



# Succeeding in the Maelstrom of Change: Unique Challenges in Higher Education



White Paper

by Jan Wilson, M. Ed., SHRM-SCP, SPHR





If you care to look for them, there are parallels to be found between the amount of change facing higher education and the amount of change in many business settings at this particular moment in history. Right this moment, we are grappling with the transition to online teaching and working from home due to the Coronavirus pandemic, but we aren't the only ones struggling with change.

Healthcare is an easy target. All of healthcare, big and small, rural and city are struggling with how to better retune the industry for person centered care, and that was before the pandemic! Once the domain of doctors and nurses that provided what was needed, the new way forward will be a collaboration between caregiver and patient (and that patient's family) with outcomes driving standard of care and cost containment.

The automotive industry is another example. Fossil fuel or clean? Ridesharing or owning? Or perhaps the way of the future will be home based with delivery services abounding. Perhaps we won't go anywhere – even to our jobs – and things we used to go out for will magically appear at our door. In some ways, that is already happening and will continue to be, particularly when the lessons of the pandemic have been digested.

Even the way we pay for things is facing a serious re-imagining. Bitcoin anyone?

If you are leading change in higher education in the midst of all of this, identifying what to change in the midst of uncertainty is unnerving. "Is this the right way to go?"

Designing change and rolling it out is a project all on its own. "Did we think of everything?"

Most changemakers navigate these early stages relatively easily because they know the status quo is not working. *"We have to do something!"*

But toss in all the people who must understand the change, embrace it and actually change the way of your institution is a whole other thing. In a change management effort, this is where the magic happens. Change demands not just new processes, but also additional and deeper human dynamics. This is where most change efforts fall apart, no matter the setting.

When things change, it rattles the collective "us." Humans, it seems, are not hardwired to be comfortable with change, and that includes humans in higher education.

This paper will examine change in institutional learning today—the move to student centered education, digital transformation, and the parallels between the worlds of higher learning and business.

It will also examine how changing demographics are requiring a closer alignment between higher education and the workplaces in which students ultimately perform. The good news is we are all in this together, and with some change management awareness and techniques, we can navigate change more successfully.



### Student Centered Learning

Student centered learning poses a fundamental question: “What if students themselves were the focus of learning, and the primary goal was to structure their learning in the way that best met their individual needs?” Students are given choices of how and what they learn, in what order, and are driven by a direct connection between the instruction and their own interests and real-world experiences.

Advocates of student-centered learning contend this approach offers the best opportunity for students to boost critical-thinking skills and spur deeper learning, better preparing students for workforce success.

That sounds fantastic but how does that scale? How do you take an institution historically organized around brick and mortar lecture-based instruction and move to something more personal?

Louis Soares, Chief Learning and Innovation Officer for the American Council on Education was interviewed by The Evollution magazine recently, and he had this to say about higher ed’s move to student centered learning:



***“Human-centered design has become generally popular, and I’ve been finding that more and more institutions are taking a student-centered approach to change management.*”**

***Part of the shifting journey of enrollment management in higher education right now lies in gaining a more granular understanding about what your value proposition is, and for whom. That is evolving. I don’t know if we’re moving towards full personalization of postsecondary education yet, but we are moving towards a deeper understanding of the limited set of value propositions that an institution offers and building processes and programs around that set.***

***First, we have to look at the market factors affecting the cost of higher education. This includes student debt and public policymakers who are looking at higher ed and saying, “Okay, show me the value.” We need to be able to articulate the value of what we’re offering at a high level.***

***While there’s always going to be new knowledge and new tools, the level of our use of technology in the learning process, the granularity of understanding learning, and change management strategies will continue to change. You add those three together and it allows you to start reimagining different ways for institutions to do their work, and perhaps even envision new institutional forms.”***



Adaptive learning leveraging technology is an area that is growing in business and in higher education. Adaptive learning provides activities, assessments and feedback to students that allow for a pathway to be developed tailored to individual strengths and weaknesses. Arizona State University, University of Central Florida and Georgia State University were all Digital Learning Initiative’s 2018 award winners for their work in adaptive learning.<sup>1</sup>



## Digital Transformation

Digital transformation is a term most often associated in the business world where companies are striving to keep up with changing business environments brought about by customer demand and technology. It also refers to how a company is transforming its core business processes using digital technology in order to gain competitive advantage and gain differentiation in its market segment.

