

What Makes a **Successful** Leader in a **Changing** Higher Ed **Landscape?**

By Kendall D. Isaac

Change can be difficult. Change can be constant. Change is sometimes scary. But change can also bring opportunity. Embracing change does not come easy, and leading change can be even more difficult — it takes a trained, adaptive mindset to do so. Unfortunately, far too few leaders possess the transformative mindset to help them see, interpret and properly respond to the forces of change impacting higher education today, and because of this, they often have difficulty developing teams and organizational direction collectively committed to formulating strategies suited to handle the unpreventable and disruptive change impacting the industry today.

Two Critical Traits of Transformative Leaders

Indeed, the landscape of higher education is rapidly changing — heightened governmental scrutiny over student debt loads, retention and graduation rates; internal pressures surrounding the need to increase enrollments; a push to become more flexible in course delivery methods in order to adapt to the needs of today's ever-evolving consumers of higher education.

Thus, it is critical that leaders are not only willing and able to develop collective commitments to address these changes, but also to unearth and quash hidden commitments (like a need to maintain the comfortable stasis that currently exists, to not have to do more work when they already struggle with an over-full plate, and a lack of willingness or outright inability to motivate the individual contributors supporting them and tasked with carrying out change projects) that cut against progress and instead serve as the impetus to defeat positive momentum.

Transformative leaders are needed today more than ever in higher ed — leaders who are willing and able to develop and communicate a vision, mission and strategy that is clear, workable and capable of overcoming obstacles. Today's leaders also need to maintain quality control, and they must be master motivators to inspire others to embrace the change necessary to deal with the shifting landscape of higher ed. To meet these challenges, leaders must possess many leadership competencies. However, I

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would argue that there are two that are more critical than the rest: emotional intelligence and managerial courage.

Emotional Intelligence

Leaders who can think about emotions accurately and clearly while staying focused on multiple stakeholders with conflicting interests (students, administrators, faculty, board of trustees, the community) may often be better able to anticipate, cope with and effectively manage change.

This balancing act is accomplished by possessing emotional intelligence. In the article “The Emotional Intelligence of College and University Presidents: An Exploratory Study” in the August 2011 issue of *International Journal*

of Humanities and Social Science, author Corina N. Slaff defines emotional intelligence as “the ability to perceive and express emotions, assimilate emotion in thought, and understand and reason with emotion in self and others ... and it is absolutely necessary [in order] for us to make good decisions, take optimal actions to solve problems, cope with change and succeed.”

Unfortunately, many people devalue the importance of emotional intelligence, subscribing instead to the antiquated thought process that simple common sense can drive effective change in organizations. While this appears logical on the surface, it ignores an unfortunate reality in many organizations: sense is not all that common. While I'm certainly not saying that most people lack basic intelligence, the reality I've witnessed does suggest that

Hone Your Higher Ed HR Competencies

What does it take for higher ed HR professionals to be effective, efficient, strategic business partners who contribute to the institutional mission, vision and goals? CUPA-HR's **Learning Framework** (www.cupahr.org/learning/framework.aspx) answers that question. From change management to collaboration, from organizational development to adaptive leadership, from employee development to diversity, equity and inclusion, the Learning Framework outlines the skills, competencies and traits higher ed HR pros need in order to be successful in their jobs. You can use the framework to assess your skills and competencies (or those of the people you supervise) as well as to guide your professional development.

And if you find you're lacking in certain areas, check out CUPA-HR's free e-learning course, **Creating Your Individual Development Plan** (www.cupahr.org/learning/idp.aspx), to develop a plan to get where you want to be in your higher ed HR career.

sometimes individuals can be so consumed with their own self-interests and commitments that they place them before the needs of the organization. This phenomenon results in decisions and actions that seem to make sense to the individual, but are deemed nonsensical by many others.

To overcome this, leaders need to continuously message the collective commitments of the organization and their expectations. Communication can transform individuals from self-serving beings to being actively involved as team-oriented change embracers and chasers. Leaders who fail to adequately communicate and instead make assumptions about what employees know or should know will find that those unspoken expectations are not met. And when this happens, they have no one to blame but themselves.

Managerial Courage

Managerial courage involves having the resolve to implement a new and possibly controversial vision or direction. This entails being in control of one's emotions, the courage to be persistent in the face of obstacles and potential opposition, and the perseverance to be consistent in application over the course of time. By assuming these traits with unwavering focus, it is possible to face disruptive change head-on and push through it with success. In order to move a team from resistance to embracing change, removing obstacles is critical.

Unfortunately, oftentimes the obstacles to change tend to be people — individuals who are complacent or outright resistant to doing anything different than what they have always done. This doesn't mean that all dissenting voices are bad; input from dissenters can be helpful in designing a robust vision and program. But dissenters who refuse to adapt to the ultimate plan acceptable to the majority and continue to openly and defiantly fight change can poison others. When leading a change effort, it is best to create a team consisting both of internal knowledge leaders who possess adaptability skills as well as strategically placed external change agents.

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Leading the Leaders

Creating this team of internal knowledge leaders and change agents is a very deliberate and cerebral process. This is where human resources professionals are integral. Indeed, HR's role in this transformation process is undeniable. From helping leaders develop and hone their emotional intelligence and managerial courage skills to supporting and executing the infusion and extraction of talent, HR is key to the ultimate success of virtually every adaptive change initiative that leaders desire to execute.


In order to embed emotional intelligence and managerial courage into the institutional leadership fabric, HR professionals must not only embody and exemplify these concepts themselves, but also must be willing and able to train and coach leaders to develop these competencies. For this to happen, managing/training both up (president, provost, chief business officer and other senior executives) and out (other emerging and mid-level campus leaders) is a necessity.

Pushing Forward

Higher education is transforming — not by choice, but rather out of necessity in order to survive. Technological advances and fiscal strain are forcing a rethinking of educational

delivery models and how to produce more value with lower overhead. Colleges and universities are taking various approaches to address these unsettling times.

Institutions that will be most successful in pushing forward are those with leaders who possess both the element of emotional intelligence

to understand the motivations of self and others and the element of managerial courage to drive change through all levels of the organization. With these two critical elements intact, institutions and their leaders are more likely to be able to quickly and easily regroup and adapt, and in doing so successfully move from a point of stagnation to deliberate adaptive transformation. 

Kendall D. Isaac, J.D., is chief human resources officer and legal counsel at Darton State College. He can be reached at kendall.isaac@darton.edu.