Managing Change

Part of engaging in continuous improvement includes managing the change process.

Change has been defined in a number of ways; in his book *Managing Transitions*, William Bridges defines it as "the external event or situation that takes place to advance the system." It is also important to understand that change is a natural process, and that understanding is the first step in helping stakeholders navigate thought any change process that is occurring or will occur.

Understanding change involves realizing that a desired change moves a person, group of people, culture, structures, and systems form one point to another while creating the conditions for future organizational success.

When thinking about the continuous improvement process, it is critical to understand the following:

1. Continuous improvement is by its very nature a process of change.

2. It is critical for continuous improvement team members to understand how the change process impacts continuous improvement.

3. Change impacts both individuals and systems.

4. Identifying and assessing how change impacts the organization is critical to the planning process and, ultimately, to successful continuous improvement.

One way to think about change is to distinguish between change and transition.

- **Change** is a shift in the **external** situation while **transition** is the **internal** personal adaptations that people make in response to change.

- Transition generally occurs in phases.

When managing transition during change, it's important to remember the following:

- Supporting members of the organization during transition requires a thoughtful, organized, people-centered approach.

- Phases of transition may occur at different points throughout the continuous improvement process.

- Change frequently surfaces emotion, and it is critical for the continuous improvement team to understand and acknowledge personal emotions during the various phases.

According to Bridges, the three phases of transition include endings, the neutral zone, and new beginnings.

- Phase 1 – **Endings** – During this phase, people are forced to let go of things they are comfortable with, including relationships, processes, team members, and/or locations. During this phase, emotions may include anger, denial, fear, frustration, and uncertainty. To support this phase, it is important for leaders to acknowledge emotions, accept resistance, communicate openly about what is expected to happen, listen empathetically, and help stakeholders imagine a positive future state.

- Phase 2 – **Neutral Zone** – During phase two, psychological realignments and repatterning take place and new processes are created. Intensive support from leaders during this time is critical. During this phase, emotions may include anxiety, low morale and low productivity, and skepticism about or resentment toward change initiatives and actions. To support this phase, it is important for leaders to communicate regularly to give feedback on performance, acknowledge quick wins and provide "morale boosters," set short-term goals and remind the team of the future goals, and communicate acceptance of feeling uncertain or unsettled.

- Phase 3 – **New Beginnings** – This phase is marked by acceptance, with new beginnings being rooted in new understandings, values and attitudes and anchored in a renewed sense of energy toward organizational change. During this phase, emotions may include high energy, openness to learning, and renewed commitment to organizational goals, processes, and actions. To support this phase, it is important for leaders to reward the team, celebrate the desired change that has occurred even if only an incremental step toward the final goal, and highlight success stories.

So how does an organization get ready for the change that is part of continuous improvement?

Getting ready for managing such change requires the following:

- Understanding that establishing readiness is necessary for successfully initiating and executing change initiatives during the continuous improvement process.

- Understanding of the change process and of key actions necessary to create organizational readiness.

- A collective commitment and coordinated approach from the district and school levels.

To that end, it is important that district leaders understand the process for assembling a continuous improvement team and ensuring that essential perspectives are represented on the team, have a knowledge of the change process and of the elements that need to be present to successfully implement change, understand district and school leadership capacity and ability to facilitate change, provide professional learning for the continuous improvement team on the change process, and identify a person with an understanding of the change process as well as of the continuous improvement process to facilitate continuous improvement efforts.

As you engage in planning for continuous improvement, consider the following:

1. What learning might your team need to do to fully understand the impact of change suggested by your continuous improvement plan?

2. Considering the impact of change, what might your team embed in the continuous improvement process to ensure successful implementation of your continuous improvement plan?