



Campus Change Readiness, Part 1: Trust, Skills, and Capacity

Katherine Sanders and Patrick Farrell • July 10, 2023

We have all lived through a change initiative that looked great on paper, but when we tried to implement it, it either didn't succeed in the ways we'd hoped or failed in ways we didn't see coming. One reason for this is because the success of change initiatives doesn't depend only on the rigor of the project plan; success also hinges on the readiness of the organization.

We see campus change readiness as having the trust levels, skills, and capacities necessary to engage change initiatives fully, thus improving their likelihood of success. Change readiness is always in flux and, like health, will always need attending to. Daily choices in how we work affect our readiness and can either improve it or weaken it.

Increasing trust

Developing trust is a great example of how daily decisions about how we work together can either promote readiness or erode it. If we invest time and effort in supporting work processes that improve *psychological safety* and *open communication*, we are increasing change readiness. When our colleagues know their contributions matter and that it's safe to make them, we have access to their full array of talents. If our people feel it's unsafe to offer their ideas and concerns, we are operating with only a fraction of the intellectual and creative power of our workforce.

Similarly, if we make clear how decisions are made on a daily basis, and how people can give input on decisions that affect their working lives, we increase readiness. If people know their input matters, even if the decision is not the one they would have chosen, we improve trust. If *transparency and clarity in day-to-day operational decisions* don't exist, our people won't trust that the change initiative dynamics will differ from the black box they're already dealing with. A change initiative will likely be a heightened version of the daily power dynamics that already exist.

We must *include many perspectives* in order to grow trust levels. Our people need to know they will be included in conversations that affect their daily working lives. Having the *autonomy to help shape your working life* and *knowing your input is valued and sought after* leads to conversations that have creative and transformative potential. If our people have agency in their working lives, a change initiative has a greater probability of engaging them.

For leaders, an important element of building trust is *being trusting*. Trusting leaders can delegate responsibility and authority and trust that the folks involved will use their knowledge and creativity to their fullest. If their people need advice, they will come and ask (if they feel psychologically safe). The leadership challenge is to articulate a proposed outcome, suggest a path, and invite folks to modify or completely change the process if they come up with a better one.

Developing skills

Systems thinking is a necessary skill for change readiness. When we include multiple perspectives in the process, it not only promotes trust but can also be a first step in understanding a work system and its interrelationships.

Every work system consists of interdependent parts (Figure 1): its people; their jobs; the technologies they use; the physical and social environments they work within; and the organization's policies, procedures, reward structures, and culture. When we intervene in any part of the system, we impact the rest, either intentionally or unintentionally.

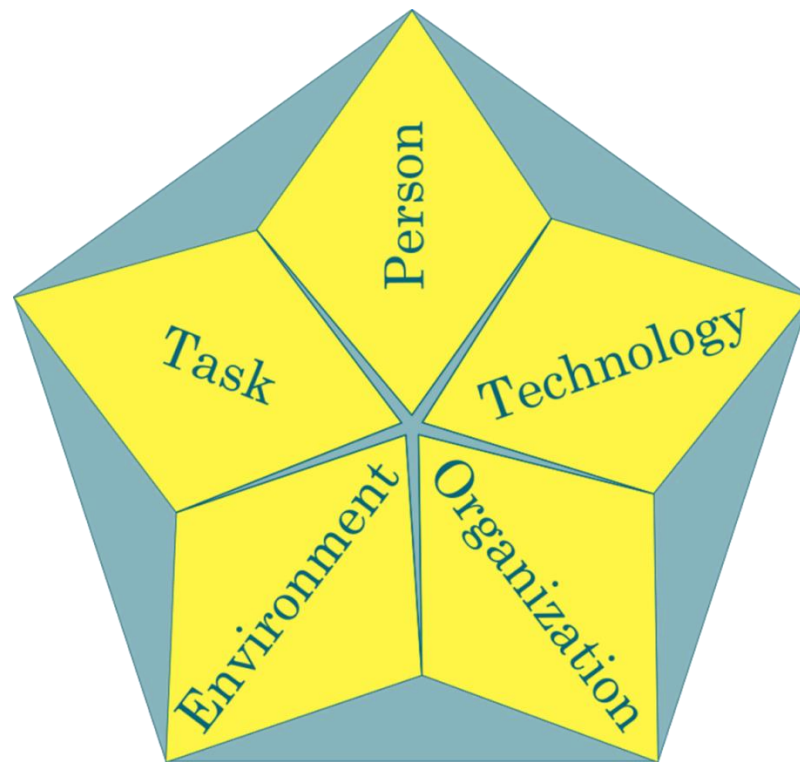


Figure 1. Work Systems Model, adapted from Smith & Sainfort (1989)

