In Chapters 5, 6, and 7 we learned about the theory of change as well as two roles of the chief student affairs officer (CSAO): visionary and change architect. Now we will consider what it takes to actually champion a strategic and transformational change effort. This is the CSAO’s role in engaging and managing people to lead them through the change process. To be successful as a change leader, the CSAO must develop specific skills and abilities. From years of experience, we, the authors, have learned that leaders benefit from embracing the following advice.

**Be visible.** As the leader of the change, you need to make it clear that the vision is your priority. You will need to communicate your
passion and commitment continuously. Get out of your office and talk to people. Let them hear from you that this is not some “flavor of the month” that will be soon forgotten. Leadership is not something you can delegate.

**Build teams.** This change effort will require different kinds of teams. First, you need a strong leadership team to help you manage the change process. This group must take collective responsibility for the work, a new role for many of them who are used to staying in their functional silos. You will also need support teams to handle the administrative tasks of planning meetings, creating communication channels, providing training, and measuring results. Some of these teams will exist only for a short time whereas others will be merged into the permanent organizational structure. Wherever possible, make use of existing committees, teams, and roles rather than inventing new ones. Make a point to see that teams have charters and that there is an established process to measure and reward accomplishments.

**Create connections.** You have an important responsibility to communicate with people, but it is just as important that they communicate with each other. Create opportunities, both formal and informal, for people from across the organization to share what they are seeing, plan together, and celebrate success together. This might mean an occasional town hall meeting, a special Web page that people can post to, or some other mechanism to let people see that change is happening and how they can contribute to it.
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Set boundaries and expectations. There are boundaries in the change effort and you need to make them clear. Make sure you have defined roles and responsibilities in ways that encourage collaboration and not conflict or competition. Let people know what authority they have to make decisions and spend money. Also make clear what is expected of each person, team, and functional area. One way to do that is to make change goals part of performance evaluation. Another is to embed roles, responsibilities, and expectations into team charters.

Support innovation and risk taking. You won’t get breakthrough change if people are afraid to take chances. Make it clear that you will support intelligent risk taking but that your support is not a license for recklessness. Discuss with your people what kinds of risks are okay and how to prepare for and learn from failure. Everyone should have thought about alternatives, risks, and rewards of any action and have a “Plan B” to fall back on. Sharing stories of courage in risk taking is important. When bad news comes, don’t shoot the messenger.

Expect setbacks. There will inevitably be delays and false starts. Teams will be late getting started because they can’t find time to meet. Some crisis or another will get in the way. You will discover that people need more training, direction, or time to accomplish things than had been planned. Getting off track is not the problem; the problem is not being ready to get things back on track.
Celebrate success. What excites and motivates people is seeing that change is working. You will need to create ways for people to experience both early and later successes, even if they are small ones. Recognize individuals and teams that are doing a great job. Create opportunities for people to take credit for their innovations. Praise the work of everyone who contributes. A personal “thank you” note from the leader can mean a lot to someone on the front line. It is also important to remind everyone of how far the organization has come as the weeks and months go by. It is all too easy for your staff to be so caught up in the day-to-day work that they simply do not notice that things are better and that they are better because of this change initiative.

Stay the course. Leading and managing change is a race that never ends. Know that your primary role from now on is to keep people focused on the challenge of creating the future. Don’t let the distractions of day-to-day crises, institutional politics, or your own need to retreat to your comfort zone keep you down for long. Your long-term success and the success of your organization demand that you demonstrate the willingness and ability to be a visible, passionate, and courageous leader, even on days when you don’t feel like it. The rewards will be enormous.
The CSAO’s 8-Step Process for Leading and Managing Change

Most major change efforts in organizations fail (Kotter, 1995). Why? Because organizations often do not take the holistic approach required to see the change through. They address symptoms rather than root causes. They underestimate the difficulty of getting people to understand and support the change. Over the past 30 years, there has been much research on how to create successful change efforts. Business and academic gurus such as Peter Drucker (2006), D. Edwards Deming (Deming & Orsini, 2012), and John Kotter (1995) have given us insights into the dynamics of change. Organizational development pioneers like Ron Lippitt (Smith, Lippitt, Noel, & Sprandel, 1981; Lippitt, 1982) and Kathie Dannemiller (Dannemiller & Jacobs, 1992; Dannemiller Tysons Associates, 1994, 2000) have provided robust processes for engaging the people in organizations.

The 8-Step Process listed here, based on Kotter’s (1995) model and the work of Lippitt (1982) and Dannemiller Tyson Associates (2000), provides a strategic framework for a change effort. By following these steps, an institution can avoid failure and become skilled at change. By improving the institution’s ability to adapt...
continuously, an institution can increase its chances of success in the near and long term.

