

University of Alberta

Navigating Institutional Change in Higher Education: Leadership Challenges.

by

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Abstract

Like all higher education institutions, universities face tremendous pressures to continuously reform as a result of ever-changing conditions in both their internal and external environments. For example, neoliberal policies by many governments have led to the marketization of universities and cuts in government funding, which are among the factors putting pressure on both public and private universities to undergo institutional reform. The purpose of this paper is to examine leadership behaviors that are most effective in supporting universities to drive the needed institutional change in response to the increasing pressures to reform. The literature synthesis revealed that university leaders who demonstrate transformational leadership are more effective in leading these change efforts. Their ability to clearly communicate a compelling vision, serve as charismatic role models, encourage bold and innovative thinking, and show personal care for their followers during the transformation process is highly impactful. Leaders who optimally combine vision, focus, and implementation are more successful at carrying out change initiatives, often adopting a more flexible, emergent approach to change rather than a linear one.

Key words: higher educational institutions, universities, transformational leadership, change, vision, focus, implementation, idealized influence, inspirational motivation, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation

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Introduction

Change has become an inevitable part of almost every organization today. According to Boateng (2020), an organization's performance is largely determined by how effectively its mission connects with a constantly changing environment. Similarly, Weston et al., (2017) argued that for organizations to remain resilient in today's competitive global landscape, leaders must keep alert to environmental changes. Like other organizations, universities are confronted with similar challenges and need leaders who can effectively adapt to change. For instance, in order to keep up with their core mission and, most importantly, remain sustainable, both publicly funded and privately owned universities are compelled to implement institutional reforms prompted by the global economic crisis, neoliberal policies from various governments that have led to the marketization of higher education (Mintz, 2021), and evolving expectations from stakeholders. According to Mintz (2021) and Vlachopoulos (2021), the climate of uncertainty around funding sources, combined with increased competition and growing globalization, has induced universities to revisit the way they are governed and consider avenues that would help them become more agile in a fast-changing marketplace. This changing environment necessitates that university leaders effect change at all levels of the institution (Vlachopoulos, 2021). As Delener (2013) noted:

As the pace of change in higher education continues to accelerate, the challenges are becoming increasingly complex; current and future leaders must deal with the changing demands of multiple stakeholders, increasing regulation, a skeptical public, stiffening competition, new technologies and ways of delivering education, and revenue streams that are drying up. Delener (2013, p. 20).

Against this backdrop of growing pressure, universities need strong leadership to guide institutional change. Gigliotti and Ruben (2017) stressed that the contemporary university leader needs more than a narrow knowledge of effective higher education practices; his or her

purview needs to correspond to the broader picture of higher education and encompass an array of concepts and tools of organization and leadership. The authors further posited that university leaders need to construct both professional and personal competencies that empower them to use these competencies productively in their everyday leadership practices. Indeed, leadership of this kind with such key competencies is essential for addressing complex challenges and leading institutions in the right direction towards effective and lasting transformation. This paper aims to delve into the leadership behaviors required for change implementation in universities, especially in the light of increasing pressure to continuously reform. The paper will look at the difficulties leaders face when implementing change and consider the wider implications for university senior leadership.

Purpose and Objectives of the Study

The purpose of this paper is to synthesize existing literature on the leadership behaviors of senior university leaders that facilitate the effective implementation of institutional change. In the context of this paper, senior university leaders are individuals who wield a large influence, while their decisions largely impact the entire institution. They hold top-level positions, assuming varying titles such as president, chancellor, vice-chancellor, registrar, provost, and so on. The influence of such individuals is normally felt throughout the university, affecting faculty, staff, students, and the wider university community. The main question for this paper is: What critical leadership behaviors are required of senior university leadership to effectively navigate institutional change implementation challenges? This capping exercise aims to explore the leadership challenges involved in leading change and provide recommendations for effective strategies to implement change in universities and higher education institutions in general.

The sub-questions, based on a synthesis of the literature, include:

- What strategy or approach to change leadership is most likely to be effective in universities?
- What are the challenges of leading change implementations in universities?
- Which leadership behaviors or qualities are most effective in driving change initiatives within universities?

Method

The main method for this research project will be a synthesis of relevant peer-reviewed literature related to the research questions. The organized themes of the critical literature review will come from the sub-research questions. These are theories of change, the challenges of leading change implementations, and recommendations for effective change leadership strategies.

Literature Search

The peer-reviewed journal articles used in this project were obtained through Scopus, Academic Search Complete, and Education Multi-Database Search (containing the Australian Education Index, CBCA: Social Sciences, Education Database, and ERIC). All these databases were accessed via the online library portal of the University of Alberta Library. The boolean operators, specifically AND, OR, and NOT, were used for narrowing down the article searches. Additionally, peer-reviewed book chapters were included in the literature synthesis.

