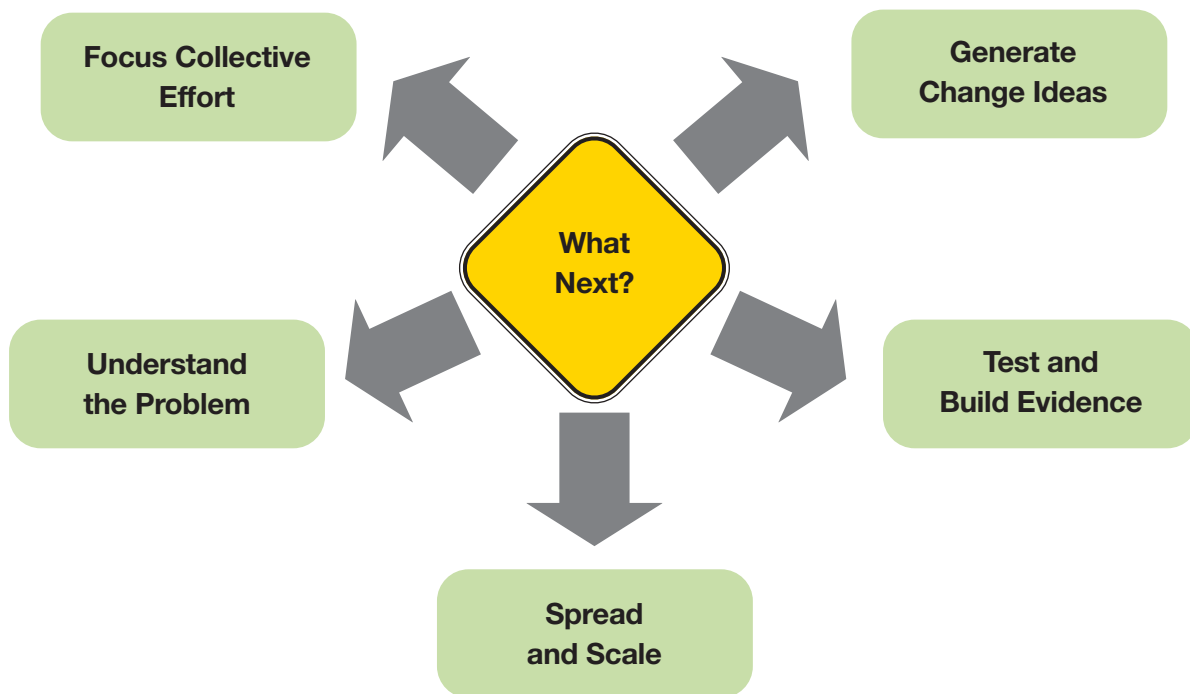


Tool: “What Next?” Leadership Reflection



Adapted from the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching

Overview

The improvement process is rarely linear and predictable, and there are often moments over the course of a school’s improvement journey when doubts emerge about what to do next. To help leaders of an improvement team navigate these moments, this tool lays out common challenges and a menu of possible action steps to meet those challenges. Leaders of the improvement team should use this tool as a guide for their own thinking as they weigh their options for what to do next.

When to Use

- At natural pause points in the school year, such as just before or after major school holidays and breaks
- When the changes you are testing plateau or run out of steam
- When you learn something that raises questions about the work
- When you want to renew team members’ engagement with the work

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How to Use

This tool lays out five broad directions for taking the work, each containing tips on when this direction may be appropriate and details of what next steps could look like. Team leaders, either independently or with members of their team, should take a moment to reflect on where they are, then read through the proposed action steps. By comparing available options and turning these into a shortlist, team leaders will be better equipped to make the right decision for their teams.

Step 1: Self-Assess

Before deciding what your team’s next move should be, it is important to take a moment to make sure you are clear on exactly why you are feeling stuck in the first place. Take a moment to recall the steps and the decisions that have brought you here. Using the guiding questions below to help:

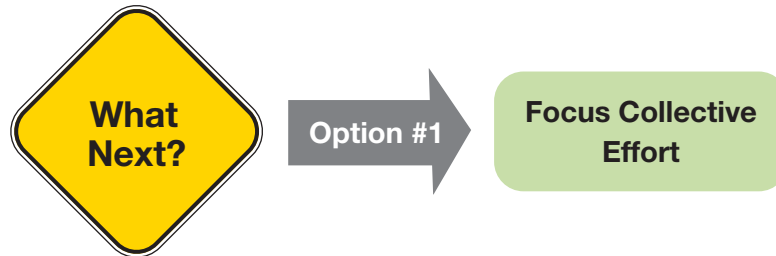
- What is the state of our work? Where did we start and where are we now?
- What are the needs of our team?
- What aspect of the work feels stuck, and what have we tried to get unstuck?
- When we think about the path that exists between us and the accomplishment of our aim, what parts of that path feel most unclear or challenging?

