

 VIEW FROM THE TOP

Leading and Developing a SEM Unit and Plan

By John Haller

New leaders working to launch a successful SEM unit will often be bombarded with multiple priorities—some of them strategic and others operational and needing immediate attention. It can be overwhelming to build a unit for the long term while addressing short-term objectives. It can feel a bit like building a plane while flying a plane. So where is the best place to begin?

The process of building a successful SEM unit begins by assessing and working to align the leadership team behind a common vision tied to institutional priorities and the mission. Next, new leaders should work to implement a data-informed culture within their unit. The subsequent step involves working to implement a SEM plan by engaging the leadership team and unit. This should happen after conducting a listening tour in the community and capturing feedback based on institutional priorities tied to the mission. New leaders should guide their unit through an organization lifecycle to achieve the desired vision as documented in the SEM plan.

Lead and Assess Your Team

New SEM leaders will likely inherit a leadership team within the SEM unit. Historically, the inherited team will have a level of affinity for, and will operate under a paradigm of, the predecessor's philosophy, values, and

priorities. For example, some on the team may share the sentiment that the work has always been done a certain way so why would someone change that? Others, looking to make a good impression, will agree with everything the new leader says. Neither of these approaches are constructive. Of course, leaders are looking for early adopters to their approach, but they should also pay attention to those who also have their own insights and experiences to contribute. It is the leader's job to assess the team while working to align them with new philosophy, values, and SEM priorities. Having a clearly-defined leadership approach when entering a new engagement helps to galvanize a team around common objectives.

A good start is to meet with each area leader in the SEM unit to understand their philosophy, values, and priorities for operating their respective area. Active listening and being open minded as they share out is critical. Ultimately, leaders are looking to assess how individuals match the new leadership approach and values. A diversity of perspectives is important in developing a trusting relationship. Leaders should be looking for individuals who share their values, as this will lead to developing trust and allowing for delegation of work. (Not being able to delegate is a recipe for long-term challenges). Leaders will not be able to be all places at

all times and having to dedicate more meaningful time to one individual will be at the expense of others.

Developing cohesion on the leadership team will not happen overnight. Alignment and building trust are part of a process mandating a vision your team can support, where everyone knows the important part they play in achieving the vision. The vision should be in line with the institutional mission, and institutional priorities should be clearly communicated by the senior administration. In a SEM environment, working to coalesce the team around successful student outcomes can facilitate team unity.

Most institutional missions emphasize “successful student outcomes.” The phrase speaks to the fact that every SEM unit plays an important part in student outcomes, from admissions to financial aid to student success. Via the literature, “David Kalsbeek (2013), defined SEM as ‘A comprehensive approach to integrating all of the University’s programs, practices, policies, and planning related to achieving the optimal recruitment, retention and graduation of students’” (Hossler and Bontrager 2015, 5). Admitting students who are likely to succeed academically and personally, awarding financial aid so that students are more likely to persist, and backstopping this with support engagements and interventions works to ensure successful student outcomes. This is the first step in creating a vision that will lead to developing a successful SEM unit.

Foster a Data-Informed Culture

After communicating the vision and aligning the team, the next step in developing a successful SEM unit is fostering a data-informed culture. For example, if part of the vision is to grow student demand by increasing application numbers, ensuring a high conversion rate from those who visit campus to those who apply is important. The author worked at an institution where after asking a question about the percent of students who apply after visiting campus, the answer received was, “We think a lot.” A more data-informed answer would be, “85 percent of students who visit campus apply.” In another case, if student persistence is a priority, mechanisms need to be in place to help understand why students leave the

institution. Anecdotes like, “we think it is financial” or “we think it is academic” are not grounded in data. Again, a more data informed answer would be, “70 percent of students withdraw for academic reasons.” While quantitative metrics are important, qualitative themes are also important. If survey work or focus groups find that common themes emerge over and over, this is important data to supplement the quantitative data.

Working to establish a data-informed culture is essential in developing a SEM unit. For instance, the admissions area can assess opportunities for improvement by understanding inquiry-to-applicant conversion. Are there lagging demographic or geographic areas? How productive are the on- and off-campus recruitment programs? How efficient is the applicant review process? Are staff tracking metrics tied to the institutional mission or priorities? Examples include high school academic performance, strength of curriculum, math readiness, standardized testing, and rank in class. Post admission, what is the yield rate segmented by demographic or geographic areas? Assessing melt pre-matriculation by academic, financial, demographic, and geographic areas is also important.

Within financial aid, understanding the socioeconomic profile of applicants and admits is critical as it impacts how financial aid is awarded to attract students who are institutional priorities. This also plays into admitted student yield assessment. It allows for crafting a financial aid strategy so institutional aid allocations via either merit- or need-based aid are optimized, based on student enrollment behavior, resulting in desired outcomes. Data analysis also allows leaders to assess institutional aid relative to any federal or state financial aid students may receive.

