

# A Humanistic Approach to Scaling Up

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*What does it take to transform a large, bureaucratic institution with a fractured culture and a compliance orientation into a nurturing, collaborative, vision-directed organization?*

## About This Brief

This brief was produced as one of two final reports on a humanistic and systems thinking approach to cultural change in a large scale state organization. To see the other publication, please visit <https://edpolicy.stanford.edu/library/publications/1619>. This research is made possible with funding from the Stuart Foundation.

**M**ore often than not, institutions that want to change start by cultivating employees' understanding of the need for change and by implementing strategies to affect change that will also increase efficiency and satisfaction through changed structures and policies. Assumptions undergirding these more traditional approaches view employees as cogs in the institution that can either muck up the works in opposition to change or ease the turning of the wheel by demonstrating compliance. Few would suggest taking time for meditation, personal reflection, and relationship building would be an efficient and productive approach to educational improvement. The sole focus is most often on employee as object, rather than employee as human.

While set in a traditional hotel environment, there is nothing typical about this three-day workplace meeting. It is October 2018, the attendees in the room all work with the State of California Expanded Learning Division (EXLD); they include California Department of Education employees, County Office of Education employees, and outside support agencies. Together, they make-up what is called the System of Support for Expanded Learning (SSEL), which manages and ensures program quality of over 4,500 after-school and summer programs at individual schools and serve 860,000 students annually across the State of California. These programs often serve the poorest, most disenfranchised students in the state.

The meeting kicks off with the over 75 attendees being asked to introduce themselves by region. As a designee stands up and introduces their team, the room explodes in cheers, claps, and shout-outs for the names of people mentioned. People jump out of their chairs to cheer on their colleagues. Over 30 minutes is invested in cheering and welcoming every single person in the room. Following the introductions, EXLD Director Michael Funk leads a late-night talk show style introduction, to the coach from the Society for Organizational Learning (SOL), Mette Miriam Raket Boll, who has been working with the SSEL group for 18 months. “Now, heeeeeere’s Mette!” at which the room explodes with cheers hoots, and hollers. Once everyone calms down, Mette leads the group in a guided meditation. Everyone is eagerly engaged, knowing now—after over a year of practice—how to sit up in their chairs, root their feet to the floor, and breathe slowly as they ground themselves in the present. A quiet serenity settles over the room. People feel seen through the individual and celebratory nature of the introductions and appreciate taking the time to physically and emotionally connect to the work of the next three days. After the guided meditation, the participants reflect on the power of the launch of this meeting, some with tears in their eyes and a catch in their voice:

“I am part of this whole; we should bring our best selves forward to do this.”

“How amazing it is to be in this room with you guys; we all trust each other and can be honest. A year ago, it wasn’t like that. The constant struggle is how do we maintain this sense of calm when we are out in the world? How do we remind ourselves that we can do this on our own?”

“I am very appreciative of this social field, this container that we co-created. I’ve learned how to create this kind of container in other places. I’ve gone through a transformation; people can see it. We can do that for kids, create this space for kids; they can grow and make mistakes.”

This scene represents a stark contrast from two years earlier, when the same people entered these spaces with trepidation and distrust. While some were friendly to each other, the community fell into cliques and people worked in silos. As one participant expressed about her experiences two years earlier:

I was surprised by how fractured relationships were. Individuals had their own agendas...you had a lot of cliques, you had the vets looking down at the newbies.

In the past, many did not see themselves “as part of the whole.” They just saw their tasks to complete in their isolated roles. Many did not feel a personal responsibility for ensuring that children had high-quality programs that could potentially save lives.

While, from the outside, this approach may appear superfluous and a waste of time, the experiences of the SSEL team have indicated that it has fostered improved relationships, a more coherent vision and sense of purpose, more effective decision-making, and more effective relationships with after-school program grantees.

In 2017, the California Department of Education’s Expanded Learning Division (after-school and summer programs) took a radically different approach by cultivating the shared humanity of those in their system. Their success was supported by the presence of a clear, consistent, and compelling goal: more children experiencing high-quality after-school programs. It unerringly and inviolably held and followed a theory of change that recognized that educational improvement is a human endeavor, so focused efforts on the growth and development of the adults responsible for the growth and development of children. Because human growth and development take time and support, the activities and processes enacted with the theory of change provided sufficient time and support for the human participants to grow and develop.

