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Preparing Faculty and Staff for Change

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Pursuing excellence in higher education requires constant and continuous change. In fact, throughout the past few decades the need for the effective change in higher education has not only increased but become more complex. New challenges have surfaced in today's educational, economic, and political environments making it more difficult to strive for and obtain this true excellence. In his book *Pursuing Excellence in Higher Education*, Brent D. Ruben (2004) presents the eight fundamental challenges in higher education today: 1) broadening public appreciation for the work of the academy; 2) better understanding and addressing the needs of workplaces; 3) becoming more effective learning organizations through clarifying goals and evaluating outcomes; 4) integrating organizational assessment, planning, and improvement; 5) enhancing collaboration and community (campus culture); 6) recognizing that everyone in the institution is a teacher and focusing on the student experience; 7) devoting more attention and resources to leadership; and 8) more broadly framing our vision of excellence.

It appears that our most pressing challenges in higher education require individual, departmental, and institutional change initiatives and interventions. Yet, institutional administrators, faculty, and staff, as well as business leaders, legislators, and community members often complain (and sometimes joke) about the insurmountable odds of successfully implementing and maintaining change of any type in higher education. In fact, administrators and staff often blame faculty and legislators for change problems; while faculty members pretty much blame everyone but themselves (I am a faculty member so I can get away with saying this!). However, as many would agree, dwelling on whomever or whatever is to blame does not solve short- or long-term problems.

More than ever before, college and university leaders at every level need to understand the change process. Currently there are hundreds of change theories and models available for use, many of which are excellent for utilization in higher education. For example, at the 2003 AAHE Change Conference in Washington D.C., the change model from John Kotter's book *Leading Change* was highlighted in various presentations, seminars, and roundtable discussions as a framework for effective educational change. Kotter (1996) advocates eight change phases for leading large-scale change efforts: 1) establish a sense of urgency; 2) create a coalition; 3) develop a clear vision; 4) share the vision; 5) empower people to clear obstacles; 6) secure short-term wins; 7) consolidate and keep moving; and 8) anchor the change. Although many models, such as the one just described, are helpful in understanding the entire change process, most do not emphasize the importance of one particular phase of the change process that is often overlooked—preparing employees to be open and ready for change. In education, change is often dictated by budget, policy, accreditation, or procedural mandates and, therefore, forced upon employees who feel they have no choices. Other times administrators make decisions in their conference rooms and send memos describing the changes required. Because of this, consideration is not always given to the preparation of staff and faculty for the change. And, often this type of change is unsuccessful.

From my work with change in higher education, and in talking to administrators from many institutions, I would argue that many educational leaders (e.g., department chairs, deans, vice presidents, presidents) do not understand how to optimally motivate and prepare employees for change. In fact, some just push or drag employees into and through change efforts. Further, when a change initiative has stalled and is not receiving support, some administrators do not have the tools to perform an in-depth analysis to determine what specific readiness issues have actually surfaced. Hence, the purpose of this article is to present an organization development readiness model that will help leaders prepare their faculty and staff for change initiatives (large, small, short-term, and long-term). Thomas G. Cummings and Christopher G. Worley (2005), in their fairly newly edited textbook titled *Organization Development and Change*, define organization development as “a systemwide application and transfer of behavioral science knowledge to the planned development, improvement, and reinforcement of the strategies, structures, and processes that lead to organizational effectiveness” (p. 1). This paper will discuss change within this organization development perspective.

