

# EQUITY-MINDED CHANGE LEADERSHIP

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There are many ways to think about change leadership, and many theories to describe how it should work. Most promote the notion that leaders who encourage and support individuals to work together to adopt new ways of thinking and behaving will succeed in changing organizations. A theory of change leadership called “adaptive leadership” (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009) makes this claim and goes on to offer practical advice about changing organizations. Adaptive leadership theory purports the importance of leaders engaging individuals throughout an entire organization, extending from the “balcony” to the “playing field.” This democratic vision of changing organizations enables diverse values, aspirations, and perspectives to emerge, take hold, and form the basis for future endeavors.

A key tenet of adaptive theory is that change leaders need to distinguish between *technical* problems and *adaptive* challenges to move organizations forward. Both technical solutions and adaptive solutions are needed to change organizations, but they are fundamentally different and operate in distinctive ways. Understanding that technical solutions target “current structures, procedures and ways of doing things” (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 19), often focusing on achieving organizational efficiencies, is helpful. It is equally important to understand that adaptive solutions focus on organizational culture that represents the “priorities, beliefs, habits, and loyalties” (p. 19) of the people who work in organizations. Adaptive solutions require “mobilizing discovery, shedding certain entrenched ways, tolerating losses, and generating capacity to thrive anew” (p. 19), and operate to promote (or stymie) change. By focusing adaptive solutions on the human and social aspects of change, it is possible to help individuals navigate the complex and thorny dynamics of organizational transformation. Also, by recognizing the values, beliefs, and dreams of the people who are employed in (or affiliated with) organizations, we can more readily identify the most powerful levers for change.

Adaptive leadership that distinguishes between technical and adaptive *problems* and also technical and adaptive *solutions* is useful to educational organizations, including community and technical colleges, yet change in any educational context means little if it does not enhance student success. Adaptive challenges linked to differences in how students experience and benefit from education, systematically advantaging some while disadvantaging others, must be recognized and addressed to change education in ways that reduce and eventually resolve systemic equity gaps. In this regard, it is important to identify inequities in student outcomes and understand how educational organizations perpetuate these problems. Without this critical scrutiny, it will be impossible to bring about the real, transformative change required of educational systems and organizations. One approach to engage in this important work is to adopt an “equity-minded” stance toward educational change (Bensimon, Rueda, Dowd, & Harris III, 2007; Dowd & Bensimon, 2014). As defined by Bensimon et al. (2007), equity-mindedness refers to a state of thinking and knowing about how systems, policies, cultural norms, and everyday practices that appear to be race-neutral may in fact negatively impact certain individuals and groups.

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Equity-mindedness is important because it stimulates cognitive schemas that enable individuals to see inequities that may otherwise be invisible to them. Rectifying problems in organizations that perpetuate inequities requires adaptive leaders who call out inequitable patterns of student outcomes, think deeply about what their organizations are doing to produce (and reproduce) these outcomes, and engage others in collective action to restructure systems, redistribute resources, and empower students who are negatively impacted.

### What is Equity-Minded Change Leadership?

By combining the concept of equity-mindedness with the theory of adaptive leadership we advocate for an *equity-minded change leadership* approach to transform education. Equity-minded change leaders are advocates for addressing inequities in the experiences and outcomes of students of color and other student groups systematically failed by educational organizations. Education professionals in positions of power have important responsibilities to lead change and make demonstrable improvements. Akin to the theory of adaptive leadership, we see equity-minded change leadership as important to professionals at all levels of educational organizations because the level of change that is needed to address systematic inequities demands strategic, collective approaches.

Our vision of equity-minded change leadership is also enhanced by the theory of “transformative” leadership authored by Shields (2010, p. 565) who argues that leadership should not be merely transformational (Burns, 1978), but transformative in motivating individuals (educators and students) to reach their fullest potential. Transformative leaders pose “questions of justice and democracy” that must be addressed to enable educational organizations to become more democratic and universally successful.