## History

The California Department of Education’s Expanded Learning Division (EXLD) features a System of Support for Expanded Learning (SSEL) that consists of California Department of Education (CDE) employees, County Office of Education employees, and outside support agencies. This group manages grant administration, reporting, quality support, and quality improvement for over 4,500 programs at individual schools and 860,000 students annually across the State of California. The EXLD manages the state’s \$650 million After School Education and Safety Program as well as \$149 million from the federal government for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers. The SSEL have a particular charge to support and help improve those programs that are not performing well. These programs often serve the poorest, most disenfranchised students in the state. The programs across the state are divided into eleven regions. Each region has 2 to 4 county office staff and 2 to 3 California Department of Education staff. Together, they

make up regional teams. One of the ways this larger group worked together was through tri-annual, three-day System of Support Stakeholder (SSEL) statewide meetings.

The EXLD and its partners had a history of fractured, inconsistent, and inequitable work. For example, one staff member described a lack of vision and coherence in how EXLD staff saw their roles and the mission of the division, “Historically, we as a department were not good at defining long-term goals and projects...A lot of confusion about what we were doing that led to a lot of issues about who was responsible for what.” Another staff person who had worked at the regional level described the services and support received from the EXLD as “fractured, no rhyme or reason to any of it...you had programs no one had set foot into...[that] impacted the quality of programs, the relationships with each, and the professional development [the sites] were able to give.” The only time this regional staff member saw her EXLD staff member they were there to “...ding us. I was shocked. I thought they were there to support us.”

In 2017, an intentionally selected team of the System of Support committed to transforming their culture through deep-level coaching in systems thinking/organizational learning with The Society for Organizational Learning (SOL), led by Robert Hanig and Mette Miriam Boll with counsel from Peter Senge. The deep coaching focused on the tri-annual, statewide SSEL meetings through six days a year of planning meetings for the SSEL; monthly check-in calls with the coaches; and the coaches’ full facilitation (with gradual release to the team) of the tri-annual, three-day SSEL statewide meetings. From the outset of the coaching with SOL, Division Director Michael Funk set cultural transformation as his goal as a means to support better programming for kids all over the State of California.

## Theory of Change

The theory of change for this cultural transformation is that, to better support high-quality programming in the state’s expanded learning programs, the System of Support (EXLD’s members and external support providers) need to work well together, communicate clearly and effectively, and be able to solve problems well. The theory of action that guided this change theory involved:

1. Investing in a small, core sponsorship group selected for their willingness to engage fully and for their representation of a diversity of perspectives and roles;
2. Working with strong coaches on personal mastery and systems thinking/organizational learning in a scaffolded way that gradually releases control to the sponsorship group;
3. Starting with the personal through inclusive practices and a focus on self-knowledge;
4. Changing the culture, transforming hearts and minds, through developing the leadership, communication, and relational capacities of the staff;
5. Using systems thinking/organizational learning tools to address institutional practices and policies; and
6. Re-creating steps 2–5 in ever widening circles of influence.

### Investing in a Core Group

The change process began by supporting personal and cultural transformation in a representative and open-minded core group of the EXLD system. The idea was that, in partnership with the SOL coaches, this group would lead the transformation process. In the spring of 2017, Division Director Michael Funk selected a team to attend a four-day systems thinking

retreat with SOL coaches. He described his rationale for his selection process:

I didn’t come into state government five years ago to lead a division. I came to lead the state to a different place of quality and experiences that kids have in these programs. And I wanted a group that shared that vision, that could see that their job was far beyond just working at the department.

This group included both CDE Division staff as well as external partners. It is important to note that, while this group took a leadership role, they did not all begin with positional leadership roles. An external partner commented that the diversity of the group was key to the success of this project. “It was multi-layered, not just CDE staff, which empowered other layers of the system to bring the work forward.” Mid-way through the first year, the initial core group acknowledged that they did not adequately represent the entire system, so they thoughtfully expanded their ranks to be more representative. The original team invested considerable time and attention deciding whom to include and how to include them so that they felt they truly had a voice. Furthermore, they paid attention to reducing an us-versus-them dynamic between those in the initial core group and others in the system and, thus, labeled themselves a sponsorship rather than leadership group.