Envisioning the ripple effects of proposed interventions is a skill that teams must develop together. By including (in a meaningful, creative way from the start of a project) the input from people in other parts of the system, an organization becomes more change ready. It might make the start of a change initiative slower, but sometimes we need to go slow in the beginning in order to go fast later.

Priority setting is another vital skill. Change initiatives are complex, with competing and conflicting requirements and different cost-benefit possibilities. We are usually limited in resources (people's time, energy, funding), so we can't address every possibility and potential drawback simultaneously. Priorities must be set and adhered to. The process of priority setting requires a clear view of the outcomes we'd like to see, criteria for progress toward those outcomes, and a systemic view to see how efforts in one area might support other system elements. To achieve this holistic view, we need an engaged, diverse group.

Expanding capacity

Organizational capacity for change is the overall capability of an organization to either effectively prepare for or respond to an unpredictable environment. We see change capacity as a measure of an organization's willingness and ability to accept the challenge of helping to shape our future environment. From a resource perspective, this involves providing the staffing and financial and technological resources necessary to move a project forward from inception through implementation and iteration.

Individual capacity for change can depend on the perspectives, energy, skills, time, and interests of participants. It is related to skill and trust levels, but it also depends upon how people are working day to day, including their current workloads and levels of autonomy. Skills and trust can support enthusiasm for

contributing to a change effort, while the constraints of current workload and existing expectations may prevent enthusiasm from blossoming into engagement.

It's important to bring the daily working lives of people into the conversation at the start of a change project. If participants don't have the time, energy, or agency to engage, your group isn't ready to take on an initiative. You will want to assess the resources your people need to fully support the project, such as release time. As importantly, you might need to put energy into addressing historical issues that might have been disempowering.

Organizational and individual capacity for change are related but may not be closely coupled. For example, an individual might have tremendous personal creative inspiration and drive to innovate in their classroom but feel they have no tolerance for or interest in faculty governance structures that shape curriculum. In this individual's experience, organizational structures, policies, and procedures might feel intractable and immovable. It might feel like a waste of time to engage. In thinking of expanding capacity for change, it is important to consider both individual and organizational capacity. Large, sustainable change won't happen without engaging both.

Each of the elements of change readiness—trust, skills, and capacity—must be expanded upon by leaders and collaborators to suit the environment of individuals and the organization. The interpretive process of discussing and defining what trust, skills, and capacity look like on your campus is a vital part of building all three.

Forward-looking campuses are never finished developing their change readiness. The key is to improve change readiness while engaging existing initiatives. In fact, having a real-life reason to increase readiness helps to focus efforts and gives meaning to building trust, skills, and capacity. In part two of this article, we'll discuss assessing and increasing change readiness as part of normal operations.

Reference

Smith, M. J., & Sainfort, P. C. (1989). A balance theory of job design for stress reduction. *International Journal of Industrial Ergonomics*, 4(1), 67–79. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0169-8141\(89\)90051-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/0169-8141(89)90051-6)

Katherine Sanders, PhD, is a work systems and human factors engineering consultant. She founded a faculty development center at the University of Wisconsin–Madison and led it for 13 years. Dr. Sanders teaches systems thinking, change readiness, and the design of work to promote employee health, innovation, and sustainable productivity.

Patrick Farrell, PhD, is former provost and professor of mechanical engineering at Lehigh University and at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. While provost, Dr. Farrell developed and implemented initiatives to promote campus inclusivity and innovation. Currently, he is the founding host for Harvard's COACHE podcast and serves as an academic leadership coach.