Transformative leaders also intentionally delve into historical, social, economic, and cultural contexts to “critique inequitable practices” (Shields, p. 565) of the past to inform change. Recognizing that it is nearly impossible to shift organizations toward more socially just structures, policies, and practices without doing critical reflection is important to the change process. This linking of “education and educational leadership with the wider social context within which it is embedded” (Shields, p. 565) is necessary to make transformative change happen.

Another foundational tenet of equity-minded change leadership is transformative learning that requires consciously recognizing that assumptions, based in biased social and political histories, limit new understandings. Self-reflection that is connected to collective learning processes is a necessary condition for equity-minded change

leadership to occur. By deconstructing our own learning, we can better understand how we perpetuate different outcomes and inequities, and we may also use these understandings to stimulate “the reflective reshaping of deeply ingrained knowledge and belief structures” (Davis, 2006, p. 1) to make change.

Equity-minded change leadership begins with reflection on individual and collective histories, beliefs, and sources of power that may be perpetuating inequities in education. Facilitated dialogue follows individual reflection about shared beliefs and values, and should purposefully surface divergent thinking. By respectfully conducting listening sessions, values and visioning exercises, and problem-solving activities individuals can be moved toward transformative change.

### Reflection Questions:

- How do leadership, equity, and transformation converge in your context, or not?
- How can you use transformative learning to bring about equity-minded change?

## Reframing to Enact Equity-Minded Change

As noted above, the way we frame our learning helps us to understand the world around us, including how we understand equity and inequity in education. We use frames, an important concept that is discussed more extensively below, to define what we know and how we know it, and also to identify the reasons why we think the way we do. Every movement for social change has either an implicit or explicit frame that defines not only the problem, but also what needs to be done, who needs to do it, and the underlying core value (e.g. justice, fairness) for doing so (Benford & Snow, 2000). By making frames visible and

scrutinizing them to understand how they activate cognitive schemas associated with our understanding of equity and inequity, we can help educational organizations transform through equity-minded change leadership. This approach to actively use frames to move toward equity, which is referred to as reframing, can be a powerful means to promote transformative change (Hand, Penuel, & Gutiérrez, 2013).

Linking these concepts to the theory of adaptive leadership, we argue that equity-minded change leaders are adept at identifying adaptive solutions that offer not only new solutions, but new frames to replace old ways of thinking (e.g., affirming rather than blaming students). These new equity-minded frames enable individuals to see the ways they and their organizations systematically undervalue and undermine the success of some students while advancing the success of others.

Equity-minded change leaders challenge themselves and others to confront inequity by acknowledging how frames shape the many ways we think about students, beginning with how we think about student access and engagement in learning. Deficit frames that stereotype some groups of students as unprepared, unmotivated, at risk, and hard to serve are pervasive in education, which is why reframing is so important to transformative change. Deficit frames that invalidate groups of students as legitimate learners contribute to (rather than mitigate) the learning outcomes that these students achieve. Educational organizations that fail to scrutinize these normative frames perpetuate inequities and undermine transformative change.

As noted, some frames are explicit in holding inequities in place, but some frames operate more subtly and go unrecognized in the day-to-day operation of educational organizations, which is problematic to addressing inequities. It is therefore not enough to describe the act of achieving equitable outcomes as a vision or goal. Instead, it is necessary to seek deeper individual *and* organizational transformation in order to disrupt opaque structures, policies and practices that contribute to inequities.

Deficit frames that go unnoticed and unaddressed perpetuate individual and shared beliefs that students who are different from the majority are deficient, unable to succeed, and therefore undeserving of resources that may help them to succeed. Solutions to address the problems elicited by deficit frames call for students to work harder to assimilate into existing structures, policies and programs, rather than for reforming the structures, policies and programs that create the inequities among students. Thus, reframing shifts from blaming students to reforming educational structures to center on their success. From the perspective of adaptive leadership, technical solutions are important because they enable structures, policies and practices to change, but it is the adaptive solutions that focus on people's "priorities, beliefs, habits, and loyalties" (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 19) that enable deeper transformative change to move educational organizations to become more equitable.