After thinking about these questions, read through the five options described in Step 2 of the tool. Make notes of the choices that seem like the best fit for your team and the place you find yourselves. When you are finished, feel free to use the guiding questions in Step 3 to help you action plan.

Notes:

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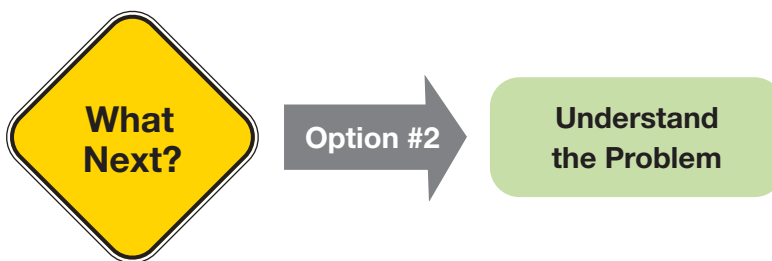
Step 2: Explore Your Options



Every so often, it is important to step back from your work on the problem itself to spend some time on the process you are following and the people who are doing the work. Make time to talk about long-term goals, uncover and discuss problems, get on the same page about the current direction, or modify the way you hold meetings, share documents, and support each other. Benefits include renewing buy-in and agency in team members, and increased clarity and efficiency in future work.

When this is helpful:	How to do it:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● We’ve lost sight of the forest for the trees! ● The team isn’t as motivated as it was a couple months ago! ● The team is divided about which direction they want to go! ● Winter/summer/spring break is coming up, and we aren’t sure how to keep up momentum! 	<p>Assess long-term progress.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Review data, the documents you have created, and the decisions you made along the way. Lean on the experience of your team. Try to understand the trajectory of your work thus far and your team’s needs going forward. <p>Have a team reflection meeting.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Collect the team’s honest impressions about what they have accomplished, the challenges they have encountered, and what they have learned. A structured share-out is a great way to address any underlying issues and renew buy-in. <p>Collect stakeholders’ input.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Incorporate multiple perspectives to broaden your thinking, check your assumptions, and generate new ideas.

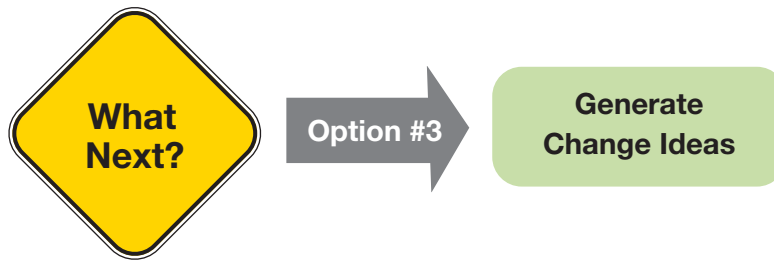
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When trying to solve complex, layered problems, it is inevitable that you will encounter parts of the problem that you didn’t predict or know deeply. Stepping back to learn more is not an admission of defeat; it is a step toward better and more comprehensive solutions. Embrace the improvement ethos that says “our understanding of the problem is definitely incomplete and possibly wrong” by continuing to study your problem.

When this is helpful:	How to do it:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Our change ideas aren’t producing any real impact. ● Our change ideas had a lot of impact initially, but we have hit a plateau. ● We were surprised by the results of a test; we think something else is going on here and want to learn more. 	<p>Analyze problem using different tool.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● See Chapter 1 for more tools to investigate the problem from a different angle. <p>Investigate the variation among students.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Consider the individual students or groups of students that your current approach isn’t helping. Look also at the students who are succeeding and compare. Try and explain the difference. ● Don’t guess at why students struggle, ask them! Student perspectives can uncover parts of their experience you may have overlooked; see the <i>Empathy Mapping</i> tool in Chapter 1. <p>Consult experts or do “desk research.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Chances are you are not the first people to face this problem. Take some time to read about what others have done. ● Be picky. Choose to invest your time in resources that match your school’s particular needs.

