

FROM THE ARCHIVES: LESSONS LEARNED: BUILDING COMMUNITY – TRANSFORMING INSTITUTIONS

— Melvin D. George, Chair—PKAL Executive Committee (2002)

- About the power of questions.

With a reputation for asking probing questions, leaders can set expectations for the work of the community—of leaders within the grass-roots and from top-down. One of the skills that is overlooked at the beginning of a reform effort is the ability to ask questions that are probing and meaningful, but not threatening or accusatory. A person can lead by the questions they ask as they establish expectations of others. Questioning can also be a process that leads to involvement of others, becoming a form of communication that becomes more shared than a simple set of declarative sentences

- About the pace of reform.

Step-by-step broadening of the support base for change can be accomplished by involving more and more people in the discussion as the various perspectives on the change are determined. Therefore, the pace of that broadening is critical. Too fast and people don't see their perspective as being part of the effort. Too slow and the momentum is lost. Each organization and issues has its proper pace; find it and change succeeds. Miss the pace and face more problems without any improvements.

- About champions and cheerleaders.

Champions are necessary to get innovations off the ground. Cheerleaders and champions are not the same. Champions know where the resources are and how to secure and use them, know where and how to lend support. (Cheerleaders can be great motivators, but may not have access to resources.)

- About political and personal agendas.

When working through the enormously complicated challenges of specific institutional reforms, the political is not personal. Sometimes so-called political stances have deep roots in interest, commitments to existing programs, and principles different than one's own. To convert legitimate differences into personal differences erodes civility and collegiality. It is important to look for and acknowledge the specific agendas and concerns that people bring to the table in discussing potential new directions.

- About budgets.

Strategic planning must be aligned with budgetary planning. Planning to implement a vision requires attention to vision and budget at the same time.



- About leadership.

It is important to understand what role you would like to play, and could best play, in the process of change. Becoming a leader does not necessarily mean one has to be out in front banging the drum. Further, realizing the value of listening gives one the opportunity to step back and understand what is going on before proposing personal solutions to the task at hand.

- About the nature of change.

Change is not sustainable unless and until it is seen as advancing the work and goals of the vast majority of stakeholders. (Doing no harm is not sufficient.) Further, the future benefits of the new initiative must manifestly justify the reallocating of existing and future resources. Basically, the change has to be, or become, what everyone wanted to do anyway, even if they didn't know it at first.

To institutionalize change in a sustainable manner, there needs to be systemic change at many different levels. Change begins at the student-teacher interface, but has to be nurtured by leadership at the departmental and institutional level, and then encouraged by larger policy structures. If any of the linked components fail, the sustainability can be rapidly attenuated.

Revitalizing undergraduate STEM is a complex problem. To paraphrase H.L. Mencken: for every complex problem, there is a simple solution, and it is wrong. While institutions, both local and national play a role, changes that "stick" are carried out in reality by academic departments, energized by faculty leadership and collegueship, in a complex interplay that recognizes and understands local missions and local constraints while keeping an eye on high standards set by the national STEM community and on the changing context beyond the campus.

