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# CIRCLE: A Cyclical Approach to Stakeholder Engagement for Change Management Chapter for Leading Change Together in Global Higher Education

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## Introduction

Dominant models of change management frequently conceptualise successful adoption of a change through following a stepped, staged or linear process. Kotter's (1995) influential work on leading change recommends an eight stepped sequential approach to leading a successful change project. In 1947, Lewin advocated a three stage model for understanding resistance to change and how to overcome it. The "unfreeze-change-refreeze" approach advocated by Lewin, one could argue, demonstrates a more nuanced view in terms of recognising a relationship between the end of change and beginning of a new cycle but it still seems to imply a linear and staged model. Regarding the implementation of change in this fashion is common in other management literature (Kotter 1995; Levasseur 2001; Bregman 2007). Although these models are helpful in framing an approach to change and a sense of the activities that need to be undertaken to engage staff, they are problematic in a higher education setting for two main reasons. Firstly, they do not take into account that merely initiating the change will result in a changed landscape during the course of the project, and therefore, steps may need to be revisited or changed as the organisational environment changes. Secondly, and most importantly for this chapter, Higher Education (HE) settings are complex and non-hierarchical environments with many competing priorities amongst those experiencing the change. Motivating academic staff to engage in change using models

developed within corporate environments can be highly problematic in settings where "management" is a loose concept and there is not always a shared sense of purpose or outcomes.

In this context, we have developed a different framework for considering how to apply cross institutional change within a higher education setting. The CIRCLE model posits an alternative view of stakeholder engagement to accommodate both the shifting environment through a change initiative and account for the multi-faceted and complex nature of higher education institutions. We present two case studies where this model is mapped onto a change project to demonstrate the messiness and complexity of change. It concludes with some lessons learnt and reflections on the model.

## Change in Higher Education

Stefani (2015: 2166) writes that 'a university operates within a highly distributed leadership framework but it is often a flawed model because little or no attention is paid to developing the leadership capabilities of individuals with responsibilities to lead'. In HE settings, there is less consensus on leadership roles which can result in poor stakeholder engagement with change initiatives (Bolden, Petrov and Gosling 2008; Bolden, Gosling and O'Brien 2014; Rowley, and Sherman 2003). As Bryman and Lilley (2009: 332) identify, 'leadership in higher education is a strange field' and this, in turn, can problematise efforts to introduce institutional change as well as work with diverse stakeholders. HE leadership is more about negotiation and persuasion than direct management in terms of compliance with change (Kezar *et al*.. 2006). When working on cross institutional initiatives, change leaders are frequently working across institutional hierarchies and areas of responsibility. They are also competing with a multiplicity of priorities and demands from the stakeholders they are attempting to engage. Despite application of university strategies and key performance indicators to drive change and ensure prioritisation, there is often a mixed view of priorities and what is regarded as an institutional priority may not well be regarded as such at faculty, departmental and individual academic level. Those responsible for the successful realisation of the change - academic staff - may be the most resistant to the application of change and less convinced of the benefits. Underlying beliefs on the role of academic staff and

scepticism about centrally driven initiatives both contribute to problematic stakeholder engagement. Nevermore is this played out more than in the arena of learning and teaching change projects. This is particularly true in many research intensive and "traditional" universities, where a focus on research and achieving successful research outcomes is the main motivator for a large number of academic staff. Introducing changes to teaching practice, a contested priority area and one that some academic staff have difficulty prioritising, can be increasingly challenging. Not only do the drivers for change need to be established but engaging staff in conversations about teaching practice at the outset can be difficult.

Given the complex nature of HE settings, traditional literature on change management is often found wanting, as we have seen. Other models of change, or at least an understanding of the landscape so that change can be enacted, do exist, for example, the "McKinsey 7-S" model (Waterman *et al*. 1980) presents a framework with which to understand the change environment. Yet even where there is such a recognition of complexity (Styhre, 2002), the application is to organisations that operate a very different culture to HE. Our experience is that to truly engage stakeholders a different process is required, which imagines change as cyclical because in the process of changing something you change the environment/landscape in which you are working and therefore change begets change.

A cyclical conception of change management enables the change process to be addressed on a number of different levels at the same time or potentially started "anywhere" in the process or indeed revisit steps. These are necessary prerequisites for engaging staff in change in higher education. Due to the complexities articulated above, when working to enact educational change in universities, reconceptualising the project and constantly revisiting the landscape, drivers, and deploying multifaceted approaches are necessary. Whilst there is an acknowledgement in linear change models that steps can be revisited, there is an overriding sense that at the end of process a successful change will have been achieved. In higher education settings though, with the variety of demands on academic staff, such a clear demarcation of before and after the change is more elusive. Measures of successful change

are harder to articulate due to the nature of learning and the time it takes to realise these measures. A cyclical model is preferable as it enables more dialogue and positions a more sustained and deeper engagement with the change process, which in turn, should lead to a more nuanced and sustainable approach to cultural change across the university.

