



Leading the charge

Change leadership
in higher education



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Why does higher education need change leadership?

It's just human nature: we crave stability. From a psychological perspective, we're all resistant to change—even when we know that the change will bring about favorable results. For colleges and universities, it's certainly no different; higher education institutions have a tendency to resist change.

And there's a good reason for that. Colleges and universities are built on tradition and represent some of our most revered values. That kind of historical veneration is a key component to the collegiate experience. And, not coincidentally, also a pivotal talking point for some institutions, whose marketing departments prominently tout the year the institution was founded. No one wants to rock the boat at a school with storied traditions and a solid reputation.

As those who work in higher education will readily attest, change occurs slowly at institutions for other reasons as well: the loosely coupled structure of institutions with multiple stakeholders and seats of power, large representative committees, fear of punitive action from state legislatures (for public institutions), or myriad other factors. Higher education institutions are not like corporations—there is no all-powerful CEO who can push for change quickly, at his or her discretion, and demand that others fall in line.



Yet even though institutions may be slow to enact change because of culture and tradition, one thing is abundantly clear—in one form or another, all institutions must tackle change, and in the near future. This is particularly important as institutions undergo a momentous digital transformation—with increased emphasis on analytics, cloud technology, and interconnected data. Those institutions that fail to adapt will quickly lose ground.

What is change leadership, anyway?

First, it's crucial to define a couple of terms. What we mean by "change" is more of a continual process. Sometimes, especially in higher education, there's a mindset that "change" means abruptly shifting course and doing something differently. That's not the case here, and certainly not conducive to the successful operation of a college or university. Change—whether planned or not—is a constant. Change is a process that allows a college or university to find stability through every bump, hurdle, and hiccup that might come their way. And the tool we use to facilitate that is called change leadership.

What is change leadership? It's important to note what it is not. Change leadership is not the same thing as "change management." The latter is more akin to a method for keeping the status quo in the face of some kind of challenge. Change leadership is a proactive approach, a kind of growth-oriented mindset. It's a way of thinking that empowers individuals and institutions to tackle changes and create advantages from them.

According to the eight drivers of change, higher education is at a critical inflection point. Now is the time to embrace change leadership.



Change leadership is a more proactive approach, a kind of growth-oriented mindset.”

The eight drivers of change

Broadly speaking, there are eight cultural, demographic, economic, and historical movements converging to force change upon higher education institutions.

Adrianna Kezar discusses these eight reasons for change in *How Colleges Change: Understanding, Leading, and Enacting Change*.¹

Not all institutions will face these challenges at the same time, but the message is clear. Change is coming to higher education. Here are the primary drivers behind that change:

1

Connection to the global economy

Today, higher education is more relevant for skilled jobs in the knowledge economy, and around 65 percent of the job openings in the next 10 years will require post-secondary education. That means institutions must anticipate a shortfall of college graduates needed for the workforce, and higher education will come under considerable pressure to provide up to 300,000 college graduates each year to meet this demand.

2

Growing public accountability

You've no doubt heard this question many times already: "Is college really worth it?" Higher education is under increased scrutiny from federal and state agencies to demonstrate greater accountability and transparency—and, in essence, to "prove" that the service the institution provides is truly of value to the student (and taxpayers). With this increased scrutiny, more

1. Kezar, Adrianna J. *How Colleges Change: Understanding, Leading, and Enacting Change* (Routledge, 2013).



agencies and organizations seek to shape the purpose and direction of higher education. And with the looming specter of substantial student debt, more parents, students, and others are beginning to question whether there's any value in paying so much for an education.

3

Increasingly diverse students

There are more college students today than at any point in history, all coming from varied backgrounds with different needs and expectations. Add into that equation a significant number of “non-traditional” students, or students with families who work multiple jobs. There's also some concern about these students being academically prepared—Complete College America states that 57 percent of students entering community college in the US require remediation in core classes such as math, English, and writing.

4

More corporatized environment

In the past, a college or university president was most likely a former professor who worked their way up the ranks and had been in academia their entire professional life. That's not necessarily the case anymore. Twenty percent of college presidents in the United States now come from fields outside academia, a sharp increase from 13 percent just six years ago, according to a new national survey by the American Council on Education. Nearly a third have never been professors. These leaders bring a strong business-sense to the job, and fully expect the institution to be operated like a business. That means increased emphasis on outcomes, profitability, and rapid response to market pressures.

