IMPLEMENTING DISRUPTIVE CHANGE
HOW TO ALIGN HIGHER EDUCATION LEADERS

By Phil Strzalka and Kurt Dorschel

In higher education, disruption is essential to innovation, but there are many challenges when transforming an institution. To bring dramatic and sustainable change to fruition, leaders need to take a strategic approach to implementation and collaboration.

As we partner to effect change in higher education, we help institutions find ways to overcome challenges and successfully implement change despite their unique operating environments. Barriers often exist in higher education, including:

- Highly-distributed authority, resulting in difficult decision making

- Institutional leaders who are misaligned with the business case for action and/or definition of success; and

- Designated sponsors or work teams that lack authority to make and implement organization-wide decisions.

In this environment, how can higher education implement disruptive change more effectively? Based on our work with hundreds of institutions, Huron has identified key strategies for progressing critical initiatives forward.

Align Leaders By Establishing Goals, Behaviors and Processes

The desire to move quickly to the hard factors (e.g., efficient structures, project roles, performance measures, incentives and progress monitoring) often leads to unsustainable change with misaligned key stakeholders. Institutions must first align goals and behaviors, then align processes necessary for desired change. Within the overall context of aligned goals, aligned behaviors and aligned processes, we've established five stages with key actions as depicted in the diagram on the next page.

Align Goals: Assess and Monitor Risk

When executed well, an organization's risk and readiness assessment will indicate the possibility of an implementation being successful and what related barriers need to be addressed. The objectives of an organizational risk and readiness assessment are to:

- Identify barriers which must be addressed to increase the likelihood of implementation success;

- Identify opportunities to leverage organizational strengths to increase implementation success rates;

- Capture the pulse of the organization via employees' perceptions related to the organization's readiness;

		STAGE	KEY ACTIONS
ALIGN GOALS	1	Assess and Monitor Risk	• Identify and monitor risks • Implement strategies to mitigate risks
	2	Mobilize and Align Leaders	• Develop a business case for action • Document and communicate the definition of success • Create a guiding coalition of sponsors
ALIGN BEHAVIORS	3	Engage and Communicate the Changes	• Develop clear, targeted and timely messages focused on your "why" • Build awareness and understanding among stakeholder groups (internally and externally) • Create avenues for involvement and feedback
	4	Prepare Your Workforce	• Identify impacts • Determine new competencies and behaviors needed • Equip managers to lead
ALIGN PROCESSES	5	Address Organizational Implications	• Define accountabilities, interfaces and interdependencies • Align performance management goals and rewards • Articulate new roles and responsibilities

• Assess the alignment of leadership orientation and resource deployment for creation of consistent experiences for faculty, leaders and students;

• Determine the effectiveness of the organization's current approach to best practices;

• Identify the degree to which systems and processes hold people accountable for proper execution;

• Provide faculty and staff with a safe channel to provide feedback;

• Foster discussion to establish stakeholder involvement;

• Establish a benchmark for ongoing assessments; and

• Develop a mechanism for providing feedback to senior management which will be used in action review and planning.

The risk and readiness assessment should focus on the following factors:

Structure. The first factor considers the organizational structure, decision-making authority and accountability.

• Is the formal organizational structure conducive to successfully implementing the initiative?

• Do you have an appropriate number of organizational layers to accomplish tasks?

• Have you clearly defined lines of responsibility and authority?

Organizational Stress. Higher education institutions are facing many industry pressures causing them to have to manage many disruptive change initiatives at once. This factor considers ways the organization is prioritizing and communicating how the initiatives align with its strategic and operational priorities and if reprioritization is necessary to successfully implement them.

• Have you clearly prioritized so stakeholders know what's most important to accomplish?

• Can individuals clearly relate initiatives to your organization's vision and strategies?

• Is the organization too distracted to implement successfully?

Sponsorship. Out of all the factors to be considered, sponsorship is the most important. The sponsorship factor considers commitment by leaders.

- Is there a genuine commitment for change, rather than simple compliance among leaders?

- Do managers demonstrate commitment and "own" the changes?