Layout of the Essay

This research took a synthesizing approach to the several peer-reviewed publications on leadership for implementing changes in universities. The paper began with a topic introduction, followed by the study's objectives and rationale. It went on to outline the methods for conducting the literature review study, including the literature focus and search. The literature review section of this paper is organized around the themes that became

evident in the literature synthesis, that was used to construct the sub-research questions for this study. The main themes included theories of change, challenges of leading change implementations, and transformational leadership as an effective change leadership strategy in universities.

Theoretical Frameworks

An overview of important change theories, focusing on the planned and emergent approaches are provided in this section. The theory of temporal planned change and the punctuated equilibrium model of strategic change are also briefly highlighted. The study intends to identify which of these approaches is the most suitable for leading change implementation in universities by examining these frameworks. This analysis helps address the first research question by identifying the most effective approach to navigating institutional change in universities.

The Planned and Emergent Theories

Many approaches to change management can be found in the literature. The planned and emergent approaches, however, appear to be the most dominant (Bamford & Forrester, 2003). Theories of planned and emergent change offer distinct approaches to organizational transformation, including in university leadership. Understanding these theories can help university leaders navigate institutional changes effectively. For instance, a university's transition to online learning during COVID-19 started as an emergent change but required planned strategies for long-term implementation. The planned approach to organizational change attempts to describe the process by which change occurs. It highlights the need to understand the various states that an organization must go through to progress from an unsatisfactory condition to a desirable state (Eldrod II & Tippet, 2002). Lewin (1952, as cited in Eldrod II & Tippet, 2002) posits that for a change project to be successful, it is important to undertake three distinct steps: unfreezing the current level, transitioning to a new

level, and subsequently refreezing this newly established level. This model emphasizes that, for change management to be effective, the organization must first abandon the old behavior, structures, processes, and culture before implementing new approaches successfully. The perspective on change presented in this discourse is predicated upon the underlying premise that change follows a linear trajectory, which should be initiated and guided from the top hierarchy of the organization.

Expanding upon Lewin's three-stage planned method, Bullock and Batten (1985) formulated a four-phase model of planned change, which divides the process into exploration, planning, action, and integration. The model examines the processes of change, which describe the methods used to transform an organization from one state to another, and the phases of change, which describe the stages an organization must pass through to implement change successfully (Bullock & Batten, 1985). The planned change strategy has faced significant criticism due to its narrow focus on small-scale and incremental change, rendering it unsuitable for situations that necessitate swift and transformative change, such as those in universities (Burnes, 1996). For Burnes (1996), the process of organizational change is not limited to a set of separate events but is rather open-ended and ongoing. Additionally, Bamford and Forrester (2003) identified another flaw of the planned change model: it presumes that stakeholders willfully engage and fully participate in any change project. This idea, on the other hand, does not take into account organizational politics and conflict, and it suggests that these problems are simple to spot and can be solved quickly (Burnes, 1996; 2004).

The criticisms of the planned approach to organizational change have given rise to a new approach to change leadership, known as the emergent approach. Unlike the planned approach that sees change as primarily influenced by top-down forces, the emergent approach emphasizes the role of bottom-up dynamics in driving change (Bamford & Forrester, 2003;

Burnes, 1996; 2004). Organizational decentralization therefore becomes a critical factor for effectively driving change under the emergent model. Thus, the emergent approach challenges the planned change model's assumption that change follows a linear trajectory. Instead, the emergent model conceptualizes the change process as rather a continuous and indefinite process characterized by the need to adapt to evolving situations and contexts, which renders the entire change process unpredictable (Burnes, 1996). Burnes also said that implementing changes that work depends less on detailed plans and predictions and more on understanding the complexities and nuances of the problems at hand and seeing the range of possible solutions. In this regard, Burnes (1996) concludes that "the emergent approach to change is more concerned with change readiness and facilitation than with giving specific, pre-planned steps for each change project and initiative" (p. 13). The emergent approach has been criticized as being relatively new compared to the planned method, lacking coherence, and having a limited range of techniques in its application for leadership practice (Bamford & Forrester, 2003).

Theory of Temporal Planned Change

The temporal planned change theory is an approach that emphasizes structured interventions in intricate systems. In recognition of the fact that different strategies are necessary for various phases of change, this theory offers a framework for the initiation, implementation, and keeping the gains from change over distinct times (Huy, 2001). Because of the dynamic and multifaceted nature of higher education institutions, the application of this theory is particularly pertinent in the context of university leadership. Universities function within intricate ecosystems that encompass students, faculty, administrative staff, external stakeholders, and broader societal expectations. Explaining further, Huy (2001) identified two types of leaders who emerge in the process of organizational change while adopting the temporal planned change theory. Those leaders whom he referred to as short-

