

 CASES FROM THE FIELD

Managing Change in a New Enrollment Management Culture

By Diane K. Walliser

SEM leaders continually challenge their teams and institutions to implement changes to student systems and processes. Often, these efforts do not go as planned. As institutions scramble to increase enrollments, streamline workflows, and improve the student experience, their success depends on their ability to manage organizational change in the midst of complex cultures. Flannigan (2016) found that leadership and culture impact the effectiveness of SEM organizations and that leadership behavior has the ability to significantly influence SEM and organizational cultures. This article describes how culture and leadership impacted my own work in launching a new enrollment management division.

Change Management Theory

In thinking about how to influence change at my new institution, I reflected on the many projects I had already led. Two authors influenced my thinking most significantly, and I realized that they addressed change not only from a project perspective but also from a people perspective. Early in my career, I learned to use the Six Sigma project tool “DMAIC” (define, measure, analyze, improve, control). The approach is primarily about project management and does not address the people element of projects. DMAIC is an effective tool, but I still faced surprising roadblocks—caused mostly by staff resistance.

Jeanie Daniel Duck (2001) introduced me to the human element of change. She identified three essentials:

- have a strategy that you believe in passionately;
- have a good management plan for execution; and
- realize that managing the emotional and behavioral issues of people is a critical component of effective change (Duck 2001).

I had learned the hard way that the best-laid plans can go awry when staff will not let go of the old way of doing things. Duck’s change lifecycle helped me see how projects can get complicated as they scale up and as more people get involved. This can lead to conflicts and project failures. If the project leader fails to identify what is going wrong and to address the issues, staff morale will flag, and the project’s success will be in jeopardy (2001).

While Duck helped me realize the importance of managing the emotional and behavioral issues in the change process, Jeffrey Hiatt’s *ADKAR—A Model for Change in Business, Government, and Our Community* (2006) provided more detail about how to implement change. (ADKAR stands for awareness, desire, knowledge, ability, and reinforcement and represents Prosci’s formula for the change process.) Prosci Sponsor training provided a detailed manual on managing change. In examining the ADKAR model, two things stood out: First, every project evolves from the current state through transition to the future state. This made me realize that often, too much

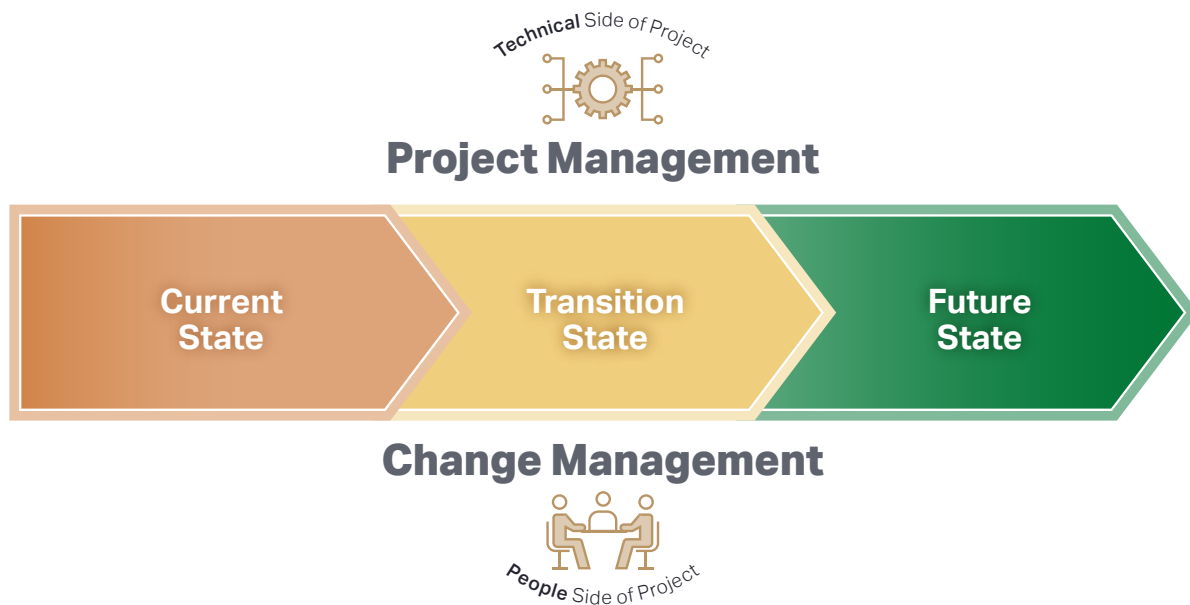


FIGURE 1 ► Project Management and Change Management (Prosci 2014)

focus is put on the current state and the future state; the transition state is often under-emphasized. Figure 1 shows that this process includes both project management and change management and that both are equally important. At a former institution, I led a technology conversion project that was phased in over two years. That was the first time I worked on a large-scale project that had change management built into the planning process. There was no doubt that building change management into the planning created additional work, but the results were more robust and predictable than they would have been otherwise.

