The NEW School Rules

6 Vital Practices for Thriving and Responsive Schools

Anthony Kim and
Alexis Gonzales-Black

Illustrations by Kawai Lai

CORWIN
A SAGE Publishing Company

Planning

Plan for Change, Not Perfection

U.S. general and president Dwight Eisenhower said, "In preparing for battle, I have always found that plans are useless, but planning is indispensable."

If "better student outcomes" is our shared mantra as educators, then we need to stick vigilantly to that purpose as our guiding principle and direction, not the plans we make to get us there. We don't want to be sidelined by our strategies, action steps, and rubrics, which can often take on lives of their own. We need to approach planning as a way of thinking, not a set product or plan that has value in and of itself. We need our planning to inspire, lead, and unify our organizations, teams, and teachers. Otherwise, we can achieve the plan but not the purpose we set out to achieve.

The Problem

Imagine you are the district leader who, under pressure to implement a one-to-one technology initiative, ordered brand-new tablets for 10,000 students. You carefully determined your needs and managed to come just under the budget for the initiative. However, there was a problem. You hadn't factored in the cost of software to run on the devices. You assumed they would just work.

We need our planning to inspire, lead, and unify our organizations, teams, and teachers. Otherwise, we can achieve the plan but not the purpose we set out to achieve.

Once you realized you needed funds to purchase additional software, what did you do? Did you move ahead with the one-to-one initiative and hope that free software would suffice? Or did you reduce the number of devices you ordered so you could allocate funds for the software?

This really happened—in lots of places. It turns out many districts opted for the former. They deployed the devices across their schools so they could "check the box" and execute the plan—no matter how limited the utility of the devices.

While we try to make the best plans possible, as quickly as possible, the question is: How can any organization execute a plan with constantly changing variables?

WHEN PLANS ARE MORE IMPORTANT THAN OUR PURPOSE

All of us have been expected to put together a strategic plan, whether it's for one semester or 5 years. We labor over these plans—sometimes over the course of 12 to 24 months—dreaming up the path ahead and detailing the resources we'll need. We aim to be future focused, but out of necessity our assumptions are based on the current realities of our schools and districts. Then we present our plan for approval.

Unfortunately, once we're set to go, we find the situation has changed before we've gotten started. Technology programs or platforms may have changed or been discontinued. People have

changed—in districts with a high number of students receiving free or reduced-price lunch, teacher turnover can be over 22 percent (Di Carlo, 2015)—and the new team isn't up to speed. Policies have evolved and buy-in has dropped off. Yet many of us have been penalized when we don't follow the plan. We can't seem to let go of this pattern, repeating the process year after year.

The plan offers a comforting illusion. It suggests we can anticipate the future and prevent failures, but ultimately it is only an illusion. Your mind may automatically default to the old adage "If you fail to plan, you plan to fail." But try this thought experiment:

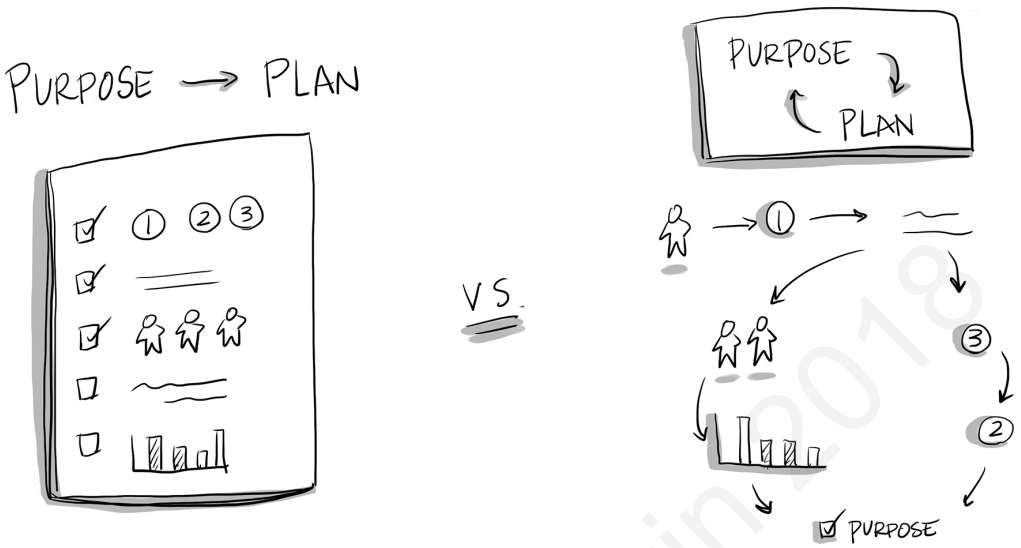
> *Is failure occurring in your organization?*
>
> *Are you falling short of goals, missing benchmarks, or experiencing any degree of failure already?*

The answer is probably yes.

