
PLANNING FOR LEADERSHIP CHANGE

A Tip Sheet from Revolutionizing Engineering Departments (RED) Participatory Action Research

Every academic change project requires planning, from the selection of team members and identification of needed resources, to setting project goals and creating metrics. Many academic change makers, however, neglect to plan for change in leadership on their projects. Leadership change can take many forms; for example, the dean who is the project's champion takes a position at another institution, or the department head who serves as the project's principle investigator decides to retire early. Planning for leadership change should be a component of your planning process, since leadership changes are likely in today's volatile academic environment. This tip sheet can help you prepare for leadership change by planning for leadership succession, using research findings resulting from focus group discussions, conference calls, and a survey with the National Science Foundation RED grantees. Contact us at redpar@rose-hulman.edu for additional information.

Leadership Change in RED Projects

In our work with 26 RED teams, we conducted a short survey to determine the frequency of leadership change in RED projects. Of the 15 teams that responded, we found a high frequency of leadership change at both the PI level and/or at the dean/provost level. This rate suggests that such change is common in RED projects, and RED team members acknowledge in hindsight that leadership change was not something they anticipated or prepared for.

Type of leadership change	% (count)
PI change	46% (7 of 15 programs)
High-ranking academic leadership change	86% (13 of 15 programs)
Change in both PI and high-ranking academic leadership	40% (6 of 15 programs)

Prepare for Leadership Succession

Based on our work with RED teams, we find that planning for leadership change can be a vital component of a project team's planning process, specifically by preparing for leadership succession at the start of a RED project. For example, by creating a full record of the project, the team relies less on the memory of a single leader, like the PI, and can feel more confident that all aspects of the project are being attended to. In addition, the project team can cultivate allies and champions beyond the limits of current leadership, in order to develop a broader range of support in anticipation of a change in leadership.

➔ **TIP:** At the start of your change project, prepare for leadership succession by documenting team roles, responsibilities, tasks lists/task status, in order to capture the operational dimensions of the project.

Align the Team with Shared Vision

A change in leadership within your project or department has a direct impact on both the immediate tactical direction, as well as the long-term strategic direction, of the change project. Change teams should use the transition period to ensure that the entire team and the new leadership are on the same page. Realigning the team around a shared vision will lay the foundation for long-term success.

➔ **TIP:** Revisit the shared vision document the team created at the start of the project and facilitate a conversation that encourages all team members and the new leadership to share their thoughts, ideas, and perspective on the change initiative. Having a common shared vision will help rally the team and provide a sense of mission for the team to follow.

“When the proposal was funded, I had already stepped down from my leadership position... We had new faculty, new leadership, and that really forced us to sit back and think about what we wanted to do now that all the players had changed, and so we spent really a whole year just trying to redefine what we’re doing.”

“The other deans, because they’re new, they’re excited to join this because it seems like something that does align with where the university wants to go. Any new dean wants to have some new wins under their belt. There’s a lot of good timing for what’s happening and that’s certainly a piece of the structural effects that are producing the change.”

Seek Potential Opportunities in Leadership Change

A change in leadership at the department, college, or university level can also provide an opportunity for the team to expand the reach of their project. Teams must invest time and resources into cultivating relationships with the new leadership hierarchy. These relationships can help sustain a change initiative by making it part of the organizational culture. Teams must also be aware of challenges as they attempt to spread their initiative beyond the initial project boundary. Each department has its own microculture, and teams need to be flexible as their effort is adapted to other contexts.

➔ **TIP:** Investing in relationships and partnerships with stakeholders and new academic leadership can help embed the principles of the change initiative as part of the rituals and cultures of the organization.

“It has helped us expand beyond [our department]. We had to be adaptable to make these transition in leadership. As we try to support other departments, getting them on board and making some of these changes college-wide, we have to be adaptable because every department has a different context. Our transitions have been a learning experience in having to be adaptable.”

“I would say one unforeseen benefit has been the direction that the institution has taken. We have hired a new President, and we had a strategic planning process unfold after the grant was funded. In our efforts to align the goals of the grant with the direction of the institution, we were able I think to achieve greater buy-in across the institution.”

Check out other REDPAR Tip Sheets that can help, available at academicchange.org

The following sources were consulted for this Tip Sheet:

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Cavanaugh, J.C. Who Will Lead? The Success of Succession Planning. Journal of Management Policy and Practice, vol. 18(2), 2017.

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