The second element of ADKAR that impacted my thinking was that every person involved in the project had to go through the three-step process as it related to their individual role (Prosci 2014). Structuring our change process in this way allowed us to maintain focus on outcomes. It increased planning and implementation time but also increased the project's chance of success. (See Figure 2.)

New Division, New Challenges

So how does one tackle change at a new institution? Having moved from the midwest to New York City, I had to consider the culture of the institution as well as those of the region and the community. My new college had experienced lots of successes and had enjoyed many years of healthy enrollments. The results were positive but had been gained the hard way, having relied on lots of people and paper processes. As the leader of a new division, I quickly discovered there was little institutional knowledge about enrollment management. Staff were accustomed to a top-down management approach and had not been involved in decision making. "Tell me what to do" was a common response when I asked staff to help with a project or a problem. Empowering staff to think on their own took a lot of encouragement and time.

Peasant Theory

Our admissions director was brought in last year to help make our systems current and to create a proactive recruitment strategy. In trying to understand our culture, this professional of twenty-plus years related the

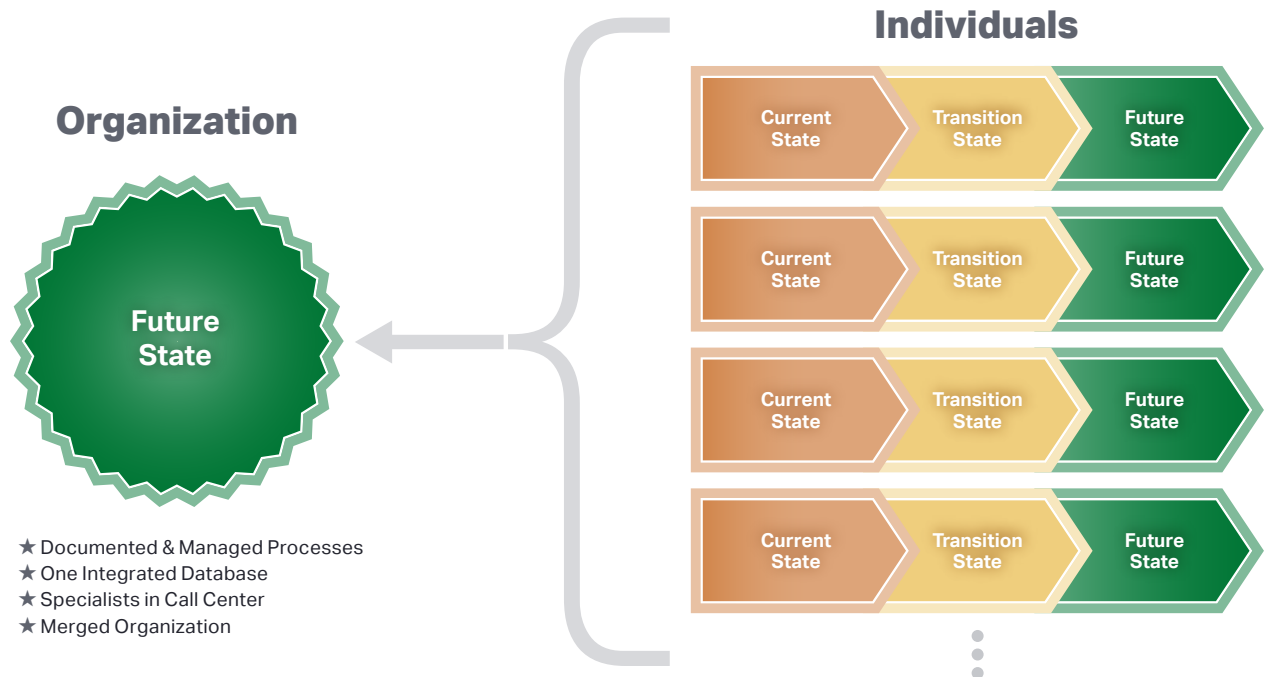


FIGURE 2 ➤ Impact on Employees in a Change Process (Prosci 2014)

change process to what she had learned about peasant theory and her Italian ancestors. She shared how peasants had viewed their world in southern Italy:

- They believed they were subjects of history, not makers of it.
- They believed they were powerless to change their environment, so there was no reason to take action.
- They were in favor of a regime that would maintain order with a strong hand.
- They lived in denial of the hope of progress and of systems (Cancian 1961).