Healthcare is going through this right now, and so is higher education. Student centered learning, and the value it provides for the institution are already demanding new ways to connect and learn at the students' direction and convenience.

Changing demographics is also driving digital change. Today's digital natives demand ways to connect, work and learn that are more flexible than in the past.

It also helps to consider how digital transformation is manifesting in business, particularly how it affects workers. One area that has affected businesses profoundly in the past few years is the low unemployment rate. There are literally more jobs now than people. This is leading businesses to struggle with improving engagement among employees in order to keep them. One way to do that is to offer a flexible

workplace, including work from home/remote work perks. Most millennials and beyond cite workplace flexibility as their main driver.

Distance education data from the National Council for State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements (NC-SARA) reports that over 1.5 million students studied toward on-line degrees in their home state last year.<sup>3</sup>

Ted Mitchell in *Changing Demographics and Digital Transformation* cites the following:

*"First, today's students are not the students of myth and legend. The new "normal" student is not an eighteen-year-old who is dropped off at the entrance to "Leafy U" in the family minivan to be retrieved four years later with a diploma marking a body of learning that will somehow last a lifetime.*

*Instead, the new normal student is just as likely to be a twenty-five-year-old returning veteran, a thirty-year-old single parent, or a fifty-three-year-old displaced worker who is looking to reskill and retrain. According to data from the National Clearinghouse and the Department of Education:*

- The average age of a college/university student hovers around twenty-seven (though that is decreasing as the economy heats up).
- 38 percent of students who enrolled in 2011 transferred credits between different institutions at least once within six years.
- 38 percent of students are enrolled part-time.
- 64 percent of students are working either full-time or part-time.
- 28 percent of students have children of their own or care for dependent family members.
- 32 percent of students are from low-income families.
- The secondary education experience has an increasingly high variation, resulting in students whose preparation for college-level work varies greatly.

*As in so much else, our students will lead us—if we have the will and the tools to listen. All around us we are seeing shifts in the nature and character of our students."<sup>2</sup>*



There is little doubt that digital is fully embraced and expected and is here to stay. But institutions will be faced with building, supporting and supplying analytics on the efficacy of these learning models.

- Does your institution have the workforce it needs to move this forward? For example, with increased reliance on data and analytics, does your IT force have the required skills? Do they understand the business unit requirements they'll be asked to support?
- Does your institution have robust platforms (or trusted vendors/partners) that can help design and build them?
- Does your workforce have or can get education on data literacy, management and analytical skills so they can use the information the platform and tools provide?
- Can your institutional leaders support and drive institutional wide data governance and benefits over departmental or individual benefits?

Cultural shifts will need to happen as well. Leaders will need to collaborate more and work to remove departmental or school silos. Flexibility will be prized as the technology shifts and changes. Strategy and innovation will demand a more outward facing focus. Outcomes based data on student success and experience will need to be shared cross departmentally and then rolled up into institutional level data. Risk management and change skills will need to supplant historical risk aversion mindsets of most institutions in order to succeed.



#### **But Are We Our Students' Keeper?**

Much has been written and opinions are strong about whether professors are responsible for their students' success in their careers. Some don't see a parallel such as a history professor struggling to see how his courses could make an impact.

The roles of institutional learning and corporate America are becoming more and more aligned.



Employers are increasingly doubting whether graduates are emerging from colleges and universities with the skills, knowledge and habits of mind the employers want to see.

*“Too often there is a mismatch between what our brochures promise and what employers think we deliver. Graduates cannot articulate what they have learned in an academic setting when they interview, onboard into their first job, or go for their first promotion. Whether the perceived gap is truly a “skills gap” or a failure of communication and translation is immaterial. Both represent a critical opportunity for creative reconsideration of classroom pedagogy, where faculty can leverage what we know from the learning sciences about good teaching to make things more relevant and meaningful to students’ future selves without sacrificing the tenets and rigor of the discipline.”<sup>4</sup>*

– Kathyne Drezek McConnell, Assistant Vice President for Research and Assessment Association of American Colleges and Universities



College curricula are not sufficiently focused on delivering the kind of learning that would better prepare students for what they will do after college.



