ORGANIZATIONAL DNA

Culture, Climate & Conditions for Success

Detailed Executive Summary with Research Foundation

CULTURE	CLIMATE	CONDITIONS
The Deep Code *Changes over years*	**The Current Weather** *Shifts in weeks to months*	**The Implementation Mechanics** *Action starts today*

70% of organizational change initiatives fail. Not because the programs are wrong. Because organizations misread their own capacity for change.

This framework changes that.

1. THE CORE PROBLEM: WHY CHANGE FAILS

Here's the uncomfortable truth that most professional development providers don't talk about: the vast majority of change initiatives in education fail. Not because the programs are bad—many are excellent. Not because teachers don't care—most care deeply. They fail because organizations misdiagnose their own readiness for change.

The research is consistent and stark:
- **70% of major change initiatives fail** to achieve their intended goals (Kotter, 1996; Beer & Nohria, 2000)
- **Initiative fatigue** is now the norm, not the exception—"too many disconnected, episodic, fragmented efforts" (Fullan, 2007)
- **The knowing-doing gap** means organizations know what works but can't execute consistently (Fixsen et al., 2005)
- **Most PD produces no lasting change** because it addresses content knowledge but ignores the organizational conditions that determine whether that knowledge gets applied (Timperley et al., 2007)

Think about it this way: two schools can implement identical curricula with identical training. One transforms. One fails. Same program. Same investment. Completely different outcomes. The difference isn't the program—it's the organizational DNA.

> **The Pattern We See Over and Over:** Leaders try to fix a Culture problem with a Climate solution (pizza party when trust is broken). They jump to Conditions ("Let's fix the implementation plan!") while ignoring the Culture and Climate gaps that will sabotage any plan. They mandate behavior change instead of building the trust that makes change possible.

The root causes, identified across decades of research, are interconnected:

Root Cause	What the Research Says
Layer Misdiagnosis	Leaders apply technical solutions to adaptive challenges (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002). They intervene at the wrong layer and wonder why nothing changes.
Ignoring Foundations	Initiatives launch without psychological safety (Edmondson, 2019), relational trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2002), or genuine buy-in. Without these, even perfect programs fail.
Initiative Fragmentation	Organizations suffer from initiative overload and lack coherence. Each new program competes with the last instead of building on it (Fullan, 2007).
Implementation Gaps	70% of initiatives fail at implementation, not design. The problem isn't the plan— it's the execution architecture (Fixsen et al., 2005).
Missing Elements	The Lippitt-Knoster model shows that missing even ONE critical element produces predictable dysfunction—confusion, sabotage, anxiety, resistance, frustration, or false starts.

2. WHAT ORGANIZATIONAL DNA IS

Organizational DNA is a framework—and a complete professional development ecosystem—that addresses the root cause of the 70% failure rate. Instead of asking "What program should we implement?" it asks the deeper question: **"What is this organization actually capable of implementing?"**

The metaphor comes directly from molecular biology, and it's more than just branding—it captures how organizational transformation actually works.

The DNA Metaphor

Your body contains 37 trillion cells, and every single one carries identical DNA. Yet a liver cell looks completely different from a neuron. Same code, different expression. What determines which genes get activated? The environment and conditions surrounding each cell.

Organizations work the same way:

BIOLOGY	ORGANIZATION	KEY INSIGHT
Genetic Code Rarely changes	CULTURE Deep patterns	The instructions that persist regardless of who's in charge
Cellular Environment Determines expression	CLIMATE Situational states	What surrounds and determines which capabilities actually activate
Activation Triggers Turns genes on	CONDITIONS Implementation mechanics	The triggers that make potential become real

The critical insight from epigenetics—the study of gene expression—is that DNA is not destiny. It's possibility space. The same genetic code produces radically different outcomes depending on environmental conditions. That's exactly what we see in organizations: the same "program" produces transformation in one school and failure in another, depending on the organizational environment.