sighted, who become more interested in driving change initiatives with a short-term outlook, resulting in immediate outcomes. Conversely, the other type of leader is the one with a long-term vision whose interest is in pursuing change programs with outcomes and impacts that are observable in the future. Huy (2001) underscored the need for leaders to appreciate the role of time as both quantitative and qualitative factors in the change implementation process. He argued that while the quantitative dimension of time is measurable by a clock, the qualitative time dynamics are influenced by the emotions and perceptions of people or followers. Therefore, it is imperative for a change leader not to be concerned only with the duration of a change program resulting from it being short-term or long-term but to pay close attention to the reactions and behaviors of people who are affected by the change program. The temporal planned change theory is better explained in four intervention strategies: commanding, engineering, teaching, and socializing. In the context of the commanding intervention, senior university leaders can implement directive and coercive strategies to whip up support for a change initiative. This intervention is concerned with the quantitative component of time. Similarly, leaders who engage in engineering interventions plan actions that focus on redesigning and reprogramming processes in ways that save time and improve the quality and speed of change outcomes. Teaching intervention refers to a directed learning strategy in which university leaders can actively facilitate helping organizational members relearn certain practices or approaches. Organizational members get involved in their own relearning, becoming active participants since they collaborate in effecting their own personal transformation through changes in their core beliefs. Thus, this intervention is concerned with the qualitative component of time. Finally, the socializing intervention aims to improve relationships among organizational members through deliberate acts by change leaders. University leaders who apply the theory of planned temporal change can navigate institutional transformations with strategic foresight. They can assure long-term progress in

higher education by aligning change with defined phases, engaging stakeholders, and promoting adaptation.

The Punctuated Equilibrium Model of Strategic Change

Organizations encounter two types of change, according to Romanelli and Tushman's (1994) punctuated equilibrium model of strategic change. The first, called convergent or equilibrium periods, happen when an organization moves from stable periods of activity with only slight changes, and the second, called reorientations or revolutionary periods, occurs when the organization goes through brief bursts of abrupt change. This theory outlines the reasons behind changes and their occurrence. It can be applied to forecast future organizational changes by suggesting that the impact of one change results in a phase of stability or equilibrium, which eventually triggers the next big change. To put it another way, strategic change happens when the inertia brought on by ongoing stability is broken by two factors: environmental change and top management turnover (Romanelli & Tushman, 1994).

Challenges of Leading Change Implementations in Universities

The challenges faced by university leaders have been found to be some of the most daunting in any field (Delener, 2013). According to the author, university leaders are often faced with the delicate task of balancing national issues, institutional goals, and the often conflicting expectations of various stakeholders. Organizational change has profound and far-reaching effects on almost every facet of its operations, and therefore, for a change program to be effectively implemented, it must involve adaptations to systems, processes, and resources (Buchanan, 2022). Such systemic configurations, which are indeed disturbances brought about by the change process, have the potential to alter organizational culture, requiring the organization to rebuild its capacity to integrate new innovations and practices. Despite this fact, Buchanan observed that many leaders fall into the temptation of

underestimating the far-reaching impact that change initiatives tend to have and the extent of adaptation required.

This arises as one of five key leadership challenges Buchanan (2022) identified while driving institutional change. Thus, a mistake university leaders implementing change initiatives often make is their failure to recognize the potential for far-reaching impacts or unintended outcomes that change initiatives can generate. Although leaders may have a compelling transformation vision, they tend to ignore such unintended side effects. These can manifest in various forms, ranging from staff and faculty resistance to incompatibility with existing workflows to values misalignment with the purpose of the project. Moreover, if these impacts are not properly evaluated and pre-emptively addressed, they can become a significant threat to the success of the change initiative. For example, when institutional culture is not taken into account, the change initiative will encounter opposition from the stakeholders, making the change initiative stall or fail altogether. These potential risks can be mitigated if university leaders take a more holistic and strategic approach to change leadership. This approach involves performing robust impact assessments prior to implementing change, consulting stakeholders at the outset to inform, and implementing adaptive strategies that allow for flexibility in response to unforeseen challenges.

The second problem that Buchanan (2022) discussed is that there are often too many initiatives that conflict with one another and are in competition for the same finite resources. Such complexities explain why it is often difficult to make change programs work in universities. Buchanan explained that many change initiatives implemented simultaneously can lead the university system to reach its limit. Therefore, university leaders can make the difficult mission of leading change more effective only if they set realistic goals and do not try to do too much too quickly. There may be some initiatives that come out of nowhere or arise unexpectedly in the course of pursuing a planned change program, but it is important

that leaders examine what resources they have available in place to support such unplanned changes, be they human, physical, or financial resources. As Buchanan noted, the pressure is increasing for university leaders to respond to a range of social problems that interfere with students' ability to learn—substandard housing, lack of transportation, inequity of access to technology, health issues, and more. Those issues, which often are outside the scope of a university's original mission, take attention and resources. However, when these additional, unanticipated initiatives compete for the same resources as the primary change efforts, it strains departments and pre-existing systems. To lessen the chances of failure, Buchanan recommended that any change effort should be well thought through by assessing the timing, the resources available, the institution's policies, the level of administrative will, resistance to change, anticipated expectations, and how such initiatives might affect other concurrently running initiatives. This strategic approach allows universities to prevent overwhelming themselves with too many concurrent initiatives without the resources needed to sustain them and more effectively position themselves for a successful transformation agenda.

