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Change management champion Brent Ruben advises on how to steer your institution in a new direction.

**By Susan Jurow**

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** The times may be a-changin', but how do you get people and institutions to move along with them? Many higher education administrators talk about change initiatives, but when it comes time to move the institution forward, the reality proves more challenging. Brent Ruben can attest to that. As a professor at Rutgers University, New Jersey, and the executive director of its Center for Organizational Development and Leadership, Ruben has spent years observing and writing about change dynamics on campus. His findings fuel the NACUBO workshop Ruben leads: Baldrige Goes to College: Organizational Assessment, Performance Measurement, and Action Planning.

As technological advances, savvier students, and new vehicles for education delivery all push the pace of and need for innovation, change management is more critical than ever. In an interview with Susan Jurow, NACUBO's senior vice president of professional development and communications, Ruben shares insights about steps you can take to shepherd change and promote a campus environment that welcomes new ideas.

**The rate of change continues to accelerate. What kinds of change initiatives are you seeing on campus, and how are they different from what was occurring 15 to 20 years ago?**

When we think about change and change management, typically we think of major organizationwide initiatives. The changes that are most often discussed revolve around the broader technological and mission issues. When people talk about change management, what probably come to mind first are the classics like the introduction of an ERP system or a new database. But change is happening fast and furiously at all levels and in all areas. I've been struck by the fact that even the little changes—such as deciding to purchase new furniture and refit a conference room—prompt many issues for consideration. Other changes that are taking place deal with strategic issues, such as mission redefinition or refocusing. Typically these initiatives grow out of the recognition that it's not possible for every department within the university or for every institution to be all things to all constituencies. A decision to clarify or revise an organization's mission or vision, in turn, leads to a host of changes.

Another area where change is prevalent is in the push today to be more service-oriented. The core mission of institutions revolves around lifelong learning. We've become more aware that we don't want dissatisfied students. We want people to like learning, like our institutions, and to return to them for the rest of their lives. These factors create more of an interest in service.

There is certainly an element of altruism—a growing realization that we haven't always been as concerned about the way our academic and educational support services are received by users. Traditionally, we've tended to focus on how we like to organize our institutions for the convenience of faculty and staff. There's been an increasing understanding in recent years that you have to look at services from the user's perspective. The various departments of an institution may all be working well in their own silos, yet a student's experiences can be fragmented, confusing, and disorienting because all the different services aren't well integrated and attuned to the needs and expectations of users.

**What else has driven the stronger focus on service?**

Undoubtedly, much of the impetus for being service-oriented has its origin in marketplace forces. There's a recognition that in the increasingly competitive environment in which colleges and universities operate, students, donors, and key stakeholders have choices about what institution to

favor. This results in the practical need to capture an appropriate market share in part by creating or maintaining an image that translates into applications, attendance, donor dollars, or research funding. Whether it's the smallest of efforts—responding in a timely way to phone calls or inquiries from students or parents—or the larger initiatives—such as trying to create one-stop shopping for student services or creating environments that are more physically friendly—all have implications for change management.

**Some of these changes in higher education can be seen as reflections of the experiences that people are having in other arenas. We want to bring the Amazon or the Nordstrom experience into our institutions.**

Absolutely, those are two good examples. Another apt comparison is the Disney experience. Disney's core business is very different than ours—call it the mass delivery of entertainment. We're involved in the mass production and delivery of educational experiences. The business is different, but many of the processes are similar. How you handle large numbers of people, how you handle waiting in a congenial way, how you make sure that staff at all levels are courteous and kind, and how you create an environment that's welcoming...Disney has been really good at this for a long time. Increasingly we're recognizing that we can learn from these kinds of organizations and that we have to because the standard people are bringing to their educational experience is based on what's happening elsewhere.

Another analogy is health care. When you look at things from the patients' point of view, the various units and specialties in a hospital or a health care facility aren't always well organized to meet patients' needs and expectations. In all institutions, the service theme is becoming a huge motivator for reflection. It has the potential to be a major driver for change, whether it's to make Web sites more like Amazon.com, libraries more like Barnes and Noble bookstores, or the experience of waiting more like Disney. They are all aimed at serving our students, donors, parents, and other constituents in a better way.

