Strengthening Your Adaptive Leadership and Learning Mindset
Resources for Education System Changemakers

Education systems are always evolving—and successful changemakers evolve with them. This resource will support you in growing your adaptive leadership mindset by helping you recognize patterns and insights as they emerge, reflect in ways that amplify progress, and confidently adjust your strategies to stay aligned with your goals.

Research shows that learning-centered approaches are essential for advancing systems transformation—especially in dynamic environments. Making space for reflection and iteration, both individually and collectively, helps keep momentum strong and strategies grounded in real-world relevance[1].

The IREX Adaptive Management Approach

1. Learn Continuously	2. Adapt Intentionally	3. Reflect and Fine-Tune
Stay connected to what is unfolding in your work and your system. Reflect on feedback, outcomes, and experiences—both planned and unexpected.	Use what you learn to make thoughtful shifts. Whether adjusting your strategy, strengthening collaboration, or trying a new approach, each adaptation is an opportunity to move closer to your vision.	Look back to look ahead. Reflection helps you understand what is creating impact and where further alignment may be helpful. It turns learning into progress.
Ask: *What are we noticing that might help us grow or shift direction?*	Ask: *What is one shift we could make that brings us closer to the change we want to see?*	Ask: *What is working—and how can we build on that?*

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[1] Preskill, H., Gopal, S., Mack, K., & Cook, J. (2014). *Evaluating Complexity: Propositions for Improving Practice*. FSG.; Lynn, J. (2024). *Adaptive Management for Complex Systems Change: Principles, Practices, and Practical Tools*. ODI and Global Integrity.

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Tools to Support Your Adaptive Practice

These practical tools can help you bring reflection, responsiveness, and learning into your everyday education system changemaking:

Tool	What It Helps You Do	Example in Practice
Progress Dashboards	Tracks system-level shifts with a focus on patterns, alignment, and responsiveness—not just deliverables.	The BHP Foundation uses progress dashboards to monitor signals of change across their education investments. Instead of focusing only on KPIs, they track shifts in alignment across partners, the coherence of interventions, and the system's responsiveness to local voices. This forward-looking approach helps them adjust in real time and strengthen collective impact.[2]
Mini Case Studies	Provides deep learning from one school, district, or site to inform broader system strategies.	Botswana's *Breakthrough to Setswana* program identified a small group of classrooms where young learners were making rapid gains in reading. A case study explored classroom routines, local language materials, and teacher collaboration. Insights from this deep dive shaped broader national reform efforts and influenced teacher support strategies at scale.[3]
Key Juncture Planning	Prepares teams to pause at meaningful moments and reflect before moving forward.	In adaptive systems work, teams are encouraged to identify learning points in advance—moments when new decisions will need to be made. For example, a program launching new school-community partnerships might plan a reflection point after the first round of site implementation. By collecting feedback and reviewing early outcomes, the team can strengthen their next phase. These moments—built into the rhythm of change—help maintain clarity and momentum.[4]
Learning Agendas	Keeps learning focused on the most important questions guiding your work.	Zambia's Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) initiative used a learning agenda to guide its national rollout. Early learning questions included: How can student grouping by learning level be integrated into existing classrooms? What forms of teacher support enable consistent use of formative assessments? How can local education offices best monitor and adjust implementation? Data collected at each stage was used to inform decisions and strengthen alignment across schools, teacher training, and curriculum policies. This agenda helped sustain momentum and embed TaRL into national education structures.[5]

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[2] BHP Foundation. (2023). *Education Equity: Systems Change Report*.

[3] Crouch, L., Rolleston, C., & Gustafsson, M. (2020). *Improving foundational learning: Evidence, actions, and new directions*. Center for Global Development.

[4] Faul, M., & Savage, L. (2023). *Reflexive Practice in Adaptive Systems Work*. Global Learning for Adaptive Management (GLAM), UK Aid.

[5] TaRL Africa & Zambia Ministry of Education. (2023). *National Scaling of Teaching at the Right Level in Zambia: Learning and Adaptation Summary*.

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The **Power Learning Tool** developed by IREX can help changemakers build personal and team-level habits of applied learning and reflection. The four-part framework supports skill development around deep learning over time:

Illustrative example of how the Power Learning Tool can support real-time growth:

Understand:
Fatima, a Regional Education Officer, wants to strengthen her facilitation skills—specifically, her ability to guide school leaders through collaborative planning sessions that result in clear, shared priorities. She reviews what effective facilitation looks like: using open-ended questions, creating space for all voices, and staying focused on outcomes. She also sets a goal to make her sessions more participatory.

Apply: At her next school visit, Fatima facilitates a planning meeting using a new technique: pairing participants to brainstorm before sharing with the whole group. She also uses a visual prioritization tool to keep the group focused.

Analyze: After the session, she notes that participation was higher than usual and the school leaders seemed more engaged. However, she also observed that time ran short, and some goals remained vague. One principal mentioned the visual tool was especially helpful.

Reflect & Adapt: Fatima reflects that the group dialogue worked well, but she needs to manage time more tightly and build in a few stronger guiding questions. She decides to adjust her session plan and ask a colleague to observe her next session for feedback.

> ### Sharing Progress and Generating Momentum
> Every insight, relationship, and shift in perspective is a sign of systems progress. Sharing these moments—through reflection or storytelling—not only deepens learning, it fuels momentum.
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> Storytelling helps others make sense of complexity, imagine new possibilities, and feel invited into change.[6] **Your story could be the spark that inspires someone else to begin.**

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[6]   Davis, R., & Pratt, S. (2021). *Storytelling for Systems Change: Insights from the Field*. School of System Change.; Westley, F., McGowan, K., & Tjörnbo, O. (2015). *The Role of Narrative in Systems Transformation*. In F. Westley, K. McGowan, & O. Tjörnbo (Eds.), *The Evolution of Social Innovation: Building Resilience Through Transitions* (pp. 197–213). Edward Elgar Publishing.

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