Why Is Change So Difficult?: Essay on the Challenge of Leading Change as an Administrator

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Essay on the challenge of leading change as an administrator

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The term "stealth change" can be used to describe how things seem to be accomplished in higher education. These are incremental changes over time that eventually accumulate and yield a significant shift. Unfortunately, and often without coherence, the major change that is introduced lacks little support or campus awareness.

Recently, one of the authors spoke to an aspiring group of medical school deans on navigating the complexities of change. Their question: "Why is meaningful change so difficult to achieve?" They weren’t interested in change "theories" which we are all too familiar with, but in results-based, practical methods to guide future initiatives.

Conversations such as these are beginning to penetrate higher education as boards, presidents and other senior leaders all understand that change is a prerequisite for surviving and thriving in this era of uncertainty. John Kotter, a well-respected professor from Harvard University, as well as other researchers, tell us that about 70 percent of all of change efforts fail. Given that there are many dedicated, smart, diligent people framing the long-term strategies of our colleges and universities, why so few victories?

To provide context, we are thinking primarily about large-scale change efforts that impact the entire institution. For example, among the major change efforts we’ve witnessed include presidential transitions, major capital projects, developing comprehensive online programs, one-stop shopping for students, admissions criteria, institutional policies and procedures, and crafting a long-term or strategic plan. Each of these efforts require a fundamental shift in how a college functions.

The following is what we consider, based on our experiences, to be the top six reasons why change is so difficult and strategies to make it easier.

#1 Most People Don’t Like Change!

As humans, most of us only see the negative aspects of a proposed change, not the possibilities. In Change or Die! Alan Deutschman uncovers our powerful aversion to change in clear and understandable terms. Deutschman cites research indicating that of the people who survive a heart attack (50 percent do not, by the way) and meet with their respective doctors to discuss healthy regimens, only one in nine will actually change lifestyles to improve health. Remember, this is after they have survived a heart attack.

Although these patients have all the motivation in the world to change, they don’t. Change is tough, mean and sticky. If change leaders are going to be successful, acknowledging this tension is essential. Platitudes about “achieving excellence” and "going to the next level" don't matter and often only serve to aggravate people. It is important for a change leader to acknowledge upfront
and often that he or she is embarking on a difficult journey. In fact, it will take a great deal of aspiration and persistence. It’s important, therefore, to recognize upfront that the odds are against producing a successful endeavor despite the greatest of intentions.

Beyond personal difficulty with change, some institutions have resistance to change firmly entrenched in their historical narratives and institutional cultures. "We’ve always done it this way" is a mantra heard on many campuses. This simple phrase is the way an institution disavows change and protects itself and its deep-rooted culture. While it is important to pay attention to institutional history and memory before implementing change, merely indicating change should be avoided because, well, it has always been avoided, is not a great rationale for maintaining the status quo. Two important cautions here:

- Change for the sake of change alone should be avoided. We are endeavoring to describe authentic changes needed to improve the institution.
- Many stealth change efforts begin in order to avoid hearing "We’ve always done it this way." If change is couched in shadows and a lack of transparency, then many important change efforts are hidden, to the detriment of both the effort and the people involved.

The late Peter Drucker, a great organizational thinker and author of many books on organizational change, leadership and management, once famously stated, "Culture eats strategy for breakfast." Culture is a powerful force in institutional life and is often misunderstood by leaders. We define culture as "the way things are done around here" and include the values, traditions and lived behaviors of stakeholders. If leaders are to be successful with their change efforts, they need to deeply understand the complexities of their campuses culture.

#2 Capture Lessons Learned

Every campus has experienced a number of change efforts that were either successful or not. Both outcomes leave strategic and important evidence if you have the discipline to reflect on where things went right or wrong. We are often reluctant to do this because of our tendency to look forward, not backward. We are also nearly uniformly averse to looking at our failures for fear we will be exposed. This is a lost opportunity.

Exploring past efforts does not need to be a complicated process and should be sensitive to the reality that many failed attempts will surface. The overarching goal, though, is not to focus on particular people responsible for such failures but rather the problems with the process. That enables people to reflect more openly on what could be done as opposed to forcing people into a corner from which they feel they have to defend themselves.

Identifying key stakeholders who were involved in past change initiatives and using their experience to gather anonymous interviews will begin the learning process.

