

# USING “ADAPTIVE EQUITY-MINDED LEADERSHIP” TO BRING ABOUT LARGE-SCALE CHANGE

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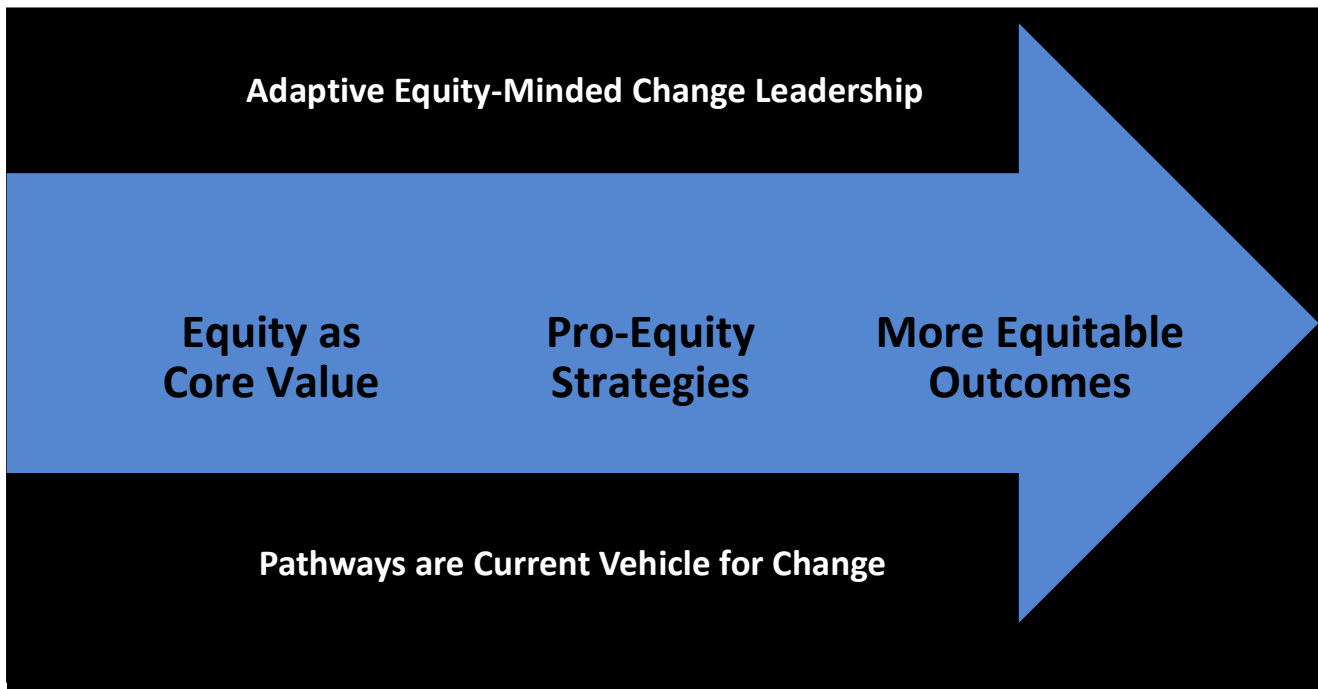
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There are many ways to think about change leadership and many theories to describe how it works, or should work. At their best, change leaders recognize that their job is to encourage and support new and different ways of thinking and doing that bring out the best in others and themselves. The theory of adaptive leadership values this perspective and therefore offers a practical approach to leadership that the community and technical colleges (CTCs) in Washington can use to implement three major change initiatives: the Student Success Center, guided pathways, and math pathways. These initiatives offer the potential to engage all CTCs in the state in the opportunity to do transformative work. Guided pathways are underway, initially, in a subset of institutions that are supported by College Spark as well as Jobs for the Future (JFF) and the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC)/Achieving the Dream (ATD). In addition, the Dana Center has committed to involving Washington’s CTCs in math pathway reform. Offering the opportunity to take stock of all three of these initiatives, our “critical friend” evaluation funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation is documenting changes that are being made through each endeavor, as well as larger shifts that result from collective interactions among the initiatives.