5

Competition and the rise of for-profit education

Traditional higher education institutions are facing more intense competition for student enrollment. Today's students are more aware of their options and which institutions will or will not meet their needs. But perhaps more importantly, for-profit schools are having the most profound impact on traditional higher education. For-profit institutions now serve 13 percent of all students, the same number as not-for-profit private institutions.

6

New understanding about learning

New ideas about and approaches to pedagogy represent the most significant paradigm shift for higher education. These changes can fundamentally alter how an institution fulfills its mission, with more emphasis on active, engaged learning and the “flipped classroom” model. That's because the students themselves are changing, and they demand that institutions adapt to their style of learning. There will always be a place for the traditional lecture hall, but today's college students may learn as much in an online course as in an in-person course. It's now estimated that over one-third of higher education students are taking at least one online course, and that number is still rising. Further, some 88 percent of students say they learn better when technology is incorporated into the class.

7

Internationalization of campuses

Institutions—and students—are increasingly seeking collaborators around the globe. That means students may be taking courses from institutions in multiple countries, and, conversely, institutions must grapple with the pedagogical implications and challenges of educating students from different cultures and nationalities.

8

Innovative technology

Technology is the linchpin for the seven drivers of change already outlined above. Innovative technological tools to help colleges and universities run more efficiently and educate students more effectively will have a tremendous impact on higher education. Robust technology geared for higher education can help institutions engage its students more deeply, track and analyze information to enable data-driven decisions, foster collaboration, and communicate meaningfully with faculty, staff, prospective students, and alumni.

What does it mean for higher education?

For higher education leaders, crossing your fingers and hoping for the best is not enough. You need a clear strategy. The eight drivers of change will impact every institution at some level. Change leadership will allow institutions to find new and exciting ways to be more efficient, collaborative, transparent, and, most importantly, help students succeed. As an important first step in change leadership, higher education leaders should adopt a mindset that anticipates change: it's inevitable, it's coming, it may be disruptive, but there may be opportunities to thrive. Of course, it isn't ideal for just the college president to adopt a change leadership mindset. Rather, change leadership should be baked into level of the institution. If institutions alter their thinking along these lines, then they stand a greater chance of successfully steering through potentially rough waters—and finding that the waves can yield some spectacular opportunities.

Case study:

AQUINAS
COLLEGE



In 2019, Aquinas College—a small Catholic institution of 1,500 students—faced a number of challenges, including significant underinvestment in its IT infrastructure, subpar WiFi across campus, and a host of inefficiencies due to siloed departments and technology.

The college's new president instituted a series of reforms and modernization programs, including an overhaul of the IT department and the creation of an improved data governance model. These changes meant that buy-in across campus would be crucial.

College leadership maintained open lines of communication with campus stakeholders and stressed the need to preserve forward momentum. Aquinas' leadership led the charge to break down silos, and the enthusiasm and involvement of staff and administrators across campus ultimately powered the successful adoption of multiple changes. Now, the institution benefits from increased cooperation among departments, improved business processes, and a better experience for students, faculty, and staff.

Change leadership models and methods

Before we examine the various models for change leadership and what sets them apart from each other, let's remind ourselves of what change leadership is—and conversely—what it isn't.

John Kotter, Professor Emeritus of Change Leadership at Harvard Business School, is a preeminent author and thought leader on the topic. He clearly and succinctly sums up the definition of change leadership:

“I am often asked about the difference between ‘change management’ and ‘change leadership,’ and whether it’s just a matter of semantics. Change management, which is the term most everyone uses, refers to a set of basic tools or structures intended to keep any change effort under control. The goal is often to minimize the distractions and impacts of the change. Change leadership, on the other hand, concerns the driving forces, visions, and processes that fuel large-scale transformation.”

Change leadership, then, is not a “one-and-done” technique. It’s a way to handle ongoing change at the institutional level. And how can that be accomplished? By employing one of these prominent models for change leadership.



