

How to Keep Your Bearing While Navigating the Turbulent Waters of Transformation

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The Reality of Change in Higher Education

Our Industry is Transforming:

- Declining enrollment at many institutions=increased pressure on revenue
- Students expect consumer-grade digital experiences (Amazon, not manual processes)
- AI and automation are reshaping finance operations across higher ed
- Regulatory requirements continue to evolve (Title IV, FERPA, collections practices, compliance)
- Competition for students means we must be service-oriented, not just transactional

Why Change Feels Harder In Our Function

The Unique Challenges We Face:

- We deal with regulations, compliances, financial aid timing, multiple payment types
- One mistake=student cannot register or graduate
- High stakes + high volume = high stress
- Do more with less has been our reality for years

Emotional weight:

- We work with students with financial distress daily
- We balance institutional needs with student circumstances (angry parents, anxious students)

Change Fatigue

- New system implementation every few years
- Policy changes mid-year
- Frequent financial aid changes
- “Just when we master something, it changes”

Why Change is Unavoidable

Key Points:

- The only constant is change - markets shift, technology evolves, organizations adapt or fall behind
- Resistance to change is resistance to loss (of comfort, control, competence, connection)
- Organizations that embrace change outperform those that resist it
- Personal career success depends on adaptability

Sound Bite: "Change isn't something that happens TO us—it's something we navigate WITH intention."

The Psychology of Change

Key Points:

- **Change curve:** People move through predictable stages (shock, denial, resistance, exploration, commitment)
- Most people aren't resistant to change-they're resistant to being changed
- Fear of the unknown is natural and biological (brain sees change as threat)
- Understanding where you are in the change process helps you move forward

The Four Rooms of Change:

- Containment  Denial  Confusion  Renewal

Sound Bite: "it's normal to feel uncomfortable during change. Discomfort means you're growing."

Mindset Matters: Fixed vs Growth

Fixed Mindset Says:

- I can't do this!
- This won't work
- That's not how we've always done it

Growth Mindset Says:

- I can't do this YET
- What can I learn from this?
- This is an opportunity to develop new skills

Key Point: Your mindset about change determines your experience of it. Choose curiosity over fear. "You cannot control the change, but you CAN control your response to it"

The Personal Impact of Workplace Change

What People Experience:

- Loss of competence (I used to know how to do my job)
- Loss of control (Decision are being made without me)
- Loss of community (My team is changing)
- Increased workload (I have to learn new things while still doing my old job)
- Uncertainty about future (Will I still have a role)

Key Points: Acknowledge these feels as valid, not as weakness. Change is hard because you're grieving what was while learning what will be

Focus on What you CAN control

Control vs. Influence

- **Control:** Your attitude, effort, learning, responses
- **Influence:** Feedback you give, solutions you propose, relationships you build
- **Accept:** Organizational decisions, market forces, timing

Key Point: Don't waste energy fighting what you can't change. Channel it not what you can.

Build Your Change Resilience

Five Pillars:

1. **Physical:** Take care of your body (sleep, exercise, nutrition)
2. **Emotional:** Process feeling, seek support
3. **Mental:** Stay curious, reframe challenges
4. **Social:** Lean on relationships, don't isolate
5. **Spiritual:** Connect to purpose and meaning

Sound Bite: “Resilience isn’t about being unaffected by change-its about bouncing back faster”

Adopt a Learning Orientation

Key Actions:

- Ask questions without judgement
- Experiment and iterate
- See “failures” as learning opportunities
- Seek feedback early and often
- Find mentors who’ve navigated similar changes

Sound Bite: In times of change, learners inherit the earth, while the learned find themselves beautifully equipped for a world that no longer exists.

Stay Connected

Why It Matters:

- Isolation amplifies fear and resistance
- Community provides support and perspective
- Shared experience creates collective resilience
- Collaboration accelerates adaption

Key Actions:

- Talk to colleagues about their experience
- Share what you're learning
- Support others who are struggling
- Build coalitions of change champions

Strategies for Leaders

Communicate, Communicate, Communicate!

What to communicate:

- **Why:** The reason for change (business case, strategic imperative)
- **What:** Specifically, what's changing and what's staying the same
- **When:** Timeline and milestones
- **How:** Process and how people can engage
- **Impact:** How it affects individual and teams

Cont...

Communication Principles:

- Say it multiple times, multiple ways
- Be honest about what you don't know
- Listen more than you talk
- Address concerns directly
- Repeat key messages (people need to hear things 7+ times)

Sound Bite: In absence of information, people fill the void with worst-case scenarios

Create Psychological Safety

Key Actions:

- Acknowledge that change is hard
- Normalize struggle and questions
- Don't punish resistance-understand it
- Model vulnerability about your own challenges

Sound Bite: “People won’t follow you through change unless they trust you.”

Involve Staff in the How

Key Points: You may not be able to change WHAT is changing, but involve people in HOW it's implemented.

Questions to Ask:

- What concerns do you have?
- What would make this easier?
- How can we make this work for our team?

Sound Bite: “People support what they help create”

Quick Wins Matter

Why:

- Build confidence
- Create momentum
- Demonstrate progress
- Provide evidence that change is working

Key Point: Celebrate small victories along the way, not just the end goal.

Common Change Pitfalls

What Derails Change:

- Under-communicating (assume people know/understand)
- Ignoring the emotional side of change, lack of empathy
- Declaring victory too soon
- Not addressing root causes of resistance
- Changing too many things at once
- Lack of leadership alignment

Sound Bite: “Most change fails not because the was bad, but because the execution was poor.”

Reframing Change

- **Instead of:** “We have to change”(obligation, burden)
 - **Reframe as:** “We get to evolve” (opportunity, growth)
- **Instead of:** “Everything is uncertain” (fear, anxiety)
 - **Reframe as:** “We’re creating new possibilities” (hope, excitement)
- **Instead of:** “I don’t know how to do this” (inadequacy)
 - **Reframe as:** “I am developing new capabilities” (growth)
- **Instead of:** “Why is this happening to me? (victim)
 - **Reframe as:** “What can I learn from this?” (learner)

Sounds bite: The meaning you assign to change determines what you will experience

We All Have An Opportunity To Change At All Levels

The Opportunity in Change

What Change Creates:

- New Skills and capabilities
 - Innovation and improvement
 - Stronger relationships (shared vision bonds people)
 - Personal Growth and resilience
 - Competitive Advantage, Career advancement opportunities
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- **Key Points:** Organizations and individuals who master change don't just survive, they thrive.
 - **The best time to develop new skills was yesterday. The second best time is during change**

The Change Equation

D=Dissatisfaction with status quo

V=Vision of what's possible

F=First steps toward vision

R=Resistance to change

$$D+V+F>R$$

Focus Per Level

Front Line Staff

- Focus on: Personal control, practical tools, peer support

Middle Managers

- Focus on: Leading through change, supporting teams, managing up and down, balancing competing demands

Senior Leaders

- Focus on: Strategic vision, change management frameworks, creating conditions for success and accountability

What This Means for Us:

- We're moving from "back office" to student success partner"
- Technology will change HOW we work, not eliminate WHY we matter
- Our expertise becomes more strategic, less transactional
- Adaptability is now a core requirement

Sound bite: The Bursar/Student Account Office of 2030 will very different than the offices of today. We can resist that reality or shape it"

Quotes on Change

- “Change is inevitable. Growth is optional”-John Maxwell
- “The secret of change is to focus all your energy not on fighting the old, but on building the new”- Socrates
- “Whether you think you can or think you can’t, you’re right”-Henry Ford
- “Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing themselves”-Leo Tolstoy

Questions?