The decision by the SBCTC to focus on adaptive leadership as a means of preparing leaders to engage in change is an important starting point for this work. This theory seeks to bring about transformative change by developing a deep understanding of how individuals and organizations work collectively toward the shared goal of creating a better state of being. This approach to leadership focuses on change happening at a measured pace, recognizing that deep change takes time to implement and sustain. It also contends that everyone can and should play a role in implementing change that seeks to reform the deepest fiber and fabric of organizations and their cultures. Fundamentally, adaptive leadership is about:

- connecting organizational change to the core values, capabilities, and dreams of the people who are involved in and also impacted by the change.
- creating an organizational culture that collects and honors diversity of opinion and uses this collective knowledge to bring about the change.
- understanding that learning processes associated with change can be painful for people to endure, so they use knowledge of how change happens to anticipate and address concerns that may impede the change.
- understanding that large-scale change is an incremental process that requires patience, persistence, and a long-term commitment.

We believe the theory of adaptive leadership is a logical companion to the notion of “equity-mindedness” (Dowd & Bensimon, 2014). By equity-minded, Bensimon et al. means a state of awareness of how structures, policies, cultural norms, practices, and other ways of thinking and knowing that appear to be race-neutral may in fact negatively affect individuals and groups of people. As such, a cognitive shift to look for subtle and institutionalized inequities is important in a change effort that is explicitly committed to creating more equitable outcomes. Producing equity in systems that currently reproduce historical inequities will require that groups, especially student groups, be treated differently, including through changes in the distribution of resources. Combining this idea of equity-mindedness with adaptive leadership forms the basis of a new leadership theory that we call “adaptive equity-minded leadership.” By adaptive equity-minded leadership we mean an approach to leadership that is strategically focused on equity, highly democratic diverse perspectives, and employs pro-equity strategies to address inequities in the outcomes and experiences of historically underserved student groups (by race/ethnicity, low-income status, first-generation status, and other characteristics that distinguish and negatively impact success). A simplified representation of this concept of change leadership appears in the figure on page 2 of this brief.



This vision of adaptive equity-minded leadership is not merely focused on persons in positions of authority but is universally applicable to education practitioners at all levels, implying change leadership comes from many different corners, and in practice may be most successful when lead by the very students who bear the weight of inequitable treatment (Bragg, McCambly & Durham, 2016). This theory suggests no talent should go untapped in efforts to nurture and support change that is transformative. By transformative change, we mean deep and lasting (what some call second-order) change that confronts inequities in power and resources embodied in existing structures, policies and practices. Like adaptive equity-minded leaders, transformative leaders are change-makers who use their knowledge and skills to bring about more fair and socially just outcomes.

Shields (2012) defines transformative leadership as an approach to leadership that

begins with questions of justice and democracy; it critiques inequitable practices and offers the promise not only of greater individual achievement but of a better life lived in common with others. Transformative leadership, therefore, inextricably links education and educational leadership with the wider social context within which it is embedded. Thus, it is my contention that transformative leadership and leadership for inclusive and socially just learning environments are inextricably related. (p. 565).

Shields claims transformative leadership is rooted in transformative learning that also requires consciously changing one’s frame of reference in order to come to new understandings and change behavior. She observed that transformative learning theory began with a focus on self-reflection to promote individual change but later expanded to include collective learning to bring about change. By “deconstructing knowledge frameworks”, individuals and organizations are able to understand their culture and “its associated privileges and powers” in ways that enable more equitable change to happen. Davis (2006) observed that using frameworks is key to transformative learning that “disrupts prior learning and stimulates the reflective reshaping of deeply ingrained knowledge and belief structures” (p. 1).

In the remainder of this brief, we explore the use of frameworks (or frames) as disruptive devices for adaptive leaders associated with Washington’s CTCs to consider using to bring about more equitable student outcomes.

### **How Frames Mitigate and Enact Equity-Minded Change**

Many theories of change leadership highlight the importance of creating a collective vision to act as a guiding force for new goals, programs, and outcomes. These efforts often begin with consensus building—whether in the form of stakeholder engagement, visioning exercises, or listening sessions—to create a collective

desire for a new state of being. In creating a vision that proactively addresses inequities that manifest in organizational structures, policies and practices, it is important to reflect on the power of framing on change agent cognition, as well as the ways sense-making processes and spaces can activate impactful rather than nominal changes.