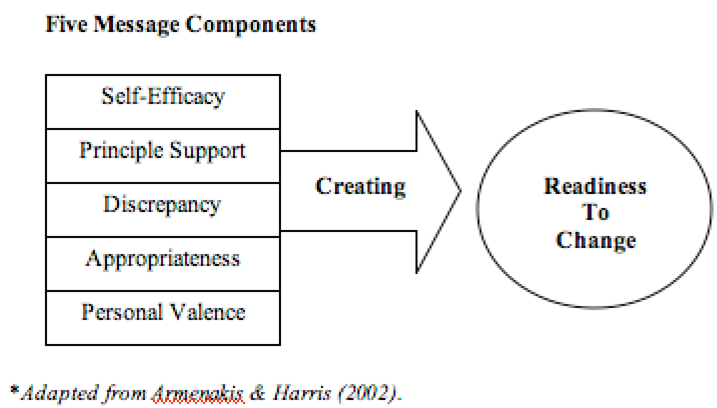
A Readiness Model for Change

One of the most well-known models in organization development was presented by Kurt Lewin (1951) who described organizational change from a metaphorical perspective which included three phases: 1) unfreeze; 2) movement; and 3) refreeze. However, he provided little guidance and depth with regard to the *unfreeze* phase. This phase has been explored in great detail in the health and medical fields with regard to preparing individuals to cease hurtful behaviors and habits (such as smoking and drug use) or start healthful behaviors (such as using sunscreen or starting an exercise regiment). However, Achilles Armenakis and his colleagues (Achilles & Bedeiam, 1999; Achilles & Harris, 2002; Achilles, Harris, & Field, 1999; Achilles, Harris, & Mossholder, 1993) have led the research effort to understand readiness in organizational life. They argued that the answer to readiness issues lies in communication. One of his colleagues, Jeremy Bernerth (2004), described Armenakis’ work in an article in the *Human Resource Development Review*. He described the five message components to help create readiness to change: self-efficacy, principle support, discrepancy, appropriateness, and personal valence (see Figure 1).

Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy, in this framework, is the confidence in oneself, another individual or group, and/or an institution’s ability to make a change effort succeed. There are many questions that might be asked that address this component: Can I make this change? Can we, as a department or institution, really do this? Will this change effort actually work? Do I have the knowledge, skills, and abilities to make the change happen? Does our department or institution have the knowledge, skills, abilities, and resources to make this type of change successfully? For example, one employee stated, “We are being required to move forward as if we *will* receive the funding needed for this type of change. Will our university leadership be able to convince the legislature for this increased funding? Why should I put forth extra time and effort when I have doubts about receiving the needed funding for this project? If faculty and staff have doubts about their own (or the organization’s) ability to successfully make a particular change, they will not be motivated to participate (at least whole-heartedly) in the effort. If it is determined that self-efficacy among faculty or staff is a concern, specific interventions designed to increase it may become necessary.

Figure 1. Readiness to Change Components



One of the major problems in this area is that often administrators will have a thorough vision (big picture) of the need for change and also understand the finer details related to making it happen; however, the vision and details are not effectively transferred to staff and faculty. Sometimes a transfer is not attempted while other times an administration believes the information has been communicated when it has not actually been effectively received. As I often say: "No matter how well you believe a message was delivered, if it was not clearly received and understood, it was not effectively communicated." These problems frequently result in misunderstandings about the effort. Employees will often "guess" about the knowledge, skills, and abilities required as well as the resources available to successfully change. I have often heard the statement, "It will never work!" Importantly, communicating the message is not a one time event. In some situations it takes weeks, months, and even years to ensure that self-efficacy is obtained and maintained.

At one institution, administrators decided that one of its schools would be put into the candidacy for a difficult accreditation. When this was done only a few faculty members had ever participated in scholarly research, writing, and publishing efforts. There were obvious self-efficacy issues during the first year of candidacy and not much progress (individual, departmental, or school-wide) was made. With a new dean and a new aggressive faculty scholarship committee, specific interventions were designed focused on increasing faculty and school self-efficacy. It was determined that faculty who were inexperienced with scholarly research and writing needed a vision, confidence, and short-term successes. Interventions such as seminars and workshops, co-authorships, research teams, scholarly writing courses, and mentoring were designed to increase both ability and motivation. The self-efficacy of individuals and the school as a unit has slowly increased, which can be attributed to these as well as the hiring of new previously published faculty members. However, the most exciting are the successes among some of the most initially resistant faculty members. After his first peer-reviewed conference acceptance, one faculty member said to his unpublished colleague, "If I can do it, you can too. Get moving!"

Principle Support

A second message component essential in creating readiness to change is *principle support.* This message is focused on the support that key organizational leaders give toward particular change efforts. There are a number of questions to consider in determining readiness related to this component: Do administrators believe in this change initiative? If so, do they talk with little action? Do they *do* what they *say* regarding this change initiative? Do my director and/or supervisor believe in it? Are they willing to step forward and support this effort? Will the top administration support this change (short- and long-term) in various ways? Do they support this effort verbally, financially, and with their time and other resources? A general guideline for organization-wide change readiness is that two or more top leaders must support a change effort for it to have a good chance at success. In higher education this would mean that the president and at least one influential vice-president, two vice-presidents, or a powerful dean and a vice-president, for example, must be initially supportive of the change initiative. It is also important to recognize that some of the most influential individuals on campus are not in formal positions. Involving individuals who have a history of "making things happen" is beneficial for change readiness.