Failure, at least to some degree, is inevitable. In fact, by failing early and often we can limit the negative impact of failure and benefit from the experience and data we gain in the process. Failure helps us surface organizational deficiencies and uncover our own blind spots. And of course it gives us a good dose of humility. It's hard to imagine that anyone has the capability of planning perfectly, anticipating every action. In fact, it could be argued that the most successful organizations are able to execute in parallel with failures.

Take school improvement planning as an example. Generally, low-performing schools are compelled to create a cumbersome plan outlining goals, actions, benchmarks, evaluations, and more. The length and complexity of these plans almost ensures that no one understands how they should be used, and they are often developed by people far removed from the day-to-day work and the real needs on the ground. Planning in a vacuum ties teams and schools to a plan, emotionally and mentally, to everyone's detriment. It makes it harder to adapt, even when data—and the larger purpose—suggest taking a different route.

Planning in a vacuum ties teams and schools to a plan, emotionally and mentally, to everyone's detriment. It makes it harder to adapt, even when data—and the larger purpose—suggest taking a different route.



PLANNING WITHOUT LEARNING

Planning is often a way for organizations to cope with uncertainty. A plan makes things feel more concrete and knowable, but it also creates a false sense of security. For example:

- Imagine a plan that focuses on making sure there is bandwidth at schools. What if after you execute this plan, which was done flawlessly, you realize that there is not enough bandwidth for the types of applications the schools end up using? Even though the plan and support systems were executed well, was the project a success? What was the purpose of the plan? To expand Internet access or to create new learning opportunities and strategies?
- Many districts are looking for a silver bullet to address the needs of low-performing students. Districts that look at programs like Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) develop complex implementation plans and procedures to follow. However, the districts are not learning as they are implementing because these types of prescriptive programs are often rigidly designed and difficult to adapt to individual schools and students.
- As districts roll out new curriculum adoptions, they continue to spend inordinate amounts of time mapping standards. Sometimes it can take years to unpack standards across all

grade levels and subjects. By the time they are done, the district teams are exhausted, the project is delayed, and there are no vendors that can meet all of the requirements.

In trying to find a reason for falling short of goals, we attribute the lack of results to not executing the plan well enough. We insist that if only we had a more robust plan, or stuck closer to the plan, we would have succeeded. This is where we get caught in a cycle of creating more and more detailed plans every year.

In trying to find a reason for falling short of goals, we attribute the lack of results to not executing the plan well enough.

When our plans are not designed to account for learning as we go, we ignore emerging information and clues like common sense and logic. It can lead to the opposite of what was hoped for—plans sitting on the shelf, half-hearted implementation, and skepticism carried over to the next initiative that comes along. I've heard this time and time again about strategic plans and strategic plan refreshes. Kind of like Groundhog Day—you dust off the old one and start a refresh every few years, with very little of the old one implemented.

CONTROL IS CONFUSED WITH PLANNING

Plans become more important than the purpose when control is confused with planning. As an example, this frequently happens with learning management systems. The system may be designed to provide personalized skills training and professional development for teachers, but administrators frequently default to using it as a tool to monitor performance by tracking teacher logins. The original planning may focus on teacher development, but the plan may focus on measurements and can feel punitive. Even though you can collect data on teacher task and usage, how can you tell if teachers were willing to learn, learned, or are applying what they learned? Is it good enough just to track whether teachers did the work?

In the 1880s, Frederick Taylor came up with a style of management, which peaked in influence in the 1910s and 1920s, though many practices continue to this day. His approach to management was scientific and based on efficiency, especially labor productivity,

standardized practices, and the transformation of craft into mass production. This approach aimed to reduce workers to replaceable parts—which would eventually be mechanized and automated—resulting in a greater division of labor and a lost connection to the production of the products. The purpose was to eliminate any deviations in order to produce a consistent product. Workers began to feel their labor was monotonous and lacked meaning, and it was often exploited, leading to a rise of united workers and unions.