The frames that are inevitably used as part of creating an equity-minded change begin with the commonly accepted rationales that represent our collective assumptions and values about what causes inequities. In other words, the frames employed in creating a strategic vision and linking that vision to changes in practice assign responsibility and create rationales for the causes of inequity. Frames provide structured ways of interpreting phenomena that simplify menus for action and interpretation, rendering a context meaningful, as well as to provide commonly accepted “hooks” through which we can garner support for change (Snow & Benford, 1988; Benford & Snow, 2000). They allow us to understand occurrences as appropriate and fair, and they influence the solutions for which we advocate or ignore.

Since frames and framing processes are ubiquitous to the human condition (existing in the presence of efforts to make change or not), it is important to engage in deliberate actions to make frames visible, to scrutinize them to identify ways to change, and to reframe to ensure that the new state operates from a more equitable place (Hand, Penuel, & Gutiérrez, 2013). Applied to education, carefully examining and challenging frames is a way to challenge how issues of race or class operate in learning environments as they activate schema for the coordination of people and resources that either create access to or exclusion from learning environments (Hand et al, 2013). In other words, carefully examining our own frames helps us identify the reasons for and approaches to normative exclusionary practices that create inequities.

Equity-minded change requires that people make decisions that (tacitly or mindfully) represent their understanding of existing and new environments (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). For example, frames influence the way we think about student access to learning and the way we assess reasons underlying who succeeds and who fails. We use frames to code for the behavior of “unmotivated” students and assign blame that can result in their feeling invalidated as legitimate learners. On a larger scale, frames that drive how organizations envision what they should do to uphold educational excellence and how they should allocate resources to achieve this

goal. This larger framing is not focused on particular students, but rather on the ways environments are constructed and how they manifest in normative practices that lead to a set of outcomes. By advancing the norms of those in power, these frames privilege some while disenfranchising others. In education, some frames are explicit in holding inequities in place, but many are subtle and go unrecognized, which is most problematic for rectifying social injustices (Goffman, 1981). This explains why it is not enough to describe equity as a vision or goal but to seriously consider how deeper understandings (often expressed through frames) are needed to disrupt and deconstruct normative practices that contribute to inequities.

#### Reflection Questions:

- Consider how you commonly frame the problem of inequity, and consider how others frame it. What would you consider your dominant frame, and what frames do you perceive that others are using? How do these frames influence beliefs about how student outcomes can and should change?
- How do predominant frames associated with the new vision of change challenge or reify: a) the root causes of inequities, b) the processes that produce and reproduce inequities, c) the solutions for reducing inequities, and d) the mechanisms for motivating people to change their practices?

There are a few, pervasive frames that place limitations on potential solutions in policy and practice. These frames are often based in normative understandings of student differences or “deficits” that remediate student differences by assimilating them into existing structures, rather than reconsidering how existing structures can be changed to produce improved learning environments.

One powerful counternarrative to this predominant deficit frame is an asset frame. This frame requires rethinking of students as being without valued qualities to thinking of them as having strengths that need to be nurtured and rewarded. Asset frames imagine student success as a product of re-envisioned organizations that emerge when structures, resources, and policies are redistributed to ensure that they have a fair shot at success. When students from cultural and/or economic backgrounds that are not well represented engage in pathways and programs designed to address their needs, they can be recognized for their assets rather than their deficits. This is not to say that no maladaptive characteristics exist, but rather to note that there is something systemic about attributing deficiencies to some groups and not to others when clearly, no group is universally strong or weak, or good or bad. It is important to recognize in both ourselves and our collective selves that dominant frames can influence our thinking and behavior. Often operating at an almost invisible level, minoritized students get labeled as problem learners without noting that everyone experiences learning as a cultural process that interprets learning as part of human growth and development.

#### Reflection Questions:

- Where and how do you see asset and deficit frames being used in your settings?
- What counternarratives are being used or could be used to challenge deficit frames?
- How can asset (or other student affirmative) frames be adopted and spread to support equity-minded change?

Thus far, this section has focused on understanding what the frame is and what strategies could guide an equity-minded initiative. The importance of shifting frames when it comes to challenging inequity means that the change process hinges in part on how environments are perceived and how such perceptions manifest in day-to-day work (Bensimon, et al., 2007; Lane, 2012). Adaptive leadership relies on interaction and webs of professional

affiliations to access meaning about an initiative and what it demands of the implementer (Spillane, Reiser, & Gomez, 2006). These interactions are important spaces for forming opinions and for learning about educational practice. Whereas leaders and reformers design for practice, they cannot design practice that is determined across interaction and through cognitive processes (Spillane, 2012). Instead, leaders create the infrastructure (e.g., routines, positions) in which actors interact to determine practice.