Prior to matriculation, data analysis is critical in assessing if students are intending to enroll. Tracking student class registrations, completed financial aid documentation, or other onboarding requirements, such as health insurance forms, is helpful.

Within the student lifecycle, being data informed involves understanding why students withdraw from the institution. Also, understanding which students are more at risk for attrition allows leaders to create inter-

vention programs to address why students withdraw. This could be tied to financial, academic, personal, or other administrative factors. For example, if data shows a meaningful population of students withdraw because of poor first-term academic performance, implementing a second-term enrichment program can help (Haller and Plummer 2024).

In building a SEM unit, engaging the leadership team by asking these questions, developing tracking metrics, and discussing them regularly will help cultivate a data-informed culture. Depending on the rigor of analytics used in the past, this may take some time. Initially, tracking those metrics of real institutional priority, tied to the mission, is the place to begin, knowing it is a building process.

Develop a SEM Plan

Engaging the leadership team and the entire unit in a SEM planning process is the next step and helps capture buy-in and support of the plan, as everyone plays a part in the process. Ultimately the leadership team is providing a vision and influencing the plan. However, rather than designing a plan from the top down, leaders should bring the SEM unit together in a retreat format that involves everyone and focuses on the institutional mission, priorities, and the vision created.

Prior to the unit retreat, it is important, as a leader, to capture feedback by meeting with senior administration to understand broad-based institutional priorities. Presumably these will tie to the mission. Conducting a listening tour with enrollment stakeholders (those in finance, the academy, student life, and IT, for example) will help shape the priorities to bring back to the unit in developing a SEM plan. Also, assessing external environment factors tied to demographic shifts, financial stressors, and changes in the political landscape should be considered in the context of formulating the SEM plan.

In the unit retreat, the team should be organized into different areas, so people have the chance to work with others they may not know. This approach also results in relationship- and trust-building within the SEM unit while pursuing the overall objective of developing a plan.

Leaders should begin with a general prompt or question. For example, where do you want to be in five years? Do you want to grow? Get stronger students? Improve student persistence? Each of these prompts should tie to the institutional mission or priorities. Each different area can work to create a list of actionable items designed to achieve the institutional mission or priorities. The areas should focus on ideas the SEM unit can either control or influence, regardless of cost. No matter how “out there” it might seem, every idea has value. Addressing current pain points or processes contributing to the institutional mission or priorities is a great place to start.

With the wealth of ideas and information from the SEM unit, the next step is to assemble a leadership team and consider the initiatives as a group. All ideas should be put on the table in order to look for common themes, threads, or intersecting ideas. At this point, it's important to prioritize each item relative to impact and cost. In addition, the leadership team should identify gaps or other items to include in the plan (perhaps those raised in the listening tour with external enrollment stakeholders). Each suggestion should be evaluated and assigned a “letter grade.” The most frequently-referenced options having a meaningful, financially-feasible effect get an “A” grade, and so on.

Some ideas will be too costly to take on, while others will be outliers and will not impact the objectives. Those can be discarded until the most impactful ideas are whittled down to a clear SEM plan. It can be beneficial to store those discarded ideas and suggestions for a later time. In the future, things may progress or change to a point where those ideas are feasible. The long list of ideas narrowed to a handful of important, relevant, financially-feasible, and actionable items, become the priorities of the SEM plan.

Manage and Lead Change

As referenced above, building a successful SEM unit is a process. This process is grounded in the life cycle of an organization model (see Figure 1, on page 6), defined by psychologist Bruce Tuckman (1965) in his paper, “Developmental Sequence of Small Groups.” The author

