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The Leader as Change Agent

The Power of Purpose, Passion, and Perseverance

By Barbara Kaufman, Ph.D.

The role of change agent is only one in a leader's constellation of roles, but in today's competitive global environment of dwindling resources, competing priorities and increased demand for higher education, it's a highly critical one. If universities are to survive and keep pace with the rising importance of higher education to economic viability, their leaders must be willing to overcome the human desire to maintain a sense of equilibrium. They must take the risk of embracing a bold vision that challenges the status quo of cherished assumptions regarding mission, academic programs, fundraising strategies and community relations.

Mastering the art of being a change agent takes purpose, passion and perseverance -- but it is not rocket science.

The first step is to become a student of change. Identify one or two role models who have successfully tackled change, and learn from their accomplishments as well as their near misses.

BELIEVING IN THE IMPOSSIBLE

Two change agents whose bold initiatives are currently transforming their institutions are Molly Broad, president of the University of North Carolina, and Alexander Gonzalez, president of California State University, Sacramento.

Gonzalez came to CSUS in 2003 as its first new president in 19 years, inheriting a status quo culture. "The campus had lost its momentum, and people had become somewhat complacent," says Gonzalez. One of his first steps was to enhance the university's profile and create the vision of a flagship campus appropriate to its location in the state's capital.

Gonzalez proceeded to develop a new physical master plan for more efficient and attractive campus layout. "The new layout recognizes the campus' potential, including an increase in student housing from 1,100 to 5,000 beds. This will dramatically change the campus from a primarily commuter to residential institution, fostering a stronger sense of community," say Gonzalez.

His master plan further anticipates enrollment growth

from 28,600 students to 33,000 by 2010. A new athletics complex and a branch campus in Placer County are also in the developmental stages.

Gonzalez is moving ahead with his ambitious plans, called "Destination 2010," despite a \$14 billion-plus state deficit and severe funding cuts. He is aggressively pursuing private funding as well as state bonds. "When times are difficult and the regular course of operations is threatened, people are more willing to think of new ways of doing things and plan for the future. It's actually a great time to propose change and innovation. When long-term goals and the positives are stressed and the steps to achieving success are clear, people are more willing to buy in." (For more details about Gonzalez' change initiatives, refer to the article "CSUS President has Grand Plans for the Future" in the February 2004 edition of *Comstock's Business* magazine, *California's Capital Region*.) "The challenge of a change agent is to promote buy-in on the part of the people who create organizational capacity for change, in other words, to move them from a state of disbelief to belief in what is possible," says UNC President Molly Broad, referring to her successful \$3 billion bond campaign.

When she originally proposed the measure in 2000, the reaction on the part of the chancellors was utter disbelief. The largest bond previously passed had been \$300 million. "I was neither fearful nor entrapped by the culture," Broad recalls. "We had done our analytical homework, and it was comprehensive and impeccable. We showed how public investment in the university had failed to keep pace with the demand for higher education and its importance to the state's economic viability.

The backlog of deferred repair and renovation needs for nearly 800 buildings, particularly science and technology labs, coupled with new construction needed to accommodate an expected enrollment growth of 48,000 students, was estimated at \$7 billion over the next decade."

Undeterred when the bill failed in the first effort, Broad asked for a legislative study to examine her case. A commission examined classrooms, labs and residence halls,

which were in a state of disrepair. “There was a big risk in exposing the underbelly of the institution,” says Broad. “UNCTV played a video dozens of times showing how bad our labs were. Members of the commission interviewed a young professor who burst into tears over the unsafe conditions in her freshman chemistry lab.” In the end, taking the risk of capturing these images for the public, along with Broad’s passion and perseverance, spelled success. Even though it doubled the state’s cumulative debt, three out of four voters in all 100 counties passed the bond measure.