A lack of response to such an initiative is not so much an issue of indifference, incompetence, or unwillingness but a problem of interpreting context, messages, and other signals that inform the change process (Spillane, 2000). This way of thinking challenges change models that tend to attribute failure to change to resistance, lack of resources, inadequate capacity, and poor compliance (Spillane et al., 2006). By reframing, we see change as resulting from a combination of deep understanding, skill, and passion. While some sense-making processes tend to interpret change initiatives as a mere variation of the status quo, equity-minded change initiatives deliberately seek to create transformative change. Thus, paying careful attention to identifying and nurturing safe spaces in which individuals can work within and across settings to understand the profound nature of equity-minded change is crucial.

A lesson from adaptive leadership theory is important here in that adaptive leadership points out the tendency of organizations to prioritize technical solutions and conflate technical solutions with transformative change. One reason this happens is that people-oriented issues are challenging and often uncomfortable while technical solutions seem more straightforward and manageable. Processes that challenge inequitable or exclusionary practices and the frames that uphold them are more likely to involve conflict than processes that involve implementing different procedures. When applied to problems specific to equity, we must keep in mind that dislodging frames that have created inequity also means dislodging frames that have preserved power and privilege for a long time, possibly from the start of the CTCs.

Conversations that question the fundamental ways of operating can also be threatening because change leaders themselves are coming to terms with the biases they hold toward others and their institutions. This recognition that self-reflection is critically important for ourselves is important as well. As such, in the application of adaptive leadership's tenets, it is important to ask

ourselves how we represent power and privilege and how we empower others to understand and voice their perspectives.

### Reflection Questions:

- Where and how is collective meaning-making happening, and how can these activities grow and spread?
- Which groups are included in these activities, and which groups are overlooked that should be included?
- What supports are being (or can be) implemented to help individuals and groups that are struggling to engage in equity-minded change practices become more engaged?

## Coupling the New Vision with Equity-Minded Practice

Whereas broad policy changes may promote more equitable educational outcomes, the magnitude of the impact may be small and relatively invisible (Bastedo & Jaquette, 2011; Cox, 2016; Harper, 2012). As anyone involved in change initiatives like those being implemented by the CTCs knows, it is sometimes difficult to know who and what is changing. Some efforts are well known while others seem to be invisible. Plus, the old ways of thinking and doing prevail as new ways of thinking and doing are introduced, fragmenting the old rational constructs (Stone, 2011). These mechanisms are a general sequence or set of social events or processes through which the solution causes some change in the outcome (Gross, 2009). Mechanisms, which act to change in educational contexts are processes rather than prescriptive reactions between a stimulus and a result (Spillane, 2012; Spillane et al., 2006; Spillane & Zuberi, 2009). Often, these mechanisms are familiar—for example, a professional development program, the enactment of assessment routines, or sense-making about a new pedagogy. For the purpose of creating systemic change, we can think of these mechanisms as

existing within day-to-day work, or organizational routines that define faculty, administrator, and student experiences.

It goes without saying that in order for a new vision to impact equity it is critical to engage change leaders in professional development that scaffolds learning that challenges the normative constructs that hold inequities in place. People need to be supported and rewarded for engaging in these professional development activities and also for engaging in practices that continues to influence and shape their understandings and behaviors in day-to-day work. Changes in a wide range of organizational routines need to move from the macro-level vision to micro-level practices that include educating and supporting students. Designing new organizational routines takes deep context knowledge of where, how, and by whom practices take place. The manner in which routines and components of infrastructure deploy resources, whether around subject matter or organizational policies, creates the patterns through which adaptive equity-minded leaders need to engage. New organizational routines must be disruptive if different norms are to develop. In other words, norms may best develop by following practice. As Fullan (2011) suggests, change leaders use their experiences in practice to advance their learning about what change leadership means and how to get better at it.

### Reflection Questions:

- Where, when and how do people learn about one another's frames and work together to re-frame?
- What processes share information about what is known about how frames relate to students' experiences, engagement, and outcomes?
- What processes are changing to align the new vision with day-to-day interactions that validate and support student completion?