Readiness. A lack of employee readiness poses another risk. To address this risk, an organization should understand different employee points of view by creating an open environment to surface any potential or active resistance.

- Do you understand employees' point of view, and are you addressing it to increase their readiness?

- Have you intentionally created an open environment to surface and address resistance?
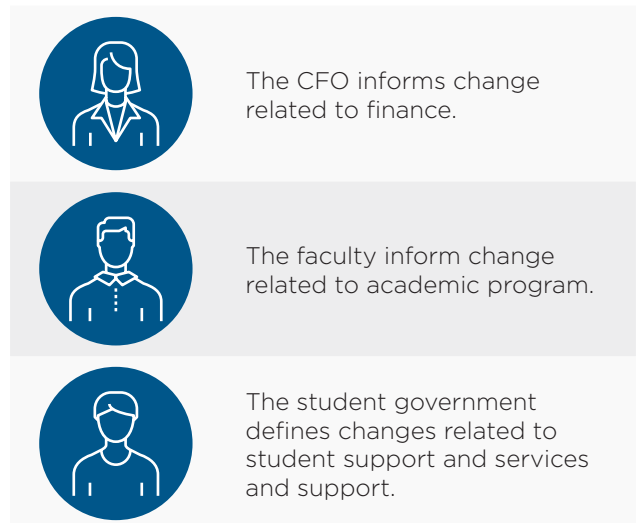
Reinforcement. After sponsorship, reinforcement is the next most important factor. This factor considers whether appropriate resources have been allocated and if the rewards and potential negative consequences for implementation have been aligned.

- Have you provided adequate resources (e.g., time, money and people) for a successful implementation?

- Are the rewards and negative consequences clear for implementation?

Align Goals: Mobilize and Align Leaders

In higher education, competing interests mutually define goals. While an institution may have a large vision or mission related to instruction, research and public service, there are many ways to get there. Even where strategic plans try to refine focus, they often reinforce a level of generality or abstractness. This can lead to change fatigue or anxiety combined with the sense that nothing is really changing or that an individual leader or business unit needs to go it alone.

When financial pressures do become demanding, the so-called "burning platform," commitments to financial performance, educational outcomes and academic rigor shape the definitions of success. Different parties within the university context make decisions related to the various outcomes:

The CFO informs change related to finance.

The faculty inform change related to academic program.

The student government defines changes related to student support and services and support.

A foundational premise of systems theory is that it's impossible to maximize all of these variables at the same time. More colloquially — somebody will be disappointed.

Without making these choices or commitments, however, strategic plans have limited value in accelerating change. Creating a clear, specific definition of the future state is critical, at both the institutional and initiative levels.

That vision of the future state should include both broad outcomes (e.g., student success, academic productivity, public engagement) as well as defined outputs (e.g., programmatic or systems changes) that clearly define — subjectively and objectively — what success looks like. More importantly, it must also establish the sequencing and interdependencies among initiatives.

High-level questions to ask include:

- Have we clearly defined measures of success for individual initiatives and the institution as a whole?

- Are our strategic goals or initiatives competing with one another?

- Have we clearly established priorities?

- Can we realistically link resources to initiatives?

Align Behaviors: Engage and Communicate the Changes

Higher education requires complex outcomes and outputs. Student success and engagement, for example, is the product of faculty, advising, student affairs and health, financial aid, admissions and even physical plant.

Working across functional and organizational boundaries — the proverbial silos — must be embedded in the daily practice of a university. Ad hoc teams are the reality of getting things done. A clear vision and motivated individuals are great to start; empowering your team to work together links the individual to the institution, which is necessary for a successful implementation.

Effective collaboration requires its own type of investment and reinforcement. At the most basic level, teams need access to shared information and resources. Collaboration technology has radically changed the way that teams manage documents, maintain repositories and communicate. Using these tools can overcome tactical obstacles of working together.

Tools alone, however, aren't sufficient. SharePoint or Basecamp on their own don't create a collaborative culture. Teams need coaches and leaders who engage and communicate consistently with the defining implementation success document.

