Change Leadership in Higher Education: A Practical Guide to Academic Transformation
Jeffrey L. Buller
Jossey-Bass, 2015
288 pp., $45.00 (plus $6.00 s/h)

Jeffrey Buller’s book, Change Leadership in Higher Education: A Practical Guide to Academic Transformation, offers readers a foundation in traditional change management theory as it relates to both academic and nonacademic entities, as well as new ideas for navigating change leadership within the specific organizational and cultural context of colleges and universities. The major contributions of this book are a reframing of the assumptions defining organizational change, the role of leadership in facilitating change, and alternative models for guiding change on campuses. The frameworks Buller provides are reinforced with institutional examples, all of which have undergone change utilizing Buller’s approach. Throughout the book, Buller offers concrete considerations and solutions that are informed by organizational psychology literature; real-world examples of change in academia (one of the book’s many strengths); and his own experiences as a faculty member, administrator, consultant, and change agent. Buller’s approach prompts readers to consider the need to shift perspectives on change and leadership in higher education.

For the most part, Buller is successful in arguing this shift. The first two chapters establish higher education entities as organizations with unique structural characteristics that require specialized change leadership in an environment that is continuously evolving. Chapter 1 focuses on historical change management literature and models, including the three “Ks,” Kübler-Ross, Krüger, and Kotter; notes traditional “corporate” change models as inefficient for higher education; and includes a primer on the intersection of organizational structure, culture, and power. In Chapter 2, Buller explores ways in which leaders reframe negative perceptions associated with change by encouraging stakeholders to see change as a positive process that is both inevitable and intentional rather than imposed and received.

Buller argues that organizations are inherently resistant to change, and individuals often react with resistance when change threatens to replace what already exists and is valued. This “replacement view of change” (30) is more prominent in higher education given that colleges and universities are typically structured as professional bureaucracies. Therefore, higher education requires a different approach to change than its noneducational counterparts. Using Bolman and Deal’s Four Frame Model, de Bono’s Six Thinking Hats, and his own Ten Analytical Lenses, Buller lays the groundwork for using these frameworks to better anticipate resistance and to lead through change processes.

Buller sees change as a “key factor in keeping us creative, innovative, and engaged” (56). However, understanding whether there is a need for change is also key. Buller promotes the use of his Ten Analytical Lenses as a “tool to determine whether a need for change exists” (79) in Chapter 3. Coupled with Calde, Paul, and Turner’s STEEPLED Analysis (detailed in the book), which provides an environmental analysis of relevant forces, and traditional policy debate formats, Buller provides a road map for new leaders to consider change.

Chapters 4 and 5 provide some of Buller’s most progressive and bold recommendations. Chapter 4 contains another of the book’s strengths whereby Buller encourages leaders to embrace change leadership over change management by using leadership reflection to consider both their own and the institution’s core values. Buller notes, “You can’t change an organization without being changed yourself” (90). Using mindfulness-based leadership, Buller convincingly argues that leaders must take a values-based approach by first learning through reflection on their own values and beliefs before attempting to promote change outward. This progressive approach to leadership is further explored in Chapter 5. In this chapter, Buller denounces the use of traditional strategic planning methods, noting their limited long-term applicability. He clearly identifies the lack of details in mission statements and the stifling of innovation in strategic plans that outline the foci of an institution. Instead, he offers the use of a strategic compass to establish greater foresight and innovation.

In the final chapters of the book (6–10), Buller further reframes the role of leadership in change processes by arguing that leaders should create cultures of innovation as renovators, borrowers, combinators, planners, and redefiners. Leaders need not be charismatic, transformational, or even extroverted; rather, leaders must be surgeons and gardeners focusing on helping people “. . . come to grips with the idea of change, see the benefits in it, and embrace a culture of innovation, not just a culture that endures innovation” (217). He lays the groundwork for creating an innovative, people-focused culture through the use of positive psychology techniques, such as Seligman’s ABC Method, which aims to shift organizational culture from a cultivator of “innovation killers” to one of “innovation midwives” (148–49). This section of the book is replete with examples of leaders and campuses with innovative cultures and ways in which they were able to successfully navigate change from proactive, reactive, and interactive perspectives.

Throughout the book, Buller provides solid advice for those, primarily at the administrative level, who are seeking to promote and facilitate change. That being said, there is room for further consideration of the complexities and limitations of cultural change beyond the vignettes offered. While the Ten Lenses, STEEPLED, and ABC Method approaches may provide good information to
change agents, the challenge in higher education is finding cohesion and collaboration among individuals in order to make a reality the changes suggested by these environmental scans. Further, many of the examples and complementary discussions focus on faculty and administrators, not other constituent groups on campus, such as student affairs professionals, staff, and students. We challenge the uniform definition of faculty as more and more institutions are experiencing greater numbers of contingent faculty, who outnumber their tenure-line or tenured colleagues. We suggest that organizational change will require different considerations when large numbers of faculty and other constituents are disenfranchised from campus operations (i.e., faculty governance). Finally, for a department chair or other academic leader who bridges the administrative and faculty ranks, the multifocused advice and models near the edge of being too cumbersome to adopt (given the other demands on time, the nature of faculty work, and their dual role straddling both academic and administrative worlds) or too difficult to implement (given the political realities of often resource-poor, siloed, and disparate higher education units).