I would argue that key support is important at the director, manager, or supervisory levels as well. For example, at one of my presentations on this topic, one staff supervisor shared his readiness dilemma. He explained that many procedures and processes in his work area were not designed effectively and efficiently which resulted in wasted time and energy for nearly every employee in the department. He and his employees redesigned some of these processes and presented them to the department director who immediately took offense. When he and his employees tried to make some of the most obvious and basic changes, the director did everything within her power to disrupt these efforts. Although all of his employees appeared to be open, ready, and willing to participate in the change effort, this supervisor was forced to abandon these change efforts. Even in large scale change efforts, if the top administration is supportive but many middle managers are not, wide-spread success will be difficult. In fact, this is one of the reasons many change efforts in higher education either fail or take so long to implement.

I have seen many change efforts move forward without the appropriate principle support. Unfortunately, most fail immediately or within the first year or so of implementation. It is essential that change initiators have key support from essential stakeholders before the effort is moved forward. Interventions at this point should be designed to obtain this support. Providing these leaders with related educational and training opportunities can be helpful. Lobbying efforts by influential individuals can also be beneficial. It is also important to keep in mind that, for a number of reasons, it may not be the right time for certain initiatives to move forward. Waiting six months or a year can sometimes make a difference in ultimate success or failure.

Discrepancy

A third message component in this readiness model is *discrepancy*. Do the staff and/or faculty see a gap between what is happening (or how things are done) *now* versus what needs to be happening or how things should be done in the future (current state vs. ideal state). There are a number of questions to consider: Why should I (we) change? Do we really need this change? Is there truly a gap? Isn't the way we are doing things just fine? Am I dissatisfied with the way it is? Is it worth the effort to change since it may not really make a difference? Change efforts that move forward without the faculty and staff understanding and belief that there is a gap or a need for the change are destined for resistance and struggles. In this situation, it is important to design interventions focused on communicating the discrepancy. But first, it is important for change agents to insure that the gap is real. I have worked with individuals who are so excited about making a change that they lose sight of the need. I had one colleague who talked to me for a full hour about a proposed change initiative. At the end of the hour I still was not convinced there was a discrepancy (at least wide enough to warrant the change effort). Making change for the sake of making change is not acceptable.

Training and educating staff and faculty about the need for change are some of the most common interventions designed to address this component. However, in higher education this often takes longer than desired. Faculty, in the school previously mentioned, working toward accreditation also struggled with discrepancy. Although the issue had been presented and discussed in multiple meetings, many faculty did not believe there was a discrepancy. Two years after candidacy one faculty member, although initially resistant, began reading current literature for one of his first scholarly papers. A few months into reading and writing he mentioned, very excitedly, that he had read some concepts that triggered ideas related to how he could improve his teaching. He finally had a glimpse of understanding related to the link between scholarly research/writing and teaching. This faculty member was asked to talk about his experiences in a small seminar for his colleagues. After the seminar another faculty member said this link was starting to make sense to her as well. Many administrators believe that a one-time explanation of the discrepancy between the current state and ideal state is enough. I would argue that, as I stated previously, "No matter how well you believe the message was delivered, if it was not clearly received and understood, it was not effectively communicated." Again, change often requires interventions based upon clarifying the gap; ignoring this could destroy a chance for effective change.

Appropriateness

Sometimes faculty and staff understand that the current way of doing things is not working or at least not effective. They know that something must be done, something must be improved. *Appropriateness* is the fourth message component in this framework. This message is based upon the solution that has been designed or chosen to fill the gap. Questions employees may ask include: Why this particular change? Will this specific intervention or solution be what is needed to make the desired change? Will it do the job? Will this proposed solution work? Is this intervention the most appropriate solution for the gap we have determined? We know that we need a change but will this solution be what we need? Do I believe this proposed solution is the correct response to fix the gap or problem? Too often managers and leaders consider a few solutions for a current issue and then make an executive decision about which to use. I would argue that, in this case, this is not an effective way to lead change especially if it affects many employees throughout the organization.

Many colleges and universities across the country are participating in major change initiatives related to software that restructures the entire organizational accounting and reporting systems and processes. Unfortunately, changes in many institutions have been made by one or two administrators after receiving recommendations from an information technology and systems director. In some institutions, the majority of staff employees may agree that their current software is not effective and needs to be changed. However, a decision made by one or two individuals without the consultation of potentially affected employees, breeds additional challenges and chaos. If faculty and staff do not believe that the designed intervention is the best and most appropriate, it will be difficult for them to be motivated (time and energy) and have the desire to change. Resistance to the change effort will most likely emerge. In many situations an in-depth analysis is necessary to determine the customized solution that would work best. This includes talking to (and considering) the ideas and advice of staff and faculty at all levels (including front-line). In many successful change efforts, selected employees from all levels of the organization are put together on a change team. Decisions are made through team processes and are then typically supported by all organizational layers. Since this type of change is more successful long-term, it is recommended.

Personal valence

The final component proposed to help create readiness to change is *personal valence.* This component is concerned about the intrinsic and extrinsic benefits of the change. Many faculty and staff are willing to put forth the extra time and energy toward a change effort if they understand and believe that the benefits outweigh the sacrifice or effort. In analyzing whether or not this is a concern, faculty and staff may ask a wide variety of questions: What's in it for me, my department, and my institution? Is the work required for this change worth the effort to me? Is it worth it for my department or school? How will I benefit from making the change? Will I make more money or receive more financial benefits? Will I get a promotion if the change effort goes well? Will I be appreciated for this extra work? Will I feel good when the project is completed? Is it an opportunity for growth that may result in my personal development? Will I be more respected? Will it make a difference to people I support and want to help (colleagues, students)? Will I earn an all-expense paid vacation? Will I be able to win an award for this work? Does it count toward tenure? Will it help me get an administrative position in the future? Will it help me get a bigger office with a window? Will people thank me for my efforts? Will it give me the experience or recognition to quit my current job and get the one I really want? Will it help me keep (secure) the job I currently have? Will I be able to associate with cool people across campus? Will it help my students get better jobs? Will my efforts make a difference to the community? Will my highly respected director appreciate my efforts? Will my dean and department chair appreciate and acknowledge my efforts and accomplishments? Is it worth learning all of this new stuff or should I retire early? Will I loose my job if I don't participate and support this change?

Faculty and staff will evaluate the pros and cons of the change effort and determine if they feel it is worth their effort and attention. Often employees are left to determine the pros and cons for themselves. Wise change agents and administrators will assist their employees in understanding the benefits of the change efforts at all levels (organization, team, and individual). This may involve such interventions as speeches, presentations, trainings, testimonials, written materials, simulations, contract changes, job description revisions, performance management interviews, or one-on-one conversations. Taking the time and effort to address these issues up front could save years of resistance.

Conclusion

The five message components can be used as a tool to assess individual and organizational change readiness. By using these components, administrators can determine and isolate specific readiness issues and then customize interventions to enhance readiness. These can also be used to investigate stalled efforts for the purpose of understanding and determining problems and challenges that may not have been previously viable. Overall, it is a framework that is helpful in stimulating more in-depth thinking with regard to readiness issues at all levels.

Overcoming Resistance to Change

In addition to creating readiness, overcoming resistance to change is also important to understand and consider. Change can engender deep resistance in individual employees, departments, and organizations as a whole. Heavy resistance can make it nearly impossible to implement improvement efforts. This resistance can come from problems and challenges stemming from elements of the five message components previously presented. Cummings and Worley (2005) explained that most resistance comes from technical, political, or culture issues, and that to overcome resistance, major strategies may include empathy, support, communication, and participation and involvement in the change effort. These strategies, in addition to the five message components and other concepts already discussed, include elements of the first three phases of John Kotter's (1996) *Leading Change* model already listed (i.e., establish a sense of urgency, create a coalition, and develop a clear vision). In fact, elements of most of the changes models overlap. The bottom line is this. Taking the time to understand readiness and resistance is imperative for effective and successful change initiatives.

Conclusion

Our challenge today is to continually strive for excellence in higher education even with decreased funding and increased demand. To do this, educational leadership must learn and understand more about the change process, which includes enhancing readiness while reducing resistance. Failed change efforts waste valuable resources; change must be designed and implemented efficiently and effectively. Taking the time to do it right upfront will actually save time and resources. More can be done; more must be done. If our primarily goal in higher education is to effectively educate our students, then let's become true learning organizations. Let's learn to lead more effectively through effectively motivating and preparing our college and university employees for change.

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