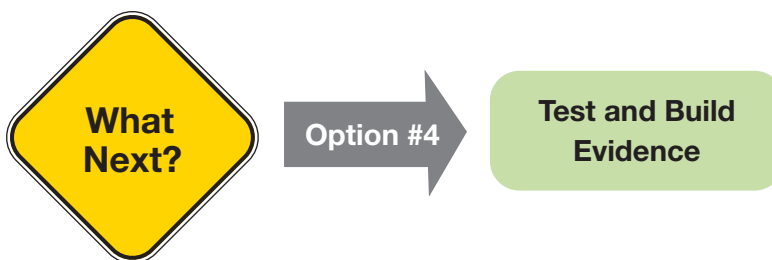
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Sometimes we run out of momentum because we are too invested in our current approach to follow our instincts and try something new. Take advantage of the agility that testing small changes affords you and turn your team’s current best ideas into changes that you can start testing.

When this is helpful:	How to do it:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Our change idea is too small and its impact seems insignificant. ● We are uncovering lots of connected problems and don’t know what to prioritize. ● We’ve uncovered something interesting that may unlock future improvement. 	<p>Review theory of improvement and learning (PDSA forms).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● You will have learned a lot about your problem by trying to change it. Update your fishbone or driver diagram with your team to see how your thinking has changed. This is often enough to spark ideas about next steps. See Chapter 2. <p>Research approaches used by others.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● You don’t have to invent it all yourselves. Ask your peers, consult the research, read a book, or look into professional development offerings. <p>Brainstorm and select change ideas to try.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Turn your deeper understanding into action steps. Gather stakeholders and brainstorm change ideas you can test.

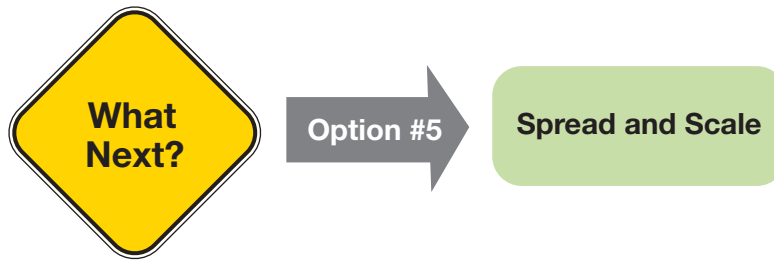
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Kurt Lewin said that “if you want truly to understand something, try to change it.” Methodically testing your best ideas is the core of improvement and puts you in a win-win situation. Either your idea succeeds and you’ve helped your students, or your idea fails and you’ve created a valuable learning opportunity for you and your team. Testing also increases teacher agency and can cut back on whole-team planning meetings by shifting the work toward execution and reflection on what happened.

When this is helpful:	How to do it:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● I’m not sure if our change ideas are working. ● We have tons of change ideas and can’t choose among them. ● We’ve got (testing/parent-teacher conferences/observations/etc.) coming up, and we don’t have time to spare. 	<p>Collect evidence of the change’s effectiveness.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Explore how, for whom, and under what conditions a change is working. Use the evidence and insight that comes with it to determine next steps. ● Dedicate fewer meetings to talking about the problem and give agency to teachers to start testing changes to solve it. <p>Optimize a practice through PDSA tests.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Continue gaining experience with and refining a change idea. Make sure it works consistently before scaling or moving on. <p>Improve data collection to build confidence in your change idea.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Work on measuring your impact using the tools in Chapter 4.

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You’ve got something that works! That’s the best kind of problem to have, but it can still be daunting. Turning a promising practice into a polished and vetted school-wide approach takes time and work. Take it step-by-step to give yourself time to test in different contexts, give others the time to learn, and develop your own expertise to scale your practice effectively across your school community.

When this is helpful:	How to do it:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Our change ideas have produced a breakthrough and we don’t know where to go with it. ● Our change idea is working where we’ve tested it, but it might be a fluke. ● The team members have all made progress; now it’s time to share the practice with others. 	<p>Test in different contexts.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Use the PDSA testing process to see if your successful changes work outside of the initial proving grounds. See Chapter 5. <p>Simplify before sharing.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Distinguish critical components from useful adaptations. Learn which parts of your practice are optional and simplify. The more simply your hard-won expertise can be expressed, the easier it is to spread to others! <p>Tell your story!</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Everyone loves to hear a success story. If you’ve got one, write it up! Working as a team to craft a narrative about the successes you have created is a great way to celebrate your efforts, and will help you spread your success and sustain it over time. See Chapter 5.

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Step 3: Action Plan

Once you have completed Step 2 and selected a few options that feel right for your team, use the following guiding questions to think through next steps:

- Which of these steps most closely lines up with my team’s most pressing needs?
- What resources (handbook or outside resources) can help?
- Who should be involved in the decision? How should I present the options/decision to the team?
- What are next steps for me as team leader? What are next steps for the team?

Notes: