

Managing Change

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Institutional change is inevitable and controversial, requiring careful management to achieve peacefully. Several elements contribute to smooth transitions:

Preparing the Environment: Since change is inevitable, a leader can prepare the institution in the present for change that will happen in the future. Communication with all segments of the organization on a regular basis develops personal relationships between the organization's leaders and various student, employee and community groups. Clear communication about core missions and strategic goals forms a common bond across the institution about priorities and the importance of each organizational constituency in the development of these priorities. At the University of Nevada, Reno, the President and vice presidents meet monthly with leadership representing students, classified employees, faculty, and less frequently with Alumni and Foundation Boards. Regular communication builds awareness and trust.

Core Missions: All change should clearly tie to core missions. With broad understanding of core missions, developed through continuous communication, proposals for change tied to core missions will appear appropriate, logical, and reasoned. If proposals for change are not tied to core missions, the changes appear personal, emotional, and competitive with support for core missions. At the University of Nevada, Reno all proposals are judged against student success, research development and community engagement.

Transparency, Justification and Data: Proposals for change can be generated by any internal or external group. Each proposal should clearly state the purpose tied to core missions, how an action likely will lead to goal fulfillment, the personnel and financial cost of the actions, and the timeline for the change. All of these elements should be discussed at the regular meetings of institutional constituent groups, if time is available, to seek understanding and support. At the University of Nevada, Reno, during the recession of 2008-11, three rounds of significant state funding cuts, totaling 35 percent, created a critical need to curtail programs. The financial crisis was explained to all constituent groups in terms of magnitude and options for addressing the challenge. A set of criteria was developed with which to judge how each unit was contributing to core missions, e.g., student credit-hours delivered, number of graduates, magnitude of research, and national reputation, and data were shared across the organization. With the application of criteria and open sharing of data, the decisions to close units were painful, but transparent and well understood.

Sensitivity: Acceptance of change has a broad spectrum from elation to a sense of loss. E-mail is not sensitive. Personal, direct contact with individuals and groups affected by change is essential. Explanations can be provided in a conversational setting where questions can be asked about "why" the change is necessary and "what next steps" will occur. Identification of mentoring and counseling services can be provided for those suffering the greatest sense of loss and university policies of appeal and grievance can be delivered as part of a sensitive conversation. At the University of Nevada, Reno, during the recession, the Provost went to each unit in a meeting to personally announce cuts which had to be made. The rationale, based on accepted criteria and data, were explained and conversations

ensued on the “why” and “what next” questions, along with counseling resources and appeal procedures.

Implementation: Implementation of change continues through time with transparent communication about details of steps taken to fulfill the actions promised. Even with difficult changes, people learn to trust that changes are appropriate and that promises are kept and applied in a compassionate manner. At the University of Nevada, Reno, the financial crisis was addressed, many programs and positions were lost, but the institution emerged with significant cohesion and momentum, and continues to achieve stretch goals for each of its missions.