Change Leadership in Higher Education

When it comes to the subject of genuine, substantive change, higher education is a paradox. On the one hand, we work in a field in which we constantly develop new ideas, solutions, and practices within our own fields. We advocate for change and, when the data contradict our current beliefs or models, we change our ideas. Basically we’re in the progress business. On the other hand, we—faculty and administrators alike—find it far more difficult to change our practices and behaviors. We consider innovation to be a distraction from, not a natural outgrowth of, our “real work.”

So, why is leading change so hard in higher education?

We might see the impediments to change in higher education as arising in three main areas. And, since we are focusing on change at academic institutions, it might be appropriate to refer to these areas by using the names of three major academic disciplines.

- **The Psychology of Change**: We try to implement change without understanding how people interpret what change is and how it affects their perception of the world.

- **The Sociology of Change**: We try to adopt mechanisms for change that don’t fit the organizational culture of higher education and ignore the way in which departments and colleges reach consensus.

- **The Philosophy of Change**: We try to change things for the wrong reasons and fail to perceive what we might call “the metaphysics of change.”
These three areas are so important for leading change successfully that we need to explore them each individually.

**The Psychology of Change**

The word *change* means different things to different people. As a result, when we talk about needed changes in our academic programs, not everyone hears the same message. For some people, change is **replacement**. A exists now and, while A may be flawed and incapable of delivering the best results, it’s familiar to us. When someone talks about change, they are saying that they want to replace A with B. We don’t know what B will be like. It could be worse than A, or it could be much the same. In any case, there will be a long of pain and discomfort as we dismantle A and erect B in its place. People who take the replacement view of change can see change only in terms of loss: loss of the familiar, lost of status and perhaps competence, and loss of wellbeing. For other people, however, change is **improvement**. A exists now and, after we enhance it and develop it further, it will be a far better A because of our efforts. People who take the improvement view of change can see change largely in terms of gain: gain in efficiency, gain in reputation, and gain in modernity.

Falling somewhere between the replacement view of change and the improvement view of change as the view that all change is a journey. According to this perspective, change is constant. As the ancient philosopher Heraclitus is reported as saying, you can’t step into the same river twice. Whether you want things to remain the same or not, they are going to change anyway. So, if A exists now, it will inevitably lead
us someday to B, which will merely be a way station along the path to C, which in turn will take us toward D, and so on. In any change process, those who assume the replacement view of change tend to be resisters. Those who assume the improvement view of change tend to be our early adopters. And those who assume the journey view of change fall somewhere in the middle: They are usually waiting to find out what kind of trip the change process is going to be. If it is likely to be a pleasure cruise or a voyage of progress, they eventually come to support it. If it is going to be a forced march or a retreat, they will try to oppose it. They tend to take their lead from the early adopters, not the initiator of the change per se.

In their 2010 study of change processes, Switch: How to Change Things When Change is Hard, Chip and Dan Heath offer a model for better understanding how to cope with the psychology of change. To the Heaths, there are three aspects of how people interpret change that we always have to keep in mind.

- **The Rider**: our rational, intellectual side that attempts to guide us through carefully reasoned analysis.

- **The Elephant**: our emotional reactive side that often seizes control from the Rider.

- **The Path**: our perception of where the change process is heading.

Each of these aspects reacts to change differently and requires different leadership from the initiator of change in order to make the process effective. The strategies that the Heaths recommend for each aspect are as follows.

To engage the Rider:
1. **Follow the bright spots**
   - Determine what is already working well and do more of that.
     (This process is sometimes known as *appreciative inquiry*.)
   - Use your ability to succeed in certain areas as a model for how to
     succeed in others.
   - Use that as a model
   - Do more of it

2. **Script the critical moves**
   - Since the Rider excels at analyzing, look for ways to help people
     resist overthinking the process and identifying potential problems
     that are unlikely or avoidable.
   - Set specific, achievable goals that people’s rational side can take
     hold of and note their progress in moving toward these goals.

3. **Point to the destination**
   - Place these immediate goals within the plans long-term context.
   - Repeatedly explain the benefits that will accrue from the change
     so that people keep their “eyes on the prize.”

To engage the Elephant:

   - **Find the feeling:** What is the dominant emotion that people are
     experiencing? If it is excitement, use that excitement as an
     incentive for progress. If it is fear, take that fear seriously and
work to make people more comfortable with the change.

- **Shrink the change:** How can the change be made to look less imposing, more manageable? If the journey of a thousand miles sounds too intimidating, focus on the next single step.

- **Appeal to identity:** How does the change relate to who we are, our core values? If a change seems threatening, present it as a natural development from who we are right now.

- **Grow your people:** How can our community become more creative, entrepreneurial, inventive?

To shape the Path:

1. **Tweak the environment**

   - People tend to be more flexible with change when their physical space also changes.

   - For example, when a program is moving to a new or remodeled facility, it is often a good time to work on curricular changes: A new focus for our new home.