## Proposing a Cyclical Approach to Change Management: CIRCLE Change for Stakeholder Engagement

Our model of change proposes a cyclical approach to ensure stakeholder engagement and enact change within the complex setting of HE which is constantly changing. This model accords with Doyle and Brady (2018: 307) who argue that in such an environment of continuous change, a different mind-set is required 'one that is cyclical, with constant ebb and flow of ideas, created by interaction and conversations between people for which there can be no predictable outcome and no end state, and in which multiple solutions are often at play.' A cyclical model enables each "process" or step to be started at any point as well as enabling steps to be revisited; projects could repeat steps, or travel through steps in either direction around the circle. It also enables new situations that arise either from external events or from the very implementation of the change to be considered and addressed by enabling stages to be restarted or repeated. This is vital in any change project as these changes mean a project needs to be responsive and continually redefined.

Effective stakeholder engagement is vital for successful change management, however as Alves *et al*. (2010) observe, the complexity of HE environments often means that the needs of stakeholders are not appropriately met. The CIRCLE model we have developed accommodates these diverse needs and how to support engagement through change.

[Insert Figure 12.1 here]

The CIRCLE (Change-Information-Realisation-Communication- Learning-Evaluation) model provides multiple opportunities for stakeholders to engage in change as well as

influence the outcomes of any change initiative. It was developed during an institutional wide educational development initiative (outlined below in the first case study, where we discuss the model in detail and provide a description of each stage) and then further tested on a second cross-institutional project (outlined in the second case study). It has also been tested in other cross-institutional projects, for example our Strategic Learning Environment initiative (Quinsee and Bullimore 2011). Each of the six stages or phases (from now on referred to as stages) were developed based on our experiences and then feedback from stakeholders during the project process. We also consulted with staff in other institutions as part of a cluster group of projects who were working on similar initiatives.

**Case study 1: PREDICT: Project on Curriculum Change**

**PREDICT** (Promoting Realistic Engaging Discussions In Curriculum Teams) was a four year funded JISC project focusing on introducing a core set of principles about curriculum design across the University. Initially the PREDICT project was based on a notion of investigating how the University could introduce a core selection of interdisciplinary modules and the impact of this on the programme design process. However, due to various changes within the institution, it was decided to refocus the project more on the actual engagement of staff in the design and delivery process of undergraduate programmes, rather than considering the approval process or the introduction of a core modules curricula.

CHANGE: The university review project was the realisation of "change" identified at the top of the cycle. This stage is comparable to Kotter's (1995) initial step of creating a sense of urgency as it focuses on establishing the rationale for change and usually requires a shared sense of need for those involved as well as a set of objectives for what the change will achieve. In the case of PREDICT, supporting a new approach to design was advocated by senior leaders in the institution.

INFORMATION: After establishing the rationale for change, we considered the environment in which we were working and the information required to validate the change. This is where the iterative nature of the model was initially developed because at this stage in the process there were changes in senior management which impacted on the university environment. We therefore had to revisit the initial rationale for change and refocus the project on staff rather than interdisciplinary core modules, as had been originally conceived. The Information stage supplied baseline data which challenged some of the initial assumptions established in the first stage.

REALISATION: At an early stage we realised the change by implementing an initial iteration of the curriculum design model to support staff developing new programmes. By regarding the change process as cyclical we were able to test some of the information from the earlier stages and refine the project accordingly. With a large change project, such as PREDICT, the Realisation stage was revisited a number of times to refine and improve the changes proposed.

COMMUNICATION: For PREDICT, this involved communicating with staff around changes to the design and format of module and programme specifications, how to incorporate more student facing language and how to engage with new support mechanisms. This stage often occurred simultaneously with the Realisation stage. Communicating the realisation of the changes also at times prompted revisiting earlier stages such as the initial drivers for change.

LEARNING: Our approach to developing change through this model, provided us with multiple opportunities to learn about how the project was changing the landscape in which we were operating. At this stage we mainly learnt about barriers to progress and staff perceptions of the curriculum changes. This led us to revisit the initial justification about the

project, revise our baseline position and make some changes to our initial design and recommunicate what we were doing. The Learning stage is different from evaluation as here the environment is re-examined in the light of the changes that have been implemented and changes to the project can still happen.