The Farming Analogy: You can have perfect farming practices (Conditions), but if the weather is terrible (Climate), nothing grows. And even great weather can't fix toxic soil (Culture). Most change efforts focus entirely on the practices while ignoring the soil and weather. That's why they fail.

3. THE THREE LAYERS

The framework organizes the complexity of organizational change into three layers. Each operates on different timescales, requires different interventions, and produces different kinds of failure when broken. This is precisely why most change efforts fail—they intervene at the wrong layer.

Culture: Deep, Persistent Patterns

"How we do things around here" — Changes over YEARS

Culture is the soil. It's the deep code that persists regardless of daily mood swings, leadership changes, or new initiatives. You can't see it directly, but it shapes everything. Culture is what remains when a principal leaves—if the good practices continue, that's culture. If they don't, it was just climate.

Culture includes five elements: Relational Infrastructure (the trust networks that enable everything), Operating Norms (the unwritten rules), Undercurrents (the hidden forces shaping behavior), Learning Architecture (embedded systems for adult growth), and Collective Capability (shared belief in the organization's ability to make a difference—the #1 factor in student achievement with an effect size of 1.57, per Hattie's research).

Climate: Situational States

"How it feels to be here today" — Shifts in WEEKS to MONTHS

Climate is the weather. It can shift quickly in response to events, decisions, or leadership actions. A new superintendent creates immediate climate effects. A difficult board meeting changes the temperature overnight. Climate is where quick wins live—when culture work feels overwhelming, climate offers immediate traction.

Climate includes: Psychological Safety (Edmondson's foundational research on whether people feel safe to speak up), Strategic vs. Operational Balance (how cognitive load is distributed), Energy & Morale (current fuel levels for change), Adult Engagement (investment vs. compliance), and Tension & Pushback (how resistance is being channeled).

Conditions: Implementation Mechanics

"What enables change to happen" — Action starts TODAY

Conditions are the farming practices. These are the practical elements that make transformation possible. Without them, even the best strategies die in implementation. But here's the catch: conditions without culture is futile. The best implementation plan fails in toxic soil.

Conditions include: Diagnostic Clarity (right problem, right layer, right approach), Coalition Building (the right people in the right order), Sustained Execution (implementation science in action), Systems Integration (coherence over fragmentation), and Transformation Scorecard (leading indicators that predict success, not just lagging outcomes).

> **The Diagnostic Question:** "If we got a new principal tomorrow, would this problem go away?" If yes, it's probably Climate. If no, it's probably Culture. Conditions problems show up as missing implementation mechanics—no plan, no coalition, no measures.

4. THE 15 ELEMENTS

Each layer contains five elements. Together, these 15 elements give organizations a complete diagnostic vocabulary for understanding where change is breaking down and what to do about it.

Culture Element	What It Means
1. Relational Infrastructure	The mutual credibility and confidence that make risk-taking and honest conversation possible. Trust is the foundation of everything else (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Tschannen-Moran, 2014).
2. Operating Norms	The unwritten rules of engagement. How decisions actually get made. What behaviors are rewarded vs. tolerated. The "how we do things around here" that persists across leadership changes.
3. Undercurrents	The invisible forces shaping behavior that rarely get named. Power dynamics, historical grievances, unspoken assumptions. Kegan & Lahey's "immunity to change" lives here.
4. Learning Architecture	Embedded systems and practices for adult learning. Not one-off PD days but structural commitment to continuous growth. This is where Argyris' double-loop learning and Mezirow's transformative learning theory apply.
5. Collective Capability	The organization's belief in shared leadership and collective impact. Donohoo's research on collective teacher efficacy shows this as the #1 factor in student achievement (effect size: 1.57, per Hattie).

