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Presidential Dialogues

TWO

FOCUS ON THE FUTURE

Lessons on Effecting Change

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By

Amit Mrig | President | Academic Impressions

Patrick Sanaghan | President | The Sanaghan Group

In dialogue with:

Ricardo Azziz, Past President, Augusta University (formerly Georgia Regents University, Augusta, GA)

Dennis Holtschneider, President, DePaul University (Chicago, IL)

Robert Johnson, President, Becker College (Worcester, MA)

Nivine Megahed, President, National Louis University (Chicago, IL)

Stephen Trachtenberg, President Emeritus, George Washington University (Washington, D.C.)

Edited by

Daniel Fusch, Director of Research and Publications, Academic Impressions

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It's easier to change the course of history than change a history course.

- Attributed to Zell Miller, former governor of Georgia and chancellor of the University System of Georgia

Getting the Inside Story

Change is here to stay and it will be more complex, ambiguous, and fast paced than ever before (Heifetz, Linsky, & Grashow, 2009). This statement rings especially true in higher education. Many of our institutions are already experiencing seismic shifts and only with varying degrees of success. Presidents are feeling tremendous pressure to significantly reshape their institutions. Boards are increasingly hiring "change agents" from outside the academy. But with or without a mandate, change does not come easily in higher education.

Much of the research on change management tells us that most change efforts fail (Kotter, 2008, 2012; Ewenstein, Smith, & Sologar, 2015; Aguirre & Alpern, 2014; Beer & Nohria, 2000). Why is this? We have many smart, dedicated, and hardworking people throughout our campuses, but still we don't achieve the success we aspire to, given all this effort. In many of Academic Impressions' leadership development programs, the topic about managing change comes up frequently, yet few of us have real answers to why it is so difficult.

We wanted the inside story—how do you manage the people, politics, and process of change? For our second event in our series, **Presidential Dialogues: Focus on the Future**, we wanted to convene a group of presidents who have achieved (but not necessarily mastered) real change efforts on their campuses. Platitudes and pithy quotes don't matter when attempting to achieve difficult and meaningful change, but hard-won lessons and strategies from practitioners can contribute to our knowledge and leverage our efforts.

We wanted to discover what success looks like from a president's viewpoint because both success and failure leave clues. A number of invaluable lessons surfaced in our conversation and in this report, we will share the ten most important. We hope their advice will be useful to you.

What is the secret to change in higher education?

Why is it so difficult?

How can you overcome or manage resistance and how do you successfully partner with faculty toward creating some shared goals for the institution?

These are some of the questions that led us to host our second event in our series, "Presidential Dialogues: Focus on the Future."

10 Lessons on Effecting Change in Higher Education

1. Hunkering Down isn't a Strategy

The first lesson learned in how to effect change in higher education is the importance of taking intelligent action – not just endlessly debating the details, or waiting until "all the data" is in before moving forward. This may sound obvious, but the research is clear that many organizations operate most comfortably in a state of inertia (Senge, 1990; Buller, 2014; Kotter, 2012). Most individuals don't like change and in fact research suggests that the longer something exists in practice, the more valuable it is perceived to be (Kegan & Lahey, 2009). And in higher education, many practices have been around for longer than any one person's tenure.

As one of our presidents noted, "The reason people resist change is simply fear. The devil you know is better than the devil you don't. People will resist change more in higher education; this industry is unaccustomed to change." This remark summarized the experience of most of the presidents in our roundtable conversation.

Long-standing traditions, complicated history, generations of "always doing it this way," and a risk-averse community define the operating environment for presidents in higher education. And yet the presidents in our group were keenly aware of their role and responsibility to initiate action—they knew they had ultimate accountability for the institution and their actions—**or inaction**—set the tone for how the institution would respond to both adversity and opportunity.

Many of our presidents spoke of the challenges that emerged during and after the Great Recession. As one president put it, "a lot of institutions in the recession were adopting the **bunker model**, hunkering down and waiting. We were going to try things. We wanted more of a **startup model** to effect change: fail early and fail often. Make decisions, learn, move forward."

These presidents became more "tolerant of failure" (Farson & Keyes, 2002). "We made decisions knowing we weren't going to have a perfect record," one president noted, "but we wanted to go forward, learn from our actions, and keep moving."

This is a key point—presidents don't have to have all of the answers and certainly can't wait until they think they do. In today's environment with increasing competition, changing demographics, technological disruptions, and shifting public opinion, leaders cannot hunker down and hope that "this too shall pass." It won't. Rapid change is the new normal, and leaders need to have the courage to lead even when there are no clear answers or solutions (Heifetz, Linsky & Grashow, 2009).