OPPORTUNITIES, NOT OBSTACLES

What can be learned from these role models? Let’s review their successful attitudes and actions:

- *A demonstrated confidence in a vision and the passion to carry it through.* Both Broad and Gonzalez believed they could achieve the unachievable. They were willing to take the risk of articulating a bold vision and focused on what was possible. “In these times of dwindling resources and support, it’s critical to see problems as opportunities rather than obstacles,” Gonzalez says. Broad’s perspective is remarkably similar. “Every hill on the horizon is just one more hill, not an insurmountable mountain,” she says. “I was passionate about the outcomes of a successful bond campaign. I have great perseverance. I’ve learned a leader has to be a marathoner.”
- *Inclusive leadership;* a willingness to engage diverse constituent groups. Having a vision is not enough. If it is not articulated in ways that resonate for and mobilize followers and supporters, buy-in will remain an elusive goal among entrenched agendas and positions. Gonzalez was creative and savvy in finding something in his vision for everyone, from new athletics facilities to an arts center. Broad had a wellspring of support from students and faculty who rallied voters in community settings such as local grocery stores.
- *Using influence more than position power.* A change agent is someone who is willing to engage detractors, not just natural followers. Successful change agents are always superb storytellers who can capture the minds and hearts of others through visions that shape the future in compelling ways. A would-be change agent who cannot tell a compelling story is often left with a dream that never becomes a reality and with an erosion of trust and support as a leader. For even greater impact, successful storytellers do not just tell; they show. Both Broad and Gonzalez used visual media extensively to drive their messages home. For Broad, the repetitive showing of the UNCTV video was a significant factor of success. At CSU, Gonzalez took to the road with a compelling video of “Destination 2010” to rally both the internal and external community.
- *Skill in overcoming cultural obstacles.* Resistance to specific changes or to the pace of change can be expected from long-tenured players who may be “retired on the job” or invested in the status quo. The first step for change agents new to their institutions, according to Gonzalez, is to do the homework and size

up the challenge carefully to avoid drawing faulty conclusions. “Learning about relationships among people and how they operate and interact are extremely important,” he says. “Only then can you move forward and impose your own views.”

How can leaders who are not yet comfortable as change agents develop in this role? Start with simple initiatives on a day-to-day basis, whether it’s questioning the sustainability of a program and offering alternatives, leading the review of an outdated policy through a process that involves seeking the input of diverse constituents, or suggesting the purposeful abandonment of reports that have outlived their usefulness. Begin by taking small risks and gradually build up to larger ones. Don’t forget to celebrate successes along the way and to document learning from failures and near-misses.

THE POWER TO TRANSFORM

Change agents are strategic thinkers with a vision that is shared across the institution. They are fearless but pragmatic risk-takers who can envision success. They are proficient storytellers and experts at managing complex problems and conflict among potential supporters.

But none of these skills will lead to success unless grounded in a passion for the end goal, and the ability to sustain a marathon through the challenges and setbacks inherent in bold visions. Higher education cannot transform itself to meet the challenges of the new millennium without this passion and perseverance on the part of its leaders.

Related Information

Don’t Go It Alone

The three biggest mistakes leaders make in trying to implement change are:

1. *Lone Ranger Behavior.* James O’Toole said in his book *Leading Change: Overcoming the Ideology of Comfort and the Tyranny of Custom* (page 37): “Leaders fail when they have an inappropriate attitude and philosophy about the relationship between themselves and their followers. Those who do not respect and trust their followers cannot lead them.”
2. *Underestimating the Level of Resistance to Change.* Intellectual arrogance may have a leader insisting that his or her way is best despite a groundswell of resistance. Respect followers, capture their imagination, value their opinions and involve them in the process of change.
3. *Underestimating Cherished Values or Programs.* Reach out to everyone, including detractors, with stories that resonate for them. Different constituent groups may call for different stories.

Barbara Kaufman, Ph.D. is President of ROI Consulting Group, Inc. (www.roiconsultinggroup.com). An executive coach and educator, she specializes in leadership effectiveness and organizational development strategies for private and public sector leadership teams. She can be reached at drbarbkaufman@earthlink.net