   - Build a habit

2. **Use checklists and “playlists” (sets of strategies that have proven to work in the past) to make new practices habitual.**

3. **Rally the herd**

   - Remember that peers tend to follow their peers, not necessarily their chair, dean, or provost.
• Nurture your “first followers” or “early adopters” so that they will assist you in making the change part of the culture.

The Sociology of Change

Change never occurs within a vacuum; it always occurs as part of a system. For this reason, although focusing on the individuals involved in the change process (i.e., the psychology of change) is important, it is not sufficient to guarantee a successful change initiative. We have to pay attention to the organizational culture in which change occurs. The most common type of organizational culture is the hierarchy. Hierarchies can be found in cultures stemming all the way from the ancient Sumerian city-state to most modern industrial conglomerates. In a hierarchy, power rises as you move up the social pyramid; numbers of people rise as you move down the social pyramid. When we prepare organizational charts for our institutions, we try to pretend that the college or university is structured as a hierarchy: faculty members report to a chair who reports to a dean who reports to a provost who reports to a president. But that sociological model fails to capture how high education actually works. For example, curricular matters are not initiated by the president and interpreted or enforced at each subsequent level; they start—and in many cases end—with the faculty. Presidents or governing boards may have the final word in promotion and tenure decisions, but those processes usually move from the bottom of the social pyramid up, not from the top down.

In order to understand the sociology of change, therefore, we have to realize that other organizational cultures are as at least as important in higher education as the
Matrix Organizations share power horizontally and diagonally, not just vertically. For example, in most curricular and hiring decisions the Department of Psychology will defer to the Department of Physics when a course is proposed in quantum mechanics or a new faculty member is being hired to teach courses in non-linear dynamics. But the Department of Physics will defer to the Department of Psychology when a course is proposed in cognitive neuroscience or a new faculty member is being hired to teach courses in psychometrics.

Decentralized organizations consist of members who are all equidistant from power. Committees are good examples of decentralized organizations. They frequently take a long time to make decisions since power is only available to them if they act with consensus or by majority vote.

Distributed organizations allocate different powers to different groups. The federal structure in the United States—with separate executive, legislative, and judicial branches—is an example of a distributed organization. Colleges and universities act as distributed organizations through shared governance, with certain responsibilities delegated to the faculty, others to the administration, and others to the governing board.

Why does understanding the sociology of change help us improve our change processes? Well, for one thing, it explains why strategic planning, the mechanism most colleges and universities adopt to produce change, is so often disappointing in its
results. Simply examine the vocabulary so often associated with the development of a strategic plan: strategy, tactics, targets, Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), benchmarks, SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats), Return On Investment (ROI), metrics, entrepreneurial, efficiency, productivity. This is the vocabulary of hierarchical organizations (the military and corporate worlds), not the complex matrix, decentralized, distributed organizational culture of higher education. If we want to develop a change process that resonates with academics, we need to adopt the language of the academy instead: collegiality, academic freedom, tenure, critical thinking, higher order thinking, active learning, research, discovery, curriculum.

What would such a change process look like? As I argue in *Change Leadership in Higher Education* (2015), it would look more like the following:

- **Organic Academic Leadership:** The idea that the academic leader’s most important responsibility is developing *people*, not programs, strategies, or goals. As the Dutch leadership expert Alexander den Heijer famously said, “When a flower doesn't bloom, you fix the environment in which it grows.”

- **Creative Academic Leadership:** The idea that the academic leader’s most important responsibility is help people become more creative, innovative, and forward-looking.

In hierarchical cultures, leaders can focus on *product* (profit, victory). In higher education, successful leaders focus on people. They create environments in which members of the faculty and staff are free to experience the excitement of growth because they don’t fear the stigma of failure. They are rewarded for thinking creatively,
not punished for failing to attain some arbitrary metric. With organic or creative academic leadership:

- Innovation is encouraged, recognized, and rewarded.
- Ideas are heard and seriously considered before being judged.
- As many people as possible are given the freedom to do their work in their own way.
- Most decisions don’t have to be cleared through a person’s supervisor.
- People feel comfortable talking with anyone in the organization (including the upper administration).
- People are appreciated for what they do.
- People are appreciated for who they are.
- Efforts are made to foster and develop creativity.

**The Philosophy of Change**

The final major reason why academic change processes are often so difficult is that we approach them with serious misconceptions about how change works. For example, we may assume one or more of the following:

- The power of positive thinking can help promote positive change.
- Large, complex problems usually require large, complex changes.
- Change leaders may best be understood as catalysts for change.
- The concept of SMART goals (goals that are specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-specific) make change easier to implement and progress
easier to assess.

- If you get the sociology right, the psychology follows automatically.

But these assumptions are based on a false metaphysical interpretation of what the reality of change is.

Positive thinking has plenty of benefits as a general approach to life. As Martin Seligman argues in such books as *Learned Optimism* (1991) and *Flourish* (2011), optimists are more likely to be hired, get promoted, recover from surgery and illnesses, take direct action, and do better in school than pessimists. But the power of positive thinking has its limits. One of Seligman’s former pupils, Gabriele Oettingen has recently conducted research that demonstrates that positive thinking is not particular effective in producing meaningful and sustainable change. In fact, positive thinking unaccompanied by a realistic assessment of past experience usually does not improve anything.