Another major problem is the lack of consensus about shared governance, particularly in terms of who sits in the decision-making chairs, how decisions get made, and how academic freedom is sustained, which makes it difficult for university leaders to effectively lead the implementation of change initiatives (Buchanan, 2022). Decision-making in institutions of higher education can be messy by design, with numerous stakeholders involved, including governing boards, university presidents, academic and administrative affairs units, faculty, and myriad interest groups. These diverse stakeholders often have conflicting priorities, resulting in a long, complex, and very delicate process of making decisions. The interactions of university leaders are often complex, making it hazy who is ultimately in charge of what and how accountable they must be. Buchanan (2022) asserted that there is also not always transparency in how much support or endorsement there is from

different parts of the university institution. Effective implementation of change initiatives in universities would benefit from collaboration and interlinking initiatives and building trust between stakeholders with different interests. Unresolved conflicts over governance can have dire consequences, as Gabriel (2020), cited in Buchanan (2022), noted:

If universities are to survive the present crisis (and, sadly, many will not), a collective drive for self-preservation must replace the internecine jostling between the faculty and administration. Averting a mass extinction will necessitate a radical restructuring of the university, which can only succeed with an unprecedented degree of collaboration. (Buchanan, 2022, p. 24)

This statement highlights the need for university leadership, faculty, and administrative arms to work together to overcome existing governance challenges and achieve real change. Such collaborative efforts are vital for facilitating decision-making among top university leaders, who are generally viewed as not acting in unison. Buchanan (2022) added that when chairs and deans appear too aligned with the administration, faculty members see them as less trustworthy, thus escalating governance conflicts and opposition to change. Universities should foster a culture of constructive planning in their institutions with clearly defined parameters around institutional actors, allowing a participatory decision-making framework. A culture of open dialogue and shared responsibility is what will let institutions overcome barriers to governance and help make sure that decisions are effective and widely supported. McRoy and Gibbs (2009) supported this stance, positing that organizational change is more likely to endure when it occurs within the framework of existing cultural/behavioral norms and does not seek to impose an entirely foreign superstructure.

The fourth major challenge Buchanan (2022) identified when leading change implementation was inadequate stakeholder participation and ineffective communication. Resistance to change is likely to increase when important stakeholders are not actively

engaged or involved in the change process. McRoy and Gibbs (2009) support this assertion, stating that in complex organizations such as universities, the task of leading change cannot be left in the hands of a few. Therefore, “senior management has to support the bold steps of change; middle managers have an important role in leading the change; in cultural change, the change agents in some cases are faculty who embrace the needs of student-centered values” (McRoy & Gibbs, 2009, p. 697).

This is why leaders who do not actively engage stakeholders in a constructive way are essentially blindfolding themselves when it comes to the perspectives, interests, and concerns of the very people from whom they need support in order for the initiative to succeed. Thus, if leaders do not involve other stakeholders in the process as well as ensure effective communication, there is the likelihood of a breakdown in trust, which may result in all-out opposition against the change initiative. This challenge is even more pronounced in higher education institutions, where diverse stakeholders—faculty, students, administrative staff, the government, and external partners—tend to have different and even conflicting priorities and expectations (Gigliotti & Ruben, 2017). In order to tackle these challenges and improve communication, Buchanan (2022) stressed the need for strategic stakeholder engagement. Leaders who consult widely are less likely to face resistance. Stakeholder engagement builds trust and drives change initiatives to success.

Buchanan (2022) emphasized the biggest challenge of all: failure of leaders to recognize the tremendous courage required to close the gap between what they intend and what they do in transforming an organization. The author points out that most of the time leaders of the change initiative face resistance as they are perceived as a threat to the current organizational culture. This pushback can manifest as an insistence to toe the line when it comes to existing norms, values, and ways of working. A leader who is not courageous and strong enough to get tough on challenges like these will find it difficult to overcome the

resistance. Moreover, the resistance to change may take other forms, including subtle social exclusion, blunt criticism, or more brazen acts of rebellion (Buchanan, 2022). If a leader does not make a conscious commitment to the process of change, they may give up on the effort and allow the existing culture or process to persist, stifling growth and transformation. Therefore, it is not enough for university leaders to have vision; they must also possess personal resilience if they are to be successful at enacting change in their institutions.

Finally, leading change in universities may also be hindered by deeply ingrained traditions, which make it difficult for systems to adapt and evolve. Such systemic resistance, rooted in institutionalized traditions, is best explained by the concept of institutional isomorphism put forward by DiMaggio and Powell (1983). This process involves coercive, mimetic, and normative pressures that push institutions to preserve existing practices. Coercive isomorphism occurs when external pressures, like government rules or accreditation requirements, force universities to get stuck to certain rules, regulations, or practices. Mimetic isomorphism occurs when universities imitate successful peers to maintain legitimacy and competitiveness. Lastly, normative isomorphism comes from professional standards and expectations, which are often strengthened by training for faculty and academic networks. These three isomorphic forces compel universities to stick to the ways things have always been done. Collectively, these forces contribute to the persistence of traditional structures, limiting universities' ability to innovate and respond dynamically to new challenges.