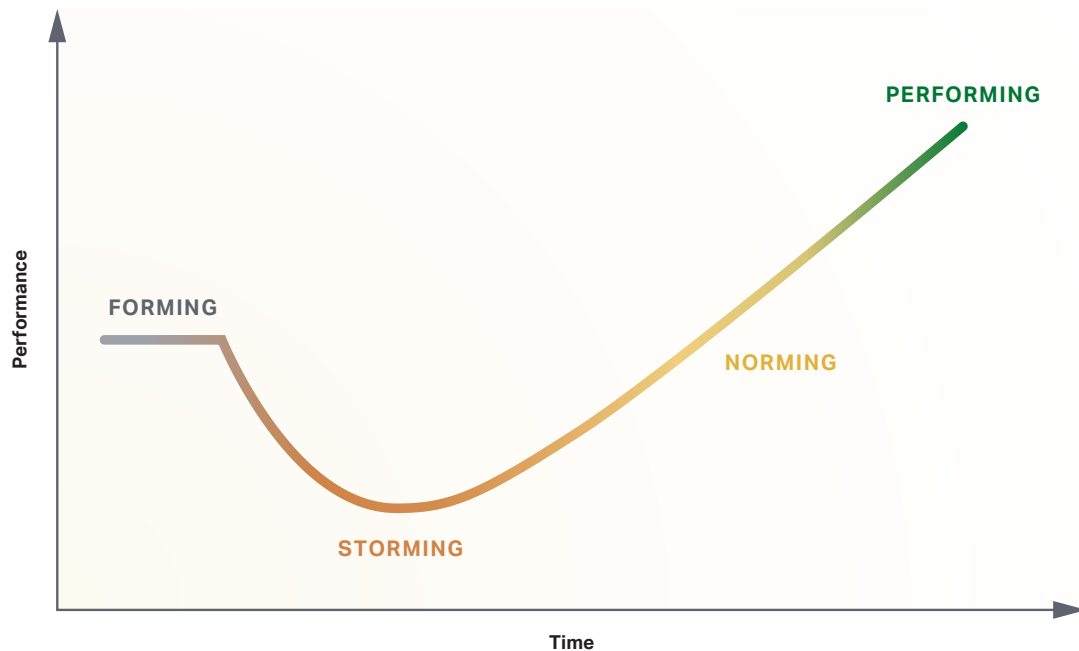


FIGURE 1 ► Life Cycle of an Organization Model

experienced this phenomenon at two institutions developing SEM units.

In the *forming* phase, the team is assembling—getting to know each other and assessing new work styles and how the team functions together. Performance is consistent with the past, as the team begins to operate with a new vision and in a new culture while working to execute the SEM plan. In developing the unit, it is important to share this model with the leadership team early on to level set expectations. The team will experience each of these phases knowing the new leader is approaching work differently in a change process.

The *storming* phase will be the most unsettling for the leadership team and the most trying for a new leader. This is where the vision for executing the SEM plan and the data-informed culture is critical. The team will be approaching work in different ways. While the leader has communicated and shared the Tuckman model, individuals may encounter or feel a sense of denial as they do work differently than in the past. Overall team performance decreases, as shown in the model, as some resist change, making it harder to take hold. This is where new leadership will be tested, resilience will

need to shine, and assessment of individuals on the leadership team is most essential.

In the book *Good to Great*, Collins (2001) described the importance of leadership teams in getting, “the right people on the bus” (41). As referenced in step one, individuals who share values and align with the vision will adapt to the changes while working to execute the SEM plan. Those who do not, should be offered opportunities to get “off the bus” according to Collins (2001, 41). This is a difficult decision to make, but not doing so will result in having to micromanage or spend too much time focused on a particular problem area versus driving the bus. Note, organizations not able to move past *storming*, eventually fail.

Successfully moving the SEM unit out of *storming* into *norming*, where overall performance improves, involves ensuring the leadership team is aligned with the vision while working to achieve the institutional mission and priorities based on the SEM plan. This is where the changes made in establishing a data-informed approach begin to take hold. In the *norming* phase, as the SEM plan is executed, leaders should expect to see continuous improvement in achieving objectives.

In reaching the final phase of Tuckman's model, *performing*, the SEM unit will begin to achieve more exponential achievements in performance. While celebrating successes is important, the unit leader also needs to provide paths for professional growth for the leadership team. Engaging them in the execution of the SEM plan will help, but as the initiatives are achieved, some team members will ask, "What's next?" For instance, the author had a rising star professional who continued to ask for more work and responsibility. Ultimately, the author was able to promote the individual by integrating two SEM areas that meaningfully intersected. This led to even further performance achievements for the unit.

At this point, leaders will return to the planning process with the leadership team and unit to build the next SEM plan. Institutional priorities may have changed, or new institutional leadership may be in place, resulting in new objectives. Environmental factors tied to changing student demographics, changes in federal policy, or environmental factors like institutional finances may result in new priorities. This will provide leaders, their team, and the SEM unit with opportunities to take on new challenges. Some of these challenges may involve

leadership team members taking on expanded or different roles, providing paths for professional growth. In essence, the lifecycle of an organization will repeat as a leader reinvents the SEM unit by taking on new priorities and challenges.

Conclusion

Developing a successful SEM unit in higher education is not for the faint of heart. The external and internal environment challenges all mandate a SEM unit aligned and fully engaged to execute a plan grounded in the mission based on institutional priorities. Assessing your team while working to galvanize the unit in developing a plan is the first step. Taking a data-informed approach to measure important outcomes is the next step. This is followed by engaging the unit in SEM planning tied to the mission and institutional priorities. New leaders need to be patient and persistent as the SEM unit works through the organizational change lifecycle. It is fundamental for new leaders to bring their teams fully into the new vision in order to focus on executing a SEM plan that will achieve successful outcomes.

References

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