### Work with Strong Coaches

Coaching from experienced and knowledgeable coaches steeped deeply in personal mastery and systems thinking/organizational learning provided the EXLD and their partners with the kind of scaffolded learning to support their transformation. For this project, primary coaching came from the Society for Organizational Learning (SOL), although their coaching was complemented by partner organizations. Several aspects were essential

in the way that the coaches worked with the sponsorship group and larger SSEL community. First, they co-constructed all planning sessions and meetings so that all work together was grounded in the experiences of EXLD. All work was tied to lived experiences, rather than teaching abstract concepts. At each meeting, the systems thinking/organizational tools and practices were introduced and then participants had opportunities to practice using them, both personally and grounded in their actual work. As the project evolved, they had more and more of these opportunities to practice with the tools in an applied fashion around the most pressing workplace issues, such as providing technical assistance to grantees deemed in the highest need. Second, their focus was on capacity building, so they gradually reduced their level of facilitation over time. Initially, the SOL coaches and external partners led the SSEL meetings; by the end of 18 months, the EXLD led their own SSEL meeting.

In addition, the coaches provided the sponsorship group an essential, critical-friend role, pointing out patterns and cultural assumptions that were invisible to the group. Furthermore, the coaches helped the staff understand that the systems thinking tools were not panaceas for fixing problems, but they could be used to shed light on previous ways of working that may not produce the desired outcomes because of underlying mental models. For example, learning about the systems thinking tool of the iceberg helped the staff understand that it was important to understand the underlying assumptions or mental models behind policies. The policies are like artifacts that can make inherent assumptions or mental models visible.

### **It's All Personal**

A primary assumption regarding starting with the personal is that, to support quality programming for kids, one has to bring

oneself fully into the work and not treat it just as a bureaucratic job; it requires heart. Starting with what drives each individual personally helps them to access their own heart, to connect with each other, and to connect to the vision of the work—which is to provide quality programs for the highest need children in California. In addition, perhaps counter-intuitively, sometimes starting with the personal is an easier access point for learning new tools and strategies.

Every meeting, both planning/coaching sessions and stakeholder meetings, began with a guided meditation, small group check-in, and journaling. The SOL coaches and the Division Director created a welcoming space for the personal. People shared deeply personal and emotionally challenging situations and were consistently met with heartfelt warmth and compassion. This is a key component of what the coaches describe as creating a generative social field and a safe container for people to grow and take an inquiry stance with each other. Placing an emphasis on building relationships among staff helps the staff work in their teams more effectively. As one EXLD staff member reflected:

Getting us involved with the SOL way of thinking has really changed how we operate with each other. In the past, we were very separated by classification. Analysts did their work, regional leads had their stuff, and we had a difficult time working together as a team.

A County Office of Education staff member added:

You don't often have a significant amount of time dedicated to get to know people at a much deeper, soulful level. You go to a meeting, and it's the meeting. I know that, when we walk in that room [SSEL meetings], it is like a family reunion; we walk in with just incredible love for each other.



I really mean that genuinely. It has allowed me to expand my connections with others at a deep level. I know that I could pick up the phone and call any one of them and have a very heartfelt conversation and feel that they have my back and I have theirs.

### Transforming Hearts and Minds: Changing the Culture

Starting by connecting with personal reflection and engaging in a number of relationship-building activities helped staff to understand their own biases as well as their role in the larger system. This awareness had a substantial impact on shifting the culture of the EXLD. The Division Director believed that a cultural transformation of the System of Support was essential to supporting higher-quality programming for children. In the past, he explained, people did not always see the link between how they did their work with the quality of experiences children had in their programs. They took a more bureaucratic stance, following the letter of the regulations, but losing the spirit behind the regulations in doing so. Supporting quality programs requires a high level of collaboration and transparency among the EXLD and external partner staff. The previous culture inhibited that. As one county lead expressed:

We needed to start with ourselves... How are we looking at the world and looking at our place within this system? We needed to do a lot of that internal reflection in order to see the larger picture of the system of support and what the potential was there for us as a whole team. I think that was a really critical juncture for us, within our statewide system, is we've got to take an inward look to be able to be a better person and a better professional, but also a better team member in this larger system.