Leadership Theories and their Application to Higher Education

The literature is filled with various leadership styles, such as authentic, servant, adaptive, inclusive, and transformational, among others (Northouse, 2022). However, transformational leadership, with its focus on driving change, has been singled out to play a critical role in organizational transformation, especially during periods of crisis. This leadership style has

been found to be the most effective for navigating both the internal and external challenges while leading change implementation across all forms of organizations (Bass & Avolio 1994; Boateng 2020; Buchanan, 2022; Delener 2013; Eisenbach & Pillai 1999; Neumann & Neumann 1999; Taylor & Machado 2010). According to Delener (2013), transformational leadership supports followers to rapidly respond to change as it focuses on developing their full potentials. Transformational leaders are able to accomplish this by setting high standards and purposeful objectives, encouraging followers through inspiration and example, creating cooperative efforts, and building trust. This section explores transformational or visionary leadership styles in response to the second research question, focused on what leadership styles or behaviors are most effective in terms of driving change initiatives within universities. The implications are significant as transformational leadership behaviors have been the focus for academics and practitioners for the very reason that at its heart it inspires innovation, energizes those who adopt it, and promotes lasting change, and in the context of universities where the challenges are unique.

Transformational or Visionary Leadership

In the literature, transformational, strategic, and visionary leadership are often used interchangeably. All these terminologies have been used to describe a leadership style that focuses on having a clear vision for what one wants, identifying and finding opportunities to achieve that vision, and even developing a long-term plan within an organization (McKnight, 2013; Neumann & Neumann, 1999). Transformational leaders are those who are committed to abandoning traditional ways of operating when the situation arises and employing novel approaches to navigate their institutions toward transformation and progress. Though these terms have their own nuances, they all highlight leadership that emphasizes the need to adapt to changing circumstances with meaningful, and sometimes even radical, measures rather than just maintaining the status quo. Transformational (or visionary) leadership is thought to

be critical for driving change in universities, especially when institutional environments are changing quickly, societal expectations are changing quickly, and technology is also changing quickly (Howells et al., 2014; Taylor et al., 2010). It focuses on inspiring and motivating faculty, staff, and students to embrace change and work toward a shared vision. This leadership style is particularly effective in higher education because it fosters innovation, engagement, and a culture of continuous improvement. The existing literature on transformational leadership commonly assumes that the presence of transformational leadership behaviors and practices is sufficient to generate positive educational outcomes (Kwan, 2020), since this leadership style, according to Eisenbach et al. (1999), can cultivate favorable attitudes that lessen probable resistance to change by building a motivating vision for followers, stimulating inventive thinking, and demonstrating understanding for their needs. Delener (2013) echoed that in higher education, such transformational leadership may be necessary to accomplish the adaption needed to meet the constantly changing external and internal environment. Four elements of transformational leadership are identified by Bass and Avolio (1994): idealized influence, inspirational motivation, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation.

The idealized influence is the degree to which followers regard leaders as trustworthy and charismatic. Followers see leaders as those who have a clear and attainable objective and vision. A leader with idealized influence is one who sets high moral and ethical standards. As a result, they take on positions as role models, earning followers' trust and emulation (Northouse, 2022). The leader can easily set a vision for their followers due to their loyalty and respect. To tackle the institutional isomorphism described by DiMaggio and Powell (1983) within universities, it becomes imperative for university leaders to embody the emotional (idealized influence) dimension of leadership. This entails effectively demonstrating empathy, vision, and charisma. Such a leadership approach is pivotal in

nurturing emotional bonds and garnering support for transformative initiatives. By cultivating a sense of attachment and enthusiasm towards the leader's vision for change, institutions can effectively transition from a state of tradition or inertia to a dynamic and progressive state.

The second element of transformational leadership described by Bass and Avolio (1994) is inspirational motivation, which refers to leaders who express high expectations for their followers, motivating them to become devoted to and part of the organization's common mission. In this situation, leaders motivate their followers by presenting them with significance and challenge. Leaders project hope and optimism about the future to motivate followers. This, in turn, facilitates devotion to a common vision. This vision is owned in common through constant and effective communication. Transformational leaders, according to Kotter (2007), need to be able to show that past changes have produced beneficial effects to justify instigating new changes. In this situation, university leaders are in a unique position to communicate a powerful vision that aligns faculty, students, and stakeholders with the mission of the institution. As identified by Buchanan (2022) and McRoy and Gibbs (2009), a university leader could address the challenges associated with limited stakeholder buy-in and engagement through the establishment and communication of a vision for the change initiative, while also possibly drawing on the momentum created through previous change initiatives and how they were successfully implemented.