*“Employers are looking for people that possess both the depth to be productive in a specific job role, but also a set of enabling “soft skills” that will sustain them throughout their careers and contribute to both the employee’s and organization’s long-term success. Skills like communication, teamwork, problem-solving and collaboration are frequently developed in degree programs, but not explicitly tracked or assessed in a way that employers can recognize them. Employers are shifting their hiring toward a “what do you know,” rather than “where did you go” model of assessment; stackable credentials offer the prospect of better recognizing these work-ready skills.”<sup>5</sup>*

—Michael King, Vice President and General Manager  
IBM Global Education Industry



Many traditional college and university faculty members don’t see preparing students for work as their job and aren’t willing to adapt in that direction.

Taylor and Harris in *BEYOND CLASSROOM BORDERS Linking Learning and Work Through Career-Relevant Instruction*, provide the following:

As disruptive technologies and innovation rapidly alter the requirements of a skilled workforce, employers and education and training providers of the future will need to focus on individuals’ readiness and preparedness to acclimate to the changing nature of work.

Current students will be expected to demonstrate their capacity and capability to adapt and learn new skills on a more or less continuous basis. Similar to changes in the workplace and to how jobs will be done, the learning environment will itself likely change; curriculum will require adaptation to how faculty teach and facilitate learning, and to how students transfer this learning into their civic and work lives.

Career relevant curricular transformation is akin to the profound pedagogical changes that have resulted from the emergence of online learning in the past decades. This ability to adapt to a changing work and learning environment goes beyond disciplinary expertise.<sup>6</sup>



## Five Things You Should Know About Change Management

A great deal of potential change in higher education has been identified. These changes are also all happening simultaneously. It would be wonderful if life provided just as much change as we humans could handle and wait patiently to deliver the next round. That isn't how change—or life for that matter—works.

So how can change be made easier or more palatable? Whether you are an individual or a leader managing a team through change, having greater knowledge on what change management really is helps a great deal.

### 1. Thing One: Getting Smarter About What Change Management Is

Change management is defined as the process, tools and techniques to manage *the people side* of change to achieve the required outcome. Change management incorporates the organizational tools that can be utilized to *help individuals make successful personal transitions* resulting in the adoption and realization of change.<sup>7</sup>

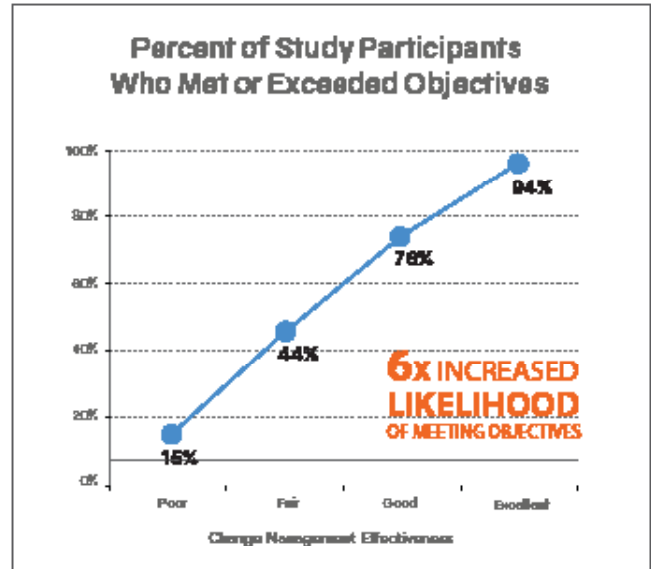
That definition didn't say a word about a project management spreadsheet, which is what most people think of when grappling with organizational change. Absolutely there will be spreadsheets in any change initiative, but the *human side* of change—that one mentioned in the first page of the paper is what the art of change management is about.

Over the past  
**20 YEARS**  
research demonstrates that  
**70%**  
of change efforts within  
organizations fail<sup>8</sup>

Tasks can be legislated, assigned and tracked all day long, but that doesn't mean the workforce embraces them. Many times that is how change efforts fail. In fact, nearly every time a change effort fails, someone did not shepherd the human component.

### 2. Thing Two: Realizing Change Management Really Does Work

Effective change management is a success enabler. Research on thousands of initiatives shows a direct correlation between how well the people side of change is managed (change management) and how successful the effort is.



