

Change Management in Higher Education

As the pace of change and digital transformation picks up across all industries, higher education institutions face their own unique challenges. Bank of America recently held a panel discussion with higher education clients who shared their best practices for managing change. The following is a summary of the conversation.

Create a steering committee to build consensus and buy-in with multiple stakeholders

Unlike the corporate world, which can mandate change, higher ed institutions need to **communicate broadly** to foster more consensus and buy-in from numerous stakeholders. “**We have many stakeholders, so we need to be more methodical than other industries,**” said Timothy Hesler, assistant treasurer for New York University.

That means more preparation from the onset to garner interest and gather resources. Hesler recommended creating a steering committee to create the business case and break down the project into clear, actionable deadlines. “**We found that a siloed approach just won’t work well for our industry,**” he explained.

Hesler also emphasized how fostering a collaborative environment is important in the current job market and to diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives. Having that collaboration in higher ed, “it’s important to create that business case. It’s essential to include the schools in projects for visioning to get the functional requirements in those sessions,” he said.

Moreover, he added: “**we see it as a chance to improve our strong DE&I initiative in our continuing mission to recruit, retain, and advance diverse employees.**”

Mike Popko, director of disbursement at the University of Pennsylvania, agreed with the sentiment. When the university wanted to implement a new paperless supplier portal, Popko and his team expanded an existing cross-functional team to include representatives from all the various schools and centers, gathering subject-matter experts who listened and communicated well.

“**We were able to reach out to the entire university, which is very important,**” he recalled.

Then, they spent a year communicating what they wanted to accomplish with the supplier portal and homing in on the requirements for such a system. Through the process, the stakeholders shared important ideas and feedback.

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Foster awareness of the problem, solicit ideas and gain buy-in to inspire advocacy

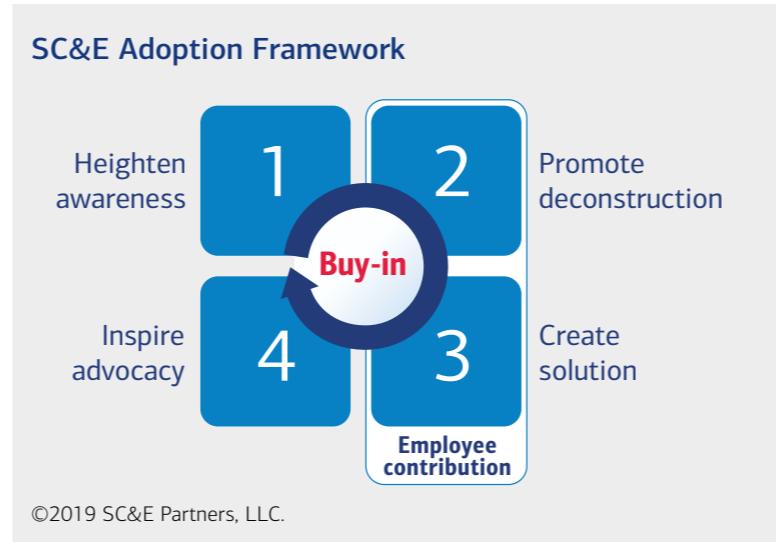
Another crucial part of change management in higher ed is getting on people's radars and creating "champions" for the project. The panelists emphasized how heightened awareness is critical to getting buy-in so senior leaders will drive accountability and results.

To do this, teams first need to communicate the problem with a cross-section of affected employees. This way, everyone gains an understanding of the need to change. Hesler said he makes an effort to be inclusive by giving various groups a chance to review the statement of work. Raising employee awareness ultimately helps a project because it puts those affected in the position to propose solutions. One way to do this is through a hub. Popko shared that his university created a virtual hub that allows different departments to submit ideas for change.

The pandemic accelerated digital transformation at many organizations, including higher education. Hesler recalled how he tried to outsource check printing for years, a move that finally happened in 2020 in conjunction with a shift to more ACH and other digital payments in their virtual payables program.

In this case, circumstances fostered awareness of the problem. "We found out that looking for incoming checks was really inefficient and clunky during the pandemic," he said, adding how he was one of a few people coming in to deal with hundreds of pieces of mail and millions in checks payable to the university. **"I must have signed 100+ documents so they can convert those to an ACH...there's less of those random checks coming in and more ACH, a real boost to NYU,"** Hesler said.