Climate Element	What It Means
6. Psychological Safety	Whether people feel safe to speak up, take risks, and admit mistakes right now. Edmondson's research (2019) and Google's Project Aristotle both identify this as the #1 factor in team performance.
7. Strategic vs. Operational Balance	How cognitive load is distributed between thinking work and doing work. When the urgent constantly overwhelms the important, strategic capacity evaporates.
8. Energy & Morale	Current energy levels and overall morale. Do people have fuel in the tank for change, or are they running on fumes? Burnout research shows depleted organizations can't transform.
9. Adult Engagement	Level of active participation and investment. Hearts and minds, not just compliance. When adults are genuinely invested, implementation fidelity increases dramatically (Durlak & DuPre, 2008).
10. Tension & Pushback	Current levels of resistance and productive friction. Not all tension is bad—productive conflict drives growth. The key is whether resistance is being channeled or suppressed.

Conditions Element	What It Means
11. Diagnostic Clarity	Ability to see what's actually happening and distinguish technical from adaptive challenges (Heifetz, 1994). Right problem, right layer, right approach.

12. Coalition Building	Strategic group-building for change. The right people in the right roles in the right sequence. Implementation science research shows coalition quality predicts initiative success (Fixsen et al., 2005).
13. Sustained Execution	Implementation science in action: stages, drivers, and fidelity. Making good programs actually work through disciplined execution (McChesney et al., 2012; Hall & Hord CBAM model).
14. Systems Integration	How parts connect and amplify (or conflict with) each other. Fullan's coherence framework: initiatives must reinforce rather than compete.
15. Transformation Scorecard	Leading indicators that predict success, not just lagging outcomes. Collins' flywheel concept applied to organizational change—measuring momentum, not just results.

5. THE LIPPITT-KNOSTER INTEGRATION

The Lippitt-Knoster Model identifies six elements that must be present for successful change. Miss any one, and you get a predictable dysfunction. The power of the framework is that it tells you where to look when something is missing—which layer the gap lives in and what kind of intervention will actually work.

Missing Element → Symptom	Where to Look
VISION → Confusion	Diagnostic Clarity (Conditions) + Operating Norms (Culture). Can people see what needs to change and why?
CONSENSUS → Sabotage	Relational Infrastructure (Culture) + Psychological Safety (Climate) + Coalition Building (Conditions) + Undercurrents (Culture). Is there genuine buy-in, not just compliance?
SKILLS → Anxiety	Learning Architecture (Culture) + Collective Capability (Culture). Do people have the capacity to do what's being asked?
INCENTIVES → Resistance	Energy & Morale (Climate) + Adult Engagement (Climate) + Tension & Pushback (Climate). What's in it for people?
RESOURCES → Frustration	Strategic vs. Operational Balance (Climate) + Energy & Morale (Climate). Do people actually have the time, energy, and attention they need?
ACTION PLAN → False Starts	Sustained Execution (Conditions) + Systems Integration (Conditions) + Transformation Scorecard (Conditions). Is there a concrete plan with stages and leading indicators?

Notice something important: Consensus—the element whose absence causes sabotage—requires attention across all three layers. You need trust (Culture), safety (Climate), and a well-built coalition (Conditions). This is why consensus-building fails when leaders only address it at one layer. It's also why the framework is so valuable—it reveals the multi-layer nature of the problem.

6. RESEARCH FOUNDATION

Organizational DNA synthesizes research from over 25 leading scholars across organizational development, change management, implementation science, and educational leadership. This isn't a framework built on opinions—every component is grounded in peer-reviewed research with proven application in educational settings.