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### 3. Thing Three: Secure All Constituencies Affected by Change

For change to work, a high degree of collaboration is needed from those who want to see the change implemented with ones who will be affected by the change. It's that second segment that is the most overlooked.

The easiest way to ascertain if a change effort is on the right track is to ask the simple question "Who here are the users?" or "How are the users represented?" If the change team can't answer that question or the response sounds something like "Their supervisors will get them on board," you have a problem.

Disengaged users will avoid at best, and at worst, even sabotage your change efforts. If the change desired makes their work harder (and you didn't do your homework to figure that out), they will not embrace the change.

## 4. Thing Four: Don't Outsource Your Responsibility For Managing Change

Ron Ashkenash in the Harvard Business Review notes:

*“The content of change management is reasonably correct, but the managerial capacity to implement it has been woefully underdeveloped. In fact, instead of strengthening managers’ ability to manage change, we’ve instead allowed managers to outsource change management to HR specialists and consultants instead of taking accountability themselves—an approach that often doesn’t work.”<sup>9</sup>*

This is closely tied to Thing Three. Managers are often completely overlooked, overwhelmed and then responsible for a mission critical change effort, which adds to the anxiety of the change effort. Think about change in your own institutions. Who in your reporting order is managing your change?



## 5. Thing Five: Adopt a “Bucket Approach” Way of Thinking

If you are a manager helping your staff through change, here is an easy way to gauge whether or not your efforts are on target.

When employees adapt or adjust to change, they make a choice to invest their valuable resources. Time, effort, cognitive and physical energy are all invested by employees to make sense of their changing workplace. Employees must learn new information and skills, change their behaviors, and even think and feel differently. Quite frankly, it can be exhausting.

Not only can a turbulent workplace reduce employees’ commitment to their organization, but multiple changes may also deplete employees’ resources to the point where they become dissatisfied and are no longer able to invest high levels of involvement in their work.<sup>10</sup>



Once their bucket is empty or near empty, these workers—your workers—look elsewhere.<sup>11</sup>

However, many employees **are** successful through change, so what do they do differently? They believe the change will impact their job positively. Not the institution’s view of success, but their own personal job satisfaction.



### Who Can Help With This?

If you are a part of a large institution who has the means to drive large complex change initiatives, you are in luck. Most likely they will have the resources to shepherd change. However, if you see that various constituencies might be left out, you have a duty to raise a flag.

In smaller institutions who may be struggling with change, there are a variety of models and resources that are worth investigating to assist yourself in dealing with change, or to support your teams.

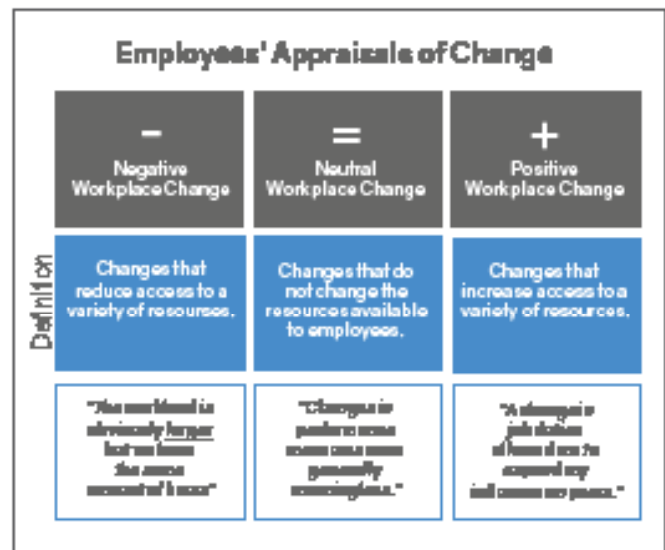
If workers feel the change will help them refill their bucket somehow at some future point—more time saved, better outcomes, better networking—whatever it is that drives that individual, the change will more likely be perceived as “good.”



It behooves managers that are managing through change to actively monitor where their employees are in regard to their buckets. Is the bucket leaking? Or is it filling? Are you helping them see the positives? Are you enlisting those that are doing better to help those that are still struggling?

