

# Leading a “Readiness for Change” Culture

Edwin T. Cornelius III, Ph.D.

Mark Twain once said, “It’s not the progress I mind, it’s the change I don’t like.”

This sentiment rings true today on campuses across the country. Innovators in higher education regularly face the challenge of instigating progress on campus while at the same time dealing with the natural resistance to change that we feel.

There are several types of change that leaders today face on campus.

## Directed Change

Much of the time leaders on campus are involved with “directed” change or “top-down” change in the institution. These types of changes are varied and numerous. For example, this might include changes in both administrative practices and employee duties that are brought about by the implementation of a new software system. As another example, a leader might have to enforce changes in policies and procedures brought about by new requirements of the state or federal government (such as changes in financial aid requirements).

In these situations, the leader in effect must make change decisions and then “force” or “drive” the

change into the institution. Directed change of this sort is always a challenge since the key campus stakeholders have not been involved in the decision to make the change.

## Engaged Change

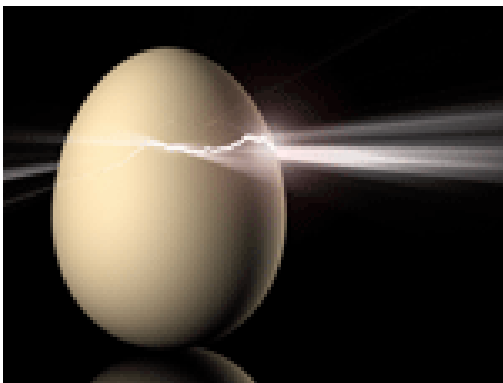
In some instances, a campus manager might lead a change initiative, but he or she has the permission, reason, and time to engage at least some campus stakeholders in the planning and execution of the initiative. An example of “engaged change” might be the development of the institution’s strategic plan, in which certain stakeholders might provide input in the planning process, but the final plan is either approved by the leadership team or, in some instances, by a committee appointed by the leadership team.

Even in “engaged” change, however, there will be resistance on campus and the leader must adroitly guide the institution through the particular initiative at hand. This usually means an implementation plan with heavy emphasis on communication, focus group sessions, and other devices to help reduce resistance. In essence, “engaged” change is still top-down driven. The change leader is faced with the difficult task of planning the change and executing the change in situations in which most campus stakeholders have not been involved in the decision for the change nor in the decisions about how to implement the change.

## A “Readiness for Change” Culture

Wouldn't life on campus be easier if stakeholders didn't fear change but instead embraced the progress enabled by the change? What if the first reaction to a change initiative was not resistance, but instead a curiosity about the new possibilities before us?

It is possible to create a “readiness for change” culture on campus and many organizations are trying to accomplish exactly that. In this culture, change is easily accepted and actually embraced by the institution. Further, change can materialize from anywhere within the institution, instead of driven top-down. Organizations are becoming increasingly interested in learning how to create a permanent “cultural readiness for change” that goes beyond one specific change implementation project. These institutions strive over time to create an atmosphere that is not only ready for change, but also welcomes and thrives in it.



### Four Characteristics of a “Readiness for Change” Culture

In order for change to “emerge” naturally in an organization, campus leadership must figure out how to put in place four specific cultural elements. Once these elements are in place, the more likely it will be for change to emerge easily on its own and the less likely there will be substantial resistance to the change.

What are the necessary elements for this “readiness for change” culture?

The first three elements concern the “readiness” of the various campus stakeholder groups (e.g., faculty, staff, students, administrators, board members, alumni, etc.). Leaders must figure out how to put in place conditions such that campus stakeholders are (1) “business literate,” (2) feel as though they have the permission to act, and (3) are willing to challenge the status quo.

The fourth necessary cultural element concerns campus leadership itself. In particular, the institution must develop leaders who are able and willing to encourage a “readiness for change” culture on campus.

We briefly discuss each of these cultural conditions below.

#### Stakeholders who are Business Literate

We define a “business literate” stakeholder as one who understands both the strategic context of the institution and the personal impact they can have on its critical goals and outcomes.

Let's take college employees as one example. Ensuring that college employees understand the strategic context of their work is a critical leadership task in the process of creating a “readiness for change” culture. If employees understand what their department and institution as a whole are trying to accomplish, then these employees are better able to interpret the need for a specific change and accept change thrust upon them. In addition, when they can see the institutional “big picture,” they are better equipped to make the right decisions and offer relevant ideas.

The second aspect of “business literacy” is efficacy. That is, do employees understand the impact their specific job has on the critical goals of their department and institution as a whole (e.g., student retention, resource conservation, operational effectiveness, quality academic programs, etc.) and do they see the link between their job performance and

the institution's overall success? If they are able to understand how a change in their day-to-day activities might affect the institution as a whole and if they understand the linkage between their job performance and the subsequent performance metrics of the institution, they will be more likely to know precisely what action they must take to have a positive impact.