Statewide meetings paid considerable attention to surfacing assumptions, ways of working, and problem-solving approaches that facilitated the division's new goal. The coaches created opportunities for participants to expose past challenges and choose to participate in the cultural transformation through the use of systems thinking/organizational learning tools and practices. For example, a portion of the January 2018 Stakeholder Meeting was devoted to vision-setting as participants were all actively engaged in the following reflection activity:

- Aspirations—What are we trying to grow?
- Current Reality—What is already in existence?
- Gap—What is missing?
- Structure—What are the structural elements that produced this (procedures, policies)?
- Recommendations—What strategies do we need to shift?

These types of activities help all stakeholders actively engage in the group's transformation. Just the idea of thinking about what they are trying to grow, rather than focusing on compliance with regulations, is a very different stance from prior years. It also demonstrates the use of the tools of organizational learning outside of the sponsorship group and becoming part of the organization's structural routines.

Furthermore, participants believe that they learned from the SOL team how to increase their emotional intelligence and their communication skills, which are the same skills that they want to develop with the young people in their programs. As one team member reflected:

It has to start with us as adults, a lot of us as adults have never really experienced that in a work environment. It has been very competitive and cut-throat and individualistic and this is much more of a collaborative community.

### **Transforming the Way of Working: Structural, Practice, and Policy Changes**

Alongside developing personal growth and relational capacities—and subsequent cultural transformation—an emphasis was also placed on changing institutional practice. Although the assumption was that people need to be able understand themselves and their role in the system in order to be able to work well with each other, before changed policies and practices could be reasonably implemented, some institutional changes also had to be made early on, facilitating the cultural change. Beyond the individual, organizational change “going to scale” sustainably requires changing the hearts and minds of the people within an organization, the culture of the organization, and, finally, changing how the organization better goes about meeting its mission. More specifically, many in the EXLD work in regional teams made up of members with different roles to support a particular region. The assumption is that, when those teams function with a high level of trust, respect, appreciation, collaboration, and communication, the grantees (expanded learning providers) receive higher-quality support and clearer expectations and are better able to deliver higher-quality services to children. In other words, this theory of change supposes that personal transformation precedes successful policy enactment. Changes in the behavior of individuals support a cultural shift born of reflection and skill-building and, placed into this culture, a policy is more likely to meet its intended

purposes. As an external partner explains, “Policy doesn’t shift behavior, culture does. You need policy, but you need culture to sustain that policy.”

The Division Director realized that there is a danger of people “trying to get to systems change by tinkering with the artifacts [policies]. But you have to examine the mental models behind the artifacts.” The deeper cultural shift in the EXLD from compliance to continuous quality improvement (CQI) manifested a number of changes in policy and practice. As the state moved from a compliance mindset to CQI, the systems and norms of engagement had to change. For example, the EXLD had been funding their County Office of Education partners in the SSEL via a contract verses a grant. During that time, the contractual approach led to a mental model of a transactional relationship between the California Department of Education and the County Offices of Education. Anytime a regional lead wanted to provide technical support to a program, they had to check with a “contract monitor” to ensure it was an “allowable” activity. Early on, recognizing the contradiction with the values of support the EXLD was trying to incorporate into their practices, they changed their policies to provide grants instead of contracts to programs. According to a regional county lead, “We are deeply committed to being in direct contact with our grantees, making sure that we’re doing right by them based on what they feel they need, not what we say we think you need.”

The regional teams have served as a key conduit to translate the state-level cultural and structural shift to their programs. Through strong and supportive relationships between themselves and the programs, the regional teams facilitated some translation of the intent and meaning behind CDE policy changes. For example, as the CDE moved

from a compliance orientation to a focus on CQI, they have asked programs to complete a number of tools to support this move, such as a program plan and a continuous quality action plan. Furthermore, without the guidance and support of the regional teams, these kinds of “requirements” could be received as a continuation of a compliance orientation; but with the support of the regional leads, they have been able to convey that the state has, as described by the county lead:

Gone narrow and deep on what that CQI process looks like. It's not just a piece of paper of an action plan. But it's really changing the culture of your team...that you go through this process, that you look into what might be those ongoing issues that we are just going around and around and not really seeing the root cause.