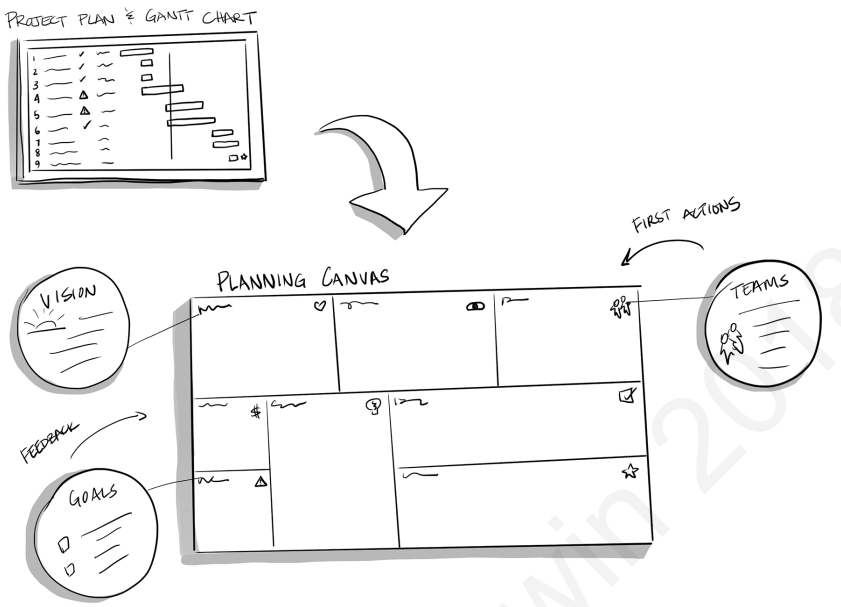
The creativity, responsiveness, and learning that naturally came with the work of the craftsperson or small business owner was "planned out" of the industrial model of work. The role of the teacher in many ways has been reduced to a set of repetitive routines. The focus on accountability, pacing guides, and standards has whittled away the creative side of teaching. Our mental model of planning in schools still comes from this 19th and 20th century picture of workers. However, the creative element is what makes learning exciting and motivating for teachers and students. Yet there's a way to have both—accountability and creative responsiveness.

The New Rule

Plan for Change, Not Perfection

To think about planning that is responsive, adaptable, and amazingly sophisticated, we can look to nature for inspiration. Take, for example, a human cell. We can think of genetic code, or genes, as a blueprint containing instructions to build hundreds of millions of different components for the body. Rather than execute the blueprint identically in every cell, the body can turn certain genes on and off to trigger specific developmental pathways, adapt to new food sources, or cope with environmental stresses. The versatility and adaptability of our genes allows our bodies to respond and thrive under various conditions.

How can we design systems in human organizations that have the necessary building blocks without creating rigidity based on fixed rules, uniformity, and control? How can we allow for flexibility and adaptability so our planning serves us rather than limits us?



The goal of planning is to get directional clarity so people know where to focus their attention and how to make sense of situations as they come about. If we begin to *plan for change, not perfection,* we continually stay open to new, better, and different options we may discover along the way.

How can we allow for flexibility and adaptability so our planning serves us rather than limits us?

This New Rule follows an approach of *planning and iterating* rather than the traditional one of *planning and control*, which focuses on compliance. This new approach gives us permission to change the plan when overwhelming data suggest a change of course. It sets the stage for a feedback process in which actions are continuously shaped by and adapted to changing conditions (such as feedback from parents, from teachers, from students) rather than by a master plan established at the beginning of the year—or the year before that!

Simon Sinek (2009), in his book *Start With Why,* states that every organization functions on three levels: what we do, how we do it, and why we do it (pp. 37–51). He proposes that while most people focus on the *how* and *what*, great leaders focus on the *why*. He defines the *why* as the larger purpose, cause, or belief—it's the answer to the question of why we get up in the morning or why the work we do should matter to anyone else.

Clarity of purpose gives you permission to evolve and make changes to the plan, as long as they are in service to the greater mission.

A new approach to planning gives us permission to change the plan when overwhelming data suggest a change of course.

At Inditex, the parent company of fast fashion retailer Zara, the purpose is simple: Keep the customer at the center of everything the company does. It's this laser focus and a *plan and iterate* approach to planning that has allowed Zara to develop some of the most innovative business models in the world. Rather than manufacturing huge orders of a certain item, Zara manufactures in small batches, sends merchandise to stores, receives data, and then doubles down on the styles that are successful. The company invests heavily in the flow of information to gather sales and trend information. Then it acts on the data with a production process that allows it to get new styles and more inventory into stores in just 2 weeks, rather than the customary 6 months of its competitors. Zara invests its time and marketing dollars in responsiveness rather than selling with advertising and high-paid celebrities (Hanson, 2012). This approach has made it a global leader in its industry.