The third element is individualized consideration, which involves leaders addressing individual needs and interacting with followers on a one-on-one basis. One-on-one connection encourages followers to set personal goals and seek their development. Here, the leader fosters a supportive environment and considers the needs of followers. Leaders serve as advisors and coaches, and they usually practice delegation as a way of developing the potential of their followers. Through professional development programs, mentorship, and

participatory decision-making, university leaders can foster a culture of personalized engagement and collaboration that facilitates the smooth implementation of change programs.

The last element of transformational leadership strategy is intellectual stimulation. Here, the leader fosters a culture of creativity and innovation among followers, encouraging them to question their ideas and values, as well as those of the leader and the organization. While promoting the development of critical thinking skills and problem-solving abilities, intellectual stimulation also provides support to followers as they experiment with novel approaches and cultivate inventive methods for addressing organizational challenges (Northouse, 2022).

Just as Bass and Avolio (1994) developed four dimensions of transformational leadership, Neumann and Neuman (1999) found three transformational leadership behaviors or skills that they believe are necessary for facilitating institutional change. The first is “visioning,” and it describes a leader’s ability to see to the “full horizon” of the organization’s future. The critical thing university leaders need to understand about change initiatives is their potential to have ripple effects that extend long after the change effort is announced. Indeed, as Buchanan (2022) observed, while university leaders tend to have the best of plans for when it comes to transformation, they miss out on the bubbles of the unexpected that erupt when enacting the process. It is essential for leaders to not only envision the desired results of change but also foresee any possible repercussions, which are often unintended. Neumann and Neumann (1999) explained that visioning also requires a strong desire for positive change, the ability to set goals that are very different from how things are now, a keen awareness of new opportunities in the outside world, and the creation of a long-term plan for growth and success. This skill or leadership behavior of visioning is what drives leaders to pursue novel paths or strategies that bring about meaningful and sustainable change in their organizations.

Neumann and Neumann (1999) identified "focusing" as the second key skill, referring to a leader's ability to direct the organization's attention from its present state toward a new vision. According to Lewin (1952), as cited in Eldrod II and Tippet (2002), an organization must first be moved from its current state to a new level, supported through a transition, and then left to settle into its new state for a change initiative to be effective, according to the planned model of change. To achieve this transition, leaders must take these important steps: paint the vision clearly to the stakeholders (so that there is support for the transformation and a committed coalition); identify those areas of utmost priority (which align to the vision); and assemble the right teams with the necessary expertise to drive the change. Helping every facet of the organization to keep a steady focus on the overarching vision informing the change initiative is critical to ensuring an effective change implementation that aligns everybody and the institution in a new direction. Therefore, university leaders ought to demonstrate "inspirational motivation," another core dimension of transformational leadership, through which they provide their followers with a sense of meaning and challenge, articulate excitement for the change, and, most importantly, stimulate their commitment to yearn to see the future state of the organization (Delener, 2013).

The third skill is known as 'implement,' which is the actual execution of the goals and plans that were drafted from the new vision. Implementation involves inspiring the members within the organization to be active participants in the change process, helping them to grow internally and review their goals in line with the larger vision of the organization. And it is also about advancing progress by clearing roadblocks and providing the right support so that the new change objectives are delivered on a timeline. Effective implementation also requires providing timely and constructive feedback to people, teams, and units on how they are performing relative to the vision and then making adjustments as necessary. For instance, demonstrating the characteristic of 'individualized consideration' — i.e., pertaining to

addressing the specific needs of each follower—significantly contributes to increasing the ability of the leader to carry out change. Because every individual is different, understanding their unique perspectives, strengths, and even opportunities for growth empowers a leader to offer tailored support. If a leader took the time to understand the peculiar difficulties faced by followers when trying to enact a new vision, it would show empathy, which can help strengthen relationships. This empathetic attitude supports followers in working through adversities and, in turn, bolsters the trust between the leader and those they lead. This encourages the followers to embrace the change, and therefore the transition will be a smoother and more effective process.

Using a sample of 279 higher education institution leaders, Neumann and Neumann (1999) researched the leadership strategies of these leaders in terms of using the three core skills or behaviors: visioning, focusing, and implementing. In their analysis, they discovered eight different leadership styles that describe how leaders blend these skills to instigate and navigate change in their organizations. The eight leadership behaviors provide insight into the different approaches that university leaders can pursue to create and sustain change. They also demonstrated the many ways that the core competencies of visioning, focusing, and implementing can be effectively combined to create positive transformative change experiences in higher educational institutions.

- ‘The Integrator’: This describes a university or college president who skillfully blends leadership behaviors associated with visioning, focusing, and implementation.

Neumann and Neumann (1999) posited that a synergistic combination of these three abilities is an important prerequisite for the effective implementation of any change initiative taken on by university leaders. This leader exemplifies a true transformational leader, as he has found the right mix of the three skills that are necessary to affect positive change in an organization.