The county lead goes on to explain that, to support this CQI process, they have shared systems thinking tools to unearth mental models and root causes that may be standing in the way of addressing challenges at their core. It is the move from “doing things right” (the letter of the law) to “doing the right thing” (the spirit of the law).

### **A Pebble in the Pond: Expanding the Work**

While transforming the culture, policies, and practices at the state level was a crucial first step, this work only becomes powerful as it ripples out to the programs and sites and changes the experiences of the children that the state is charged with serving. Division Director Michael Funk articulated his vision for scaling up the use of systems thinking and organizational learning approaches to transform his division:

This work is only successful if it goes out to broader and broader circles to

create better conditions for young people. The system of support is becoming a positive place where people are growing and caring for each other. We exist to support kids and programs. You can't authentically do that if there is infighting. Once you get past that, you can start to build a healthy experience in the container, you can make it bigger and make micro-containers.

As the work has rippled out to partners, regions, programs, and sites, leaders at all levels of the system have repeated the processes of the theory of action by beginning with the personal before moving to cultural shifts and tackling structural changes. Just as at the state level, personal transformation took hold first. Most meetings with regional teams across the state now start with some kind of check-in and guided reflection. In some cases, these practices have spread to the program and site level as well.

### **Early Outcomes**

The EXLD's foray into a humanistic change process seems to be seeding early positive results. At the state level, there is transformed staff morale, clarity of common vision, and increasingly aligned state-level policies. As one participant observed, “It was nothing short of transformational what we've seen happen in the last year and a half.” In addition, the powerful transformation that has happened at the state level has opened up the possibility for the staff that they can create similar cultural shifts in their own regions. “People can see the power in their own ecosystems, in their own regions,” according to one external partner. There is early evidence of change taking hold at the regional, program, and site levels. Initial research reveals that, in some regions, incorporation of personal mastery practices, systems thinking tools, and a cultural shift to CQI have led to program-level



changes that have the potential to positively impact students. In one region, these changes have included changes in policies and practices regarding staffing, structural reorganization at the program level to ensure higher-quality programs through distribution of leadership, and greater alignment between the expanded learning programs and the school day. Early outcomes of these changes include increased retention of students, extended special education services from the school day to after school, increased retention of staff (from a 60% to a 90% retention rate in one district-run program), shared staff training with school district staff, sharing of staff with school district, and alignment of curriculum and instructional programs with the school day.

While the changes that happened likely would not have occurred without the strong leadership of Division Director Michael Funk, the reasons for the change are greater than that of a charismatic leader. Rather, they are indicative of his leadership approach, which was to model a caring, compassionate, and humanistic philosophy that begins with the respectful growth and development of each individual as a human being. By addressing the hearts and minds of the individuals within the System of Support and then supporting their increased awareness and skills through a cultural transformation, the way the EXLD and its partners began to work changed over in just the first two years of the project. The work changed both internally, as they began to change their ways of working, as well as externally in how the EXLD interacted with other partners and how the work began to grow at the regional level.

## Conclusion

By taking a humanistic approach to the transformation process, the EXLD made great progress scaling up the influence of the coaching beyond the core leadership team. Through inclusive processes to share their learning and continued focus on individuals as whole human beings, the majority of staff eagerly embraced the personal mastery practices and orientation. From there, the seeds were planted for deeper, cultural transformation and changed practices that strengthened relationships and built a sense of shared vision and mutual responsibility to support grantees in delivering high-quality programs for children. The cultural transformation and practices of inclusivity, celebration of the individual, and more complex systems thinking tools then could expand beyond the System of Support across the division to other partners and could be introduced to the grantees—and even to other divisions at the California Department of Education.

This success was supported by the presence of a clear, consistent, and compelling goal: more children experiencing high-quality after-school programs. It unerringly and inviolably held and followed a theory of change that recognized educational organizational improvement as a human endeavor and so focused efforts on the growth and development of the adults responsible for the growth and development of children. Because human growth and development take time and support, the activities and processes enacted with the theory of change provided sufficient time and support for the human participants to grow and develop.