Wal-Mart does this too, with intensive morning meetings where managers share the sales and revenue results of product displays that are working in one location so they can be replicated across regions or the whole country in a matter of hours. Every day is an experiment in using data for feedback and responsiveness (PBS, 2004).

In a school setting, principals do this regularly at the start of a school year. Over the spring and summer, the school tries to predict the enrollment by grade level to plan for classrooms, bus schedules, and teaching staff. However, the predictions are regularly off and schools scramble to add staff, move classrooms, and redesign the bell schedule. They make plans, but ideally they anticipate and are prepared for change. A school that has a flex day schedule is able to adjust to its Plan Z schedule (such as periods that are 10 minutes shorter) to fit in special events, guest speakers, and workshops that weren't on the schedule in August.

The differences in these two strategies are summed up in the following table:

Comparison of Planning Approaches

Plan and Control	Plan and Iterate
Develop the plan, gain support for it, then execute it.	Develop the plan, execute it, then rework or redesign it based on feedback.
The plan is driven by past behaviors and information.	The plan is driven by real-time observations and data.
Build plans that are extremely detailed and as close to perfect as possible.	Build plans that are good enough for now, recognizing that more information and learning are to come.
Stick to the plan in order to measure the success of the plan.	Adapt the plan to support purpose in order to measure the success of the plan.

Think about the time, money, and resources you could save if you and your team and colleagues adopted the rule of *plan for change, not perfection*.

Case Study: When a Large District Plans for Change

A southeastern county school district is rapidly growing, with about 100,000 students and close to 100 schools. It's a noncontiguous district serving the areas outside a large city. The School Board in 2011 hired Raymond to replace the existing superintendent. Raymond's first moves were to develop a new strategic plan around personalized learning and to make the district a charter district. By 2013, the district had developed its roadmap, which included a rollout of new technology, school designs, and professional development to 100 schools in twelve to eighteen months.

Led by the then deputy superintendent of academics, Sean, a team was pulled together that included the formation of a Frontline Team, made up of district-level coaches who focus on transformative practices, technology skills, and applied learning.

The initiative got started in 2012 with an initial effort to scan for "bright spots" in K–12 schools across the state. What they found was that schools that were student-centered could help them achieve the goals they had identified:

- 90 percent of students graduating on time
- 80 percent of seniors competitive for admissions to the state university system
- 100 percent of students career ready

To make the transition to student-centered learning, the district's leadership team envisioned classrooms at every level would move along a continuum from traditional learning to personalized learning. Teachers and students would start simply with technology used as a tool to enhance learning. Over time, the schools would move all the way to a competency-based framework where students would have choice around their assignments and pace of learning.

Everyone realized it would be impossible to align 10,500 employees around a detailed project plan of this scale. If the plan got too complex and detailed, it would be hard for people feel a sense of ownership, and more time would be spent explaining the details of the plan than actually working on it. They decided to take a dramatically different approach to the usual strategic plan:

- They would create a flexible approach for teachers with a "start where you're comfortable" and "progress at your own rate" design.
- They would focus on telling a story to inspire excitement and shared understanding.
- They would measure progress and growth.

They figured the more excited and knowledgeable people were about the plan, the more readily they would adopt it. This insight affected the planning itself. They realized they could expend enormous amounts of time trying to map out all the details and contingencies without having enough experience to do it effectively. They also sensed it would overwhelm the very people they needed to get on board.

The solution they came up with was to devise a roadmap showing the reality of where the districts was, what success would look like, and key elements of the path they would take to get there. It would allow plenty of room for adaptation and change as the implementation got underway. Letting go of the notion of the perfect plan created a situation where they felt they could get a reasonable plan together in a short time frame, which they could refine as they learned from their initial assumptions and the actual experiences of students and teachers.

The roadmap comprised these key features:

- *Their future state:* Schools provide differentiated and individualized learning to all students through student-centered learning models, flexible and project-driven learning, integrated assessments, and school autonomy.
- *Their current state:* Schools needed more professional development; they lacked an integrated technology plan; a strong decision-making framework needed to be implemented to move quickly.
- *The path they wanted to follow:* Key streams of work for the next five years across the curriculum were identified as learning, tools and resources, and operations.
- *The near-term actions they needed to take to align working groups:* The project team would provide schools with a clear vision, frequent communications, and ways to collect feedback for continuous improvement.
- *How success would be measured:* Processes to collect and interpret qualitative and quantitative data needed to be in place at the outset in order to support ongoing iteration with real information and feedback.