### **Stakeholders that Have Permission to Act**

Continuing with the college employees' example, in order for these stakeholders to initiate change for improvement on their own, they must be allowed to do so. Employees should feel they have permission to make the day-to-day decisions necessary to meet departmental and institutional objectives. Campus stakeholders are more likely to suggest change and feel responsible for carrying out the change if they know they have the authority to make changes. Further, changes will be more rapid if employees have the necessary autonomy, and thus, don't have to wait for permission to act.

A critical leadership skill is learning how to install boundaries and to encourage freedom to act within those boundaries. Leaders throughout the institution must learn how to set goals, communicate boundaries, and then "let go." The more specific and understandable the boundaries, the better. For example, a leader might tell the facilities team that they can make changes to their service schedule, as long as 1) every service is completed within the designated timeframe, 2) they communicate any changes that will affect staff members, and 3) there is no increase in labor costs. When "empowered" in this way, employees are more likely to take ownership of decisions and to become more committed to the resulting course of action.

### **Stakeholders Who Will Challenge the Status Quo**

If stakeholders feel their ideas are listened to in an accepting, open environment, they are more likely to recommend creative "out-of-the-box" solutions. In an "emergent change" culture, employees must feel comfortable offering ideas that may run counter to the usual manner in which things are done. If leaders allow such "constructive disagreements," then the workforce will become more creative. Further, employees are more likely to embrace change and be a part of change if they feel they can voice concerns and disagreements.

This idea can be difficult for leaders to implement. The norm in many institutions is that employees do not challenge what management has decided. However, allowing this type of open environment gives employees a sense of ownership in the process and may trigger fresh, creative ideas from those "working in the trenches."

### **Role of the Leader in Creating a "Readiness for Change" Culture**

The role of the leader in creating this type of culture is to initiate and reinforce the three ingredients described above.

First, leaders must create and then support a college campus that is "business literate." This means there must be a willingness to share strategic goals of the institution and department. In our casual observation, we have found many institutions practice almost the opposite. For example, we have found that only a few people at the top really understand the strategic plan.

In our definition, "business literacy" also means that each person understands the impact they can have on the success of the University or College. In our

experience, we find that leaders could do a much better job of helping their employees understand the link between performance on individual jobs and the resulting impact on success measures of the institution.

Creating “business literate” stakeholders requires a leadership group that is committed to sharing information. Sharing information doesn’t necessarily mean classroom instruction. This can be accomplished through many avenues, such as informal conversations carried out by administrators, visits to other departments affected by their work, group discussions, short presentations by departmental leaders, and one-on-one coaching. There are many ways you can educate stakeholders in order to increase their “business literacy.”

Secondly, leaders should support stakeholders in having permission to act. Leaders must learn how to set boundaries and to give people permission to make decisions within those boundaries. We have seen leadership groups succeed at this by having them go through an exercise called “Release of Power” planning. Following this process, leaders list decisions that people lower down in the institution are not making now, but could be making if properly armed. Next, leaders list:

- ◆ The boundaries on decision making that would make them comfortable
- ◆ The measures that would have to be put in to place in order to monitor success
- ◆ Any possible training employees would have to get
- ◆ The information that they would need to start receiving to make these decisions

By going through this planning process, many leaders are able to get more comfortable with providing an environment where various campus stakeholders feel they have permission to act.

Finally, to make this work, we must have leaders who encourage stakeholders to be creative and feel comfortable in challenging the status quo. To help leaders in this area we sometimes pose the following proposition and series of questions: Think about the last time one of your employees approached you to challenge a decision or idea. How did you respond? Did you ignore it? Did you focus on the person while they were speaking, ask pertinent questions, and consider the pros and cons of their idea? If you decided not to implement the idea, did you explain why their idea was not accepted and encourage them to come to you in the future with more ideas? If no one on your staff has come to you with challenges to ideas or the status quo, this may signify that they aren’t comfortable discussing these issues with you. If you are unaware how your employees feel about expressing their opinions and ideas, voicing concerns, and challenging your thoughts, then ASK. What you find out may surprise you.

### Final Thought

One of the most difficult challenges campus leaders face is managing a change initiative. Mark Twain was right: people want progress, but not change.

Establishing a “readiness for change” culture will make your job easier. A “readiness for change” culture means everyone in your institution will not only be more likely to accept change, but also more likely to welcome it and flourish under the changing conditions. While this culture cannot be established overnight, in time and with the proper leadership in place, your institution could experience a vastly dramatic cultural transformation.

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