

Can You Spare Some Change?

Our preparation for and reaction to change can set the tone in our district and in the community.

By Matthew Malinowski, MPA, RSBA, PRSBA



In the PBS series *Mr. Selfridge*, Harry Selfridge, a cunning, creative, and enthusiastic American, ventures to London in the early 20th century to develop what became and to this day remains a retail empire. Selfridges & Company grew a formerly undeveloped area of London into a thriving business district.

The story is not only about the growth of an empire. Those who watched the entire series, which begins in the early 1900s, had a window into the vast changes that took place in the world over two decades—including political upheavals, wars, and social reforms.

But it doesn't take 20 years for change to happen. How long ago was it that we all wanted smaller phones—and how many of us are now holding smartphones the size of tablets? Ten years ago, most of us had no idea what 3-D printing was; now, our students are using 3-D printers in their classrooms.

Goldman Sachs compiled a fascinating look at the changes that occurred in just five years (Edwards 2015). For example, in 2010, *Wikipedia* contained 17 million articles; in 2015, it had 37 million. In 2010, 24 hours of video were uploaded per minute to YouTube; in 2015, that number was 400!

Preparing for Change

Change is inevitable—but you don't need a school business official from Pennsylvania to tell you that. I will, however, share some strategies for preparing for change.

Ease into It

From the 2016 Executive Leadership Forum, I brought back to my district the concept that the online shoe and clothing company Zappos.com no longer sifts through résumés as part of its hiring process. Instead, recruiters

host networking events, question-and-answer forums, and contests on social media to find candidates who are a good fit.

I was met with blank stares as I suggested that our district might consider adopting a creative strategy similar to Zappos.com's for filling positions.

How long ago was it that we all wanted smaller phones—and how many of us are now holding smartphones the size of tablets?

Because of our district's lack of enthusiasm to change our processes, I decided to take another tack—ease into change. Perhaps, I said, we need to develop a way to entice potential employees for hard-to-fill positions. We can make bus drivers and substitutes want to work for our school district rather than for another district! Yes, like a rock-and-roll band, we can be their “groupies.” That got the administrative staff's attention and began to break down their resistance to change.

Change doesn't have to happen all at once. More often than not, it's a matter of easing into it by setting the groundwork, getting buy-in, and moving forward slowly.

Keep Trying

Over the next few weeks, try something new. If you don't like it, try it again.

I'm not sure I am sold on computing spreadsheets in the cloud for my needs, but from time to time, I give change a try, searching for something that works for me. Recently, I had great success with an online slide show program that provided a better format for a presentation.

Be Flexible

Because change is ongoing, we must learn to adapt. In *Mr. Selfridge*, the onset of World War I necessitated many changes in Selfridge's workforce. The men were sent to the

battlefield and the female workforce expanded. The work also shifted to include tailoring uniforms. After the war, the workforce changed yet again. To survive, Selfridges & Company had to change with the times.

In education today, we must change with the times as well, adjusting to economic downturns

and upturns, enrollment growth and decline, and the requirements of changing legislation, such as the Every Student Succeeds Act, the Affordable Care Act, and regulations about restroom access for students.

The best way to prepare for such changes is to change our expectations—not to delay or avoid change, but to expect change. For example, a school construction or renovation project—even after it is “completed”—will likely require changes to accommodate the needs of students in the months and years to come. It will not be a closed chapter left untouched.

Ensure that your constituents realize that ongoing modifications are normal and often necessary. You can't foresee all future modifications, but you can prepare for the possibility.

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Consider Yourself

In the early days of his Oxford Street store, Harry Selfridge was a man after my own heart. As he was growing his business, he spent the majority of his time on the sales floor, talking to his associates and actively engaging in decisions. Fast-forward

about 15 years, and Selfridge is nowhere to be seen at the store. He has had a conflict with colleagues and now childishy refuses to work there.

Did you abandon something because you changed in some way? Is it time to get back to the core beliefs that you lost sight of? For example, to get back in touch, could you block off time on your calendar once a week to attend an event at a school or to visit a classroom rather than staying in your office?

Starting Here, Starting Now

Not everything changes quickly. For example, the federal minimum wage has remained \$7.25 an hour for the past seven years. How about our district office? Some of the desks and chairs have been here for at least 10—maybe even 15—years.

Someday, those desks and chairs—and maybe even the offices—will go away and people will work from home. We can't predict that with any certainty, but we can prepare ourselves for the possibility. Here are some activities you can do to prepare yourself for change:

- Step into a position you have not previously held. Does your district have a short-term administrative vacancy that you can assume?
- Delve into an unfamiliar work area. Poke around a bit. Have you visited a boiler room or other behind-the-scenes space in your

school buildings recently? Take a look and learn about the function, benefits, and limitations of the facilities.

- Network with an unfamiliar circle of people. Learn what another region or discipline of school business does to support student programs.

- Take a new mandate “by the horns” and make it work for you. For example, Uniform Grant Guidance is a perfect reason to look at not only your federal procurement practices but also your general procurement efficiency and documentation.
- Catch yourself when you balk at doing something differently. Never become complacent. Do you need to develop a new paper form? Maybe that “form” should be electronic!
- Accept what you cannot change and focus on what you can change.

Changes can creep out of nowhere with no explanation or reason. Some changes evolve over time, so you can’t remember exactly when or why they took place. Some things change overnight. As school business leaders, our preparation for and reaction to change can set the tone for our offices, our schools, and the community at large.

Reference

Edwards, J. 2015. Goldman Sachs compiled an epic list of the 48 most important things that changed over the past 5 years. Business Insider Australia, December 25. www.businessinsider.com.au/goldman-sachs-list-of-things-that-changed-over-the-past-5-years-2015-12?r=UK&IR=T.

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