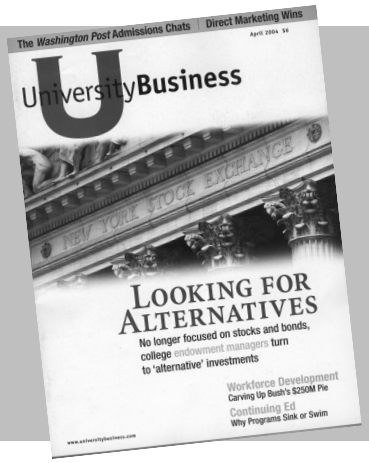

Today's new leader draws from a *repertoire* of leadership styles to promote decision-making.

Originally Published in University Business Magazine. Used by Permission.

When Consensus Is Not the Answer

By Barbara Kaufman, Ph.D.

Even as the economy improves, cuts to public higher education are likely to continue. Of course, this only exacerbates the financial crisis that was brought on by drying-up state revenues and heavy losses in endowments due to over-reliance on the stock market. What does all this have to do with consensus gathering? Simply this: In this financially pressured environment, it borders on irresponsibility to believe that consensus decision-making can always produce a win-win outcome of general agreement or precise equality in each and every decision. And though traditional academic leaders often exhibit a finely tuned, collaborative, collegial style (fostering a culture where conflict and risk are avoided), *today's* environment requires a new type of academic leader. That "new" leader is a hands-on change agent who draws from a *repertoire* of leadership styles to promote decision-making that capitalizes on opportunities and advances the institution.

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CHANGING THE STATUS QUO

The problem with this new leadership style is that many institutions still retain at least pockets of a culture that focuses on reaching consensus and maintaining the status quo. Symptoms may include "untouchable" programs (sacred cows) or search committees that sunset and reconvene month after month, unable to reach a consensus on the right candidate while a vital position remains unfilled. Underneath these symptoms may be an unwillingness (or perhaps an inability) to test assumptions about strategic directions, programs, fundraising strategies, and infrastructure.

When Alexander Gonzalez became president of **California State University, Sacramento** in July 2003, he found a status quo culture not unlike the ones we've just described.

"The previous president had been here for 19 years," says Gonzalez, "and although it was not consciously articulated, the main objective had become maintaining the status quo. The campus had lost its momentum and people were disappointed and disenchanted."

Fortunately, while Gonzalez recognized that consensus is the desired norm in higher education, he also knew that an effective leader had to be a change agent. "The [higher education] environment has changed dramatically," he says. "As the **University of Phoenix** and other proprietary institutions have shown us, higher education is big business. It's good for the country, the economy, and the individual, when we open up educational opportunities for everyone. With that as a basic premise, views of higher education must change." But more important than consensus, says Gonzalez, is "enabling people to develop on their own, have a say in what they do, and contribute to decisions. A leader can strive to approach consensus," he says, "but ultimately has to be the catalyst that moves the institution to the next level."

Wade Hobgood, chancellor of **North Carolina School of the Arts,** agrees. "Consensus is welcome and desirable, but 100 percent buy-in is an unachievable ideal," he maintains. "We cannot rely on old patterns of decision-making, because the rules have changed. Higher education must be much more responsive to, and participate in, external matters like economic development, cultural diversity issues, and technology integration." He adds that while change is not a natural process in an academic environment, "it is essential in today's climate."

In fact, in the four years of Hobgood's tenure as chancellor, NCSA has undergone substantial change. "We've made significant changes in the behavior, attitudes, and professionalism of the institution, and in the way we interact with the campus, local, state, and national community," he says. From an institution that was primarily internally oriented prior to his arrival, the school has shifted to an external orientation with a resulting greater understanding, support, and involvement from legislators, donors, and individuals with diverse needs and agendas. It has become entrepreneurial in creating business partnerships with corporations and financial institutions. The board of trustees has not only become proactive; its involvement, says Hobgood, has increased by 100 percent.

And at Cal State-Sacramento, Gonzalez says that one of his first steps as a change agent was to communicate with the campus and the community, listening carefully and giving feedback. This allowed him to develop a vision for the university as a flagship campus, appropriate to its location in the state's capital–a resulting vision, he reports, that resonated with the institution's various and diverse cohorts,

and generated real excitement. In his interactions with the community, for instance, Gonzalez learned that the campus was a "best-kept secret" in Sacramento. Like many higher ed leaders of such "secrets," Gonzalez had to set the model for getting the word out. In this day and age, he says, "viewing *any* higher education institution as independent and separate is very myopic." He now exploits every opportunity to talk about the university.