EVALUATION: Lastly we then evaluated what we had achieved, in this case in relation to the project and our successes as well as challenges. By following this structure for change we were able to continually revisit our activities and refine the project. The Evaluation stage is linked to learning but takes a forward thinking approach to assessing what we need to do in the future, such as the approach suggested by Patton (2012) on utilization-focused evaluation. This step in particular recognises that change is a cyclical, not a linear process, and therefore initiates future changes by reviewing the changed landscape and planning how new changes are required now that we have changed the environment in which we are working.

What PREDICT succeeded in doing through the CIRCLE model was to create a greater focus on curriculum design as an issue within the institution and encouraging dialogue about what we do and how we could do it differently. It has also prompted debates and engaged staff in thinking about how we manage educational changes. Developing the CIRCLE model with the PREDICT project informed our approach to other projects and enabled us to develop a different approach to engaging staff with change. We could ascertain where staff were in the model in relation to the change and then moderate the project accordingly. It also enabled a combination of bottom-up and top-down approaches to implementation of change which has resulted in greater and sustained engagement.

We have continued to develop and refine the CIRCLE model as we have undertaken further large-scale, long term and complex change projects, for example, changing our approach to educational technology through our strategic learning environment. Our second case study,

looks at how we used CIRCLE to engage staff in developing new learning and teaching environments.

**Case study 2: Designing Active Learning Initiative (DALI)**

The DALI project is a cross institutional, multi-faceted, long term initiative to develop the learning environment to support new ways of learning and teaching. We have used the CIRCLE model to engage staff in this complex change project. For this case study, the change process begins at the INFORMATION stage of the model

INFORMATION: In 2015/16 there had been concerns raised by students and staff about some of the teaching spaces and the reliability of the technology being used in these spaces. Furthermore, staff were increasingly requiring spaces to be designed for more active learning. As technology was continuing to evolve there was a need to ensure that our technological implementations could be future proofed so we could be agile in the face of change. Feedback was gathered from students in various surveys and from staff in a range of learning and teaching fora, peer review feedback and through the log of issues raised with IT about equipment. This stage has been revisited frequently throughout the project.

REALISATION: The information gathered led to the DALI project, a six year project, which is now in year three, which is focused on enhancing and upgrading teaching spaces so that the University's staff and students could engage in innovative teaching and learning. To add to the complexity, delivery of the project required the creation of a cross professional service team from the authors' Department of Learning Enhancement and Development (LEaD), Information Technology (IT) and Property and Facilities (PaF). The first fourteen rooms were redesigned and prepared for teaching with new technology equipment, layouts and furniture

based on data gathered in the INFORMATION phase. For DALI, the Realisation stage was akin to a pilot stage.

COMMUNICATION: Communicating early was the key to the success of these enhanced rooms and so the DALI team held many workshops and one to one sessions with staff who would be teaching in these rooms in the term they were launched. As well as face to face information a web page provided a range of other materials and handouts and videos on the rooms and how teaching could be active in these rooms as well as the potential of the technology. This led to refinements to earlier stages and the design of the rooms in later aspects of the project, as outlined below.

LEARNING: Acting on new information during the project and using that to inform the design was crucial to the team and the plans for year two particularly because the volume of rooms was to increase in year two to 29 rooms. All staff who had taught in these rooms were surveyed and where possible interviewed to gain feedback and any logs of issues in these rooms with IT were again reviewed. This was important because staff from all five schools had taught in these rooms and there were differences in practice related to disciplinary practice. As noted in the model outline, there is always a need to review the environment the change is taking place in and this project was no different with a need to take note of new technology options and increased student numbers and the need for active learning.

EVALUATION: Examining our learning enabled us to plan for any changes needed for year two and look to start the CIRCLE cycle again. For this project this cycle is undertaken each year and changes are made each time taking account of the changing culture in HE but also technological developments that can enhance teaching, as well as the developing academic practice of staff and new student demands. The EVALUATION stage here enabled us to take

into account the changing environment that the project had introduced and then respond to this by changing the project accordingly.

CHANGE: For DALI the change came by designing and rolling out the new teaching spaces, however as this is a phrased project, the cyclical nature of the change process described here means that the change is constantly reimagined. This model enables the changing dynamic of the project environment to be accommodated.

What is common to both these case studies is that they are focused on developing staff and the educational leadership required to support staff through the changes occurring. Although both projects happened at institutional level, it was crucial to engage staff locally to ascertain what the change looked like in their particular area. And this was often different in nuance to the overall vision. An iterative model of change supported this approach as for both case studies, different aspects of change management needed to be considered at different points and the change process was far from linear.

