ACADEMIC IMPRESSIONS

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5 Strategies for Leading Change

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Addressing the challenge of institutional change is necessary and difficult. Each institution has a unique path forward; the ones most successful at moving forward are those that match their unique organizational strengths to a compelling vision of the future. Implementing change within our diffuse decision-making structures requires an approach anchored in social science, communication studies, and organizational management disciplines.

Drawing on the academic literature from these disciplines, in this article we discuss five strategies that leaders can employ to effect change at their institutions:

1. Be clear about the purpose for the change - and paint a picture of the new reality.
2. Understand and communicate the complexity of the change needed.
3. Take the time necessary to help people "see" why the change is needed now.
4. Explore the reasons behind any resistance you encounter.
5. Use internal facilitators to ensure that the change process taps into the strengths of the institution.

1. Be clear about the purpose for the change and paint a picture of the new reality.

If leaders fail to communicate clearly why a change is needed, the change effort will suffer both from a lack of focus and also from a lack of compelling reasons for the organization to participate in the change process. It's important to articulate the need for change within the context of the institution's broader environment and the outcomes you hope for in the future. The more you can describe how current trends influence the direction you need to take (or what might happen to the organization if you don't change), the more likely people are to help you get there. The description needs to be specific, detailed and compelling in order to be effective.

In other words, bolster your argument with both data from the present and a story about the future. In any given group of people, some will be primarily driven by data analysis, whereas others will be experience-driven. So:

- When speaking to analyzers, share your analysis. Give them a spreadsheet and let them peruse the data for themselves.
- When speaking to experiencers, tell a story. Run a small pilot or trial run to provide a hands-on experience, interview others who have been through a similar change, or better yet, take everyone on a field trip to a location that has already implemented a similar change. Use these experiences to fine-tune the proposed idea (Kotter and Cohen, 2002).

2. Understand and communicate the complexity of the change.

All changes involve an adjustment in the way that tasks are done in the organization. This usually means that the relationships involved in those tasks change, too. Wise change leaders learn to identify both the *task* and *relationship* implications of the change and address both specifically when communicating with the change recipients.

When external factors force a university to change, the institution's identity and the roles of those in the organization are often part of what changes. For example, technological innovations (online course options, competency-based education, etc.) challenge both an institution's identity and the roles of its faculty. Changes that involve major shifts in roles and personnel within the institution require more time, conversation, and facilitative effort from leaders, who must be sure to provide explanation and support for those involved (Miller, Johnson, Grau, 1994; Piderit, 2000).

3. Take the time to help people "see" why the change is necessary now.

Being able to visualize the final desired outcome and convey the urgency of accomplishing that outcome is critical to the change process. Successful change leaders understand that transformation often starts with denial and judgment; these are a natural part of the process. Organizational change, much like personal change, tends to progress through four stages: denial, judgment, acceptance, and transformation. Imagine a small change in your personal life. Suppose your dentist has just informed you that you have a cavity that must be filled. Now compare your likely reaction to this news to the reactions that are frequently voiced in the initial discussions about institutional change:

Stage	Filling a Cavity	Changing a University
Denial	"No. Not in my mouth!"	"No. That is never going to happen here and here is why."
Judgment	"Are you sure? Can I see the x-ray?"	"Well I don't think that is the right path. Why would we do that?" "We have tried that before and it didn't work."

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Acceptance	"Fine. When are we going to do it? How much will it cost?"	"So who will be involved? What unit will go first? What's the timeline?"
Transformation	"Wow. I'll be able to chew without pain. Could we do some whitening at the same time?"	"I can see we need to do this; while we are at it, can we also add X?"

As leaders, be prepared for this process. Expect that individuals and groups within the organization will move through these natural reactions. The key to continuing to move forward is to take the time to hear those who are still in the judgment and acceptance stages, without losing any sense of urgency. When they question, probe for answers or express emotional dissatisfaction with potential changes, individuals in these stages are often actually seeking to understand.

Leaders who welcome these discussions have the opportunity to learn about and from their organizations. What strengths and weaknesses are expressed that can inform the change strategy? What do these discussions tell you about who can help move the change forward (Kotter, 2008; Scott and Jaffe, 1988)?

4. Explore the reasons behind any potential resistance.

Contrary to popular thinking, resistance can be helpful to the change process. Thoughtful leaders and facilitators understand that resistance to change needs to be identified, diagnosed and addressed. There are three basic reasons for resistance:

1. A lack of understanding or agreement.
2. A feeling of threatened security.
3. A lack of understanding about what actions or skills are necessary.

Each of these calls for engagement with the resistant individual (or group) so they can understand the change, so they can become reassured or better informed about whether there is a threat to their security, and to support them in taking action through specific and detailed performance conversations (Connor, Lake, and Stackman, 2003; Piderit, 2000).

5. Use internal facilitators to ensure that the change process taps into the strengths of the organization.

The facilitator's role on the change management team is to structure group process in order to ensure all group members are engaged, are working effectively toward the outcome, are reaching consensus, and are defining and understanding their differences. Facilitators can also help the leader identify and draw upon the strengths of the individuals and units involved in the process.

Each organization has its own culture, and it's important to view those cultural factors as key assets, rather than barriers, in the organizational change process. This is why dialogue led by *internal* facilitators is critical. *External* consultants can be excellent at providing broad environmental context, best practices from other organizations, and/or content expertise; however, external consultants often lack the specific context and language of the organization. A facilitator who understands the organizational culture is better equipped to assist you in diagnosing the reasons for resistance and in using dialogue with resistant stakeholders to help you learn and adapt your change strategy.

Conclusion

A planned change management process that draws upon the strengths of the institution -- the individuals within it -- can achieve lasting organizational change.

> **LEARN MORE**
> Hear more from the authors at our webcast Overcoming Three Root Causes of Resistance to Change.

About the Authors

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Marilu Goodyear has thirty years' experience as an academic program manager, information technology leader and librarian. Presently, she is Associate Vice Chancellor at the University of Kansas Edwards Campus in Kansas City. In this position, she works across the University to develop academic programs targeted at Kansas City area workforce development needs.   Previously, she served for seven years as the Director of the School of Public Affairs and Administration at the University of Kansas which is #1 ranked by *U.S. News and World Report*. From 1999 to 2005, she held the position of Vice Provost for Information Services and Chief Information Officer (CIO) at the University of Kansas where she oversaw the delivery of library, information technology, networking, telecommunications, and printing services. Dr. Goodyear holds a Ph.D. from the University of Colorado in public administration and masters' degrees in public administration and library/information science. She is a Fellow of the National Academy for Public Administration. She specializes in decision-making processes, service management, policy development, organizational structure, human resource management, organizational change and interpersonal effectiveness.

Jenny Mehmedovic

Jenny Mehmedovic is an experienced facilitator with more than 15 years in higher education. Currently, she is executive assistant to the vice provost for faculty development at the University of Kansas where she coordinates programming for faculty and academic leadership development. She has previous experience in both the KU Policy Office and in Information Services developing policy for the university community and educating users on policy issues. She has also worked in the Office of Institutional Research and Planning, and has held an internal audit position with Sprint. Mehmedovic has presented nationally on topics including leadership, organizational change, organizational and professional development, and working from your strengths. She provides professional facilitation to groups engaged in strategic planning, team building, and process improvement. Mehmedovic served as a faculty member of the EDUCAUSE Management Institute from 2009-2012. A 2005 Frye Leadership Institute Fellow, she holds a Masters in Business Administration from the University of Kansas, and bachelor's degrees in anthropology and Spanish.

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