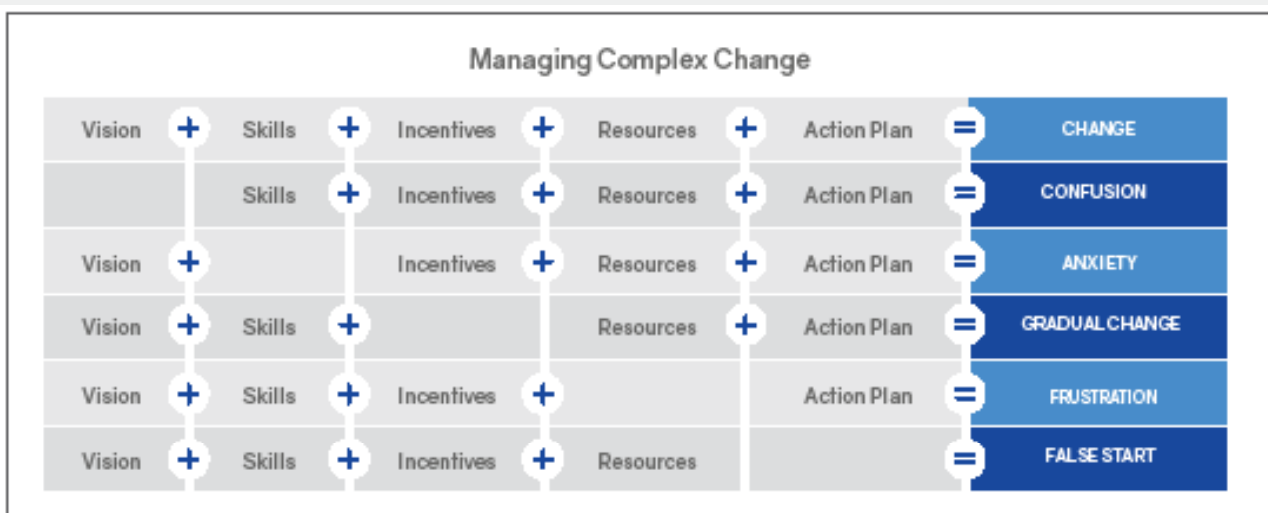
Peer and manager support through change is vital. The moral of the story is that the tighter you as a manager are with the perceptions and feelings of the staff navigating change, the more successful you will be.

One part of a successful change strategy is the communication plan that outlines every user with a user story that explains what the change is, why and how it affects that particular user group in detail.



Here is a handy reference for minding change efforts and the results you might see when something is missing.

- All change efforts need the attributes outlined on the first line of the graphic below.
- All successful change efforts consist of a vision. Where do you want to go and why? And how well have you communicated the vision all the way up and down the line?
- Next, you have to provide the skills for your people to be able to do the "new". This is usually a training component of some sort.
- There have to be incentives for them to do the change. This is where the bucket analogy begins. What is in it for me and how is it going to change my world?
- You have to provide resources for the team to be successful. If you don't have these identified, your team will identify them as missing during the change process. That is not the time.
- And finally you have to have an action plan for progress (this is where the spreadsheets and project plans live) so you can monitor where you are at in the change cycle.



Adapted from Knoster, T. (1991) Presentation in TASH Conference. Washington, D.C. Adapted by Knoster from Enterprise Group, Ltd.



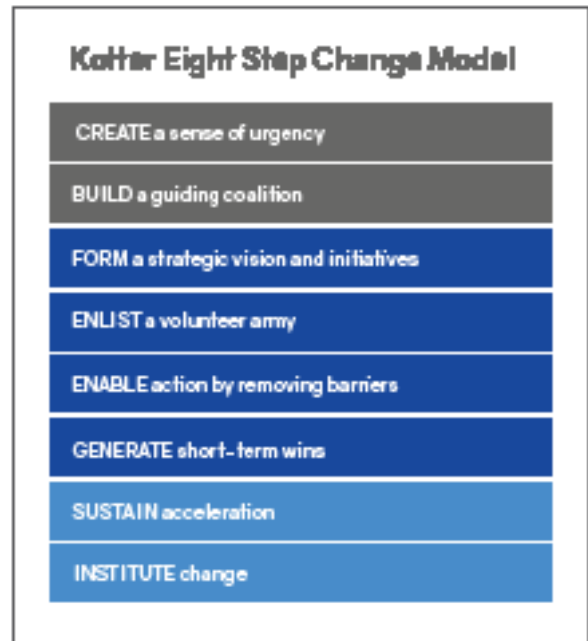
### So Where Can Help Be Found?