The Kotter method

John Kotter is probably the most respected thinker when it comes to change leadership. He has significantly shaped the theory and practice of change leadership, and his ideas are tested and true.

His method works primarily on the organizational level. That means his technique for managing change is best suited for steering large groups. For example, the Kotter method could be utilized to guide an institution's advisory council, faculty senate, or its cabinet toward a desired change. It provides an effective roadmap for working with these groups and their leaders.

Kotter's method begins by identifying the errors and obstacles that can impede lasting change. They are:

- Allowing too much complacency
- Failing to create a powerful leadership team
- Underestimating the power of vision
- Under-communicating the change vision
- Permitting obstacles to block the change
- Failing to create short-term successes
- Declaring victory too soon
- Neglecting to anchor changes in the culture

This method arms you with an awareness of the pitfalls when it comes to instituting change, so that you know what to avoid. This is especially useful when dealing with those aforementioned groups, as group-dynamics can come into play. Kotter's method offers a communication



strategy that can help you hurdle the all-too-predictable resistance, hesitation, and (sometimes) outright hostility toward change, especially from institutional groups and organizations.

The second part of Kotter's method outlines the required stages to effectively lead change. These are almost an inverse of the errors and obstacles:

- Establish a sense of urgency
- Create the guiding coalition
- Develop a vision and strategy
- Communicate the change vision
- Empower broad-based action
- Generate short-term wins
- Consolidate gains and produce more change
- Anchor new approaches in the culture

Basically speaking, Kotter's method is geared toward organizational development through the techniques outlined above. These eight points form the backbone of an effective strategy to anticipate—and overcome—resistance to change within a group.

The ADKAR approach

But Kotter's method is not the only way to tackle change leadership at an institution. Yet another change leadership method goes by the acronym of ADKAR—which stands for the following:

- **A**wareness of the need for change
- **D**esire to participate and support the change
- **K**nowledge on how to change
- **A**bility to implement required skills and behaviors
- **R**einforcement to sustain the change



The ADKAR approach was developed by Jeff Hiatt, founder of the change management consulting and research group Prosci, as a way to foster and develop a change-oriented culture. In contrast to the Kotter method, however, the ADKAR approach works best with individuals, rather than groups or entire organizations. It is most effective when managing individual employees or staff members in helping them see and accept the value of change—and his or her role within the organization in helping to make that change happen. If Kotter’s method is akin to keeping a car on the road toward a destination, the ADKAR approach is akin to making sure the individual parts—the tires, the headlights, and so on—are working harmoniously on the journey.

The ADKAR approach describes the required phases that an individual will go through when faced with change—it’s a foundational tool for understanding “how, why, and when” to use different change management tools. The ADKAR model simply describes how one person makes a successful change, and effective change management requires an individual model as its foundation to encourage effective organizational change.

Now, when looking at the components of ADKAR, this method involves asking yourself some key questions or becoming more aware of what’s needed to communicate and guide change within an individual:

1 **Awareness of the need for change**

- What is the nature of the change?
- Why is the change happening?
- What is the risk of not changing?

2 **Desire to participate and support the change**

- Personal motivation to support the change
- Organizational drivers to support change

3 **Knowledge on how to change**

- Knowledge, skills, and behaviors required during and after the change
- Understanding how to change

4 **Ability to implement required skills and behaviors**

- Demonstrated ability to implement the change
- Barriers that may inhibit implementing the change

5 **Reinforcement to sustain the change**

- Mechanisms to keep the change in place
- Recognition, rewards, incentives, successes

One of the primary criticisms of ADKAR is that it may be overly simplistic—particularly when applied to the unique needs and requirements of higher education. Simply put, faculty and staff at a university or college may not think or behave in the same way as their counterparts in the corporate world, so the ADKAR approach may be less effective.

The Bacharach approach

There's one more change leadership method that higher education administrators should consider: the Bacharach approach.

This model was developed by Samuel Bacharach, professor at Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations. Bacharach developed his perspective on leadership via a focus on winning support and maintaining momentum, outlined in his books *Get Them On Your Side* (2005) and *Keep Them On Your Side* (2006).

