Supporting adaptive change:
Expecting the unexpected

Most change is not linear or mechanical, but we tend to plan as if we could draw a straight line to the outcome we want. We don't plan for setbacks and unexpected detours, though we know they will happen. We don't account for human nature. And even when we know we aren't the only actors affecting the outcome, plans tend to focus on our actions as if we were in a vacuum.

Perhaps the trickiest thing about complex or adaptive change is that each action affects the configuration of the overall landscape, so taking a step can make the path itself disappear.

There is no perfect plan. We need a good plan, plus a system of supports to keep us going when things get messy and to help us take advantage of unexpected opportunities. We need to collaborate, communicate, act with compassion, pay attention to what's going on, and adapt. Supports for that include monitoring, coaching, learning communities, data systems—continuous improvement tools.

The impatient idealist says: 'Give me a place to stand and I shall move the earth.' But such a place does not exist. We all have to stand on the earth itself and go with her at her pace.
—Chinua Achebe

Guiding/Coaching Questions:

- Is the change likely to disrupt any commonly held expectations or beliefs? Is there a new conceptual framework that needs to be created to sustain the change?
- How can your plans remain flexible to accommodate continued learning?
- What can you do to encourage colleagues to embrace the awkwardness, mistakes, setbacks?
- Do *all* stakeholders understand why the change is necessary? Have all stakeholders had input into the decision to make the change and the plan for how it will happen?
- What new knowledge and skills are needed in order to implement the necessary change? How will capacity be built around these knowledge and skills?
- If you are selecting an innovation or change, is it based on a root cause analysis, and is it the most effective step you can take to address the root cause?

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Sample Practices:
- Talk about adaptive change and the inevitable discomfort and resistance that goes along with it. Make space and time to acknowledge the emotions coming up.
- Think ahead of time about the uncertainties you face, and plot basic strategies for the main scenarios.
- Be transparent about planning and decision-making processes, which means not waiting until the finished product to communicate about the status of things.
- Invest resources and time to develop the knowledge and skills to make a change stick. Coaching sessions can increase commitment by providing feedback and encouragement and developing skills.
- Assess the organizational culture in terms of how it supports change, identifying strengths, weaknesses, and systemic barriers. Take that into account when planning.
- Develop plans for internal and external communications, and include feedback mechanisms.

Common Pitfalls
- Trying to dissect an adaptive change to make it into a series of technical changes
- Narrowing the scope to what we can "control." Not looking at places where we might persuade, nudge, heighten awareness, influence or collaborate
- Assuming that communication and collaboration skills are basic skills everyone has, rather than skills everyone needs to gain
- Allowing resistance, conflict and the inevitable discomfort of change to stop the work from moving forward
- Prioritizing comfort over disrupting an inequitable system—attempting to align a change initiative to existing (inadequate) paradigms or merely tweaking the status quo rather than making true changes
- Prioritizing productivity over progress, focusing on checklists and technical moves over lasting systemic and adaptive change, setting SMART goals that aren't ambitious and strategic

Resources & Points of Connection
- Agreement & Certainty Matrix, a Liberating Structures exercise for facing uncertainty
- Schlechty, Phillip C. 1993. "On the Frontier of School Reform with Trailblazers, Pioneers and Settlers." Journal of Staff Development, Vol. 14, No. 4, pp. 46-51. https://www.wisconsinrticenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/3.5-Frontier-of-School-Reform.pdf
- DPI's EMLSS model: systemic implementation, strong shared leadership
- DPI's Model to inform culturally responsive practices: become self-aware; examine the impact of systems, structures, policies, and practices on learners and families; lead, model, and advocate for equity
- DPI's Continuous Improvement Process Criteria & Rubric