Keep the interview process simple by using a few strategic questions which may include:

- Looking back, what stands out most about the change effort?
- What are two pieces of advice you would give campus change leaders from your experience?
- What is one thing you would have done differently and why?
- Were there any warning signs present that you missed?
- What information could you have used at the beginning of the process that would have made the process better?
- What positives emerged in the process that should be replicated in the future?

In short, develop a handful of carefully crafted questions to provide useful feedback and illustrate openness to self-inspection that can help future process move forward.
Emphasize transparency in this process. Find a secure, but easily accessible, location where the information generated through the interviews can be posted. If the information collected is not shared with the community in an open manner, the assumption will be that negative information is going to be gathered and used “against” participants. This takes real courage but will make you smarter and communicate to your people that their input is valuable and wanted. Don’t stop there. Publish the feedback (and we strongly recommend this) where interested parties can check out what others are thinking -- you will be guaranteed a gold mine of advice. The interview information should be distilled into themes that can be reviewed and considered by the campus community at large.

A process such as this can have a powerful impact on your assessment of institutional effectiveness. A meta-assessment such as this, reviewing the process, can play an important role in providing evidence of where change did and did not, should and should not, take place. While the goal of this step is to understand the process, it is clear that understanding the process can clarify our understanding of outcomes.

#3 Conduct a 'Pre-Mortem' Before the Change

If change leaders are going to be successful, they must anticipate the potential pitfalls the face. The "mud pies" are out there and you want to discover them before you step into them. Sources of concern and resistance, if identified early, can improve the outcome while keeping the process intellectually honest. Once identified you can strategize on how to deal with the anticipated hurdles.

A "pre-mortem" analysis is a protocol we have utilized on many campuses. It takes some organization and time, but pays off big. For example, a senior leader involved in the change process would convene a meeting of a diverse group of stakeholders throughout the campus. Make sure you have a wide range of experiences and backgrounds in the discussions. Depending on the size of the institution, this could easily be a group of up to 30 individuals.

Have a large room set up with several stations marked by flip charts and easels. Each flip chart should have an identified topic clearly marked on it which may include organizational politics, campus culture, physical resources, money, technology, people, communication, and organizational priorities. You can pick your own topics but these suggested ones usually help create a strategic database that is useful to change leaders.

After some opening remarks and a rationale for the meeting, have the invited participants self-select a topic they are interested in or have experienced. Give them 30-40 minutes to answer three questions and post their answers on the flip charts.

- Given your topic, what could potentially get in the way of the successful implementation of our proposed change effort?
- Identify recommendations or strategies to deal with your identified potential challenges.
- Who (else?) should be involved in the change effort? How will it benefit them to be involved? How will the effort be impacted if they are not involved?

After the time allotted, have each self-selected group present their findings. In a relatively short period of time, you will have powerful and effective information that will leverage the learning of the change leader(s).

For example: under “organizational politics” you might find the following diagnosis anticipating the potential pitfalls:

- We never identified the "peer influencers" that were essential to the change we wanted.
• We failed to clarify the decision rules between our governance bodies (e.g., faculty senate, union, senior cabinet).
• We didn't communicate effectively throughout the change effort. We did well at the beginning, but then we faded.
• We didn't get authentic faculty buy-in and they were never on board.
• There were competing interests at the cabinet level and they failed to get consensus on a shared picture

#4 Everything Looks Great on Paper

A thoughtful, well-reasoned plan is essential, but do not be fooled for one minute that the initial strategy will be followed exactly when strange and unanticipated circumstances should be expected. These emergent strategies may enable us to expand or refine our effort and we need to be able to take advantage of them as part of the process.

The change leader needs to be agile and responsive to the ongoing changes that will occur. This can only happen if they:

• Build in responsive feedback mechanisms throughout the change process. Feedback should not just be gathered but acted upon thoughtfully and in a reasonable timeframe.
• Produce transparency about what is working and what is not and how each will be addressed.
• Create specific opportunities to slow things down and identify what's really happening. This will take some real discipline because the momentum of the change effort can take on a life of its own and speed becomes a priority. It is counterintuitive to slow things down when they are moving so fast. Do it anyway. These intentional slow moments are ideal opportunities to gather feedback from the community as a whole.
• Measure what matters. It is almost always helpful to have a simple "scorecard" that illustrates to stakeholders the progress that has been made on a handful of important milestones. You can easily get carried away with measuring all kinds of things. It is important to identify the key things and communicate them over and over again. For example, new technology can produce a scorecard capturing the percentage of users online, the technical issues that are being addressed, and the percentage of issues resolved.