Buller’s purpose is to provide solid advice for higher education leaders as they face an uncertain and evolving landscape. He argues that leaders can temper the change-averse tendencies of higher education by “devoting their energy to changing the culture, not mandating new vision,” in order to create “an academic culture that responds well to each new challenge . . . capitalize[s] on evolving possibilities when times are good, and demonstrate[s] resilience when times are bad” (xii). Given that higher education is a people-driven process, his suggested approach is practical, and frankly, refreshing. As he suggests in his conclusion: Trust the people you work with, empower them and recognize their efforts to be creative, and the change that will result will be far more spectacular than can be possible even with the most well-developed strategic plan.

The Leadership Identity Journey: An Artful Reflection

Carol A. Mullen, Fenwick W. English, and William A. Kealy
Rowman & Littlefield, 2014
146 pp., $23.95 (plus $5.00 s/h)

The Leadership Identity Journey is packed with insights and reflections that provided as much meaning to my own academic leadership experience as anything I have ever read. It is not light reading. It both shares and calls for artful reflection. The title is accurately descriptive; leadership is a journey, and examining our own personal leadership journey allows us to better understand who we have become and also to recognize our responsibility to give back, to share our discoveries with those who haven’t yet made their journey or who are having one different from our own. Such sharing is usually done by telling stories. “Leaders like stories,” the authors write. “Leaders use stories to make a point—to drive an agenda, to get people to listen, and to inspire.”

The Leadership Identity Journey draws on the work of American mythologist Joseph Campbell who wrote The Hero with a Thousand Faces. First published in 1949, Campbell’s book about heroic epics is reported to have provided considerable inspiration for George Lucas’s classic Star Wars stories. Campbell’s extensive research about the mythologies of world cultures reveals common storylines for heroes of all kinds that begin with a “call,” which might simply consist of standing in front of; and thinking about knocking on, a “leadership-wanted” door. Anyone who is recruited through that door steps into unfamiliar territory, and if they’re lucky, there will be one or more people there to assist them (think Obi-Wan Kenobi and Yoda). The new domain is characterized by trials, often consisting of the behavior of others, as well as one’s own attitudes. Successful hero-leaders not only overcome these trials but become adept at sharing their new-found awareness and at helping others to perform at their best. “Leadership is ultimately about teaching,” the authors say.

The authors report the results of their unique and creative research wherein they gathered and listened to a select group of practicing educational leaders. These practitioners were allowed to react to a series of visual prompts (photographs mostly of the human face or of people participating in life-journey activities). Reactions to the visual prompts provided insight into the practitioners’ identities and how they perceived their work as a journey.

In reporting their research and discussing their results, the authors:

• Considered the delicate line between mythology, parable, and religion or spirituality—all of which provide meaning to life
• Discussed the concept of “fit” and how great leaders are those who succeed in sharing their life with a large number of followers
• Probed deeply the role of emotions in leaders’ lives and decision making, as well as the fact that “leadership is emotional work”
• Confirmed the necessity of compassion and ethics in leadership
• Challenged the trend of striving for educational efficiency, which can easily bypass artistry and underserve students with special needs

I am reviewing this book at the end of a forty-three-year academic career; retirement is upon me in a few months. I am pleased with the way the book has helped me bring closure to twenty-five years of academic leadership. I am now better able to accept my failures and defeats as valuable life-enriching experiences. The authors quote Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski who said, “Wounding is an inevitable part of leadership; it might have to be considered part of the job.” All those who are senior academic leaders with wounds like mine will understand why these words stirred my emotions and also provided comfort.

This is not to suggest that in order to benefit from reading this book one should be a senior. In fact, the opposite is true. Harvard Business School’s Clayton Christensen uses his last day of class to interact with his young MBA students about how they can be sure they will find happiness in their upcoming careers. A few years ago his colleagues encour-
aged him to share his classroom insights more widely; in 2010 he published an article in Harvard Business Review titled “How Will You Measure Your Life?” Within only a few months it had become HBR’s most popular article ever. Christensen wrote, “I’ve concluded that the metric by which God will assess my life isn’t dollars but the individual people whose lives I’ve touched. I think that’s the way it will work for us all. Don’t worry about the level of individual prominence you have achieved; worry about the individuals you have helped become better people.”

It is my experience that Christensen got it right; helping others along the way is what makes any kind of journey worthwhile. Not just a few times have I visited with fellow senior educators who have said, “Oh I wish I had…” and then told me how, almost too late in their career, they had become aware of something, usually related to interactions with others, that would have made an improvement in both their journey as well as the measuring of it at the end.

Whether you’re a veteran administrator, or a younger person only contemplating getting into academic leadership, you’ll want to read and reflect on this book. You’ll be helped to know what to expect as typical for someone who accepted the leadership call. You’ll know to watch for and learn from your mentors. You’ll become aware of the universality of significant leadership-journey challenges. You’ll be better prepared for setbacks and wounds to your self-esteem. You’ll be inspired to both accept and surmount challenges and to spot opportunities to provide assistance and comfort to others. Best of all, you’ll be better equipped to enjoy the journey.

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References