**Step 1: Create a Sense of Urgency**

People don’t change unless they are motivated to do so. Organizations have a kind of inertia that keeps them moving in the same direction unless there is a force to cause that direction to change. Colleges and universities are particularly resistant to doing things differently. Your first step as a leader is to build the case for change. People need to see both the risks and the opportunities presented by what is going on inside and outside the institution. If student persistence is a major priority, you will need facts about enrollment that go beyond the standard top-line numbers for retention. If your 6-year graduation rate is 40% (not uncommon) you need to lay out the consequences of not graduating 6 out of 10 entering students. What is the cost in human terms of a student dropping out without a degree but with a mountain of student debt? What new accountability measures are being imposed by state and federal authorities? What does that figure mean in terms of lost revenue to the school? What are the long-term implications for faculty, staff, employers, donors, and prospective students? One of our clients summed up the need for urgency by saying, “If you are not scared by the current situation, you just don’t have enough information!”
Step 2: Build a Leadership Team to Guide the Change

If you are the change leader, you will need to assemble a group with enough power to lead and manage the change effort. You will need to help the group to work as a team. If you are not the leader but a member of the leadership team, you will need to understand your role and how you can support the team. In either case, change is a team sport that requires working across organizational boundaries. So, for instance, if you want to implement a new early alert system, you will need to engage all the necessary functions to participate in that system, including the faculty, academic advisors, information technology, and residence hall staff. Often these are groups that do not have a good track record of working together. Your leadership team can help make the right connections and bring knowledge, resources, and influence to your project.

Step 3: Create a Compelling Vision of the Future

Most institutional vision statements are just bumper stickers that say in a few words what the school wants to be known for. As discussed in the last section, the kind of vision we propose is much more robust than that. Imagining the future in detail is about describing our dreams for the institution. If you can’t picture what you want, you can’t achieve it. A preferred future statement will be much more multifaceted than a simple phrase or slogan. So if we say we want to have an institution that in 5 years is thriving, that’s
a beginning. If we say we want our institution to be able to attract, retain, and graduate well-prepared and highly motivated students who are ready to take the next step in their lives, that adds to the picture. If we are able to describe what we want people inside and outside the institution to be thinking, saying, and doing differently in 3 to 5 years, we start to bring that picture into sharper focus.

The process of creating a robust and energizing picture of the future requires engaging the people who are needed to help create it. Leaders have a point of view about the future and they should. Enriching that point of view by getting input from others makes it better and more likely to be supported. It is through uncovering and combining our aspirations that we can harness the potential of the organization.

**Step 4: Engage People in Creating the Change**

Make sure as many people as possible understand and accept the vision and the strategy. The engagement process goes well beyond simply calling a meeting and lecturing about the change. The people in the organization have a great deal of knowledge about what is and isn’t working that leaders simply do not possess. The people in the organization are also a rich source of creativity and innovation. Creating teams and task forces, holding interactive town hall-style meetings, and letting people have a voice in the change effort may feel risky.
effort may feel risky. Our experience is that the more people are trusted and involved, the more likely the change is to be successful.

**Step 5: Empower Broad-based Action**

Remove obstacles to change. Alter systems or structures that seriously undermine the vision. Encourage risk taking and nontraditional ideas, activities, and actions. Before you can set out on the journey to the future of your dreams, you must first know where you are now. Systemic change is really about three things: *processes, people, and information*. Processes describe the work we do and how we do it. People are the ones who do the work, so we need to understand what roles they play, how they are organized, and how they interact. Information is the fuel that drives the organization. We need to understand what information people need to view the big picture and to make wise decisions in their daily work. This largely has to do with what information is gathered (what is measured) and how it is distributed, as noted in the Star of Success Model in Chapter 7. Organizational structures and organizational culture strongly influence how well these three components function in getting to the preferred future.

**Step 6: Achieve and Celebrate Short-term Wins**

Nothing builds momentum for change like achieving victories, even when they are small. Plan for achievements that can easily be
made visible, follow through with those achievements, and recognize and reward employees who were involved. When you begin the change effort, look for things that can be accomplished in the first 30, 60, or 90 days. Bring people back together periodically to hear what others have been doing and what can be learned from those efforts. Renew enthusiasm by being highly visible in supporting the change.

**Step 7: Be Persistent in Sustaining the Change**

Use increased credibility to change systems, structures, and policies that don’t fit the vision; hire, promote, and develop employees who can implement the vision; and, finally, reinvigorate the process with new projects, themes, and change agents. Some things will take time. Often change efforts are limited in their first year because the budget is already fixed. Getting the right people into the right positions can be complicated and may take time. Make sure that people know you are in this for the long term.

**Step 8: Embed the Changes Into the Culture**

Culture can be simply defined as “the way we do things around here.” Culture is a pattern of beliefs, attitudes, norms, values, and behaviors that do not change overnight. Articulate the connections between the new behaviors and organizational success, and develop the means to ensure leadership development and succession. This means phasing out temporary structures (e.g., pilot
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programs, task forces, change teams) and integrating the new functions and processes into existing permanent roles. Hire and train new people based on their ability and willingness to support the new culture. Above all, make support of the vision one of the criteria for evaluating individual and group performance at every level.

Conclusion

Change is a journey that the leader must be ready to devote time and attention to over time. These eight steps help to frame the beginning, middle, and end of a particular change process. Embedding the change into the fabric of the organization is a major accomplishment deserving celebration. Making the change part of the culture allows the organization to refine and improve its new operating mode. Eventually, circumstances will, sooner or later, require another cycle of renewal as the organization adapts. It is the leader’s responsibility to make sure that the lessons of successful change are learned so they can be repeated.

References