His second step was to develop a new physical master plan for the campus that would recognize the campus' potential, and include a dramatic increase in student housing–another move that would have a profound effect on the campus community. In addition, Gonzalez had inherited $62 million worth of deferred maintenance. But rather than rehabilitate the old buildings (as called for in a previous master plan), he decided to replace them with new buildings around the periphery, only four or five stories high. That way, the campus could be "opened up" to the community, and offer wide-open green spaces for campus and community constituents. "We are creating a whole new look," he says, which is an appropriate way to herald the institution's profound change inside and out.

Try These Tools to Promote Accountability

In addition to style flexibility and hands-on leadership, there are other management tools that can guide groups, committees, and other decision-making entities in making decisions within a time frame that is meaningful to the institution–*without* abandoning consensus and collaboration. These include:

- **Leadership style inventories** to assess style flexibility
- **Decision-making templates** to order decision-making processes
- **Implementation plans** that have milestones and outcomes and are the basis for decision-making
- **A shared-responsibility charting matrix** that lists tasks and players,defining accountability for key tasks (this reveals faulty assumptions about the process, allows room for negotiation of roles, and provides a non-threatening opportunity for people to come back to the table when something derails)
- **A role-support agreement between players** who have interdependent roles that overlap across boundaries
- **A performance review process** that is a 21st-century tool to negotiate goals and identify professional development needs for the next year, not just a perfunctory exercise

Still, says Gonzalez, the first step for a change agent must be to sort out information and size up the situation carefully, to avoid drawing unwarranted conclusions. "Learning how people operate and interact is extremely important," he says. "Only then can you move forward and impose your own views." Pointing to proponents of "status quo at all cost," he readily admits, "I'm not a very good caretaker. Being a change agent is tough, but it's also exciting."

BUILDING COMMITTEES OF ACTIVE PLAYERS

As most administrators know (and as one academic leader recently admitted to me), when risk avoidance and the need for consensus get in the way, budget committees may debate the grammatical construction of the sentences in the committee's charter. Anything, to avoid working on the real issues. But capitalizing on opportunities requires a shift in the culture of committees from "everyone is accountable, therefore no one is accountable" to committees made up of active players chosen on the basis of needed core competencies. Rather than academics looking for "the right answer," the new model is one of collaboration, dialogue, and accountability for results. This decision-making process takes the institutional perspective rather than simply a departmental, school, or college perspective.

"Committee members need the appropriate core competencies," says Gonzalez, "but you also have to take into account the need to train the *next* generation of campus leaders. Junior faculty can develop their leadership skills by learning from senior faculty and administrators on committees." As for Hobgood at NCSA, he has been successful in energizing campus committees by communicating his sincere interest in their involvement as well as their obligation to brief themselves on the issues. They must be committed to such briefings, he says, in order to be able to contribute intelligent and useful insights and become active (rather than reactive) elements of the decision-making process.

LEADERSHIP FOR ACCOUNTABILITY AND OUTCOMES

Certainly, a collaborative leadership style can be an asset in bringing diverse constituents to the table to elicit the best thinking and creativity, and to achieve authentic dialogue. But a focus *solely* on collaboration cannot achieve a balance between tasks and the need for action. Moving the institution toward action includes a) identifying the problem or opportunity, b) brainstorming solutions, c) having an authentic dialogue, d) establishing pros and cons, e) assessing the fit of a decision within culture and context, f) reaching a decision, and g) agreeing on accountability and next steps.

And importantly, since knowledge and information are not static, it's essential to develop the discipline of demonstrating style flexibility to promote effective decision-making. As we've said, in today's environment, an over-reliance on consensus can be counterproductive, for when decisions don't get made or fail to advance the institution, missed opportunities are the result. So, rather than striving for consensus, it's much more realistic to aim for decisions that have some *element* of compromise, forged through a sense of urgency, with course corrections along the way. The art of collaboration today lies not in achieving the consensus of a perfect win-win situation, but in achieving accountability and outcomes that are meaningful to the institution and to those who serve the institution.

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