BOOK REVIEW

Change Leadership in Higher Education: A Practical Guide to Academic Transformation

By Jeffrey L. Buller
Jossey-Bass, 2015

REVIEWED BY:
SHEILA T. LISCHWE
Clemson University

ABSTRACT
Research administrators are masters at adapting to change. We continually adjust operations to accommodate new regulations, electronic systems and application formats. This book challenges traditional thoughts on managing change and urges administrators to create environments in which stakeholders are comfortable with change and innovation. Case studies and exercises provide readers with practical tools to tackle the most common causes of change resistance.

Clemson University is immersed in change. A new president and provost are engaging the campus community in fresh dialogue, refocusing the existing strategic plan to heighten emphasis on research. An ambitious reconfiguration of the college structure will realign departments and their support systems in new ways, dismantling identities and forming new power relationships. These changes promise to significantly alter the current business model for the Office of Sponsored Programs, so I am making room in my professional library for Buller’s 2015 book, Change leadership in higher education: A practical guide to academic transformation.

In the past eight years, I have overseen two major office-restructuring efforts so the
change management literature is familiar to me, but two words in Buller’s title caught my seasoned eye: leadership and practical. We often think change is something that happens to us, and we must “get through it”. Leading rather than managing change promotes the idea that foreseeing circumstances and responding proactively provides an inherent level of control, thus making changes to the status quo less threatening and facilitating their successful implementation. Leading change also presents opportunities to address unrelated but troublesome operational issues that would otherwise disrupt the current flow of business if tackled separately. Innovation-friendly organizational cultures facilitate this “leading change” approach, so Buller lays out techniques to foster innovative environments. The approach is practical in that a plentiful collection of instructive exercises and case studies supplement Buller’s recommendations, providing resources for administrators needing to prepare faculty and staff for both major and minor alterations in standard business practices.

First and foremost, Buller argues that we are managing change all wrong. He jarringly asserts that traditional strategic planning techniques are inappropriate for the dynamic, organic higher education environment. SWOT analysis rarely raises the leviathan issues that lurk below the surface and drag down attempts at progress. Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) hold us to such laser-focused insularity that we miss chances for greatness when unanticipated events arise. Strategic planning limits us to one grand outcome that must politically appease all, resulting in mission statements that are bland and unmotivating. Finally, outcomes-focused strategic planning promotes “mission creep”. It isn’t satisfied with improving the status quo: strategic planning seeks grand identity change.

Instead, Buller advocates adopting a “strategic compass” and scenario-based planning as less prescriptive approaches that provide directional guidance while allowing institutions to opportunistically veer off course or nimbly change direction when rough waters approach. A “strategic compass” asks the following questions: What do we do best? What do our strengths tell us about who we are and where we should direct our resources? Answering these questions highlights an institution’s true distinction, revealing an identity around which faculty, staff, and students can rally and to which they contribute. In scenario-based planning, best-case, worst-case, and most-likely case scenarios provide room for adaptation as circumstances change. Detailed case studies illustrate each approach, and complex exercises challenge the reader to apply these new concepts in meaningful ways. The discussion that
follows each exercise is thorough and insightful.

Other chapters pose new and interesting questions. How can we reframe change so stakeholders focus more on how they will gain from doing things differently and less on what they fear losing? What are the differences in leading change reactively or proactively? What are the implications of different change management styles: Renovator, Borrower, Combiner, Planner, or Re-Definer?

Buller evaluates four models for assessing the potential impact of a particular change, each from a different vantage point. The Four-Frame Model considers impacts on organizational structure, human resources, internal politics, and institutional traditions. Six Thinking Hats employs a color-coded scheme that may be used to gauge impacts from an optimistic or pessimistic viewpoint, as does the Ten Analytical Lenses model. STEEPLED Analysis considers forces that drive change that are social, technological, economic, ecological, political, legislative, ethical, or demographic in origin. All offer worthwhile perspectives, despite the Seuss-like mnemonics.

Messaging—the language used to communicate change—is critical. Expressing change as the natural progression from one state to another soothes fears of hidden agendas and loss of influence that are common causes of resistance. Leaders are advised to take special care in explaining why change is necessary, so stakeholders have a crystal-clear understanding of the underlying problem. A list of “innovation midwives”—phrases designed to counter “innovation killers”—is yet another example of the practical tools provided to readers of this book. To the oft-heard “we’ve tried that before, and it won’t work,” leaders are encouraged to say, “Before we make a final decision, let’s review all of our options.”

Chapter 6, “Creating a culture of innovation,” is chock-full of even more specific tactics for combating change resisters that readers can put to immediate use. “Lateral Thinking” challenges us to see something from a different angle—to question our underlying assumptions. How do we maximize the return on brainstorming sessions that produce realistic ideas? What steps can help prevent one dominant individual from hijacking the process, through either voice or rank? Most importantly, we learn how lessons from the chapter’s exercises can lead to a long-term growth mind-set easily transferable to our day-to-day work lives.

Change leadership in higher education: A practical guide to academic transformation inspires new ways to think about change and offers practical tools for cultivating an environment that embraces change and innovation. References throughout the book are current and from varied sources—both
peer-reviewed academic journals and popular literature. The advice offered is equally relevant for change on a grand, sweeping institutional scale or in smaller, unit-based settings when we adjust processes, policies, SOPs, and organizational structures to improve operations. It is certain to become a well-worn, dog-eared reference book that I keep within close and easy reach in the coming months.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sheila T. Lischwe is the Director of the Office of Sponsored Programs at Clemson University, where she oversees pre-award services. In the past year, Dr. Lischwe represented the Division of Research on the Clemson 2020 Forward Strategic Planning Committee, co-chairing the Research Administration and Support Subcommittee. She earned a doctorate in Higher Education Administration and an MA in Urban Affairs from Saint Louis University, an MBA from Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville, and a Bachelor’s degree from Saint Bonaventure University.