

Managing Change in Higher Education

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As I think about change in our nation's universities and colleges, I am reminded of a wonderful story about a man and his wife who were shopping. The man picked up a shirt with a label on it that said, "shrink resistant." He asked his wife what that meant. "It means," she said, "that it will shrink but it doesn't want to." Change and resistance to change is a dilemma that we face each and everyday. Change is a non-avoidable part of our very lives. The issue before us can be stated quite simply, change or be changed. As Alvin Toffler tells us, the solution "is not to suppress change, which cannot be done, but to manage it." From my perspective, we must work under the belief that an enterprise is lost if it assumes it will be serving the same market with the same product five years from now.

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Each of us in higher education has come to recognize that sometimes we have to start running without knowing precisely where we are likely to end and that can be frightening. But as President Kennedy assured us, "just because we cannot see clearly the end of the road, that is no reason for not setting out on the essential journey. On the contrary, great change dominates the world and unless we move with change we will become its victims." The willingness to move forward without knowing for certain the final destination calls upon us to have faith and self-confidence in our ability to succeed in a process which will surely require continuous evaluation and often midcourse corrections in response to new insights, opportunities and challenges. The truth of it is that in real life we seldom, if ever, have all the information we want or need at the moment a decision must be made. Fear of starting on the journey of change can be paralyzing while the courage to start is liberating. In the words of Peter Drucker,

the question we must ask ourselves about every activity is "if we weren't doing this today, would we start doing it now?"

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Change in higher education has caused and in turn been caused by drastic alterations in the traditional boundaries of our nations' universities. Bricks and mortar have been supplemented by cyberspace and fiber optics. Past patterns of age, ethnicity, academic interests and pre-college preparation are today unrecognizable. Degree programs now meet professional, vocational, continuing education and accrediting needs of students. Scheduling of academic programs and facilities has become a balance of synchronous and asynchronous scheduling. And finally, campus missions have broadened to be more responsive to varied constituent demands and expectations.

Great change dominates the world and unless we move with change we will become its victims.

The very character of American higher education has changed as different models of structure have come in and out of vogue. Although writing about change in the world of commerce, Sonnenfeld (1998) gives us some insights, which seem very much applicable to higher education. For example, population ecology thought suggests that organizations survive through a process of natural selection and thus they represent conditions present at the time of their inception subject only to "survival of fitness" changes. A resources dependent orientation suggests that institutions change in response to such external forces as constituent demands, availability of talent, supplies, markets and government regulations. The visionary leader model sees changes

in the academy as being primarily driven by a strong leader who serves a symbolic, substantive and integrative force through the articulation of an institutional vision which is timely, sensible, empowering and simultaneously, contemporaneous and futuristic; the vision serves to capture and channel the available, tangible and human resources. Regardless of how the move toward change is driven, it seems clear that virtually all planning to lead and manage change involves the budgeting of resources, such as finance, space, personnel, readiness and receptivity.

While most organizations encourage concurrence, agreement and conformity, we do well to understand that the pursuit of these principles, if carried to an extreme, may discourage the questioning of the status quo and inhibit innovation and movement in new directions.

Warren Bennis (1973) tells us that change occurs in two primary ways, through trust and truth or dissent and conflict. But dissent and conflict bring about change through combativeness and so in the short and long term are destructive of the organization. Hence, the only real approach available is trust and truth. The challenges to the organization then are to create an environment in which trust and truth can flourish and thereby lead to a constructive process of change. Experience tells us that trust and truth develop when our organization embraces a vision that is founded upon clarity and participation. The vision creates the understanding, the necessity and the courage to embrace a new way of doing things.

As an organization embarks upon a process of reinvent-

ing itself, it must maintain a balance between continuity and change. Purpose, tradition and values can serve to channel the direction and pace of change (Gardner, 1990). These characteristics, having evolved over years, should be relatively durable and provide an infrastructure upon which we can absorb change without losing a much desired distinctive character and style. However, the organization can only embark upon a program of change when the participants are not fearful of stepping forward to become the agents of change. While most organizations encourage concurrence, agreement and conformity, we do well to understand that the pursuit of these principles, if carried to an extreme, may discourage the questioning of the status quo and inhibit innovation and movement in new directions.

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We learn from the Harvard Business Review (Pasale, Milleman and Grijoja, 1997) that there are three separate strategic dimensions to change. You can simply reserve the right to play by investing sufficiently to stay in the game; you can adapt to change by recognizing and capturing opportunities in existing markets; or you can shape the future by playing a leadership role in managing change, setting the standards and creating demand. I trust you will agree that it is at the “shaping of the future” level that higher education must play its hand.

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The true and proactive process of change is not for the faint of heart or for those who are in need of immediate gratification. Centuries ago, Machiavelli said that “there is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things.” Today we know that meaningful and lasting change within an organization can only emerge from a process characterized by respect for shared values, sensitivity to the anxieties which change may elicit, reinforcement for those who are willing to take reasonable risks, tolerance for a path of trial and error and incentives to motivate participants to give up what may be a comfortable status-quo (Gardner, 1990).

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The path to change is fraught with traps that keep us from recognizing and using change. Experience identifies the most common obstacles in adapting to change as believing that yesterday’s solutions will solve today’s problems, assuming present trends will continue and neglecting the opportunities offered by future change. Poor communication is a dominant theme in organizations that have failed to celebrate change. Information is an organization’s primary asset in the process of change. If information is not available, people will make it up. Good communica-

tion is seen as a vital sign of an institution's health. From studying educational institutions that have enjoyed successful programs of change, we have come to understand that in creating a supporting environment, it is essential to:

- avoid “crazes” and change for the sake of change;
- build support for change among like-minded people;
- plan for change from a solid conceptual base;
- understand that the rhetoric of change is quick and easy but substantive change is the only real objective;
- not over promise inasmuch as visions of future greatness may lead to disillusion and failure to appreciate more realistic accomplishments;
- develop an attitude which sees change as a positive attribute and a belief that we need not lose those things which are already done well while at the same time adding to our greatness; and
- create a sense of urgency and receptivity for change.

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Further, for change to be successful, we must be willing to challenge some of the organizational principles we have built for generations into our work environment and have come to accept as the “way” we do things.

From a point and counterpoint perspective, consider the benefits of:

- homogeneity of workforce transformed by a celebration of diversity;
- generations of continuity succeeded by a willingness to recruit new talent from outside;
- work efforts in isolation changed by the teamwork concept;
- pride of handcraft enhanced by an acceptance of technology;
- tidiness offset by untidiness;
- predictability supplanted by an acceptance of the element of chance;
- hierarchy modified by the advantages of full participation in decision making;
- smallness of enterprise replaced by an appreciation of national and global influences;
- well-defined reporting structures challenged by models of open communication; and
- authority as tempered by the accountability of power.

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As we move forward in reinventing ourselves, it is important to remember that “change has considerable psychological impact on the human mind. To the fearful, it is threatening because it means that things may get

worse. To the hopeful, it is encouraging because things may get better. To the confident, it is inspiring because the challenge exists to make things better” (King Whitney, Jr.).

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