The key element of the Bacharach approach is the concept of leaders as agents of change. Revisiting the automotive analogy mentioned earlier, the leaders of an organization might be considered the GPS system that provides the guidance and direction required to make the journey successful. The Bacharach approach outlines a few principles to help institutional leaders guide change.

In short, leaders must:

- Develop an agenda
- Map the political terrain
- Get them on your side
- Make things happen

With this approach, it's the leaders of the group or organization who lay the groundwork for effective change. The Bacharach approach is not some kind of hardline, top-down method wherein the leader marches into a boardroom and announces that changes are on the horizon—and everybody better get on board. That type of tactic is almost always a recipe for disaster.

Case study:



As a non-profit online institution, Excelsior College must rely on innovative, relevant courses to engage and educate its diverse student body.

In 2018, Excelsior began an initiative to transform its entire online curriculum by rethinking and redesigning its course offerings—more than 400 courses in all.

This ambitious approach required change leadership to pave the way for a successful transformation. Involving faculty was paramount: Collaboration has helped to build momentum, enthusiasm, and buy-in from various stakeholders for new and revised curricula.

Excelsior held regular meetings during which administrators and faculty shared ideas about program and process changes. The institution also employed elements of both the ADKAR and Kotter methods of change leadership. The results thus far have been encouraging: Excelsior has successfully completed 57 courses, with an aggressive schedule to roll out additional courses in the coming months.

The Bacharach approach empowers leaders with the effective organizational and psychological tools to guide change in an organic fashion, rather than a dictatorial one.

The onus is on these leaders to generate support and buy-in for the change, and to establish and maintain momentum for that change.

Momentum is the linchpin of this approach. Instituting change without momentum leads to frustration and—sometimes—suspicions about the motivations for the change in the first place. Bacharach advises leaders to look at four sources of momentum to keep the change rolling:

- **Structural.** Maintain capacity and keep things going
- **Performance.** Monitor and make adjustments
- **Cultural.** Motivate to sustain focus
- **Political.** Mobilize support and anticipate opposition

Remember that change is not a destination, but a continual process. That's why momentum is so important, and according to Bacharach, it's best sustained through vision, culture, and political agility.

What's the right model for your institution?

There's no single, correct answer to that question. It depends upon the kind of change being implemented, the culture of the institution, or the personalities involved. Perhaps a hybrid approach might be the most effective—and in many cases, it can be.

Regardless, the important point here is to recognize that there are a handful of useful tools to craft a successful change, and to become familiar with these methods in order to determine your path forward.



Communications best practices

Change leadership in higher education is markedly different from change leadership within the corporate world. An important piece of that puzzle is that there is an intrinsic emotional component for higher education employees. There's an expectation that employees—as well as students and faculty—have a voice in what happens on campus, and that everyone shares a passion for one goal: education. When you work at a large corporation, you may not feel that same sense of emotional or shared connection.

What does that mean? It means that properly and effectively communicating change in higher education is critical. You're not just dealing with employees—you're dealing with people who are emotionally invested with their workplace and its culture. And an ineffective communication strategy in this environment can be disastrous.

Timing is everything

The number one rule when communicating change in higher education is this: Start talking about potential change early. Most change models (the Kotter Method, ADKAR, and so on) stipulate that communicating early is the foundation of successful change leadership. In doing so, you are setting the context for the change and building a case for it.

No one likes to feel as if a change has been imposed upon them from someone higher up in the organizational tree. However, there are times when a decision or change must be communicated or enacted relatively quickly, and it's impractical to open up multiple lines of input. In those cases, it's essential to directly and honestly communicate how the decision was made, and why. Did the president unilaterally



make the decision? Did the cabinet or leadership team discuss it in a formal meeting? Did a committee make a recommendation? Were there focus groups or open forums for input? Disclosing how the decision was made sets the stage for the next part of the process where you explain the impact and outcomes of the impending change.

However, it's important to note that a preferred approach to communicating change is to do so before the wheels have been set in motion. In other words, build a coalition for change by soliciting input. Within higher education, because of its culture and inherent ambiguity, there are no central rallying points around change—such as, “We’ve got to increase profits.” Higher education is comprised of many different stakeholders with differing concerns—students seek one thing, faculty another, and so on. Seeking input from these groups before a decision has been made can make all the difference.