**It's difficult to implement change initiatives quickly. What do you see as the major obstacles to change? What keeps people and institutions from managing it successfully?**

Certainly resources come to mind first. You've got to have ample resources in terms of dollars and technology and people to make it happen. What's less obvious is that ultimately what may be more important are leadership skills and awareness, communication, planning, and cultural sensitivity. With technological changes, financial resources are critical, and we tend to devote a good deal of attention to making sure these needs are met. But effective change also requires attention to leadership, communication, and culture, and all too often these issues do not get the focus that they should in the planning and implementation process.

**Is higher education getting any better at managing change?**

I think there's been progress, but there is still a long way to go. It's easy to identify the importance of resources and technical issues, and it's easy to underestimate the significance of leadership, communication, planning, and cultural issues. In some cases we assume that we're all so adept at these processes that they won't be a problem. These days I don't think we hear many of the legendary nightmare stories about ERP introductions that we heard when they were first introduced 10 or 15 years ago with incredible cost overruns and systems that didn't work as advertised. So while we have overcome a lot of technical problems, my sense is that with technological and other kinds of changes, many of the impediments of leadership, communication, planning, and culture do continue.

We see evidence of the problem when new systems or processes "work" but are resisted or reluctantly adopted by faculty and staff. We also see evidence of inattention to leadership, communication, and cultural issues in the amount of time it takes to make and institutionalize change. Another manifestation of the difficulty is what happens when the leader who is the initiator of change leaves—and the whole array of changes begin to cascade back to where they started. In such instances, it becomes clear that change was only in place by virtue of force of personality and was never integrated into the culture through skillful leadership and communication.

One of the things that can help the change process is having as part of your vision a concept of what

an outstanding organization ought to look like. That's where something like the Baldrige approach is very helpful. If you can clarify the roles of leadership, planning, and organizational climate and help your institution articulate the outcome it seeks, you are more likely to succeed in embedding the change in the culture. In addition, you must define effectiveness measures that can be compared among institutions.

**You put culture at the heart of the change leadership process. How do you define culture, and what makes it so vital to change?**

Many elements of an organization's culture are intangible, but they become the critical factors during change efforts. A traditional definition of culture would include the standard business practices and the rules and procedures of an organization, some of which are written but most of which are just embedded in the way people have come to operate. These intangibles are the kinds of things that are revealed to a new employee in the form of anecdotes, stories of people who were fired because of this or that, who was rewarded and why. When you listen to these classic stories within any organization, they reveal the values, norms, and do's and don'ts about how to behave.

I've found that culture in many institutions is far more influential than a leader can be. Leaders come and go, and oftentimes the cultures are more effective at transforming the leaders than vice versa. It's these largely tacit, somewhat invisible ways that the system works that have to be considered carefully before you engage in change initiatives. Changes have to be introduced in a way that's cognizant of cultural realities. The difficulty is that many times what you want to change is the cultural reality. That's when a leader's ability to assess a particular culture and an individual's communication skills is most critical.

Here's an example. Suppose a new leader, either an administrator or an academic, decides that he or she wants the institution to become more service-oriented. One of the things that person discovers is that several units on campus aren't open over the noon hour, or they're not open in the evenings, even though the campus has many students taking evening courses. If you were running a car dealership, you would be open when the customers are there. It would seem logical that the institution needs to be open over the noon hour and at night, but that's a much easier change to make at a car dealership than it is at a university. In addition to union issues that could confront the new cultural realities you want, there are other issues. For example, when you push down to the department level, you see that secretaries are used to going out with each other at the noon hour. They don't want to give that up. People are used to going home when they want to go home, so the idea of more flexible scheduling is not appealing. While it might be easy to figure out the change that's needed, and it would be tempting to mandate it, there are many situations where these sort of subtle realities and operating principles get in the way. You have to pay special attention to how you roll out potential changes so they align as best they can with the culture.

**How do leaders effect a change when cultural issues are at the heart of the problem that they're trying to solve?**

First of all, it is important to assess the readiness of the culture. You need a realistic read on the extent to which what you want to happen is going to be consistent with or is going to confront the core issues of the culture.