Success with one digital transformation project can encourage change in other areas, too. Popko shared his university embraced robotics process automation, or RPA, to automate certain work processes within procure-to-pay that were manual, high-volume and rule-based. The university did three proofs of concepts involving RPA with different vendors in 2020, but these were put



on hold for a while because of the pandemic. In 2022, they completed a pilot and automated one process.

Another panelist, Donald Addison, faculty member at the University of Georgia Terry College of Business and former change management executive at Bank of America, also emphasized how important it is to foster awareness among all affected employees. **"Quite often, leaders fail to share the initial challenge or problem with their employees in favor of contemplating the problem at the highest level, making a decision, then telling the employees what's going to happen,"** he stated.

The benefits to communicating the problem early and often pay off because employees feel more invested and can offer helpful insights. "It's amazing what a fresh set of eyes can do. It allows you to leverage a view from the trenches and quite frequently surfaces other aspects of the problem or challenge which mid- or senior-level management typically miss," Addison said.

Scale back to ensure success

Several panelists noted it is critical to tackle manageable, "doable" projects that can succeed and build traction. Schools and faculty have a particularly long memory when it comes to recalling failures,

Hesler said. **"Sometimes you need to scale back if necessary to be successful in the project to prevent that scope creep,"** he stated.

That may mean narrowing or scaling back the project to improve the chances for success and create leadership buy-in. Popko added that extending a deadline is sometimes helpful to ensuring success. **"Don't be afraid to delay it a little bit and make sure you're in good shape,"** he said. When his supplier portal project ran into issues, they decided to extend the deadline by a month while communicating the change to everyone.

Hesler advised starting implementation quickly to get a quick turnaround—another factor that helps build momentum. **"Get that quick turnaround between the assessment and then the project kickoff and implementation that sell the change. That'll kind of boost your bias and urgency for change. Don't delay,"** he said.

Create a mindset that is prepared for setbacks and comfortable with change

While scaling back and narrowing the scope of a project can increase its chances for success, panelists said it's also essential to prepare employees for setbacks. Change is hard and not always linear. Projects encounter setbacks, and when they do, it's up to change management leaders to prepare employees for an initial dip in productivity or ROI. That's when leaders typically get nervous, and resistance starts to build in an organization.

Troy Montgomery, faculty member at the University of Georgia Terry College of Business and former consultant on organizational improvement at Bank of America, reviewed the five stages of grief—shock, denial, anger, resignation and acceptance—that organization behavior scholars say also apply to the way groups and individuals in organizations deal with change. **"This is one of the key points in communication that we've got to remember as leaders. Our teams and individuals are working through this transition,"** he said. Team members are dealing with something new that they're not familiar with or proficient in and that can be a cause for despair.

Communication is key, he said. Both the message and who delivers it are important. If there's a setback or bad news to communicate, it should come from the person who has already established relationships with stakeholders. **"It's not just what the message is, but it's also who delivers the message and then how the message is framed up,"** he said.

There are techniques to minimize that dip in proficiency or productivity, Montgomery explained, but even more important is that team leaders prepare employees to accept change. One of the main drivers to that dip in productivity or proficiency is mindset.

"Most of us human beings aren't comfortable with change, so the question is, are your associates or team members open to experience the change? Are they open to training?" he said. Without the right mindset and training, a project faces serious hurdles. The most important thing, he emphasized, is **"we've got to communicate that things are probably going to get worse before they get better."**

Celebrate wins publicly



Lastly, panelists emphasized the importance of celebrating all wins and making sure the broader community knows about it, too. Success begets more success. Wins help create more leadership buy-in and recognize the work of project teams and steering committees, which can otherwise be invisible.

After the successful implementation of a new paperless supplier portal, Popko recalled how his team was able to show quantifiable improvements across the board. At one point the university was printing 110,000 checks a year; that's now down by 64%. Now that the portal is up, they continue to celebrate its success and added improvements each year. Each celebration makes it clear how it's been a team effort. **"It was just a sense of team university accomplishment, not some central group that's trying to force something down,"** he said.

Conclusion

Higher education institutions face challenges such as numerous stakeholders, but as these panelists showed, following best practices can help bring about successful change. Creating awareness of the problem, managing expectations and giving employees a voice in the process inspire inclusivity and buy-in, paving the path to success.

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