2. The President Must See the Horizon, but Cannot be the Only One

Presidents are in a unique position to connect the dots—meetings with local and state governments, interactions with diverse community stakeholders, discussions with corporate leaders who are both investing in the institution and hiring its students, connecting with high-level donors and innovators, and talking with faculty and students—to identify trends and opportunities. New ideas can and do come from inside and outside the institution. The president must be adept at capturing this information, making sense of it, and sharing what they are learning with others.

This is a critical first step in creating a shared picture of what lies ahead for the institution. One president offered an example of how he engaged the campus in these types of honest conversations: "I talked about this notion of 20/20 when I arrived: this idea of having 20 conversations over a 20-day period with faculty & staff in small groups. These went beyond the regular town hall meetings. With those 20 conversations, it was an open format: faculty, staff, and administrators." That president invited diverse stakeholders to share their hopes and fears openly and honestly. Leaders need to create both the opportunity and the trust to have these authentic dialogues."

Engaging others in conversations about the future, conversations that also explore the costs of not acting, are key to building a powerful coalition that can move change initiatives forward.

Unequivocally, all of our presidents stressed the importance of being transparent in these engagements and at all times. A leader must share the truth—both what is going well and what is not going well—with their organizations. There have been numerous incidents in the last few years where institutions have had to make drastic changes—layoffs, severe budget cuts, shuttering of programs, etc.—and most faculty and staff had no idea that the institution was in deep trouble.

To this end, several presidents mentioned the importance of relying on data to combat anecdotes, rumors, and opinions. One president shared: "We are changing the culture from 'I feel it's this way' to a more data-driven one. We created a Business Intelligence unit, and everything is metrics-driven. We started an orientation program for new employees. I go into every one of the orientations and talk about the vision, mission, and culture of the institution, and our commitment to measure what matters."

3. Be a Sacrificial Lion, not Lamb

Presidents can't be afraid of making a tough decision or being decisive—that was stressed repeatedly by our group. In fact, at many points, the presidents realized that if a decision was right for the institution's future, but could put their own future at risk, they must put their own interests aside. This is easier said than done, of course, but this is the difference between being a "sacrificial lamb" and a "sacrificial lion." Presidents must lead with courage and conviction, even when others doubt their intentions and assume the worst. One of our presidents stated eloquently, "There are times as a leader when you do stand alone. You have to have courage."

But being a courageous decision maker isn't just about being tough-minded or willing to risk everything on every decision. Leaders must also be thoughtful and reflective about the possible impacts (many of them unintended) of their decisions, and still be willing to take risks that will move their institutions forward.

Most importantly, presidents must be open to honest feedback about their ideas, initiatives, and proposals. Presidents need to avoid the "seduction of the leader" dynamic (Sanaghan, 2011) in which they are told only what they want to hear, not what they need to hear, because their followers are reluctant to tell it like it is.

Our group spoke openly about some of the most difficult decisions they made. Ultimately, their decisions weren't about ego. One president described what it meant to lead with courage and integrity, as follows:

- **You need to develop expertise and be authoritative.** Put simply, "there is stuff you need to know. But you also need to develop standing, so that your faculty and other stakeholders have a reason to listen to you and respect you."

- **Engage your constituents face-to-face** and share your thinking and your reasoning. "I can't remember a single decision I ever made as president that I couldn't explain."

- **Have "lived" values and make them explicit.**

- **Have a reputation for honesty and being ethical in all matters.** This is essential because it creates the "relational capital" necessary to move people forward.

- **Take the blame** when things go wrong (and they will) and share the credit for successes.

This president recalled a situation in which a key decision went to the faculty senate. "The faculty senate voted no. I wrote back and said, 'Thank you for your counsel, I'm going to do this anyway.' They called me in, and wanted to do a vote of no confidence because they felt I was ignoring them; I said, 'I'm not ignoring you, I've heard your counsel. You all devote yourselves to History and English and Math; I devote my time to this, I may know more about it.'"

College and university presidents serve many stakeholders who often have conflicting interests and positions. One president noted that "you have to be prepared to not necessarily be loved by everyone all the time. New presidents don't always get it: you have to be decisive." Another shared, "I always listen. I set a horizon, I need to make a decision by this point; I will listen until then, then make my decision, and I will tell you why I made the decision I did."