Second is to understand what has made the culture the way it is. How has it evolved? What do people value? What are the keys to their way of thinking and behaving? If you understand that, you can find ways to demonstrate how the changes you have in mind address their needs in a slightly different way. If you don't know what drives the behaviors and the values, then you won't have an opportunity to communicate effectively to make your case.

Communication is the third key. In assessing readiness and finding out what makes the culture tick, what's valued, and what the obstacles are, words can be the problem. In some environments, you can talk about strategic planning and get, "You've got to be kidding, we did that and it's a waste of time." In other environments, strategic planning might not carry those connotations. Another example has to do with service. The word *service* has not been universally embraced in higher education, and at some

institutions, on the academic side particularly, it evokes a business metaphor. Understanding the language that's used and carefully selecting ways of describing what you're doing is essential.

One element that makes higher education much more difficult than any other sector is that we have an array of cultures within what we call the higher education culture. We have the administrative or business culture of every campus, the student culture, and the academic culture. In the broadest sense, the differences between the business culture and the academic culture are vast. It would be bad enough if you just had the problems of introducing change within one resistant but homogeneous culture, but we're usually talking about two or three potentially resistant and heterogeneous cultures. Operational strategies often have to be built with a coalition to lead the effort. No leader can make significant change completely on his or her own. You've got to find a cohort, choosing participants who are potential opinion leaders and who represent the various points of view. You must establish a process that brings people on board and effectively engages them so they feel a sense of ownership and buy-in to the change.

### **What about when there is resistance from the culture?**

You have to use existing culture even if your goal is to change it. You'll go nowhere if you try to completely transform a culture 180 degrees in one initiative. I think it's suicidal, frankly. There are cases where people tried to do that, and generally they're not around to talk about how it went.

If you want to make a fundamental change such as becoming a more service-oriented culture in an environment where that has never been an explicit value, it's not going to happen in six months or a year. You need to form a plan—and it may be personal rather than public initially—that articulates the ideal endpoint and addresses how you are going to start, how to build a group that supports the change, and how to leverage low-hanging fruit and work with relevant departments. You have to plan the change process to be methodical and incremental, taking account of what's there and recognizing that for change to be successful, people need to see that what you're proposing is going to be in their best interest.

### **Learn More About Change Management**

#### **Resources**

- National Consortium for Continuous Improvement in Higher Education ([www.nccicu.org](http://www.nccicu.org))— shares effective organizational practices among institutions and has resources on change management
- *Excellence in Higher Education: An Integrated Approach to Assessment, Planning, and Improvement in Colleges and Universities*, by Brent Ruben (NACUBO, 2005)

#### **Upcoming Events**

- Baldrige Goes to College: Organizational Assessment, Performance Measurement, and Action Planning, May 22–23 in Memphis. For program information, visit [www.nacubo.org](http://www.nacubo.org).
- Several sessions at The Campus of the Future: A Meeting of the Minds, will address the topic of change management. Don't miss the conference, July 8–11 in Honolulu. For details go to [www.campusofthefuture.org](http://www.campusofthefuture.org).

There is a fundamental principle that if you want to overcome resistance, you're going to have to educate people about the benefits of change. Pointing out that a new direction is in the best interests of the institution is seldom sufficient, unless that statement can be buttressed with compelling reasons why the change is also in the best interest of those whom you want to endorse and support the change. Most changes do have the potential of benefiting everyone who works at the institution. Often the benefits will be clear to senior administrators but far less so at other levels. This is where education and skillful communication come into play. For instance, the message may need to have several elements: If we're more service-oriented, our constituents think more highly of us, and the institution will enjoy a better reputation. When we go out into the community and mention the name of our institution, it's going to bring smiles instead of stories of discontent or frustration. And to the extent that our reputation improves, we can expect an increase in enrollment and eventually resources from proud and grateful alumni.

The change leader's role is to be an educator and to explain the vision for change, why this will make

the institution better, and why this is going to be a good thing for the folks on the ground. My general theme here is that no matter how big the change, you still need a plan, a methodical way to move toward that new vision. You need to work through it with a knowledge of what the culture and the people value, and you need a compelling story of how the change addresses these values.