- ‘The Net Caster’: This is a president who might at times have difficulty focusing or having a consistent direction, but they know how to think in terms of the big picture and execute strategies for change. This kind of leader knows the true opportunity and sees the big picture, but he or she might not be focused enough and is likely to juggle multiple efforts at once. As noted by Buchanan (2022), the deficient focusing behaviors of the net caster leader can hinder effective change implementation. Nonetheless, Neumann and Neumann (1999) suggested that these leaders may still be effective because of their superior skills in plan execution and driving vision.
- ‘The Focused Visionary’: A focused visionary president has a clear grasp of the big picture and long-term objectives and hones in on key priorities that enable progress. They are able to think through what is required but lack the specific know-how or practical experience required to implement a change agenda.
- ‘The Focused Performer’’: A focused performer is a leader who may not have a compelling vision for the future or one that galvanizes people around a direction but who excels at maintaining focus and implementing strategies for change effort. Neumann and Neumann (1999) emphasized that such leaders will always be needing substantial guidance, assistance, and support in determining the appropriate direction for their organization. They argue that without a well-defined and compelling vision from the leader, it becomes nearly impossible to initiate or sustain meaningful progress.
- ‘The Prioritizer’: This is a president who may not have a clear vision or the talent to effectively implement change plans but is adept at identifying and prioritizing the most important tasks.
- ‘The Dreamer’: A dreamer is a leader with a grand big visionary outlook and the ability to visualize ambitious future possibilities. But this leader can have trouble with

the details and is sometimes lacking in practical know-how to achieve their vision.

Although ‘the dreamer’ president can indeed set the strategic vision for the university, Neumann and Neumann (1999) argued that without an effective team dedicated to clearly defining, communicating, measuring, and delivering on the comprehensive plan, this leader is likely to fail.

- ‘The Implementor’: Implementors are leaders good at executing plans but may struggle with strategic planning and long-term goal setting. Neumann and Neumann (1999) argued that this type of president is successful in a university environment where there is already a clear vision and where operational processes are well organized.
- ‘The Maintainer’: This kind of leader does not provide clear direction or purpose, cannot focus on long-term goals, and is not great at implementing plans. University leaders who do not demonstrate mastery of at least one of the three key transformational leadership behaviors—visioning, focusing, and implementation—will not be able to drive innovation, serve as an effective guide to their team, or implement plans that bring about transformation. In other words, such leaders are trapped in a paradigm of inertia where they cannot escape the cobwebs of normalcy. “This president cannot really function as a transformational leader and will usually survive in relatively stable environments with no need for significant changes” (Neumann & Neumann, 1999, p. 75).

Together, these three skills—visioning, focusing, and implementing—form the foundation of a transformational leadership style, where a combination of vision, focusing, and implementing come together to inspire and drive substantial change within organizations. Taylor et al. (2006) presented a framework that categorizes the above-explained eight distinct leadership styles, arranged in a hierarchical order ranging from ‘Integrator’ to ‘Maintainer.’

Drawing from their analysis, there is a noticeable and progressive decline in institutional effectiveness as one moves down this hierarchy from one leadership style to the next. They believed universities perform better under integrator and visionary leaders than under maintenance-focused leaders. The authors noted that these leadership styles should be considered closely by universities on the hunt for a new leader, as choosing the effective approach to leadership will play an important role in securing long-term institutional transformation and growth. Incorporating transformational or visionary leadership behaviors or skills allows university leaders to enact change that aligns with the evolving needs of their institutions and society at large, paving the way for innovation, inclusivity, and responsiveness to the changes occurring both internally and globally.

Implications for University Leadership Practice

The synthesis of literature on theories of change and transformational leadership, particularly in relation to the challenges associated with implementing change in university settings, offers many valuable insights for practical application. By examining the interplay between leadership approaches and institutional transformation, this synthesis highlights key strategies, potential obstacles, and effective practices for driving meaningful change in universities. The findings not only deepen our understanding of leadership effectiveness in academic environments but also provide actionable recommendations for administrators, policymakers, and educators seeking to navigate the complexities of change implementation within universities and higher education institutions in general.

To be an effective leader of change within a university, it is evident that a person must possess strong visionary abilities, as well as either exceptional focusing or strong implementation skills. This insight is particularly valuable for search committees tasked with selecting new university presidents, as it suggests that a president's strategic approach can significantly influence the future success of the institution (Neumann & Neumann, 1999). If

leaders are mainly interested in keeping things as they are or are just great at following through, they may not create much of the positive change needed. By contrast, leaders who are integrators—capable of fusing together vision, focus, and implementation—seem to be better candidates, particularly at colleges and universities that require institutional change. Such leaders are able to mobilize disparate parts of the institution and move them towards a common goal, which is essential in addressing many of the challenges inherent in embarking on institutional reforms and achieving sustainable change over time.