The first is the [Association of Change Management Professionals](#) (ACMP). This is the professional organization that represents change management professionals. This group promulgates the body of knowledge and credentials their membership on current change management topics.



With local chapters, they provide education, networking and consulting services. There is even the opportunity to work with a local chapter to assist with a change management initiative in fulfillment of certification requirements.

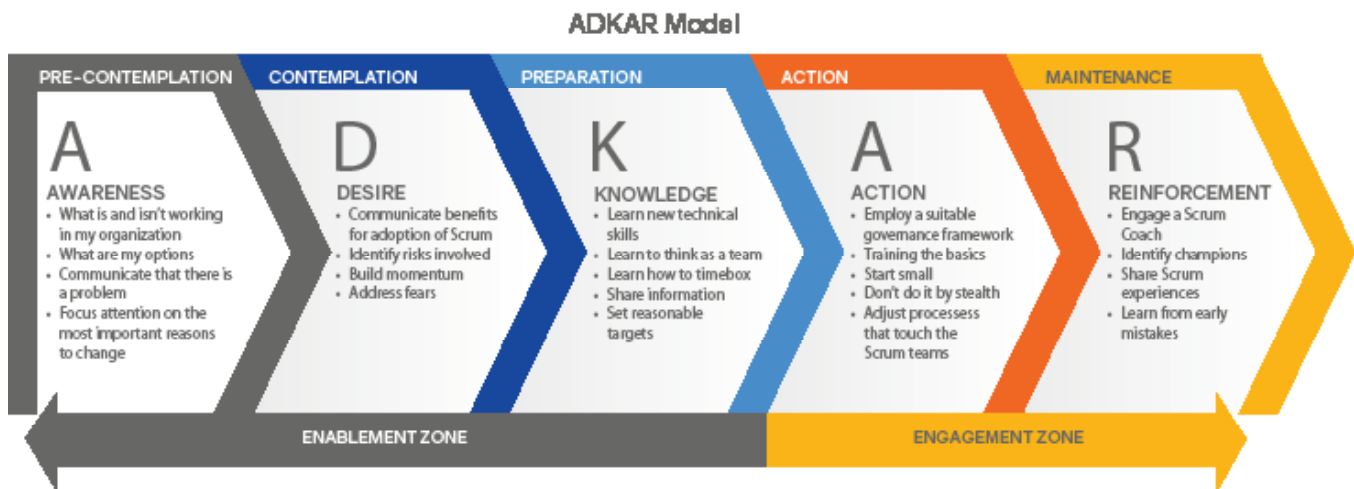
John Kotter's [Eight Step Change Model](#) is another great resource in literature and practice for further reading.



There are others who certify change management professionals in a particular model of change management. One of the most recognized is Prosci. They certify change practitioners in the the [ADKAR model](#).

This graphic is a high-level overview of each of these methods.

Do your homework, enlist some help, and embrace the change that's coming. It isn't easy, but it isn't going away, either. The more you know, the easier it will be.



## Conclusion

No matter your views on whether or not we are our students' keeper, providing institutional value and rigor to the marketplace is top of mind—for schools, employers and the students themselves.

It will take a concerted, well managed process to move institutions from the “way we are” to the “way we will be” over the course of the next few years.

Raising literacy around change, the change management process and change management resources can help you travel that journey.



**Jan Wilson, M. Ed.,  
SHRM-SCP, SPHR**

As an organizational development and learning consultant, Jan has provided strategic planning, process alignment, change management, curriculum development, and planning, as well as learning solutions to a variety of clients such as pharma, healthcare, and state governments. Jan earned a Bachelor of Business Administration with a concentration in information technology from Belmont University in Nashville, Tennessee, as well as a Master of Education in Human Resource Development from Vanderbilt University, also in Nashville, Tennessee. Additionally, she has served as adjunct faculty at the Peabody School of Vanderbilt University.

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phone: +1 844-243-2500

email: support@honorlock.com

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