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Leading Change: Using Data and Feedback to Launch a Strategic Plan or New Initiative

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ABSTRACT

Traditionally, new strategic plans begin with reviewing the past plan and scanning the environment. Establishing trust between planners and stakeholders is a crucial first step to managing and leading change. Creating a campus-wide feedback loop with data and ideasharing provides the necessary groundwork to launch transformative change. This presentation will describe a pre-kickoff communication campaign that shared illustrative data points and gathered information from faculty and staff close to practice. The campaign used a Qualtrics survey to perform a gap analysis of core college functions and yielded valuable qualitative data. With current practitioner knowledge in hand, a kick-off event was launched that captured and maximized stakeholders' attention.

INTRODUCTION

It is tempting to forget the confusion, jarring change, and sadness early in the pandemic.

While the pandemic context was extreme, the lessons learned have lasting relevance for data teams using emerging institutional data to lead organizational planning and change.

Traditionally, the strategic planning cycle begins with reviewing the past plan and scanning the environment for positive and negative factors. Leadership and planning thinking has shifted to the VUCA framework.

In her book *Leading with Vision*, Bonnie Hagemann, et al., talk about leaders across industries claiming the military term VUCA, which stands for Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous. It describes the effort of making sense in a chaotic tactical moment. Planning during the pandemic was like waiting and waiting for the smoke to clear.

There was no sense of clear vision to see the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. Instead, connecting with and analyzing the point of view of our employees who were the boots on the ground seemed like the only proper way to proceed. Even with the knowledge, they were also overwhelmed.

This paper shares an approach to launching a pre-kickoff communication campaign for a strategic planning process or with new initiatives. The preliminary step included sharing illustrative data points from recent institution-wide surveys and then gathering analysis from employees working with our students during rapid change. The intended outcome was to create a bank of thoughts for consideration during the planning process.

THE PURPOSE

The process occurred over the summer of 2020 in a telework environment. The emails first shared the most recent data and then used a short qualitative survey to gather practitioner analysis of future and current states related to core institutional functions.

Sending out a survey in response to a survey may be counterintuitive. The series was not an attempt to ask more questions of a closed survey. Rather it was to gather analysis to gain an accurate picture of how to move forward in a chaotic environment.

Therefore, the main goal of the short emails and response surveys was to engage employees in advance of expected institutional changes with a focus on communication and collaboration. So, there should not be an expectation of new revelations or never-beforethought-of solutions.

A leader can glean relevant phrases or words for building trust and effectively communicating through the qualitative analysis of open survey responses. In addition, planners can provide evidence that the viewpoints collected are incorporated as changes are considered and implemented.

HOW WAS IMPACT MEASURED?

Employees completed a climate survey before, March 2020, and after the strategic planning process, March 2022. Comparisons on items captured improvements in employee satisfaction with institutional planning and senior leadership.

The March 2022 survey had a response rate of sixty-six percent (n=262), which is the highest response rate since 2017. The employee satisfaction survey item "There are sufficient opportunities to participate in institutional planning" showed a seven percent gain. Also, four items related to senior leadership gained ten percent in employee satisfaction, including communicating openly about essential matters, providing a clear direction for the future, and showing a genuine interest in employee well-being.

While a direct causal effect cannot be made, confidence was gained in efforts like the summer email series.

For structure, the READI email series utilized an acronym representing its core functions, Recruit, Engage, Advise, Develop, and Instruct (READI). The later strategic planning task forces utilized the same structure.

WHAT DOES IT TAKE?

What foundational attitudes need to be in place for a successful institution-wide feedback loop between data gained and idea-sharing?

The following four factors are needed: new data that is relevant to the institution's core functions and its employees; honest questions directly related to common values; and an authentic desire to seek the best for others.

Additionally, like most surveys, anonymity is key. However, in this case, we also created an electronic suggestion box that allowed employees to directly share ideas outside of the anonymous survey. Each email included the following statements:

The College will not tie your responses to you. That is, this survey is anonymous. If you want to share your name with your answers or other ideas, please email your responses to suggestionbox@xxxxx.edu.

The capacity to successfully carry out this type of work includes developing a project plan. Steps to launch the email series include:

1. Obtaining buy-in from the leadership team;

2. Identifying key facts/insights from emerging data;
3. Developing a series of short surveys that require respondents' analysis, such as a gap analysis;
4. Creating invitational email messages.