A practice of effective facilitation is one of (i.e. needs of many intitutions) the primary many institutions. Identifying people who have the skills and orientation to bring individuals together and move them to collective action can have a significant impact. These individuals can be embedded within the team or provide outside, consulting support. In either case, they focus on maintaining the balance between "I" and "we."

Finally, a skilled facilitator still requires the commitment of the institution at large. Identifying opportunities to endorse and reward team accomplishments may be a way to overcome some organizational boundaries and reset expectations regarding collective over individual priorities. This approach must still fall within the context of an overall rewards strategy, but the concept follows the premise of reinforcing the type of behavior and attitude needed to move change forward.

High-level questions to ask include:

Can our teams easily share information and ideas across institutional boundaries?
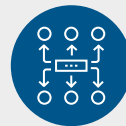
Do we share a single source of information and data?

Are communications consistent and aligned with the "Defining Implementation Success" document?

Are communications customized to an individual's frame of reference?

Do we have resources available (internally or externally) to align teams and model behavior?

Are sponsors aligned in what they say, do and reinforce?

Do we emphasize and reinforce collective action?

Align Behaviors: Prepare Your Workforce

Once an institution has assessed and is monitoring risks associated with the initiative and mobilized and aligned leaders who have communicated the impact of the disruptive change initiatives, it's time to prepare and equip the workforce. This is an area often overlooked as institutions tend not to invest time into understanding the impact to individual roles, which new competencies or behaviors are necessary in the new state and how to move the current workforce to this desired state. As such, institutions can't equip managers with tools to orient employees, so they must design and deliver necessary training "just in time."

The work during this stage is highly dependent on the change initiative being implemented, but effective execution requires supporting capabilities to seamlessly integrate to retain, recruit and develop the workforce.

High-level questions to ask include:

- Do we understand this change's impacts on key stakeholder and their teams?

- Do we need to redefine roles and responsibilities as a result of the change?

- Do we have the right competency or skill set necessary to implement and sustain the change?

- Have we allocated the necessary resources to train our team members?

Align Processes: Address Organizational Implications

The mission and service focus at many colleges and universities is integral to driving engagement. We frequently hear the phrase, "Here, we bleed [insert team color]." This sense of affiliation and institutional commitment may be a strong source of employee engagement. On its own, though, it doesn't provide the focus required to achieve ends purposefully. Without discipline, it can yield proliferations of efforts or projects that nominally support the institution, but actually compete for resources and attention.

The strategic plan charts where the institution is going. That direction should be connected to the day-to-day, week-to-week, and year-to-year focus of individuals. Making this connection is done through talent management practices — in particular, performance management. Much like the strategic planning process, the individual planning process needs to be dynamic and tangible, articulating new roles and responsibilities. Institutions must clearly define and measure outputs and outcomes to define accountabilities, interfaces and interdependencies.

For example, performance management at many institutions is a source of great frustration. Inconsistent, cumbersome practices, combined with limited resources to reward excellence, frustrate managers. Performance management, like strategic planning, needs to be dynamic and may be an organizational consideration as part of the disruptive change initiative(s). Performance engagement (regularly connecting with employees on their goals and alignment with outcomes) is the core of management. Like strategic planning, it's not a separate process, it should be embedded in day-to-day practice.

Also, like the strategic planning process, the institution needs to make material commitments. Reinforcement at the individual level has a much greater impact than pure communication. This reinforcement may take different forms, including the following:

- Well-defined roles and responsibilities
- Appropriate training
- Staffing allocation
- Adequate resources to accomplish goals

In essence, empowering individual success to achieve institutional success by addressing the organizational implications of a disruptive change.

High-level questions to ask include:

- Are we holding leaders and team members accountable for adopting the behaviors necessary to implement and sustain the change?

- Do our policies and practices align with these desired behaviors?

- Do we effectively align our performance management process to the desired outcomes?

Conclusion

Higher education faces unique challenges to implementing disruptive change as institutions often face highly distributed authority, misaligned leadership, and designated sponsors and work teams that lack authority to affect organization-wide changes. As leaders look to move their institutions beyond the status quo, they need to focus on leading through change by aligning goals, then aligning behaviors and, finally, aligning processes. Under this framework, higher education can become mission-driven and more effective at implementing disruptive change.

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