## Reflections and Conclusion

As the two case studies above have demonstrated, the CIRCLE model of iterative change can be applied to large scale institutional wide educational change projects. The model was developed during the PREDICT project and then mapped onto the DALI implementation. It therefore represents an attempt to understand the "messiness" of actual change and a way of considering how to manage future change. The advantages of this model are that it enables constant reflection on how the change is progressing and the opportunity to re-engage at different points in the process. It is not unfeasible that during a project one might "go

around" the circle more than once in terms of engaging staff with the change, as DALI demonstrates. The model is adaptable and one may go in either direction around the wheel.

This would certainly be the case for large projects. What the cyclical approach enables is a recognition that change is complex and that, in reality, a change project might engage staff at different points. Although in the case studies, we generally followed the stages consecutively, it is not inconceivable that a change project might start to engage staff at the communication stage or later. The fact that model is cyclical too is a recognition that large scale change projects never completely end. For example, with DALI, changes to the rooms physically changed the learning landscape and this presented new opportunities for staff to rethink their teaching that they may not have hitherto considered.

In both these examples, more traditional models of change were originally considered. However, when progressing through each stage, we found it was not as clear cut in terms of implementation as imagined. Kotter (1995) advocates "removing barriers" at stage five, we found that understanding the challenges we were facing was part of our learning and actually enabled us to revisit the rationale for change that we had originally stated. It also uncovered information for our baselining and evidence gathering that we had perhaps not anticipated. The ability to move back and forth around the circle was certainly a strong factor with PREDICT where the landscape, due to changes in the university, was rapidly changing around us.

The CIRCLE model is not without challenges, however. It still presupposes a staged approach to some degree and does not completely address the messiness of change. Whilst it enables a more iterative process, it does assume that stakeholders will engage and move through the stages. It also, in its current iteration, does not fully reflect that some stages overlap. Greater refinement is needed in terms of dealing with some of the complexities

around the changing landscape and how to encompass a more non-sequential approach. In its current form, it attempts, in a relatively clear fashion to represent the dual factors of change: that the environment will change over time both independently and as a result of the change project. How to represent this complexity is an area we are looking at developing further.

The model also implements the actual change at a relatively early stage in the cycle, if followed from the top. This is important in the model as early change implementation changes the landscape in which one is working. However, a further refinement could be to develop a fuller planning stage which would enable the change to be more developed when it is implemented, as considered with the DALI project. This then also enables the evaluation to be a development, not a summative stage.

By reconceptualising change management as a circle and enabling different points of entry/exit of the change process, the CIRCLE model enables greater flexibility in relation to understanding how change can be managed in complex HE environments. This is important for educational development projects where there are multiple stakeholders and where changes in institutional strategy can impact on the project outcomes, often causing projects to be revisited and revised. We have attempted to represent this complexity and alacrity in the CIRCLE model and demonstrate a different approach to change in HE that enables leaders to engage with staff in multiple ways and at multiple points in a change project. This should lead to deeper engagement with the change and more effective implementation.

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## Reader's Response

Educational development is concerned with change. Higher Education itself is concerned with change. It is exciting to encounter a framework for change that is both theoretically based and practical in implementation. As an educational developer in Toronto, Canada, I found the CIRCLE framework immediately resonated with my work. To illustrate I apply CIRCLE to a project from my own institution. York University is a large comprehensive university with 55,000 students it is the third largest in Canada. In 2011 we introduced a

funding source for faculty – Academic Innovation Fund. The AIF has funded several millions of dollars for projects aimed at improving teaching and learning at the university. Last year we focused some of the funds towards teaching related research projects, often called Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). The aim of the project was to bring about change in the level of SoTL engagement at York.

How does this apply to CIRCLE?

- CHANGE – the change we sought was to increase SoTL activity.
- INFORMATION – we began by establishing the current level of activity and identifying a major hurdle was the lack of time and money for faculty to engage in SoTL.
- REALISATION – senior administrators were persuaded to allocate some of the AIF funds towards SoTL projects.
- COMMUNICATION – a marketing exercise ensured that potential AIF applicants were aware of the change in the AIF, and encouraged to apply for funds. Support was provided for those who were new to SoTL and were unsure how to frame their request.
- LEARNING – as applications for funding were received and evaluated, we learnt not only that there was a demand for this funding but also that we needed to provide more information in future cycles.
- EVALUATION – we are now in the process of evaluating the impact of SoTL funding as part of the AIF.

In applying CIRCLE to an existing project, I have been able to demonstrate that it is appropriate in a setting other than that of the authors. CIRCLE provides a valuable tool when planning, implementing and evaluating change. It enables practitioners to acknowledge the iterative and complex nature of change. I shall use this model with future change projects.