To make the concept of student-centered learning less abstract, the roll-out of the roadmap included the story of a hypothetical student named Monica. For example, 11-year-old Monica would use her personal dashboard on a tablet throughout her day. She could be reminded of something a teacher said in class by watching videos of lectures. Every day, data would be recorded about Monica's coursework and progress, which would become part of her online profile. Her teacher would diagnose and recommend resources and communicate with Monica's parents based on that information.

Monica's story brought to life the central idea of co-planning between students, teachers, and parents. It emphasized how students would participate in and demonstrate their learning and would be engaged by choice and variable learning environments to define their learning paths based on career- and college-readiness standards.

The storytelling approach to planning was also applied to the evaluation aspect of the plan. They wanted to come up with a simple purpose, or goal, for each year of the initiative. It needed to be specific enough to be measurable and broad enough to allow for flexibility and varying needs across so many different schools, teachers, and students.

THE SCHOOL DISTRICT'S PLANNING FOR SUCCESS

Success was defined as follows:

Year 1	
Goal:	Instructional practice is changing and students are more engaged.
Measured by:	Teacher surveys, classroom observations, review of digital content usage data
Year 2	
Goal:	Instructional strategies are positively impacting student performance and engagement.

Measured by: Formative benchmarks and state assessments, student retention

Year 3 and Beyond

They didn't plan the later years because they didn't have data from Year 1 to inform their plans. Once they got to Year 2 they would develop new plans to continue their implementation work.

For every school in the county, the aim was to make progress. There was a wide range of classroom designs to achieve more student-centered, personalized learning, ranging from very simple models to highly complex ones that fit the abilities of the most proficient and experienced teachers. As long as teachers were progressing on the roadmap, they had the go-ahead and autonomy to continue at their pace.

The new strategic plan basically established a five-year continuum for teachers to move from a traditional learning model to a personalized, student-centered learning model. There wouldn't be a standard, one-size-fits-all pace for implementation. Rather, teachers were allowed to select a level they were comfortable with and then progress to the next level. This allowed teachers who preferred a more cautious approach to avoid taking a massive leap, which might result in them falling on their face. This progression model increased autonomy and creativity and motivated teachers to learn, participate, and engage in the work.

In 2015, Raymond and Sean moved on to new senior leadership roles in other districts. With a change in leadership, many school districts drop or curtail current initiatives, since they may be complex and hard to understand and embrace, and they start on a brand-new strategic plan. However, we believe the roadmap approach allowed new people to shape the effort as it evolved. It seemed that broad ownership of the work throughout the district continued to move the original vision forward. All one hundred schools in the county have adopted new school designs aligned to the district vision, guided by the roadmap and their continuous improvement process.

Lessons

We believe that the success the school district in the case study experienced relied on everyone's willingness to eschew the traditional model of detailed strategic planning. Instead they painted a clear picture of the future state and asked people to come along with them on a journey in an environment that supported teachers to take iterative steps and learn along the way.

There are several key lessons about iterative planning we can cull from their success:

- Build roadmaps, not manuals.
- Use cadences and pivot points, not just schedules and deadlines.
- Encourage testing, experiments, and responsiveness.

BUILD ROADMAPS, NOT MANUALS

Plan is an ambiguous term. It can be as directional as a roadmap and as detailed as a manual. In order to become more responsive and successful, organizations need to move away from plans that act as manuals and focus on building roadmaps and logic models. Rather than dictating specific actions, these approaches give people the tools they need to make quicker and better decisions on their own.

Just think of the technology startup world. Many startups don't even write business plans anymore. Instead they are focused on building prototypes and testing them with customers for real feedback.

There are a variety of models for this type of planning. IDEO's Design Thinking approach, Eric Ries's Lean Startup methodology, Toyota Production System's evolution to lean production, or even some of the more complex organizational models like Frederic Laloux's teal organization—all of these follow a similar theory of action that focuses on learning, doing, and measuring in iterative cycles.

Lean in this context doesn't refer to a lack of frills or management fat. In Ries's (2011) book *The Lean Startup* he describes the build-measure-learn feedback loop methodology, which focuses on launching a "minimum viable product" and learning as quickly as possible.

These ideas can seem antithetical to everything we've learned. Since we were in elementary school, we've been indoctrinated to focus on defining all the parameters of a problem with a single correct solution. These other approaches to planning and problem solving fundamentally accept ambiguity as part of the process—and the execution.