Cancian (1961) also noted that peasants were not unaware of modern processes. He shared a particular example related to their knowledge that human and animal waste could aid the growth of crops. Encouraged to use this fertilizer to improve their crops' growth, "the peasant usually argued that it would tire his mule too much to carry it to his land" (Cachian 1961, 9).

It was ironic that our work culture was similar to the world view of peasants long ago. How could we shift

employees' thinking and get our teams to do more than "just plant?" It was clear that we had to challenge them to think about how they could change their practices to "improve their crop." Most important, we wanted staff to know that their actions made a difference and that their help was vital in creating a better environment for students and staff.

Starting With a Plan

In contemplating how to reset the thinking of our work teams, I knew I had to develop a plan with which our team could connect and toward which it could work. I spent a lot of time seeking to understand the college's strategic goals and to identify students' needs. It was also important that our teams understand the broader context so they could appreciate how vital their work was to students' overall experience. To achieve this, I created a student experience model. (See Figure 3.) This helped our teams understand that enrollment management was more than admissions and that all of our efforts must work together from start to finish so students can reach their educational goals. This model was also

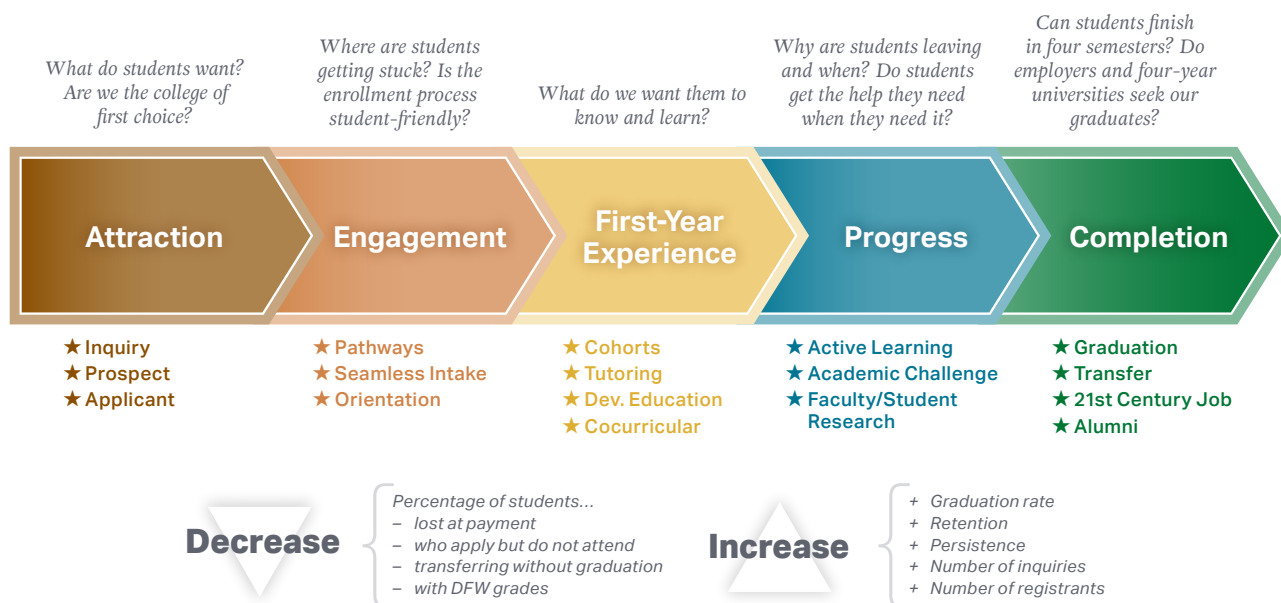


FIGURE 3 ► Student Progression Model

used as the framework for our college-wide strategic enrollment management plan.

With a clear picture of what we wanted to accomplish, our divisional leadership team focused on three goals to help us improve the student experience:

- Enhance recruitment and outreach.
- Improve the student onboarding experience.
- Streamline enrollment operations.

Everything we do in our division is connected to these goals. We share them with our teams at monthly forums. When planning new initiatives, teams must show how they connect to these divisional goals. New staff positions must be justified in a way that enables us to help meet these goals. Employee performance is rewarded for work in these areas, and upcoming goals are established around these goals. The goals were translated into an ambitious to-do list:

- Expand the call/contact center for phone and virtual traffic.
- Build a one-stop center for walk-in traffic.
- Implement a new admissions application and processing workflow.

