

## Indistar: People Power, Implementation Science, and Performance Management

### Center on Innovations in Learning

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Indistar is premised on the beliefs that the people closest to students can direct the continuous improvement of their schools and that those people bring to the table a wealth of experience and ingenuity. The work of school improvement is best accomplished collaboratively, with a Leadership Team that meets regularly to focus on improving the professional practices that affect student learning. Indistar gives the Team a structured process, guided by indicators of effective practice, with access to research briefs and resources, and with the capability of coaching feedback. Indistar's structured improvement process gives the Team traction, and the Team applies its expertise in fleshing out its course of action and achieving its objectives.

Three bodies of research merge in the preceding description of Indistar's underlying philosophy: studies of (a) motivation and empowerment; (b) implementation science; and (3) performance management. Principals, teachers, and other school personnel, when motivated and empowered, will take the reins of school improvement because they, more than anyone more distant from their setting, want their students to succeed. School improvement is a "profoundly local process, contingent on the knowledge and orientation of principals, teachers, parents, and students working in individual schools" (Plank & Smith, 2008, p. 414). But we know that implementing change is no easy task; it requires planning, capacity building, monitoring, feedback, and course correction. When the professional practice of school personnel is consistently ratcheted up, student outcomes also improve, and the essence of a performance management system is in place.

Whatever the degree of intended change, achieving it depends upon the engagement of people, communication of purpose, articulation of short-term wins, and consolidation and institutionalization of the improvements (Kotter, 2012). Indistar first engages the Leadership Team, and then, through its plans, the entire school community (including parents), providing transparency to all stakeholders through a guest login. The focus on specific indicators of effective practice enables the school to experience many short-term wins that, in their aggregate, produce institutional change. This indicator-based approach differs greatly from that of drawing up on paper a few large plans, often vague, with goals that may never be achieved. Goals are good, but the everyday, detailed work of improved practice is the only route to goal attainment.

Thus, fundamentally, school improvement comes from a change in behavior. Heath and Heath (2010) describe both the psychological and practical groundwork that must be laid by leaders for constructive change:

Many leaders pride themselves on setting high-level direction: *I'll set the vision and stay out of the details.* It's true that a compelling vision is critical. But it's not enough. Big-picture,

hands-off leadership isn't likely to work in a change situation, because the hardest part of change—the paralyzing part—is precisely in the details. (p.53)

Indistar gives attention to the details about change in professional behavior. That's the hardest part, but the only way to sustainable improvement.

### **Motivation and Empowerment**

Daniel Pink (2009) reminds us that people in a learning culture are motivated by having a purpose and the prospect of achieving autonomy and mastery. Too often in recent history, school improvement has been viewed by the people closest to the students as a compliance regimen imposed by the state or the collection of programs that demand their own, sometimes conflicting or redundant, procedures and documentations. Indistar honors the abilities and motives of school personnel by giving them primary control in driving the improvement of their schools. Indistar focuses on effective practice, not programs, and encourages the personal mastery of professional skills aimed at the purpose of improved student learning. However, when school personnel are conditioned by past experience to view a system provided by the state as another means of shallow compliance monitoring, and as something whose time will surely pass, they fail to see the value of what has been provided them. That is a matter of mindset.

Mindset has emerged as a concept to describe a person's attitudes, beliefs, and disposition relative to particular realms of activity in life, such as school learning. Stanford University professor Carol Dweck's (2000, 2006) scholarly work laid a foundation for understanding mindset, and her book *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (2006) did much to popularize the beneficial consequences of a "growth mindset," the belief, for example, that ability is not fixed but is enhanced through learning and effort. Of course, we know that students do best when they possess a growth mindset, and that teachers (also possessing a growth mindset) can bolster in students' minds the idea that ability is not fixed but is enhanced with effort.

School improvement also requires a growth mindset: The ability of school personnel to perform their professional roles is never fixed but always subject to improvement. Improvement in professional practice requires a candid appraisal of people's current skills, knowledge, and practice and continuous work at their improvement. Hard and smart work, focused on effective practice, elevates the quality of performance of each adult in the school, and the result is an ever-improving school and greater learning outcomes for students.

Cokins (2009) asserts that "we substantially underestimate the importance of . . . considering and altering people's attitudes and behavior to overcome their natural resistance to change" (p. xxix). When school personnel are accustomed to paper documentation of minimal compliance with externally-imposed programs, a change in attitude —mindset— is necessary for them to discover the joy of collaborative engagement in purposeful pursuit of professional mastery.

Simply granting autonomy in the school improvement process to school personnel is not itself a sure formula for success, regardless of their mindset. The local autonomy is most likely to be fruitful when couched within the parameters of accountability, and with external (state) expectations for engagement in continuous improvement and fidelity to implementation. Likewise, the ability of school personnel to make productive decisions about improvement depends upon their understanding of school improvement processes and research and their access to guidance and coaching.

## **Implementation Science**

Research on implementation science (see, for example, Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005; Fixsen, Blasé, Naoom, & Wallace, 2009) has confirmed what common sense tells us: Efforts to change organizations, including schools, often fall short of expectations, despite being based on sound, research-based models. The failure lies in insufficient attention to the management of implementation. The best plans fail to achieve their potential because compromises to their integrity are made in carrying them out. Fixsen and colleagues (2005) define sound implementation as “processes [that] are purposeful and are described in sufficient detail such that independent observers can detect the presence and strength of the ‘specific set of activities’ related to implementation” (p. 5).