Positive fantasies, wishes, and dreams detached from an assessment of past experience didn’t translate into motivation to act toward a more energized, engaged life. It translated into the opposite. ... [Repeatedly in experiments that were conducted] positive thinking wasn’t always helpful. Yes, sometimes it did help, but when it came in the form of a free-flowing dream—as so much positive thinking does—it impeded people in the long term from moving ahead. Oettingen (2014) 11, 16.

As a result, Oettingen developed her own six-step change process based on what she learned about leaders who produced meaningful, sustained change in their organizations.

**Step 1.** Set goals.

**Step 2** Specify the likely result of achieving those goals.
Step 3. Develop a plan to achieve these goals.

Step 4. Identify the likely obstacles that may prevent you from achieving those goals.

Step 5. Develop a plan to overcome the obstacles you identified in Step 4.

Step 6. Revise (Step 3 to include Step 5).

Large, complex problems may not always require large, complex changes. In fact, simple solutions are often surprisingly effective. Bacterial infections long proved to be a very difficult problem for societies, and the complex approaches taken to address them—such as spending several months in a spa “taking the waters”—often provided little or no improvement. But with the discovery of antibiotics, a simple cure turned out to solve the large, complex problem in the vast majority of cases. In fact, antibiotics proved to be such a simple, low cost solution that certain pharmacies do not even charge for them, and many physicians over-prescribe them. The result is another large, complex problem (antibiotic resistant bacteria) that will someday likely also be solved by a simple, inexpensive solution. In 2012, when the Main Bus Switching Unit of the International Space Station, those who tried to repair it found themselves facing a large, complex problem: The accumulation of metal shavings around the bolts made it impossible to gain access to the unit. Sending up the proper tool from earth was impossible due to the time and expense that would be involved, so the astronauts adopted a simple, inexpensive solution: They cleaned away the shavings with a toothbrush. As we saw with the Heath Brothers’ change model, shrinking the change
has many advantages over making it long, difficult, and complicated. Often the least expensive and most direct solution is the best.

Change leaders often like to view themselves as catalysts for change, but this metaphor is highly flawed. A catalyst is a substance that increases the rate of a chemical reaction without itself undergoing any permanent chemical change itself. But the reality is that you cannot produce any meaningful change without being changed yourself. As we saw in our discussion of the sociology of change, change always occurs within a system, and change leaders are part of that system. So, there really is not anything like a “change agent” in higher education. Change leaders are more properly understood as “change reagents,” part of the same process that will be different (and, one hopes, better) at the end of the process that it was at the beginning.

Like positive thinking, SMART goals ((goals that are specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-specific) have their place. They are wonderful ways of making people better managers of their time and more accountable for their actions. But they are very poor strategies for bringing about significant change.

The specificity of SMART goals is a great cure for the worst sins of goal setting – ambiguity and irrelevance (‘We are going to delight our customers every day in every way!’). But SMART goals are better for steady-state situations than for change situations, because the assumptions underlying them are that the goals are worthwhile.”. SMART goals presume the emotion; they don’t generate it. ... There are some people whose hearts are set aflutter by goals such as ‘improving the liquidity ratio by 30 percent over the next 18 months.’ They’re called accountants. Heath (2010) 82.

SMART goals do not engage what the Heath brothers call the Elephant aspect of change psychology. Riders may want to know what the SMART next step is, but the Elephant wants to be excited about where it is going. So, it is useful for change leaders
periodically to emphasize the excitement of the journey and its ultimate destination. That kind of long-term perspective may not always be SMART, but it is certain smart.

Finally, our philosophical framework for change might lead us to conclude that, if we can just get the sociology right, the psychology will follow. In other words, if we focus our attention on the committees that will be involved in implementing the change and if we can get the process right, a positive outcome is all but guaranteed. But effective change leadership requires a lot of one-on-one conversations. It is a lot like coaching: motivating individuals in order to achieve a team result. If we want to be effective leaders of change, we have to understand that not everyone shares the same philosophy of change. And we have to work with individuals so that they understand and appreciate how they themselves contribute to the long-term benefits that will result from the change.

At the same time, we should also recognize that the inverse of what we just observed is also true. Anyone who has ever discussed a proposal with every member of a committee and gained their support only to have the committee vote it down when they came together as a group understands that any group is more than a sum of its members. Just as colleges and universities have an organizational culture that is different from the organizational culture of military or corporate bodies, so does each group within our organization have its own culture, its own “mind.”

**Summing Up**

In this way, we can describe the barriers to effective change leadership in the following
way.

- Change is often difficult because we fail to see the extent to which different people view change differently.
- Change is often difficult because we do not take time to understand the unique organizational culture in which the change must occur.
- Change becomes even more difficult when we approach it with false assumptions.

If we can approach change leadership with a clearer notion of how the psychology, sociology, and philosophy of change all fit together, we will greatly increase the likelihood that our results will be significant and sustainable on into the future.

References