This approach to change leadership is about more than creating a sense of acceptance or getting people to adjust their thinking about impending change. It's about allowing all stakeholders to feel that they've had a voice or a chance to participate in the process. Getting that input sooner rather than later can go a long way toward making change an easier, more streamlined process for everyone involved.

Getting personal

The second point in handling change in higher education reflects back to the ADKAR model, which argues that change leadership is best handled at the individual level.

Typically, a change isn't to benefit the employee. It's to benefit the outcome or an ultimate customer—or in the case of higher education, the students. We ask faculty and staff to make sacrifices for the students, which is, of course, a lofty

and laudable goal, but one that does not directly benefit the employee. So how do you most effectively communicate a change that will impact an employee? By getting personal.

Higher education institutions (and corporations) love to send out emails to communicate change. But it's not the most effective method, nor is it particularly personal and engaging.

It may seem somewhat self-serving, but we want to motivate the employee by what's in it for them. Communicating change means helping each employee understand what they will personally gain from it. Will the change make their jobs easier? Is it going to reduce time on task? Will it reduce their time on mundane paperwork so they can spend more time on more complex—and more interesting—tasks?

Basically, this approach says, “Here is what you will get out of the deal.” The institution benefits from having employees who are engaged in the change, motivated by it, and behind it.

The idea behind this approach is to shrink the change to an individual level. Institutions are large and complex. Anytime you can humanize a change, it makes the road to change far less rocky.

That also means communicating the concept that the change is not going to completely and utterly transform the institution into something unrecognizable overnight. Change happens incrementally at higher education institutions. But it's important to remind employees that a change doesn't mean the institution is changing its values, abandoning its mission statement, or giving up on how students are educated. How we define success may evolve, but the students always come first.

Building a sense of urgency

When communicating an impending change—regardless of size or complexity—it’s important to convey a sense of urgency.

Why is that? Without adequately communicating urgency, any kind of proposed change is doomed to fail because the will to push that change forward won’t be there. The most effective communicators of change know this: they place the change in context and explain why it needs to happen so the organization (whether higher education or corporate) can adapt and grow to meet new challenges. It’s a two-part process—building a coalition for change also means creating a catalyst for that change.

That’s certainly a challenge for higher education leaders, because higher education is not like the corporate world. Obviously, college and university presidents can’t simply say, “We need to change so we can sell more widgets and our stockholders will be happy.” Rather, it behooves higher education leaders to create a sense of urgency around the need to evolve, without mistakenly giving the impression that something earth-shattering is occurring or that higher education employees’ lives are about to be turned upside down. That’s a tricky balancing act.

As previously mentioned, one of the more effective ways to communicate change is to scale it down and make it personal. I encourage higher education presidents to get out there in front of people—go to the faculty senate, go to staff council, conduct a campus “town hall” meeting—and have an open and frank discussion about the impending change. A website that offers updates or emails about the change is absolutely secondary to the president or provost putting in face time with the people on campus who will be directly affected by the change.



One of the more effective ways to communicate change is to scale it down and make it personal.”

One of the mistakes we often make is an over-reliance on mass communication and a misplaced belief in how effective it is. Higher education culture is driven by individual attitudes, and the only way to change those attitudes is to reach out to people as individuals. You're trying to build momentum and urgency—and the only way to do that is through two-way dialogue.

Part of that “two-way dialogue” must include consistent messaging. Leaders and managers have to possess the right tools so that they communicate the president or provost's message clearly and accurately. A communications plan that includes talking points, PowerPoint presentations, and so on will help those managers and supervisors discuss the impending change with their respective teams.

Implementing a change management program is only the beginning. One of the most difficult challenges is figuring out how to communicate that change to all stakeholders and do so effectively without alienating core constituencies. After all, attempting to make any change without adequately communicating what's happening is a surefire way to sabotage your own efforts.

There's no question that higher education is facing some real challenges—but the decades ahead will also bring opportunities. It's incumbent upon today's higher education leaders to be ready for those challenges and poised to make the most of those opportunities as well. Hopefully, the advice and tools offered here will provide a roadmap to help leaders navigate the road ahead.





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