One president had a particularly novel idea on how to instill a culture of decisiveness and action. "We created a 'Get Out of Jail Free' card. We had been an institution where no one made decisions. We need decision makers. We want everyone making the best decision you can for the student. *Do not punt*. Make the best decision you can. If you've taken a thoughtful stance and put the institution's best interests forward, the 'Get Out of Jail Free' card can help move politically-contentious decisions forward."

Leadership is an action, not a position, and campuses across this country are in desperate need of leaders who are willing to act. This starts with the president who, by his or her own actions, can infuse this mindset into the institution's culture. Presidents must go further, however, and help others calculate and take smart risks, and value the lessons derived from both failure and success.

> ### *Examples of Lived Values:*
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> - *As we move forward as an institution, we will be inclusive, but not get lost in endless process.*
>
> - *We will define the decision rules before important decisions are made.*
>
> - *We will explain the rationale behind our decisions.*
>
> - *We will use data to inform our actions where appropriate, but won't get lost in "data safaris."*

4. The Right People Are Critical

The importance of having the right people in the right positions—senior team, middle management, key committees—could not be overstated by our group of presidents. Change theory is clear that leaders cannot do it alone (Senge, 1990; Kotter, 2008, 2012). Lasting change is successful because of the efforts of dozens or hundreds of people, not just one. The president needs to facilitate this process by having the right team around him or her, and must be prepared to make leadership changes if necessary. If people see that the senior team is not aligned with the change effort, they will doubt its likelihood of success.

Advocating for the change, reinforcing the future vision, and reiterating key messages cannot come only from the president. One president noted, "you have to have a lot of people. The president can't be the only messenger. Communication is a network-spreading thing. If you don't have the right team, it won't happen."

Heifetz, Linsky and Grashow (2009) tell us that leaders must build the capacity of others to make the decisions and take the actions needed for successful change. Presidents must realize they play an important but limited role at the institution. One president put it perfectly: "Let go of your pride. At the end of the day, this college is successful because of you, not because of me. I don't register any students; I don't package financial aid; I don't teach the classes. Get the right people and help them be successful."

5. Create an Inspired and Authentic Sense of Urgency

"One of our roles is inspiration. We have to remind people why they're here, what we all believe in, the big idea we're all committed to." This president reminded us that most in higher education are motivated by making a lasting impact on students' lives and on the communities in which we live, and sometimes we can lose sight of this broader and more ennobling mission.

The good news is that higher education is infused with meaning and purpose. We don't have to make things up or generate false feeling. The lived mission and values of every campus create a powerful context for change.

The president plays a critical part in helping others step back and look at the big picture. How might we protect what we hold so dear by changing? The president needs to convey that in order to serve the mission and deliver on its promise, big changes are needed. How might a new initiative or idea help us serve something that is bigger than any of us? If we can create a more powerful and shared vision of the future, it can become easier to see the rationale behind the change.

Presidents should strive to create urgency in ways that also create inspiration—that is the best of both worlds. A common trap leaders fall into is playing to people's fears—what might happen if we don't change? The president needs to talk about these possibilities, but in ways that lift the campus community and move it towards more positive action and towards shared and noble aspirations.

Presidents and other leaders throughout the campus must use the information and data they have gathered to create a case for change (Aguirre & Alpern, 2014; Kotter, 2008), so that stakeholders understand (not like, but understand) the reasons for dramatic change. The rapidly changing demographics, new ideas about mobile content delivery, the role of emerging technologies in the classroom, rising tuition and concerns over affordability: the list of factors driving the need for change is long and must be understood by everyone. People need to be on the same page and need to understand that they can shape their futures, not just wait until forces beyond their control have shaped their futures for them.

6. This is Personal—Leaders have to Engage Nose to Nose

Effective change management is more about EQ than IQ, and presidents ignore this reality at their own peril. The smartest strategy or the most elegant solution will mean nothing without the buy-in and support of the campus community (Sanaghan, 2009; Kotter, 2008; Aguirre & Alpern, 2014).

One of the presidents suggested that "people fear loss, not change." Loss can be deeply personal and subjective and presidents must take the time to understand the concerns of their various stakeholders. Presidents who don't take the time to truly listen, care, and empathize

are likely to ignore key pieces of information. Often, if this engagement is authentic and purposeful, leaders gain important insights and ideas for how to improve their strategy, as well as how to bring their teams along.