Research Domain	Key Scholars & Findings
Trust & Psychological Safety	Amy Edmondson (2019): Psychological safety as the #1 predictor of team performance. Bryk & Schneider (2002): Relational trust as foundation for school improvement. Tschannen-Moran (2014): Trust in schools research. Google Project Aristotle: Safety as the defining factor in high-performing teams.
Culture & Organizational Change	Edgar Schein (2010): Three levels of organizational culture. Gruenert & Whitaker (2015): School culture rewired. Kegan & Lahey (2009): Immunity to change—why organizations resist what they say they want. Kotter (1996, 2012): 8-step change model and the 70% failure rate.
Implementation Science	Fixsen et al. (2005): Implementation stages, drivers, and fidelity frameworks. McChesney et al. (2012): 4 Disciplines of Execution. Hall & Hord: Concerns-Based Adoption Model (CBAM). Durlak & DuPre (2008): Implementation quality determines program outcomes.
Collective Efficacy & Leadership	Hattie (2008): Visible Learning meta-analysis. Donohoo (2017): Collective teacher efficacy—effect size of 1.57, the largest single factor in student achievement. Bandura (1997): Self-efficacy theory. Heifetz (1994): Adaptive vs. technical leadership.
Systems & Coherence	Collins (2001): Good to Great—the flywheel concept and disciplined action. Fullan & Quinn (2016): Coherence framework—why fragmented initiatives fail. Spillane (2006): Distributed leadership. Senge (1990): The learning organization and systems thinking.
Adult Learning & Development	Argyris (1977): Double-loop learning—questioning underlying assumptions. Mezirow (1991): Transformative learning theory. Timperley et al. (2007): Teacher professional learning and development—what actually changes practice. Knight (2007): Instructional coaching frameworks.

7. THEORY OF CHANGE & LOGIC MODEL

The Central Hypothesis

"If organizations accurately diagnose which layer their challenges exist in, and intervene with strategies matched to each layer's timescale and nature, while ensuring the six Lippitt-Knoster elements are present, then they will build sustainable transformation capacity that enables any good program to succeed."

Causal Mechanisms

Layer Dependency: Culture enables Climate enables Conditions. The layers have a directional dependency—you can't fix Conditions if Climate is broken, and you can't fix Climate if Culture is toxic. But here's the nuance: culture work and climate work can happen simultaneously. Climate improvements create space for the longer culture work.

Multiplicative Effects: The layers multiply rather than add. Weakness in one dimension doesn't just subtract from capacity—it compounds through the entire system. This explains why organizations with one critical gap fail catastrophically despite strengths elsewhere.

Intervention Matching: Different layers require fundamentally different intervention types and timelines. Culture needs patient, long-term work on beliefs and values. Climate responds to leadership behavior and quick wins. Conditions can be addressed immediately through planning and execution. Mismatched interventions fail predictably.

Logic Model Summary

INPUTS	ACTIVITIES	OUTCOMES
Human: Leadership teams, guiding coalitions, trained facilitators **Material:** 17 facilitator guides, assessment instruments, participant workbooks **Knowledge:** Research from 25+ scholars, Lippitt-Knoster model, implementation science	**Phase 1 – Diagnostic:** Administer assessments, identify gaps by layer, map technical vs. adaptive challenges **Phase 2 – Learning:** 17 PD modules, PLC discussion series, case study analysis, sorting activities **Phase 3 – Action:** 90-day plans, coalition building, flywheel focus, transformation scorecards	**Short-term (0-6 mo):** Shared vocabulary, diagnostic capability, layer-matched interventions **Intermediate (6-24 mo):** Improved safety scores, reduced initiative churn, coherent improvement strategies **Long-term (2-5 yr):** Self-sustaining transformation capacity, improved student outcomes, organizational resilience

8. THE ASSESSMENT SYSTEM

The assessment system is multi-tiered, designed to meet organizations where they are. It's built on the Lippitt-First adaptive model—shorter for healthy organizations, deeper where gaps exist.

Assessment Tool	Purpose & Design
Lippitt-First Adaptive Assessment	The flagship diagnostic. Part 1 is a 6-item Quick Diagnostic (5 minutes) mapping to the six Lippitt-Knoster elements. Part 2 provides Targeted Deep Dives only in areas where gaps were identified. Shorter for healthy orgs, deeper where it matters.

