

Using school surveys to manage change better

Schools are continually making changes. Staff encounter new leaders, new ideas, new policies, and, of course, new inspection frameworks. Managing change effectively is therefore crucial for school and trust leaders.

Change invariably creates challenges: the bigger and more meaningful the change, the bigger they are. Let's take a fairly small example however, a new scheme of work. This presents a few problems:

- It demands time and effort. Someone has to plan and write the new scheme. Everyone has to make changes, creating new lessons and resources, or adapting old ones.
- It can be contentious. The old scheme of work may not be better, but it is at least familiar. Teachers may well be attached to it, and unhappy about the changes.
- It can be uneven. Some teachers may embrace the new scheme of work and start using it effectively. Others may try, but struggle. Some unhappy colleagues may try to avoid making changes.
- Results may vary! Schemes of work usually change because we're pursuing better learning. But we may make the changes and find learning doesn't improve initially – or at all.

Whatever we change, we face similar barriers: it takes time, it causes contention and the pace and impact of change is uncertain. Effective leaders need to stay on top of all these potential risks – while continuing to nudge the school in the right direction. That's where surveys come in. Effective surveys can help leaders to:

Monitor change

Surveys allow leaders to monitor the speed, intensity and effect of change. Let's stick with the example of a new scheme of work. There are a range of questions we could ask staff (and parents and pupils) to check how it's going. For example, we could ask staff how long they're spending planning, how helpful the resources they've been given are, and what more we can do to help them. We could ask pupils how much they think they're learning and how enjoyable, interesting and challenging lessons are proving.

Something like this is essential if we're to evaluate change properly. To do this, we must check how things are going before, during and after the change. For example, we might hope that our new scheme of work will reduce the amount of time teachers spend planning eventually.

In the short term, however, we'd expect planning to take longer, as teachers get to grips with the new approach. By repeating questions about how long teachers are spending planning and how they're finding it, we can check whether this is the case.

Correcting course

Change almost never goes exactly as planned. Early monitoring allows leaders to check how things are going and correct course where necessary. The range of things they may pick up is incredibly varied. They include misunderstanding of the goal, miscommunication of what's to be done, undesirable effects and even less desirable side effects. Whatever the issue is, picking it up early means leaders can do something about it. Rather than assuming change will work, we should assume it won't work, look out for early signs that something's wrong, and steer it to success.

Making room to vent

Change is an emotional process. As we've discussed, at some point in most change processes, most colleagues are going to struggle. Even those who fully support the change may be unhappy when they're in the middle of making it. The final thing surveys do is make room for staff to vent. By providing a lightning rod, surveys catch staff concerns and frustrations. In some cases, leaders may be able to address the causes. Even if they can't, knowing what staff are thinking allows leaders to acknowledge the issue, remind staff why the change matters, and recall the light at the end of the tunnel.

Conclusion

Staff spend an astronomical amount of time pursuing change in schools. That's time they could just as well have spent planning, marking, or going home earlier. It's therefore essential that leaders check that their changes are being understood correctly, executed effectively, and are achieving the intended goal. The sooner we check the impact of our efforts, the sooner we can see whether things are working, and the sooner we can make changes to ensure they do. Surveys are an invaluable tool to support this.

Key takeaways

1. Surveys are powerful tools for monitoring the progress, impact, and emotional aspects of change.
2. Regular monitoring allows leaders to track the speed, intensity, and effect of change initiatives – and adjust course accordingly.
3. Surveys provide a safe space for staff to express concerns and frustrations, allowing leaders to identify and address issues promptly.

If you'd like to discuss your current approach, and discuss how School Surveys can help you track change quickly and effectively, [get in touch](#).