A powerful counter-narrative to the predominant deficit frame is an asset frame. Asset-based frames position students in terms of leveraging their diverse strength that have developed across a variety of sociocultural contexts, rather than privileging only the strengths of the white middle class (Sudsberry & Kandel-Cisco, 2013). An asset-based frame imagines student success as a product of re-envisioned organizations and systems that provide students with supportive and diverse options for succeeding. For example, when students of color engage in programs designed to address their strengths and cultural practices, their assets are recognized rather than treated as weaknesses to remediate. This is not to say that maladaptive characteristics do not exist, because they do; however, it is important to recognize that no one group of students is universally strong and another universally weak.

Equity-minded change leaders understand how individuals working within educational organizations enact and support prevailing structures, policies, and practices (Spillane, 2012; Spillane, Reiser, & Gomez, 2006), and how they must

engage with these individuals to help them develop the knowledge, skills, and compassion to change. Developing and promoting change processes that enable individuals to join the ranks of equity-minded change leadership is important.

Self-reflection coupled with collective dialogues that examine inequities help to surface deficit frames and help individuals come to terms with their biases. By applying the tenets of adaptive leadership, individuals can also see ways in which power and privilege influence decisions that they and their organizations make to perpetuate or overcome inequities.

### Reflection Questions:

- When and how do you see deficit frames used? Why are they so hard to eliminate?
- How can asset (or other affirmative) frames be used to support transformative change?

## Coupling a New Vision with Equity-Minded Change

As anyone involved in educational change knows, it is difficult to know exactly what is changing when a change process is happening. Some efforts are clear while others are obscure, resulting in old and new ways of thinking and doing happening all at once. For transformative change to take hold, it is critical for change leaders to spotlight learning that challenges organizational norms that hold inequities in place. Professionals need to be supported and rewarded for engaging in individual and collective learning that is directed at changing day-to-day work. Doing so requires contextual knowledge of where, how, and by whom practices take place, also called "organizational routines" (Spillane & Zuberi, 2009), that reflect the patterns through which equity-minded change happen. New organizational routines are needed to disrupt norms, and change leaders need to help

individuals learn about how transformative change should happen to address inequities. Speaking to the importance of supporting students of color, Bensimon et al. (2007) argue that educators need to see connections between their day-to-day tasks and their role in “making or unmaking unequal outcomes” (p. 32).

Critical reflective practice is an iterative learning process that involves observation, interpretation and intervention (Bragg & Gerhard, 2017). In order for transformative learning to take place, individuals operating alone and with others need to evolve from observation, to interpretation, to intervention, all of which is enhanced by using data, a topic that we address below. In the context of organizational change, this learning cycle occurs on both an individual and an organizational level.

Individual and organizational learning involving observation, interpretation and intervention is vital to addressing complex adaptive challenges, especially challenges to equity. In order for adaptive solutions to emerge and grow in ways that are transformative, critical reflection is needed to overcome the status quo.

### Reflection Questions:

- How are equity-minded change leaders making sense of the changes that are happening around them?

## Using Data for Transformative Change

Communicating about the day-to-day experiences of individuals who work in organizations is important but it is insufficient to achieve transformative results. To transform educational organizations, it is important to analyze data and engage in data-driven decision-making. Change initiatives require the analysis of outcomes using

student-level data, and help individuals to use the data to transform their practice. Using data to understand why a problem (or gap) is occurring represents the starting point for transformative change. The data do not produce the change but rather operate as the conduit for shared learning that gives insight into what’s happening and what’s possible. Data can also be instrumental in shifting practices from old to new norms that create more equitable outcomes.

When analyzing data to identify problems and disrupt normative organizational routines, it is important to understand what frames are being used to interpret results and identify solutions. To shift away from deficit-oriented frames requires change processes, tools and templates that enable professionals to examine their beliefs and shift to new frames. These processes should align past organizational routines to a new vision for equity, which results in new organizational routines. Enacting this new vision requires change processes that offer technical solutions, as well as interventions focusing on more deeply rooted adaptive challenges.

