



Campus Change Readiness, Part 2: Theory to Practice

Patrick Farrell and Katherine Sanders • August 7, 2023

In our [previous article](#), we outlined the critical elements campuses need to be ready for change: trust, skills, and capacity. Below, we focus on practical actions campus leaders can take to assess and enhance change readiness.

Assessing change readiness

It's logical to start thinking about how these concepts translate to your organization or group. The characteristics of change readiness (trust, skills, and capacity) don't easily lend to quantitative scoring

and may look different across a range of organizational cultures. And there will always be groups of people who more readily engage change than others.

What can you do to assess where you are in a way that's informative and moves you forward? One approach might be to task subgroups of a leadership team to assess the organization across key areas independently and then compare their perspectives. The exercise can bring your leaders into a creative conversation with each other and the rest of the campus, first in deciding how to assess elements of readiness and second in deciding how to describe them.

One practical technique Patrick has used is the thought experiment (with respect to trust, for example): "If we have a high level of trust on campus, what would we hear in peoples' conversations that we don't hear now?" For example, staff members might be excited about being asked for their input into a significant campus project, knowing that their ideas will be taken seriously.

This kind of activity will bring the group to two key issues:

- Whose perspectives matter?
- How will we find out what people think?

Most campuses have survey data that can help in assessing levels of trust, skills, and capacity. This information may also help identify some of the reasons your campus isn't as ready for change as you'd like. We suggest making use of the information you already have, showing people that their earlier input mattered. This is another way to increase trust. When you ask people to give their input, you make use of it.

Katherine uses a different process to arrive at a similar outcome. She asks the leadership group to identify and discuss their organization's readiness using systems thinking. Work systems consist of the people; their jobs; the technologies they use; the physical and social environments in which they work; and the organization's policies, procedures, reward structures, and culture. These elements are interdependent and dynamic. To increase campus readiness for change, leaders can discuss each part of the system and see where the most powerful intervention points might be.

For example, if your people are overwhelmed with daily responsibilities (tasks), making it difficult for them to engage in large-scale change initiatives, you might decide to look at where you are asking people to spend their time. Or if you are incentivizing individual goal achievement through the way you reward your people, you might consider ways to recognize and support collaborative work.

Whichever approach you use, the activities should help name your shortcomings where you feel you are much less ready than you would like to be. As importantly, they give you a realistic assessment of where you have some strengths. By engaging in this way, your leadership teams develop more skills for change readiness.

Enhancing change readiness

Campuses are busy places. Most people have more to do than the hours in the day allow. New tasks will be hard to fit in unless something else is taken off the to-do list. We suggest to *not* make the development of trust, skills and capacity an add-on or competitor for time and attention.

Instead, we suggest doing the following:

1. Find ways to *integrate* the development of trust, skills, and capacity into daily work.
2. Try out new ideas and approaches while developing confidence in their success through *iteration*.

Integration means changing how you do your daily work to develop change readiness. For example, the culture of trust in organizations usually comes from how people work together day to day. That culture of trust will transfer to a major change effort. You don't need to wait for a new initiative to look carefully at how you build and maintain trust. If you find you are not where you want to be in that regard, you need to change the trust culture in your everyday activities by changing how you do those everyday activities.

Another example of integration is to use existing processes and structures to develop skills. For example, hiring committees are an integral part of campus success. Usually, the process for recruiting and onboarding new members of the community is well established. There is also usually broad agreement about the importance of hiring well. Over time, the attributes you would like to see in new hires change, sometimes significantly. Suggesting modifications to the hiring process that develop additional skills in the committee members is a natural way to prepare hiring committees to recognize and appreciate what you might look for now in new hires. Given the importance of hiring, most of these committees are quite willing to develop their skill sets to do the work better. The skills developed in this hiring context, if well chosen, are also ones these committee members can use in other, much different situations.

Iteration emphasizes taking action and learning from our successes and failures. For simple challenges, straightforward solutions may be evident, and further learning isn't needed. For complex issues with many participants and influences, where interactions may be difficult to predict, we suggest a learning approach with iteration as an expectation. In our experience, contemplation cannot take the place of the experience of doing the real work of change. Efforts improve as you gain experience in your environment. Anticipating iteration can also remove the stigma associated with "failure" and telegraph that a lack of total success is not failure—it's what you expected given the complexities of the system. You learn from the last iteration and make the next one better.

Moving forward knowing you're not completely ready

It's likely that some of your assessments will show you that you're not as ready as you'd like to be. Can you embark on a large-scale initiative if you're not ready? The answer has to be yes. Despite your best efforts, you are unlikely to be completely ready for all changes, and even if you thought you were, new elements will eventually arise and will challenge your initial assessment that you were ready. Complete change readiness is a direction, not a destination.

You will be initiating, managing, reacting, and tolerating change even in your partially ready state. This may feel discouraging, but it might also allow you a bit of grace. You need to do the best you can with your imperfect organization, imperfectly prepared for what is in front of you. And, as noted above, you will iterate as you learn.

Starting from where you are today

Leaders at any level can focus on one or two ideas to begin with. You might look for potential tipping points. ("If this one element was different, it might generate a cascade of complementary changes.")

Each person can use their creativity to decide how to integrate change readiness into their group's daily work and embed the idea of iteration. Some possibilities to consider:

1. You have a role in *framing the current situation*. You can choose an area of focus for change efforts, and start to envision what success might look like. Over time, your people might modify your suggestions, but you can lead by reframing what the group should work on and what they might let go of.
2. You can suggest a *context for the work*. It might be historical, drawing on historical strengths and points of pride for the campus. Perhaps you wish to address persistent shortcomings that are embarrassing to see recurring. You can show your people where the new initiative connects with past, present, and future work.
3. You might surprise nearly everyone by *emphasizing process*—how you will do the work. You are interested in the outcome, but you might emphasize that how the outcome comes about is as important as the outcome itself because it either improves readiness for the future or erodes it.
4. You could quietly focus on one element of change readiness you would like to see improved (e.g., trust) and look for authentic opportunities to encourage its development.

Leading change is challenging. No campus will be fully prepared in every way for the changes it faces, nor will any leader feel they are fully prepared in every way to lead those changes. We are human and we learn as we go.

We believe that the best change leaders see themselves as part of a learning enterprise, which includes your campus community. Another vital learning community is one of peers who are facing similar challenges at their institutions. We encourage you to look for opportunities to listen, share, and support each other. We all need help and inspiration along the way.

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