

Lead Through the Emotional Stages of Change

Stage and Emotional Experience	Human-Centered Leadership Actions
<p>Stage 1: Awareness</p> <p>Leaders feel the initial weight of the need for change—often a mix of urgency, concern, and isolation. Others might not yet see the problem, leaving the leader feeling alone in their realization.</p>	<p>Lead with clarity and empathy.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Reflect deeply on the why before communicating broadly. ▪ Share data transparently and with context. ▪ Invite perspectives from staff and families to build shared understanding and trust. ▪ Listen more than you speak early in the process. Create psychological safety for open dialogue
<p>Stage 2: Denial</p> <p>The community may rationalize that change isn't needed ("It's not that bad"). Resistance surfaces, creating frustration for leaders, who are aware of the urgency.</p>	<p>Lead with patience and transparency.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Avoid confrontation. Focus instead on storytelling and evidence that connect the community to emotion and the purpose behind the change. ▪ Provide opportunities for dialogue; don't merely issue directives. ▪ Openly acknowledge fears and concerns. ▪ Reassure the community that change is a process, not a demand.
<p>Stage 3: Frustration</p> <p>As the process unfolds, staff may feel overwhelmed or inadequate. Emotions such as anxiety, self-doubt, or irritation often target the leader.</p>	<p>Lead with empathy and composure.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Normalize the discomfort of growth. ▪ Break large goals into manageable steps. ▪ Celebrate effort, not just results. ▪ Stay calm and compassionate. Your tone sets the emotional temperature for the team.
<p>Stage 4: Depression</p> <p>Fatigue and discouragement emerge as the hard work sets in. Energy dips, cynicism may surface, and progress feels slow. Leaders often feel isolated or depleted.</p>	<p>Lead with connection and care.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Prioritize relational check-ins before operational updates. ▪ Be visible and approachable. ▪ Create safe spaces for emotional processing. ▪ Model self-care and encourage wellness within the team. ▪ Lean on trusted colleagues for support.
<p>Stage 5: Exploration</p> <p>A turning point begins: Staff start exploring solutions and recognizing the benefits of change. Optimism grows, but sustaining it takes effort.</p>	<p>Lead by empowering curiosity.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Provide the time, tools, and freedom to experiment. ▪ Celebrate innovation and learning from mistakes. ▪ Keep the pace steady; resist the urge to rush progress. ▪ Reinforce how experimentation builds ownership and collective confidence.

<p>Stage 6: Acceptance</p> <p>The school community begins to believe in and act on the change. Confidence and commitment increase, though some resistance lingers.</p>	<p>Lead with trust and consistency.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Reinforce shared goals through frequent reflection. ▪ Recognize contributions across all levels. ▪ Communicate clearly about next steps. ▪ Strengthen community identity through collaboration and shared wins.
<p>Stage 7: Commitment</p> <p>Change becomes embedded in the culture. Momentum builds, and the community feels unified in the mission.</p>	<p>Lead with celebration and sustainability.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Acknowledge achievements and express gratitude often. ▪ Institutionalize reflective practices. ▪ Continue investing in professional growth. ▪ Protect time for recognition and renewal to maintain long-term commitment.