Organizational routines that support learning about how to lead change to obtain more equitable outcomes may also involve creating new positions that focus on

developing or monitoring equitable practices, reforming admissions and assessment processes, implementing new student intake procedures, offering new faculty evaluation processes, and more. Practitioners dedicated to student success need to see connections between their day-to-day tasks and their role in “making or unmaking unequal outcomes” for students (Bensimon et al., 2007, p. 32). The CTCs’ implementation of pathways reforms may involve and it is important to assess how these equity-minded practices are carried out.

By transforming organizational routines, it is possible to begin to see how day-to-day interactions can change student outcomes. To achieve this goal, it is very important to analyze data and engage in data-driven decision-making. Often change initiatives link student outcomes to the analysis of student-level data, but then leave the change agents without sufficient knowledge and skills to use the data to transform practice. Using data to highlight a problem is not the end goal but rather the starting point to implementing pro-equity strategies. As with any organizational routine that is intended to shift a dominant deficit-oriented frame to produce equity, the goal is to analyze data to identify inequities that need to be rectified and determine which solutions will produce the greatest impact. Data can never produce change without the insights of knowledgeable change agents who carry out the day-to-day work. Thus, data are valued because they become the centerpiece of new organizational routines that couple new frames with day-to-day practice that creates more equitable results (Spillane, 2012).

To use a data-driven initiative to disrupt organizational routines, it is useful to design processes (templates and scripts) that shift old frames toward new ones. These processes can show how new organizational routines can support the new vision for equity or decouple practice in favor of ceremonial change. Also, redesigning organizational routines to move the new vision to reality is often more than a technical solution or management tool but more about transformative learning that occurs with, for, and about students (Bensimon et al., 2007). With respect to pathways initiatives such as those being implemented by the CTCs, the responsibility for creating pathways that result in student success demands the thoughtful use of data, including using data to move asset frames to the center of the equity-minded conversations that engage change agents of the reform (Dowd, 2005).

### Reflection Questions:

- What organizational routines contribute to inequitable student outcomes?
- How are these organizational routines being changed, and how do the new organizational routines differ from the past?

## Sustaining Momentum—Bringing Learning to Bare in Accountability Frameworks

Much can be and in fact has been said about methods and measures of accountability relative to equity and outcomes. For this reason, we have chosen not go into great depth on this subject, but we do want to reference accountability because of its importance to transformative change. While we do not take a stand on a specific approach to accountability in this brief, we do consider think it important to state that accountability is a critical element in sustaining work towards equity in the context of changing organizational routines. 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) posits that “equity-inclusive performance accountability” focuses institutions on reducing social and economic inequality, therefore evidence of these changes should play a role in policy, staffing, and funding.

In addition to 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, Patton, & Wooden, 2009). It is simply not possible to have a sustainable impact on inequity if the communities of color, low-income students, disabled students are not meaningfully heard (Harper et al., 2009). 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 have impacted detrimentally, and possibly completely excluded. Only from this perspective can respected constructs like meritocracy be understood as mechanisms that result in the exclusion of underserved students.

Relative to this issue of equity through appropriate accountability measures, we cite the potential of formal strategic planning playing a role in institutionalizing intentions, goals, plans, and intended outcomes. In this regard, the *Equity and Social Justice Strategic Plan* of King County, Washington (2016) may serve as a useful example. By stating for the public what the Country believes and how it is positioning itself relative advancing the individual and collective good of its citizens, the strategic plan becomes a tangible means of determining whether outcomes are being met.

#### Reflection Questions:

- With whom does the buck stop if progress stalls?
- What should accountability look like relative to ensuring more equitable outcomes?
- Who is responsible for making sure momentum continues?

One important study from outside of education looked at equal employment opportunity legislation in the workplace and found that diversity training, professional development, or mentoring did not create meaningful equitable employment outcomes if no one bore responsibility for long-term implementation of the change (Kalev, Dobbin, & Kelly, 2006). This mirrors in a powerful way what many in education have said for a long time—if new initiatives are not embedded in ongoing processes and policies they will fade away (Adelman & Taylor, 2003). In short, accountability for equity needs to be embedded in on-going structure, policies, practices, value systems, and rewards. To overcome deeply seated beliefs, it is necessary to create new visions that question normative deficit frames and enable counternarratives to

emerge that enable students and communities that have experienced historic underrepresentation to experience success that is meaningful and impactful on their own terms.

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