After reading retired General Stanley McChrystal's (2015) book *Team of Teams: New Rules of Engagement for a Complex World*, which describes his command and model for remaking of the Joint Special Operations Task Force in 2004, Anthony had the opportunity to interview Devin Diao, an infantry assault man in the Marine Corps during McChrystal's tenure. Anthony wanted to know how McChrystal's perspective influenced Devin's actual, on-the-ground experience while he was in Afghanistan.

Devin explained that in the military there are standard operating procedures (SOPs), basically step-by-step instructions to perform specific functions. For example, there was an SOP that detailed how to set up a rucksack. In the past, he explained, "If you were going out on a mission, regardless of what you were going to do, you would have a standard pack. If you had a specialized role, you might have a slightly different pack but you didn't have an opportunity to make decisions."

As McChrystal started implementing changes, Devin, as an individual, was able to make adjustments to the SOP for what he packed. He could use the gear list as a guide, not a total given. If he was out on patrol and felt the need to carry more ammunition, he could; he could drop weight by not taking other things.

The rucksack was a small example of a bigger trend during McChrystal's tenure—the ability to make smart adjustments to SOPs allowed Devin and others like him to tailor their approach to their conditions and needs for success.

While education isn't war, futures are on the line and there is a common lesson to be learned. Each district, each school, and each classroom has a unique set of variables that is ever changing. Why expect one plan or one standard operating procedure to work in all contexts?

In our school environments, when plans get so detailed, like a curriculum pacing guide that spells out every action a teacher must take on a specific day, it can be stifling and, depending on your experience, demotivating. New teachers may feel safe with

something so prescriptive day to day, but the strategies won't be reaching every student across the spectrum in a meaningful way. Master teachers might see these fixed plans as questioning their experience and may completely ignore the material. By setting a vision and allowing people to have leeway in deciding how to get there, you strengthen results and morale at the same time.

USE CADENCES AND PIVOT POINTS, NOT JUST SCHEDULES AND DEADLINES

In today's rapidly changing world, a plan's value has an immediate half-life—it's dated before it's fully underway. If we focus on planning as a process, not just plans as static products, we prime ourselves to evolve and change. Rather than measuring plans against schedules and deadlines, we can think of plans in terms of cadences and pivot points.

If we focus on planning as a process, not just plans as static products, we prime ourselves to evolve and change.

Deadlines are designed to be fixed, while cadences are intended to evolve. It's true that some dates are not fungible. Deadlines for grants, fundraising benefits, standardized tests, vacations, and the like are structures we must incorporate into planning. Well-defined and explicit deadlines create a sense of security and can help us prioritize actions. However, not all deadlines are grounded in reality. Many are set long in advance during planning phases and are based on nebulous assumptions. Often we end up working on something because we committed to it, not because it is the most important thing we can do for our organizations at that moment.

Instead of an overreliance on deadlines, we can build in a regular cadence to evaluate progress and to pivot if needed. Think about the example of planning a trip. Some of us plan every detail in advance. We book all accommodations, determine activities, and produce a detailed and fixed itinerary. Others take a more plan-and-evolve approach. You might compile a prioritized list of things you want to see and do during your trip. Based on this information you might create a route and select potential places to stay overnight. In order to be flexible, you might decide not to make all your reservations in advance. For places with fixed dates (say, for a concert) or limited hotel options, you might make some reservations

ahead of time and defer other decisions for as long as possible to keep options open. Interestingly, both plans require planning time upfront, but the trips differ in the way they are executed and revised along the way.

Back to our schools and district offices, we might plan for short sprints of work with reflection points around each turn. Instead of outlining every measure, we can place emphasis on outlining a guiding vision of success and the early warning signs that might indicate we're off track.

In *The Lean Startup,* Ries (2011) also identified the concept of the pivot, a course correction designed to test a new hypothesis about a plan. If the planning and desired results aren't working or meeting expectations—the festival is booked; it's high season and prices are sky-high—then it's time to pivot. We refer to this ability to pivot as *responsiveness* and see it is a key measure of any successful school or organization.

We have to realize that we can't predict every move in the future. The more open and responsive our planning, the faster we can adapt and pivot. That's why it's wise to avoid putting too much value into Gantt charts or other detailed project plans. These tools are useful to understand the whole picture, but they have to be maintained with learning and iteration in mind. Otherwise, assumptions made in projecting the future will be quickly invalidated.