Furthermore, when university leaders do not fully understand the nuances of how to effect change, they may neglect important elements of the change process, like training, communication, assembly of support structures, etc. Lack of these considerations could lead to the process of change going wrong, leading to resistance from staff and even low morale. Buchanan (2022) stressed that for meaningful reform to take place, university leaders must not only anticipate the need for systemic changes but also engage in careful planning and resource allocation, ensuring that the entire organization is prepared to make the necessary adjustments. In this regard, implementing the ‘teaching’ and ‘socialization’ strategies based on the temporally planned change theory could assist in overcoming this challenge. By supporting stakeholders to learn, unlearn, and possibly relearn and reform their beliefs and persuasions, as well as providing a safe space that improves relationships in the workplace, university leaders will stand a better chance of winning the hearts and support of members while implementing change initiatives. Therefore, by acknowledging and preparing for the full complexity of change, university leaders can enhance the likelihood of successful transformation while minimizing disruption to the institution’s mission and operations.

Another important implication for practice is that a successful model for change must be dynamic and iterative in nature (White, 2000). Thus, the change strategy must be flexible enough to accommodate both the planned (deliberate) outcomes and those that emerge

unexpectedly. This adaptability ensures that the change process remains effective, regardless of whether the results were anticipated or arise as the process unfolds. This requires an eclectic approach to applying change models when university leaders guide the change implementation process.

The literature further underscores the pivotal role of communication as a strategic tool in facilitating change implementation (Buchanan, 2022; Delener, 2013; McRoy & Gibbs, 2009; Neumann & Neumann, 1999; Northouse, 2022). For instance, Delener (2013) suggested that university leaders really need to communicate change intentions effectively for a variety of audiences to ensure adequate engagement and communication with stakeholders. Such a relationship calls for leaders to build an authentic and consistent interaction with stakeholders based on ongoing, collective, and participatory conversations. Thus, stakeholder involvement and engagement are critical. Therefore, university leaders must focus on achieving levels of trust and sharing of relevant information while reconciling stakeholder interests (Milliken, 2001) to ensure change implementation success. A well-articulated vision that excites and engages people to be part of the change is essential for leaders to develop, and they must do so in building support for a change initiative. Moreover, they can increase engagement by pointing to successful prior initiatives, showing how these or similar efforts were successful. By referencing previous successes, leaders can create credibility, build trust, and instill confidence amongst followers, which in turn encourages more engagement and commitment to the initiative. Moreover, with the inclusion of feedback mechanisms and being active with stakeholders in the decision-making process, the participation of stakeholders in the initiative can be further enhanced, and the alignment with the initiative's vision can be reinforced.

Finally, university leaders need to encourage practices of creativity and innovation that disrupt unhelpful traditional practices based on an informed understanding of

mechanisms of isomorphism in their institutions. By honing in and applying their abilities at intellectual stimulation, they can promote an innovative atmosphere on campus, a trait that is deemed vital for higher education leadership (Delener, 2013). Providing faculty and students with the opportunity to experiment with new methods of teaching, research, and community engagement should be encouraged and rewarded by university leaders, and most importantly, the dominant campus culture should reward and cherish risk-takers and change agents. Such a culture would recognize, and if possible, reward those who challenge the status quo, encourage innovation, and take bold steps toward creating a more inventive and transformative academic and social environment. By prioritizing an inventive culture, university leaders can inspire a climate of creativity, progress, and positive transformation that benefits the entire community.

Conclusion

Universities today face multiple leadership challenges, especially around leading change in the midst of internal and external environmental pressures. These pressures require leaders to be agile and responsive. Fortunately, the literature provides valuable insights and strategies that university leaders can leverage to create positive solutions to these challenges and navigate institutional reforms more effectively in a changing and unpredictable world. A major theme in the literature illustrates that leaders who take a linear, planned approach to change face serious roadblocks. Organizational change is not, of course, a sequence of discrete events that can be managed in isolation. It is not a once-off event but an ongoing, sporadic practice that is fluid, demanding that leaders be flexible and adaptive (Burnes, 2011). Understanding the nature of change is important for university leaders because it requires them to go beyond the static, linearly planned approaches to leading change, while at the same time encouraging them to pursue a more emergent, responsive and multidimensional change leadership strategies. This lays the foundation for leadership

approaches equipped to thrive in a challenging and changing academic environments, with the strength to handle inevitable changes. In doing so, university leaders will be able to address the complexities and emerging countervailing forces at play in contemporary higher education, ensuring that higher education remains both resilient and able to flourish amid constant change.

The literature underscores that, among the various leadership styles and approaches, transformational leadership stands out as the most effective for initiating and driving change within universities and higher education institutions. This is largely due to the distinct qualities it brings to the table. Research has shown that transformational leadership fosters positive responses from followers to organizational change while simultaneously minimizing negative reactions. Therefore, university leaders tasked with navigating periods of change must exhibit transformational leadership behaviors. This includes the ability to clearly articulate a compelling vision, act as charismatic role models, encourage bold and innovative thinking, and demonstrate personal consideration for their followers during the organizational transformation process. Leaders who successfully merge vision, focus, and practical implementation are more adept at executing change initiatives.

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