotten comfortable with this skill, why would I want to modify it?")

A risk of routine implementation is false clarity. According to Fullan (2001), false clarity "occurs when change is interpreted in an oversimplified way; that is, the proposed change has more to it than people perceive or realize" (p. 77). When we have false clarity, we know less than we think we do. We aren't implementing an innovation as effectively as we think we are. That means we probably aren't having the impact that we desire.

Innovations ultimately need to be adapted to respond to the unique strengths and needs of teachers and students. However, change just for the sake of change probably isn't the best strategy. The best outcomes occur when educators make informed, intentional adaptations —informed because the educator deeply understands the principles and nuances of innovations (which often comes from coaching and diverse experiences) and intentional, because educators use their knowledge to make good decisions about how to adapt strategies for better student outcomes. This kind of modification of an innovation is really only possible during the proficient stage.

Proficient

When people arrive at the proficient stage, they have developed a deep understanding of the knowledge or s kills they are learning, and consequently a deep understanding of how they can and should modify an innovation to provide personalized support. They can adapt the innovation to the specific needs of the situation at hand. Coaches who have reached the profi cient stage in their questioning skills, for example, are able to ask the right question at the right time to facilitate a collaborating teacher's reflection or planning. They can do this because they have read about questioning, practiced questioning, and used questioning in many coaching conversations.

As another example, teachers who are proficient at giving one -to-one feedback are able, in a very short period of time, to communicate to individual students what they have done well, pinpoint where each st udent needs to improve, and communicate the right amount of personalized information so each student can move forward. What works for one student won't necessarily work for the next student, and a proficient teacher will be able to personalize one -to-one f eedback so that it works best for each student.

Observing a proficient performer, it can appear that he or she effortlessly modifies an innovation so that it's more effective. That "effortlessness," however, is the product of learning, practice, and experi mentation over time. It takes a lot of work to look like you're carrying out an innovation effortlessly.

Supporting Movement from One Stage to the Next

Naturally, those working to support teachers in improving their practice or in trying a key innovation want to help teachers move to more sophisticated stages of using that innovation. Here are some approaches leaders and professional developers can try to make this happen.

Moving Beyond Resistance

When people are actively or passively resistant, blaming the m for resisting usually doesn't improve the situation. A better strategy is to try and figure out why people aren't embracing an innovation. A

leader might nonjudgmentally ask hesitant teachers what worries them about the innovation or what they object to, perhaps by exploring some common reasons teachers balk at an innovation:

> Are teachers resisting because they don't think the strategy will work for their students?
>
> Are teachers resisting because of an ideological difference? (For instance, if a teacher with a constructivist philosophy is asked to use direct instruction?)
>
> Is the leader's *approach* to change creating the resistance? (For example, have we not given teachers a voice in what happens in their classroom, or failed to acknowledge others' knowledge and status as we proposed ideas?)
>
> Is this innovation threatening people's identity?
>
> Does the school's history of professional development suggest people should have low expectations for this new innovation?

When we take the courageous step of understanding *why* teachers resist, we can change our approach to one that's more likely to lead to mutual understanding than to resistance. If teachers report that they don't have enough voice in decision making, we can make adjustments to ensure teachers have the chance to give meaningful, authentic input. If teachers don't think a strategy will work, the fi rst step should be to try and ascertain whether or not they are correct. If a teacher considers a reading program insufficiently challenging for students, for example, administrators should try to understand clearly other teachers' experiences with the mat erials. Perhaps, rather than being resistant, the teacher is actually sharing important information. With each question, our approach should be to listen first, acknowledge that we've heard what was said, and respond appropriately.

In reality, resistance i s more often produced by a system or change agents' approach to change than it is by a resistant individual's personal characteristics. If a large number of people are resisting within a system, the people probably aren't the problem. An overly simplistic top -down approach that doesn't recognize the importance of teacher autonomy (Knight, 2019) almost always produces either apathy or resistance. A one -way model of change, in which experts put out ideas for teachers to implement and fail to take into account teacher knowledge, rarely succeeds. Systems will be more effective if they gather and act on what teachers are learning during the implementation process. Movement forward in an organization, like movement forward for a person, is messy and nonlinear. The coherence that results from empowering, meaningful conversations with teachers in schools takes time. However, *not* taking the time to involve teachers in decisions and plans is even more inefficient, since it seldom leads to high -quality implementation.

Getting to Proof

One reason people resist moving through the stages of implementation is that they aren't convinced that a proposed change will be worth the effort. No matter how big an "effect size" research shows for the innovation, people usually aren't convinced it will work until they see it make a difference for their students. This creates a catch-22: People don't like to implement a new strategy unless they have seen it be effective, but they can't experience its effectiveness unless they try it. As Joseph Grenny and colleagues (2013) explain:

> The most common tool we use to change other's expectations is the use of verbal persuasion … [but] … When it comes to resistant problems, verbal persuasion rarely works. Verbal persuasion often comes across as an attack. It can feel like nagging or manipulation. … The great persuader is personal experience. With persistent problems, it's best to give verbal persuasion a rest and try to help people experience the world as you experience it. (p. 51)

In my work studying coaching for the past two decades, I have found, paradoxically, that the best way to get teachers to implement an innovation and become proficient with it is to turn the focus away from the innovation and toward students. When educators see that a new strategy is making a difference in students' lives, they're much more likely to keep using that strategy. Seeing an innovation as a means to an end rather than the end itself increases the likelihood that the innovation will be implemented effectively.

Using student-focused goals related to achievement or engagement as the focus for professional learning also increases the likelihood of high-quality implementation because student goals are objective standards. For instance, to hit a goal of 95 percent of students getting 100 percent on a single-factor rubric for sentence writing, a teacher will need to effectively implement the strategy associated with that aspect of sentence writing. With this goal in place, coaches can be less directive about ensuring high-quality implementation. The goal takes care of that because the only way a goal will be hit is if the innovation is used effectively.

Overcoming Fear and Perfectionism

Even though it's widely accepted that people need to step out of their comfort zones to get better, most of us hesitate to put ourselves in situations where we feel out of control. Moving from one stage of implementation to another is a bit like a trapeze artist letting go of one trapeze to grab the hands of a fellow aerialist. No wonder people hesitate before moving to the next stage. Perfectionists will especially find it difficult to move forward. As Brené Brown has written, "perfectionism is a twenty-ton shield that we lug around thinking it will protect us when, in fact, it's the thing that's really preventing us from being seen and taking flight" (2010, p. 56). Perfectionism can keep us from messing up, but it can also keep us from growing. If you don't try something until you're sure you can do it perfectly, you might never try.

Professional developers can make it easier for people to step out of their comfort zones and move beyond perfectionism by providing sustained, meaningful support for professional learning. This often involves clear explanations, demonstration (in person, through video, or by visiting another teacher's class), and ongoing conversations about how innovations or implementation can be modified to meet individual students' needs. To decrease fear, intentionally affirm teachers rather than critically judging them and create a psychologically safe place for coaching conversations.

Onward to Action

Talking about change can feel like something is actually happening, even though, as the Chinese proverb says, "Talk doesn't cook rice." But the only way professional development can have a positive effect on students' learning and well-being is if that new knowledge is translated into action. When we recognize the stages people generally go through to become proficient, we can see what steps to take to make it more likely that real implementation occurs.

Reflect & Discuss

➤ Think of an innovation your school or district is trying to implement. Which of the 5 stages of implementation do you think you're at personally? What brought you to that stage, or keeps you from advancing?

➤ Can you identify instances where your school or district has made missteps in getting teachers to adopt an instructional change? What would you do differently now?

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