We have to realize that we can't predict every move in the future. The more open and responsive our planning, the faster we can adapt and pivot.

ENCOURAGE TESTING, EXPERIMENTS, AND RESPONSIVENESS

Schools want to be innovative but are often afraid to try due to the possibility of failure. We forget that innovation requires experimentation and learning, and learning goes hand in hand with failing. Under the banner of innovation but with the goal of avoiding failure, there can actually be increased control and rigidity.

For example, in an effort to increase autonomy and innovation, one school district decided to put more control for the budget into the hands of principals. The logic behind the move was to

empower principals to make budget decisions with their unique schools in mind. But fears of mismanagement along with a desire for more community involvement led the state to require that community boards also approve budget decisions. Although for the most part these boards were well intentioned, legislating oversight stymied the original purpose of increasing autonomy and innovation and led to bottlenecks, politicking, and general confusion.

A better approach might have been to set the budget parameters for principals and allow them to experiment with spending, reporting, and decision making in short cycles that could be reviewed. The principals could try different ways of involving staff and community in spending choices and adapting the approach to fit the needs of the students. The principals could learn and iterate, and the community wouldn't fear that spending would get out of hand.

In the context of classrooms, teachers can be encouraged to experiment with how to adapt techniques, materials, and technology to different situations and students and how to make changes based on insights they get from observations and data.

Demanding that teachers implement a reading program with fidelity may mean they comply fully with the letter of the program, but it doesn't ensure the quality of student learning. The best-case result is that you get uniformity in classrooms; the worse and more likely scenario is that natural differences in the way students learn aren't accommodated by the reading program and all students suffer.

Often when you are on the frontlines, whether you are a soldier on the battlefield or a teacher in a school, confronting specifications or requirements that are generic and not specific enough to the situation makes it illogical to comply. In the case of a soldier, it could lead to life or death.

Schools and organizations will continue to struggle to perfect the right level of tight and loose in these situations, but *planning for change, not perfection* helps create the space for experimenting, learning, and responsiveness to the actual needs of students and the larger purpose.

Experimenting With Planning

Remember: Experiments are designed as trials to be tested out, iterated, studied, and broadly implemented over time. Try out and adapt the experiments on planning to fit your role and context.

What follows are some simple, practical steps to guide you as you begin to follow the New Rule: *Plan for change, not perfection*. You can think of them as changes from the "ground up" that you can affect in your own role, planning, and teams without waiting for larger-scale efforts. If you begin to shift your own assumptions, language, and practices around planning, you'll experience real shifts in the way you—and the people around you—work.

EXPERIMENT 1

Define a Clear Purpose

A simple definition of purpose is "the ideal state we wish to achieve." We typically reserve purpose statements for large initiatives and organizational initiatives, but defining a purpose is useful for all the work we do. When embarking on any project—on our own, with a team, or even at the whole-organization level—start with a quick mental exercise and ask, "What is the purpose of this work?"

Using the tips provided, in just a few minutes you can come up with a usable purpose that will provide guidance and clarity when you have to make decisions.

1. **Paint a picture of success.** If the purpose is to be a North Star, it must provide a guiding vision. Brainstorm and discuss ideas by asking yourself questions like these:

   What would success look like?

   What's the ideal state I am trying to achieve?

   When I am done with this work, what do I hope will be true?

   For example, let's say you are a school principal and you have heard that several of your top teachers are planning to leave next year. You

know this will leave a hole in your instructional team. You want to take on a project to recruit and retain great talent at your school. You ask yourself the questions on the previous page and determine an ideal state might be the following:

> *Highly motivated teachers feel personally and professionally aligned with the school and decide to stay and work here.*

This is a great starting purpose. It's easy to imagine, and it's inspiring and ambitious. When you close your eyes you can see and feel what this looks like, including identifying highly motivated teachers, brainstorming ways for teachers to feel personally connected with the school, discovering how to align the school with the professional goals of strong teachers, and asking great teachers to stay and work here. A great purpose paints such a clear picture that it's easy to think of ways to start working toward that vision.

Painting a picture of success is also a great vehicle to communicate purpose. By sharing the statement above, you can solicit targeted feedback and reactions. This might be the most important step. Can people see this picture of success coming true? Does it provide a clear North Star to work toward? Now is the time to get clear and aligned.

2. **Get specific about impact.** As you can see from the purpose example above, a purpose statement begins with a clear vision of success. For many planning activities this could be enough. If you are looking to supercharge your purpose, adding in the impact can help with inspiration and gives the purpose more context. Ask, "What impact will this have on our team and organization?"