Pre/Post Assessments (15 instruments)	Individual assessments for each of the 15 CCC elements. Administered before and after PD to measure growth in diagnostic capability and understanding.
Mid-Year Progress Check	Pulse check on organizational shift. Measures whether diagnostic language is being used, whether layer-matched interventions are being attempted, and early indicators of climate and conditions shifts.
End-of-Year Assessment	Comprehensive evaluation measuring shifts across all three layers, Lippitt-Knoster element presence, and progress toward transformation capacity.
CCC Check-Ins (3 layer-specific)	Quick diagnostic tools for each layer individually. Used for ongoing monitoring between formal assessment points.
Scoring & Interpretation Guide	Detailed guide for translating scores into actionable insights. Includes score bands, interpretation frameworks, and recommended next steps by layer.

9. WHAT WE'VE BUILT: THE FULL ECOSYSTEM

This is not a concept in development. Organizational DNA is a complete, production-ready professional development ecosystem spanning multiple delivery formats, learning modalities, and organizational contexts.

100+ Documents	50+ Hours of PD	15 Components	5+ Delivery Formats

Core Materials

- **17 Facilitator Guides** (90 min each)—complete modules following the LMNO Learning Arc with scripts, timing, discussion prompts, activities
- **15 Virtual Session Agendas** (60 min each)—adapted for remote delivery
- **Participant Workbook** —comprehensive companion resource for all sessions
- **PLC Discussion Guides** —structured protocols for ongoing team learning

Assessment & Diagnostic Tools

- Lippitt-First Adaptive Assessment (the flagship diagnostic)
- 15 Pre/Post Assessments covering each CCC element
- Mid-Year and End-of-Year Assessments
- 3 Layer-Specific Check-Ins (Culture, Climate, Conditions)
- Scoring & Interpretation Guide
- Assessment Tracker (Excel)

Support & Sales Materials

- Executive One-Pager and Framework Visual (PDF)
- Case Studies (Harrison Street, Geneva Middle School North)
- Competitive Positioning document
- Discovery Questions and FAQ
- Email Sequences and LinkedIn Content Calendar
- TikTok/HeyGen Scripts (4 volumes)
- Conference Proposals
- Pitch Decks (multiple versions)

10. WHAT THIS MEANS

Organizational DNA fills a gap that nobody else in the education space is addressing directly. Domain-specific tools like LETRS teach what the science says about literacy. They assume organizations can implement well. That assumption fails 70% of the time.

We're not competing with content-specific PD. We're building the organizational capacity that makes content-specific PD actually work. It's transferable transformation architecture—the ability to make any good program succeed.

> **The Market Position:** Domain tools teach WHAT the science says. Organizational DNA teaches HOW to make it work in your organization. These aren't competing offerings—they're complementary. And right now, nobody else is doing the HOW at this level of rigor and completeness.

Key Strategic Insights

- **Culture work and climate work happen simultaneously.** Climate improvements create space for the longer culture work. This gives organizations immediate traction while building toward deep change.
- **Conditions without culture is futile.** This is our differentiator. Anyone can sell an implementation plan. We sell the organizational capacity to make that plan work.
- **Climate is where quick wins live.** When culture feels overwhelming, climate offers visible, measurable progress. This is how we keep organizations engaged in the harder work.
- **The Lippitt-Knoster elements cross all three layers.** This cross-cutting nature is why single-layer interventions fail and why our integrated approach succeeds.
- **The research base is deep and defensible.** 25+ scholars across six research domains. This isn't a framework built on intuition—it's built on decades of peer-reviewed evidence.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Organizations don't fail at transformation because they picked the wrong program. They fail because they misread their own DNA. This framework gives leaders the diagnostic lens to see which layer needs attention, which Lippitt-Knoster element is missing, and what specific action will move the needle.

The question isn't "What program should we implement?"

It's "What is our organization capable of becoming, and what needs to shift for that to happen?"