An inquiry-based process is a powerful way for change leaders to generate data that are necessary to understand problems rooted in historic inequities, and to build a shared foundation to develop solutions. To address how change happens, organizations should engage in inquiry-based processes that deliberately identify more equitable outcomes. An inquiry-based process can also benefit from traditional research processes (i.e. data collection, data analysis, and data interpretation) to support claims made about the object of inquiry, in this case equity concerns, to move organizational change forward.

Inquiry-focused processes that gather data to inform practice, including practitioner-action research and critical reflective practice, are necessary to inform change (Lott, Gerhard & Bragg, 2017). When integrating equity into an inquiry it is important to consider who is involved and how those who are involved can affect student

outcomes. Involving individuals who represent a diversity of perspectives in challenging conversations is critical to addressing inequities in outcomes.

### Reflection Questions:

- How are inquiry-focused processes and reflective practice being used to facilitate change?

## Bringing Accountability to Bear in Transformative Change

Much can be, and in fact, has been said about methods and measures of accountability relative to equity and outcomes. Recognizing this, we have chosen not to go too deep, but rather reference the importance of accountability to transformative change because we do believe accountability is important in this work. We do not take a stand on a specific approach to accountability, but we do argue that accountability is a critical element in sustaining work towards equity in the context of changing educational organizations. Measures of equity in outcomes can be embodied in formal decision-making processes that involve counting, or as Dowd and Shieh noted, “what gets counted, counts” (2013, p. 50). Dowd (2003, p. 114) also observed that “equity-inclusive performance accountability” focuses institutions on reducing social and economic inequality by influencing organizational policy, staffing, and funding, and these efforts are critical to bringing about lasting change.

In addition to using quantitative data, it is important to think about how stories of communities that have been treated inequitably get collected and heard. If we believe that racism is indoctrinated, normalized, and realized, it is important to surface the experiential knowledge of those who have been negatively affected to

understand how processes that produce those outcomes operate (Harper, 2012; Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009). Without acknowledgement, it is not possible to have a sustainable positive impact on inequity for students whose concerns are not meaningfully and respectfully heard. Put another way, the structures that translate difference into deficit are built on normativity, and the best way to deconstruct them to create something new and better is to consider them from the perspective of the communities that are impacted detrimentally. We argue that only from this perspective can normative frames be understood as mechanisms that result in the exclusion of some student groups and the privileging of others.

Relative to this issue of equity through accountability, we cite the potential of formal strategic planning to play a pivotal role in institutionalizing intentions, goals, plans, and intended outcomes. In this regard, the *Equity and Social Justice Strategic Plan* developed by King County in Washington state (2016) offers a useful example. By stating publicly what this county believes to be an equitable and socially just future, including how it is positioning itself relative to advancing the collective good of its citizens, this strategic plan offers a tangible means to determine whether outcomes are changing for the better. The plan speaks to the importance of what equity means:

*Our end goal is for full and equal access to opportunities, power and resources so all people may achieve their full potential. The process of advancing toward equity will be disruptive and demands vigilance. [But] being “pro-equity” requires us to dismantle deeply entrenched systems of privilege and oppression that have led to inequitable decision-making processes and the uneven distribution of benefits and burdens in our communities. Similarly, we must focus on those people and places where needs are greatest to ensure that our decisions, policies and practices produce gains for all.*

Focusing again on the importance of accountability, one study conducted outside of education found that well-intended solutions such as diversity training, professional development, and mentoring did not create equitable outcomes if no one bore responsibility for long-term implementation of the change (Kalev, Dobbin, & Kelly, 2006). This result mirrors in a powerful way what many in education have said for a long time—if new initiatives are not embedded in organizational structures, policies and practices, they will not last (Adelman & Taylor, 2003).

Equity-minded change leaders question normative deficit frames and offer affirmative counter narratives that enable individuals to find and implement technical and adaptive solutions that help their students to succeed. Educational organizations that implement these changes can empower their students to experience success that is meaningful and impactful on their terms, holding themselves accountable for sustaining these transformative results.

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