**I watched a colleague change a culture. His focus was creating a performance-based organization. It took him seven years to do it. He repeatedly explained what he wanted and demonstrated that he wouldn't settle for less. He knew what he wanted when he walked in, but it took that long to make it happen.**

What you outline are some of the key leadership principles that helped to make this happen. There is a vision piece and an action piece. He had a clear vision, which is an important beginning. But he also was persistent and focused on outcomes and performance. He consistently practiced what he preached. That's the action part of leadership. When you commit to making improvements or changing, it's easy to confuse talk with action. That's the subject of Jeffrey Pfeffer's book, *The Knowing-Doing Gap*. In all organizations, but perhaps especially in higher education, we have a lot of discussion, change planning, and PowerPoint presentations about it, but ultimately it comes down to really making things happen.

An analogy for culture in higher education institutions is the immune system of an organism. When faced with intrusions that are perceived as threats to traditions or operating practices, the culture has a way of mobilizing itself to fight off the intrusions of the potentially infectious innovations or innovators. This highlights why you need to proceed carefully. You have to find a way to overcome the immune system of the organization. The more fundamental the change you want to make, the more resistance you are likely to encounter.

**We have a new generation and more people from different cultures and countries moving into leadership positions. How can an institution maximize the cultural capital of these potential new leaders?**

We simply must view this diversity as an opportunity rather than an obstacle. The action step is to find ways to engage these new voices. They are needed not only at the leadership level but also to provide insight into the array of diverse cultural perspectives throughout the organization. They can be helpful in anticipating the sources of resistance, in knowing how best to build support and buy-in, and in vision setting. To engage these individuals effectively, there has to be both listening and collaboration. The time when change was designed, masterminded, and implemented by a few people at the top of an institution is over. In part it's because the growing diversity requires a more engaged approach to change than ever before.

**Have you seen fundamentally different attitudes toward change from the new people moving into these positions?**

One way that attitudes manifest themselves is through differences in preferred leadership styles. Some of this is generational. The classic model is the strong, directive leader who rides into town, identifies what needs to be done, gets it done, and then rides out of town as everybody waves and cheers—that doesn't happen too much anymore. Particularly in higher education, leaders with this style often leave town in a less celebratory manner. Today there is greater value placed on collaborative leadership styles and on individuals who are more engaging. This is something that women often bring to the workplace—more skill as collaborators and a greater appreciation for building relationships. I would encourage these new leaders to be flexible in assessing change as they determine what kind of leadership is most appropriate for each circumstance.

**To give themselves the flexibility to exercise different types of leadership styles?**

Exactly. And your word "exercise" is appropriate because if you don't exercise those different skills in low-risk situations, you fall into a rut. By default, you adopt a style and use it whether or not it applies in a given situation. The key is to become a lot more self-conscious as a leader and to develop a range of leadership competencies and styles so that you're comfortable doing different things at different times. That flexibility allows you to have a range of options available and to make choices strategically.

**What kinds of change initiatives do you anticipate during the next 10 years?**

As the workforce become more diverse in terms of age, gender, and race and ethnicity, even simple changes are going to require more creative and collaborative approaches. Diversity is going to increase the need for attention to human factors—communication, leadership skill, and planning. There will be a continual need for institutions—and the divisions and departments within them—to sharpen their focus and be clear about what is in their mission. There may be more outsourcing and restructuring of institutions.

We will be seeing retirement and health care issues that the private sector is seeing, and they are likely to generate change initiatives as well. I think technological changes will continue, but these will probably become relatively routine. What I don't think will ever get routine are changes in departmental or institutional direction or broad goals that affect what people do and how organizations are structured. The skills we develop for managing and leading change today will find many avenues and applications in the future.

**That gets back to the importance of having a model as the basis for your approach.**

Right. It's one thing to have a vision, but it's even more powerful to have in that vision some specificity so that you know what meets the standard of excellence. Without this you can easily get bogged down in discussions about what things used to be like. It's difficult to get people to stop looking at what "we used to do" and start looking at what other great organizations do and are planning for the future. To the extent that we want to be seen as society's leaders in the pursuit and application of new knowledge, we need to be particularly diligent about practicing what we teach.

**Agree With Ruben?**

Ready to follow Ruben's advice?  
Or do you take issue with his points? Let us know; e-mail [jane.rooney@nacubo.org](mailto:jane.rooney@nacubo.org).

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