Having a great written plan gives people confidence as they undertake a change process, just don't get caught simply managing the plan and not the change process. A successful plan is highly dependent on those engaged in the process.

#5 Institutional Trust is a Fragile and Enduring Element

When a campus has a high level of trust between faculty, staff and administrators, you can produce great things, even with scarce resources. When trust is present, stakeholders are willing to take risks, follow others, share credit, communicate openly and sacrifice in service of the institution's vision, mission and values. However, when trust is low, every detail becomes a debate, things move at a glacial pace, the rumor mill is in full gear and shadows cross the campus. If you have ever experienced this situation, you realize how difficult, even excruciating, it is to accomplish even the simplest of tasks.

If you try to lead a change effort in a climate of low trust, you will most likely fail, even if you have enormous resources. In fact, if you are functioning in such an environment the first, and possibly only, function you need to be concerned with is genuinely improving trust. Change is challenging under the best circumstances and even the most benign moves are viewed as politically fraught when made in an environment of distrust. To attempt to make major, transformative changes in an institution of distrust is a herculean task.
It is important to acknowledge that trust is difficult to build and maintain. Even in trusting environments, we find a climate of open communication, mutual respect and appreciation challenging to create and maintain.

To address these issues of respect and trust, we must first recognize that every campus has multiple cultures (e.g., faculty, staff, administration, student life) and change leaders need to be able to interact and communicate effectively with all of them. We believe effective leaders need to enlist the help of "cultural travelers" if they are to be successful.

Cultural travelers are those individuals who have the ability to create authentic relational capital across multiple institutional boundaries. They have huge credibility with different stakeholder groups because they are deeply trusted and have a passion for the institution's mission. What gives them so much influence is that they enable things to get done because they can translate ideas between different stakeholder groups and have the institution's best interests at heart.

Cultural travelers should not be confused with "designated change champions." Stakeholders might not like or trust the "designated change champion" as there is often a perception that such individuals are acting in a self-serving capacity. The person who is responsible for the implementation needs to be highly credible and deeply trusted by others. Simply having a title of executive vice president, chief of staff, or chief technology officer doesn't really matter. The leader has to have a stellar reputation and, at a minimum, a good track record. If you put the wrong person up front, your process will fail because people will simply not follow someone they don't respect, like or trust. Choose wisely.

# 6 'Resistance as a Resource'

This is a principle that has been around the field of organizational development for many years, and was identified by Ron Lippitt, the late, great organizational thinker. Resistance, of course, is a natural response to planned or unplanned change so expect it. Resistance can be a rich source of information and feedback and is a valuable asset for leaders.

When you hear complaints, criticisms and what seems like an endless list of questions, listen carefully. There is gold in them. In fact, a strong leader has the courage to not only internally acknowledge the resistance but can publicly thank those resisters for openly supporting the process and for providing rich and necessary feedback. A leader who has, or is building, trust must be able to authentically and proactively engage the resistance and should be a model of this practice for the campus.

We realize that, at times, there is "unprincipled" resistance where people protect their own self interests by throwing up roadblocks throughout the change process. We have found this is more the exception than the rule. People will more often have legitimate concerns and complaints that, if dealt with effectively, will lead to a pathway for success.

We have found that stakeholders usually have several reasons for "legitimate" resistance. This could include an ever-increasing load placed upon faculty. Leaders can use these reasons as a diagnostic tool and create the appropriate strategies to deal with the various reasons.

Leadership is mostly about navigating change successfully. There are few shortcuts, it's usually a long slog through difficult terrain. Surprises are inevitable, stakeholders will become tired and, often, angry. It will usually take longer and be harder than ever imagined. Change leaders must craft a process that is attentive to campus culture, inclusive in nature, is transparent and honest and measures the right things. Tall orders indeed. But if you persist (at least half the answer) for the right reasons, have the support of your people, focus continuously on trust, you can positively change
things in a meaningful, even transformative, manner for your institution.

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