- Implement a new student onboarding system.
- Reformulate the college's recruitment strategy.
- Develop a comprehensive student communication plan.
- Implement document imaging and workflow for financial aid and the registrar's office.

Assessing Our Teams

Our next goal was to map out a plan to reach our goals and actively engage our teams in the process. Our leadership team was ready, but were our work teams? Did they have the skills and the mindset to support our lofty goals? Did we have the right people in the right jobs? I asked each of our divisional directors to evaluate their work teams. What skills were missing? What kind of training was needed? Who were the rock stars? After each team was evaluated, our divisional team went through the same assessment for the division. After a long series of discussions, our divisional directors came up with a plan to leverage our resources in the best way possible. Our financial aid and registrar's offices were well-managed and functioning at high levels, but other areas were struggling. We used our high-performing

teams to help coach and mentor those that were underperforming. Rather than each director focusing solely on the work of one unit, they all focused on the goals of our division. Without this sharing of resources, open discussions about our deficits, and agreement regarding how to attain our goals, the change process would have failed before it had begun.

We learned that very little formal training was in place for our teams. We put together a cross-functional work team to survey training needs and to make recommendations regarding what was needed. The committee got off to a slow start. I met often with the team chair, who was having difficulty getting the team to engage in real solutions. They weren't confident sharing ideas and were afraid to make recommendations for the whole division. We were fighting against a culture in which staff did not believe their opinions mattered. Creating a safe place for them to own and present their ideas was a real challenge. With a lot of patience and nudging, we eventually overcame the resistance. The team has since surveyed staff needs and now is mapping out a staff development plan and organizing staff appreciation events.

Following are some specific examples of how we are progressing with our divisional to-do list. While all of our initiatives are important and include work plans, we have made the most progress on our call center expansion and one-stop planning. Consider particularly how teams worked through organizational change in these specific areas.

Start Small

This year we are launching a new one-stop center. To start, we decided to close our admissions service counter and merge its functions with those of our information desk. The intent was to enable admissions staff to catch up on processing and to have the one-stop center begin phase one of implementation. What started out as a simple first step quickly turned into long lines and chaos. Staff didn't have the system access or training they needed to respond efficiently to admissions inquiries, and we had unexpected staff turnover. The enrollment services director focused on the goals and worked side by side with the team, coaching them along the

way. It was a rough couple of weeks, but in the end, staff were confident in their new skills and supervisors and had a realistic view of the challenges of bringing a one-stop center to full scale.

Another step in preparing for the one-stop shop was to expand the call center, which initially responded only to admissions calls. Staff were able to answer 96 percent of the calls. Other departments were not doing so well. For example, during peak season, financial aid was able to answer only 38 percent of incoming calls. Expanding the call center to respond to all divisional calls would constitute a significant first step in building our knowledge base in order to ultimately create the content training manual for the one-stop shop.

We put a plan in place for the division and hoped to have the expanded call center fully functional by the start of the fall semester. Midway through the project, the manager abruptly announced that the call center would not be fully up and running until the first of the year. We had no idea of any struggles that would cause such a delay. We were so focused on achieving our goal that we had missed the subtle hints from the call center manager that the project was encountering some challenges. Call center staff were struggling particularly with the complexity of financial aid information, and training was not proceeding as planned. Staff were overwhelmed, resulting in illness, absence from work, and staff turnover.

The enrollment management team spent time with the call center manager to better understand the challenges. We validated the call center issues, reengaged the call center team, and reordered our priorities. Financial aid narrowed the scope of the information agents were required to learn, and new technology was put in place to provide operators with greater access to the answers to financial aid FAQs. Ultimately, we met our goal, but certainly not as we had planned. Our team persisted through the challenges, identified better solutions, and found a way to meet goals without compromising desired outcomes.

The call center's modest start resulted in some early wins. Abandoned call rates decreased by more than half in the past year. The team answered an additional

27,000 calls during the expansion, and the call answer rate is currently 92 percent, which meets global call center standards of excellence. The center is moving to a new location and is expanding its staffing from 13 to 29 operators.