One president shared a strategy that worked at their institution: "I started faculty dinners at my home, a mixture from all colleges, 12-15 faculty at a time. I just wanted to connect with them, let them talk with me about what their interests were and what they valued about the institution. After we built rapport, I found they became a lot more talkative. Some conversations became so intense that at the end, they would hug me and cry at the end of the evening. A couple of faculty would say: 'Now we believe you're going to stay.' That made a big difference: those dinners together made me human to them and made them human to me." Building trust and "relational capital," face to face, is key. Leaders can't deliver mandates from forty thousand feet overhead.

Other presidents spoke about listening deeply to their diverse stakeholders and understanding the different perspectives they bring. One president discussed how he scheduled time in between meetings so that he could walk *slowly* through the campus and down the hallways, chatting with people, having informal conversations, building relationships and listening closely to his stakeholders.

7. Remember the 20-60-20 Rule

There is an old adage called 20-60-20 and it is useful when thinking about leading change. 20% of your people will resist you no matter what. 20% will be your cheerleaders and will be ready to move forward. The middle 60% is trying to figure out which group to align with. But as one president cautioned, "the risk is that you could spend 80% of your time trying to convince the bottom 20%, and that isn't going to happen." Instead he suggests, "focus on aligning the middle 60% with the top 20%. Now you have 80% of your institution moving in one direction."

This notion was reiterated in different ways throughout our conversation. One president stated quite pragmatically, "instead of convincing everybody of the need to change, invest in the people who want to build something. Let those people champion the change and invest in it. It doesn't have to be me convincing everyone all the time."

Another agreed, saying, "instead, find the first adopters; invest in them, and let them champion the efforts. These people become your key influencers; they become your advisory groups. They will also give you the pulse of how the campus community is feeling and thinking."

Ewenstein, Smith, & Sologar (2015) and Senge (1990) would concur with these approaches. Forcing change from the top-down rarely works (Senge, 1990; Kotter, 2008). While you cannot convince everyone, you can garner the support of those formal and informal leaders distributed throughout your campus, and have them carry the torch of change with you.

8. Learn to Manage the Drumbeat of Change

As Kotter (2008) tells us, change will always be harder and take longer than you anticipate. Change of any magnitude is more likely to be a marathon than a sprint and that has several important implications for leaders. Presidents who can learn to manage the pace and drumbeat of change are much more likely to see lasting success.

First, presidents should work with their constituents to break larger goals into smaller chunks—what can be realistically accomplished in X period of time? One president's working philosophy is to communicate that "change is coming; every 90 days, something was going to change. In the second 90 days, we built on that change. The next 90, on and on. If you want to be entrenched, you won't last. Change is coming."

A key to engaging faculty and staff is to provide a credible and visible timeline. You don't want to spend a year just debating the process you want to follow. One president said, "I'm giving you the opportunity to contribute to this plan; I need your contribution by the end of the month. Manage the pace. Manage the drum beat. That's critical to being a change agent."

Another noted, "Get the people and organization ready for the change. Allow that 60% in the middle to have time to grieve, and set a due date. As of X date, we move forward, and you're either on board, or not. We'll listen to input for X number of days, then we'll move forward."

Equally important is to make progress visible and to celebrate it: "We said change was coming; we did change, and it worked. Let's celebrate that."

9. Faculty are not the Biggest Resisters

Perhaps counterintuitively to some, our presidents were quick to point out that faculty are not often the biggest resisters. As one stated emphatically, "Let's not make the mistake of characterizing faculty as 'poor little dears.' There is great strength in faculty; they have skill sets we need to draw on."

One reminded us, "faculty have been trained for thousands of years to resist and to reinterpret the data you offer. You have to provide a narrative, an interpretation, with the data—not just the data itself. Explain *why*."

Change often falters at the implementation stage (Bungay, 2010), and often it is actually the staff of the institution that presents the biggest obstacle, not the faculty. One president shared this anecdote: "I thought our faculty would be our big resistance. It was actually everyone else. Faculty watched cynically from a distance, but it was actually the other functional areas that were resisting: the registrar saying 'we can't operate like this' or financial aid saying, 'we can't package if we work like this.' I said, 'Look in the mirror; you keep talking about how faculty don't get things done, but you have become the people who tell us all the bureaucratic reasons a thing can't be done.'"

Authentic faculty engagement and participation is essential to success when it comes to meaningful, lasting change. Involve them in shaping the change effort, informing the direction, and providing feedback. Faculty can be both an ally and a strategic asset, and it is important to approach them as such.

10. You Cannot Effect Change without the Board's Full Backing

Presidential leadership is critical for effecting sweeping change, but will be short-lived "if the board is not on board." The supervisory board must provide full backing to the president, especially for large-scale change.