School project: Teacher recruitment and retention
Purpose: Highly motivated teachers feel personally and professionally aligned with the school and decide to stay and work here.
Impact: Students have the opportunity to build meaningful long-term relationships and grow with and alongside teachers.

3. **Avoid action items.** Notice that the purpose does not prescribe specific actions or a to-do list. It doesn't say, "Creating a program

that doubles retention" or "Rolling out an initiative that incentivizes employee referrals." Part of creating a purpose is setting a vision of success without defining how the team will get there. This frees up the team to be creative in their approach and responsive to the needs they uncover.

4. **Apply the Goldilocks principle.** In the famous fairy tale, the girl finds the bear's porridge that isn't too hot, isn't too cold, but is just right. You want to avoid a purpose statement that is too generic or too prescriptive. For example:

Too broad: Parent engagement
Too specific: Parents are engaged through monthly newsletters, weekly emails, and quarterly in-person events.
Just right: Parents are engaged in multiple ways that allow them to access information as easily as possible.

5. **Use it—make purpose part of your plan.** After you create a purpose, it's important to use it. When executing a plan ask, "Is this direction (or decision) in line with our team's purpose?" When someone comes to you asking for feedback or advice, use this simple question to refocus a discussion around the most important guidepost—the team or project purpose. By referencing and using the purpose often, you bring the purpose statement to life, rather than it being a relic or artifact of early team creation.

EXPERIMENT 2

Delineate Between What You Know and What You Anticipate

During the planning process people can get caught up arguing over things they don't even know for sure are true. Instead of relying on assumptions, guide your plans with data from real experiences. When you embrace the motto "start by starting," you can skip the anticipation game and refine your plan as you learn and iterate. In other words, move forward with what you know, and decide later what to adjust and how.

Let's extend the example of a teacher retention program. Here are some of the possible actions in the plan:

- Identify highly motivated teachers.
- Brainstorm ways for teachers to feel personally connected to the school.
- Discover how to align the school with the professional goals of strong teachers.
- Ask great teachers to stay and work here.

While planning out the steps, you might get worried about the distinction between "highly motivated" teachers and the rest. You may be concerned that by singling out a group of teachers, others could feel left behind. For that you can ask yourself:

Do I know this is going to happen, or am I anticipating harm will happen?

What do you know? ***(based on presently known information and experiences)***	**What are you anticipating?** ***(based on what might happen or could happen)***
Several teachers have mentioned that explicitly asking them to stay would increase the likelihood that they will consider staying.	Teachers who aren't asked to stay will develop malicious feelings toward the school, and their performance will suffer as a result.

The issue in the right-hand column might feel worrisome, but you don't know it will happen. Rather than trying to plan around these decisions, or argue over their validity, you can delay addressing them until you have further information. Just make sure you revisit the plan as often as needed to pivot once you do gather experiences and data.

For example, after the first communications, you might get feedback that people are confused about why certain teachers are getting individual invitations to stay on. This may lead you to reassess and shift directions. People can rest assured that this plan is more realistic because it doesn't rely on artificial assumptions (which we know will all be ignored or changed).

Once you begin using this simple skill, you will see ways to apply it everywhere.

Planning Is Working When . . .

As with any successful planning, we want to leave you with a vision of success. At the most basic level, a simple measure of successful planning is how often a plan gets referenced. When a plan is meaningful, it is used as touchstone and guide. People at all levels refer to it frequently as they talk about and navigate their next steps and the decisions they are making. It guides everyone's communication, contributing to a sense that people are on the same page. We know planning is working when . . .

There's a greater sense of being alive. When planning sets the direction but is open enough to encourage change and evolution, the process feels aspirational but real enough to inspire action. Responsive planning doesn't feel like an exercise in futility.

Teams and organizations have a clear and motivating purpose. Many organizations talk about purpose, but it's much rarer for purpose to be an organizing framework. In a plan-and-evolve environment, planning clarifies purpose up front and empowers people to be guided by a larger vision, instead of sticking to a predetermined plan-and-control set of actions or timelines. A clear and motivating purpose inspires learning and iteration, and it lessens the fear of being judged, wrong, or less capable.

Everyone is continuously evolving, improving, and aiming higher. When planning is open, iterative, and relieved of the need for perfection, each person is empowered to take actions that are responsive to current reality. You can see students and teachers approach learning with more openness and enthusiasm. The ultimate result is that students and teachers make more progress toward goals and learn much more along the way.