

# in the moment

## NEWSLETTER

### IS IT CHANGE FATIGUE YOU'RE SEEING IN YOUR STAFF, OR CHANGE VOLATILITY?

*It's a leadership distinction NZ educators can't afford to ignore.*

There's a moment I remember well as a principal. Fresh-faced from sabbatical leave, I was explaining my latest silver bullet that would solve the stubborn non-progress of our NCEA endorsements. Merits and Excellences had not improved for years. *"Making thinking visible"* was the answer, I intoned. Flashy power point. Well-chosen words. I was on fire.

Not so my audience. It was another expectation. I could hear the sound of their hearts drop. There had been curriculum updates, changes to NCEA, new health & safety requirements, changes to form class structures and timetables. I had their attention, but not their enthusiasm.

#### Can you identify?

A colleague who leads an early child learning centre knows the experience. Her staff are committed to using Te Whāriki with intent; they're supporting a new-to-NZ teacher to navigate our system; they're attending to compliance pressures. So when she raises the latest health & safety

expectations with them, heads nod and notes are taken. No one pushes back. But she can almost see the calculation happening behind people's eyes. *Where does this fit? What drops off? Are we actually allowed to stop anything?*

You're leading in a time of relentless change. Every week seems to bring a new missive from the Ministry – often you're hearing it in the news before it arrives in your inbox.

The feeling associated with such turbulence is 'change fatigue.' It's what happens when change stops being an event and starts being a pattern.

#### It's not just change. It's volatility.

Most teachers we know through our work in schools and early childhood centres don't object to improvement. They want their practice to get better. They genuinely care about their tamariki, so they'll lean into something that makes sense.

The problem isn't change itself. It's the current volume of it. And with that volume comes overlap.

In the past few years alone, schools and ECEs across Aotearoa have been navigating continual changes to compliance: regulations/licensing criteria, pay parity, curriculum refresh, NCEA reform, structured literacy shifts attendance directives, PB4L, strengthening culturally responsive pedagogies, wellbeing frameworks, digital changes, Kāhui Ako dissolution, RTLits restructured, and more. And all in a post-COVID recovery.

Each initiative may be reasonable on its own, but together they feel like a storm.

The OECD has warned more than once about 'policy churn' in education systems. Too much movement at once doesn't speed up improvement, they say. In fact, it may thin it out and slow it down. The Education Review Office has been saying something similar in its more recent work around improvement cycles: focus matters, coherence matters, time and pace matter.

### WHAT CHANGE FATIGUE ACTUALLY IS

When change volatility goes on long enough, something shifts inside people. It's not necessarily rebellion or laziness or closed-mindedness. It may be depletion. Christina Maslach's research on burnout describes it as exhaustion, cynicism, and a reduced sense of efficacy. In plain language, people get tired, a bit hardened, and start wondering if what they're doing is making any difference.

Teachers don't usually say, *"I refuse."* OK, sometimes they do, but typically they say, *"Sure."* But they may carry it unenthusiastically, without the drive that makes change successful. They may carry it without the mojo – that's fatigue.

They're implementing the new curricula and refreshing culturally responsive practice and reviewing attendance systems and the PLD schedule is booked to the end of the year. Oh, and the Board's strategic plan is about to be introduced.

Nothing is wrong, but it feels like everything is happening at once. Whether staff are resistant or not, they can all feel stretched. Their question isn't *"Is this good work?"* It's *"How do we do this properly?"* That's change fatigue.



## DON'T MAKE THIS LEADERSHIP MISTAKE

The leadership mistake our InterLEAD consultants are often seeing in schools and centres is interpreting change fatigue as a people problem. Leaders talk about resilience, wellbeing and self-care. Those things matter, to be sure, but they don't solve change volatility.

Volatility is structural; fatigue is the human response to it.

If we treat fatigue as the issue, we end up asking staff to cope better, but if we understand volatility as the issue, we start asking different questions.

- What are we absorbing?
- What are we slowing down?
- What are we deliberately not doing this year?

In organisations that feel steady, even in this storm of reform, a few patterns tend to show up. Leaders narrow the work, choosing fewer priorities. They sequence change. They're explicit with staff about what's not happening yet, so that staff know the pace of change is being controlled. And sometimes, quietly but firmly, leaders push back on timelines that aren't realistic. That takes courage, especially when external pressure is loud. But narrowing the work creates the oxygen it needs to thrive.

When something outside changes, teachers need to feel that the core of their school or centre remains steady, so effective leaders create anchors. In volatile conditions, people look for what isn't shifting, such as clear teaching frameworks, agreed non-negotiables and shared language. Anchors don't remove turbulence, but they make it more survivable. This is probably not the time to be pulling up those anchors, even if they're getting a bit rusty.

Effective leaders may also stop things. This might be the hardest one. Everything is important and it all has its place, otherwise you wouldn't have started doing it. But can you identify what isn't having an impact? Initiatives that haven't fired up. Meetings that aren't moving you where you hoped to go. Agendas that are too long. Requirements you're asking of staff that aren't making the difference you expected.

The Education Endowment Foundation says that implementation is a process, not an event. That process needs time and space. If nothing ever comes off the list, fatigue is the predictable result.

Stopping isn't weakness, in fact it's courageous leadership. So at your next SLT meeting, instead of asking, "Are staff coping?" try asking:

- What change volatility have we absorbed this term?
- What have we filtered out?
- What have we deliberately slowed?
- What have we put a stop to?

If the answer to that last question is "nothing," then your system may be asking more of staff than is healthy.

Because this is one of the most reform-dense periods NZ educators can recall, it's worth remembering that sustainable improvement doesn't come from asking teachers to be tougher. It comes from leaders who create coherence inside the instability.

Change is not the enemy, but unmanaged volatility is. We can't control the climate, but we can decide how much of its impact reaches our staff. And that decision shapes whether people feel steady or spent.



This issue of our In the Moment Newsletter was developed collaboratively by consultants from the InterLEAD team, each contributing their expertise to the research, analysis and writing.

Please look out for our next issue coming May 2026.

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