Building Momentum

Building on the success and confidence gained in the call center expansion, planning continues for our one-stop student center. We have a plan for how the center will be designed, built, and staffed. We have been communicating planning timelines with staff for the past year, and the feedback has been very positive. In the next couple of months, we will be asking members of admissions, financial aid, testing, and the registrar's office to apply for positions in the one-stop shop. As we announced the process for selecting the one-stop team, staff began to share their concerns. An important next step will be to work individually with each staff member involved in the change to pinpoint areas of concern. This will take time but is a critical step in positively engaging team members. Hiatt (2006, 90–94) offers some suggestions for how to work through employee resistance without adversely impacting the overall project:

- **Identify the barrier point to the change.** With regard to the delay in opening the call center, we needed to find out what the issues were and to address them appropriately. Our project was at risk until we reassessed the situation and adjusted our plan.
- **Listen, and understand objectives.** We are committed to holding monthly forums to talk about divisional goals. Questions do not always surface during these meetings, but often, staff will reach out to me or to their supervisors after the meeting to seek clarification. Staff are beginning to engage in conversations about the future; this is a critical part of motivating staff to change.
- **Remove obstacles.** Part of the delay in opening the call center was because staff were struggling with the steep learning curve relative to financial aid content. After hearing feedback, the director of financial aid trimmed the training content to the top ten frequently asked questions. This made it easier for the

call center team to learn the financial aid content and enabled them to answer the majority of questions callers were asking.

- **Make a personal appeal.** Through staff forums and one-on-one meetings, I share my vision and commitment to improving the student experience. I work hard to emphasize the important role that everyone on the team has in making our goals a reality.
- **Negotiate; find the win-win.** In motivating staff to move to the one-stop shop, we tried to focus on their professional goals and to offer new roles that would help them move toward attainment of those goals. While we were not able to offer promotions, we were able to offer new work opportunities that would increase the likelihood of advancement in the future.
- **Provide simple, clear choices and consequences.** Some employees are not anxious for change and are not seeking to move to the one-stop center; they need to understand that even if they stay back and work in operational roles, their jobs will still change.
- **Hold employees accountable.** New expectations are being mapped out for the one-stop and the operational teams. Staff members are beginning to understand that they are expected to be actively engaged in helping us reach our goals; there are no seats on the sideline.
- **Convert the strongest dissenters.** While our first instinct is to avoid the naysayers, they are the ones with whom we particularly need to connect. Until we understand their real concerns and fears, we can't move forward in a way that will be most beneficial for students.

The list of projects to complete is long, but by taking small steps, our teams are learning how to manage change successfully. Despite the stress, cost, and time delays of unexpected challenges, we fight the urge to retreat to our old ways of doing things. Our confidence in managing projects and change continues to grow. As Winston Churchill said, "When you are going through hell, keep on going." In the heat of change, our natural instinct is to retreat; instead, we must keep on mov-

ing. In the end, we will realize the intended benefits of change. We may even experience additional benefits, like a stronger, smarter and resilient work team whose members are ready and willing to tackle new challenges.

About the Author



Diane Walleser

Diane Walleser is Vice President for Enrollment Management at Borough of Manhattan Community College, which serves 27,000 students as part of the City University of New York system. Walleser oversees the offices of admissions, testing, financial aid, the registrar, and enrollment services.

Previously, she served as Vice President of Enrollment Management and Student Services at Columbus State Community College (Ohio), where she

oversaw programs and services to increase the access and success of the college's 24,000 students. Walleser also spent ten years at Madison Area Technical College (Wisconsin), where she served in various roles—including Vice President of Enrollment Management and Marketing—at the nine-campus, 40,000-student school. In 2013, Walleser was awarded AACRAO's SEM Award of Excellence for her leadership in strategic enrollment management at two-year institutions. Prior to beginning her work in higher edu-

cation, Walleser spent fifteen years in private industry in finance and brand management leadership roles.

Walleser has an Ed.D. in higher education leadership from Edgewood College (Wisconsin); an M.B.A. from the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, a bachelor of science in business administration from Viterbo University (Wisconsin), and an associate of applied science in finance from Western Technical College (Wisconsin).

References

- Cancian, F. 1961. The Southern Italian peasant: world view and political behavior. *Anthropological Quarterly*. 34(1): 1–18.
- Duck, J. 2001. *The Change Monster*. New York: Three Rivers Press.
- Flanigan, M. 2016. Diagnosing and changing organizational culture in strategic enrollment management. *Strategic Enrollment Management Quarterly*. 4(3): 117–129.
- Hiatt, J. 2006. *ADKAR: A Model for Change in Business, Government and Our Community*. Loveland, CO: Prosci Learning Center Publications.
- Prosci Inc. 2014. *Change Management Sponsor Program*. Loveland, CO.