One president noted, "The role of the board is critical. The board backed me. If the board doesn't back you, you're in the wrong position to effect change." With change, there is inherent risk, and that risk-taking must be visibly supported by the board. Therefore, your board needs to be educated about the what and the why of the change effort, so they can commit wholeheartedly to it.

When the board realizes that the change effort will likely create resistance, fear, confusion, and disgruntled stakeholders, they can provide real support to the president as he/she leads that effort. If that support is lukewarm, or if the board is divided in their support, that will be noticed quickly, especially by the disgruntled who will see this as an opening to dislodge or sabotage the change process.

The president needs to "line up the votes" before moving forward by communicating the case for change openly and honestly to the board, so that they can stand with the president as they move the institution forward. Half-hearted support from the board will derail a change effort swiftly.

Conclusion

There is no magical formula for implementing change in higher education. Context matters. Leadership matters. Our leaders understood the importance of their role—both the power and limits of their offices. They knew instinctually the importance of working with others. Their success was going to be based first and foremost on their relationships. They knew if their people didn't trust them, they couldn't lead much less effect any meaningful change. They built personal and organizational trust and they did this by taking the time to cultivate meaningful relationships throughout the campus.

These presidents were also motivated to ensure their institutions were on a path towards sustainability. The changes they led and continue to lead were not about themselves or their egos. They had the long view—the long-term value of their work would by far outweigh the short-term costs. They were stewards of important institutions but they knew the only way to carry out this responsibility was to make tough decisions. Being steadfast about the long game was critical to their courageous leadership.

Finally, our presidents were well-schooled in the tactics of leadership and change. They knew how to build effective teams, on whom to lean and when, the importance of timelines, how to work with the board, and how to leverage their office. They knew change management is about learning as you lead. There aren't clear paths forward and no best practice models from which to copy; they surrounded themselves with the right people, encouraged openness and honest feedback, and learned from what worked and what didn't. Most importantly they led, and continue to lead, with conviction and purpose. We can't think of a better formula for effective positive change in higher education.

One Thing to Focus On: Advice for Presidents

It can be daunting to take all this in: there is a lot of complexity involved in effecting meaningful change at a post-secondary institution, and a lot of nuances to consider. And we recognize that you can't do everything.

We asked the five presidents who joined us for the second of our Presidential Dialogues to each offer one critical thing to focus on. If they were each to suggest one piece of advice that every president who is committed to effecting change should take to heart, what would they say?

The following pages present their advice.

Ricardo Azziz, Past President, Augusta University (formerly Georgia Regents University, Augusta, GA)

Get the right leaders. I can't over-emphasize this. The right leaders during a time of change are not the same as the right leaders at other times. You need the right leaders who can embrace, manage and lead change. Provide air cover and development opportunities for those leaders, once you've recruited them. And be prepared to take the hit for them so they can get the work done.

Dennis Holtschneider, President, DePaul University (Chicago, IL)

I'd warn new presidents about the rut. You might think that becoming a great university means raising the SAT standards of your entering class or shifting faculty time toward research; that's the rut everyone falls into. Your faculty, and perhaps even your trustees may think that is the route to go, but it's not enough. Focus on what new fields are emerging; on the exciting new ways students can learn; partner with non-academic institutions. Create new paths, don't follow the old one.

Robert Johnson, President, Becker College (Worcester, MA)

That relational capital is so important. I'm on campus and have meetings in the other person's office when I can. I make sure my assistant gives me at least 20 min between meetings; I leave that meeting on time, but then I wander around, say hi to people, look in on a class, sit and talk with a student, bump into a faculty member in the hallway. Once a week, I schedule time where all I do is walk around and engage faculty and staff, sit down in the registrar's office, stop and talk to faculty. I find out more with that informal conversation than I ever learn in calling a formal meeting. It's about forming relationships and listening.

Nivine Megahed, President, National Louis University (Chicago, IL)

During my darkest hours in leadership, what sustained me was reminding myself that as president, I was responsible for the long view. What I manage day to day is in service to the long view. I can sustain any onslaught of criticism if I stay focused on the long view.

Steven Trachtenberg, President Emeritus, George Washington University (Washington, D.C.)

Goodwill is a form of currency. Just as you want to have cash reserves, you want to have goodwill reserves. For my first year as president, I went to church every Sunday; they were black churches. When we had racial incidents on campus, I had clergy willing to stand with me when I went to address student associations and other stakeholders. To this day, people who saw me in church come up and say hello. I gave them my cards because GW is of Washington, not just in Washington.

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