Those specific sets of activities include an improvement plan’s tasks leading to full implementation of objectives for effective professional practice. *Paper implementation* consists of putting in place new policies and procedures (Hernandez & Hodges, 2003). Rogers (2002) estimates that 80-90% of the people-dependent innovations stop at paper implementation. *Process implementation* follows the paper plan with procedures for training, supervision, and reporting. Beer, Eisenstat, and Spector (1990) pointed out that the lack of quality in the process implementation often subverts the best intentions of the paper plan. *Performance implementation* measures the impact of the change on the intended beneficiaries. In the case of schools, this would be seen in student outcomes resulting from implementation of effective professional practice.

Indistar is not a paper plan; it is a continuously evolving implementation process that asks the Leadership Team to assess current implementation of indicators of effective practice, map the path toward full implementation (with detail of task, responsibilities, and timelines), and continuously monitor execution until evidence of full implementation can be provided. This means thinking about the people who will be affected, providing training and other supports to build their capacity, and gathering data to determine when full implementation is achieved. Then, at a time period set by the state in the Indistar system, the indicator that has been previously determined to be fully implemented is flagged for reassessment. The implementation process is continuous, as is the improvement in performance (first in professional practice, then in student learning) that results from it.

## **Performance Management**

Gross and Jochim (2013, p 3) identify three basic features of an effective performance management system:

1. setting high performance standards and goals

2. systematically assessing performance and evaluating progress
3. improving or adapting practice

Gross and Jochim further note that “[i]n organizations working toward multiple objectives . . . performance management supports the alignment of work so as to better advance strategic goals” (p. 6). Performance management, then, aligns work, measures the quality of work, and aims work at the organization’s strategic goals. In schools, the goals are related to student learning outcomes, and the work is what the adults do to affect student learning. Too often, school personnel measure student outcomes without calibrating and enhancing the professional work that yields the best results for students.

Applying science always means introducing measurements, and measurements facilitate purposeful human interaction. Dean Spitzer (2007) asserts that performance measurement (a) directs behavior; (b) increases the visibility of performance; (c) focuses attention; (d) clarifies expectations; (e) enables accountability; and (e) improves execution, decision making, and problem solving. Thus, measurement, properly communicated and applied, enables people to work together toward common aims and find greater satisfaction in their work.

Indistar provides a wealth of measures of the progress of improvement efforts, and it structures data collection and analysis for the Leadership Team to determine and provide evidence of implementation of effective practice. Improving the performance of personnel requires more than measuring what they do; it requires building their capacity to change in positive ways. Redding and Nafziger (2013, p. 13) categorize four components of organizational capacity, as follows:

1. **Functional capacity** is the collective skills and knowledge of personnel working in the organization. Functional capacity is increased by improving the skills and knowledge of current personnel, which means improving their practice.
2. **Motivational capacity** refers to a person’s measurable willingness to engage in an activity and to persist in it—the strength of his or her motivation. The catalyst for a successful innovation is motivation (Christensen, Horn, & Johnson, 2008). Even when personnel possess the skills and knowledge that an innovation requires, their best performance depends upon their motivation to adopt the new practice and persevere.
3. **Social capacity**, or social capital, is captured in the trust, communication, cooperation, coordination, and collaboration among personnel working to accomplish a shared mission. A highly functioning organization depends upon the requisite level and kind of human capital, but more is necessary than the accumulation of individual capacities. People must work together, inspired to achieve common goals. Social capacity is affected by the structures within which people work.
4. **Technical capacity** includes tools (e.g., electronic devices), systems, processes, and protocols that guide and facilitate work. The organization’s capacity to improve depends upon the quality and appropriateness of its technology and the proficiency of personnel in using it.

## Conclusions

School improvement rests upon a change in behavior, a change in the professional practice of school personnel. Indistar places in the hands of school staff a system to guide their work, access to resources, and coaching from the district or state. Indistar is not a program, and, in fact, it is indifferent to the programs that may come and go in a school. It focuses on practice, and effective practice is universal and not program-specific. To succeed with Indistar, school personnel must realize the autonomy that it gives them to engage in purposeful mastery of individual and collective skills and knowledge. For many school personnel, success with Indistar requires a change in mindset, and the state influences that mindset in the way it introduces and supports Indistar. Autonomy alone is not the answer, but is productive within an accountability structure and with sufficient support.

Indistar embodies the principles of implementation science, down to the details of planned and implemented change. It provides the means to assess and measure the professional performance that leads to improved student performance. But Indistar must be used properly to be effective. That means a highly functioning and focused Leadership Team that relentlessly builds the capacity of school personnel to engage in continuous improvement. Feedback and suggestions by supportive and knowledgeable external coaches, from the district or state, add the quality of human insight and objectivity to the process.

## Questions for Reflection

1. How do school personnel perceive Indistar in your state? How do you present it to them and support them in their use of it?
2. Is the state's basic expectation for "compliance" in the use of Indistar the school's consistent and candid engagement with the process by a Leadership Team?
3. How do you help change educators' mindset about school improvement so they exercise their autonomy, with purpose, in pursuit of mastery of effective practice?
4. How do you expect coaches to interact with Leadership Teams via Indistar?
5. How do you monitor the work of your coaches and the progress of the schools?
6. How do you engage districts to assume responsibility for monitoring and supporting the work of their schools' Leadership Teams?
7. Do your districts take on the role of coaches for their schools? How do you train and assist them?

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