Time also needs to be allotted for (1) processing qualitative data in a short period of time, (2) updating the leadership team throughout the process, and (3) at the conclusion, creating summative reports for future planning.

For the READI survey, nearly real-time insights from students and employees about the effects of the pandemic's onset were attention-grabbing. For example, the college learned that one out of four students' biggest worry was having enough to eat daily. Even though our employees' jobs remained secure, many also reported negative financial impacts from the pandemic.

An example of the structure for the gap analysis open-response questions follows:

What do new students experience in the first 2-4 weeks?

What do you want new students to experience in the first 2-4 weeks?

What new opportunities exist to engage students early?

The leadership team approved the series of short surveys in each of the six, weekly employee-wide emails. Then in the email to employees, after sharing data, a link to the short survey was provided.

The opening email had unique content. The remaining emails in the series followed a predictable pattern of communication. The first email included an introduction of myself and the email series purpose and structure. It read as follows:

Hello,

<Personal Introduction>

This is my first of six emails called "The R.E.A.D.I. Survey Series." I have worked with [the leadership team] to create this opportunity to share the results of recent campus-wide surveys and to get input from everyone about ways that all of us can engage in our core business of Recruiting. Engaging. Advising. Developing. Instructing. (R.E.A.D.I.).

I will share some recent data that the Research and Planning Office has gathered each week.

Each week I will ask you to contribute your thoughts about each part of being R.E.A.D.I. for the new learning environment this fall. Your input will feed [the leadership team's] decision-making for this fall, the upcoming strategic planning cycle, and the agenda for the Strategic Enrollment Management Committee.

Student Survey Results

The College recently surveyed its active students. The recent survey of students related to our COVID-19 response tells a compelling story.

While 70% of respondents said that they “definitely” intend to return in the fall, nearly 1 out of 4 also reported that they worried about “having a safe and secure place to sleep every night” and “having enough to eat day to day.”

This group of students intends to keep coming to college despite daily challenges for basic needs. I hope you hear the same challenge to serve them that I do.

About the survey. The survey was developed by the Higher Education Data Sharing Consortium (HEDS) and is called the COVID-19 Institutional Response Student Survey. It looks at how students experience their institution’s response to COVID-19. It was distributed to 34,250 students at 64 institutions nationwide. A-B Tech had 738 students respond. This represents 13% of all active students on May 4th and 22% of all students who received the survey link in a text alert message.

Add to the R.E.A.D.I. Discussion Keep

the information coming.

Click the blue link to answer open-ended questions related to Recruiting all students:

<LINK>

Kind regards,

The first survey yielded twenty-three in-depth responses. There was no pre-determined goal or expectation for the response rate. Keeping the coming strategic planning process in mind, a key factor was that every employee had multiple invitations to provide input on a topic of importance.

In hindsight, I believed the repeated sharing of data and appeals for insights built a sense of inclusion that may have contributed to the later increase in employee satisfaction with the planning process and senior leadership.

The following five emails had the following components and used headings and concise language. The opening included thanks for previous participation, a summary of insights gained from the prior survey, and a mention of the attached short, qualitative report that shared key quotes for themes from past employee insights.

The closing included an introduction to the next survey topic, a repetition of the invitational language, which included assurance of anonymity, a reminder of the opportunity to share ideas directly, and the intended use of insights gained. Last, the email provided the link to the new survey and to the prior surveys to contribute ideas on past topics.

WHAT WAS THE WORKLOAD FOR THE IR OFFICE?

The IR summer workload did increase. On the front side, it is hard to estimate the time spent on developing the project. I did not keep a log. The project proposal, with the concept, timeline, and survey items, took a dedicated block of time, but I found it energizing. A goal is that this article would save others time in similar efforts.

While the survey ran, I estimate that I spent at least eight hours a week reading responses, crafting emails, and providing updates and problem-solving. A second employee, an analyst, and an experienced qualitative researcher dedicated about eight hours a week. She processed the open comments gathered that week and wrote a one-page summary for the email attachment.

WHERE WERE THE RESPONSES USED?

The promise made to use the input for institutional planning, and decision-making was kept. In the early fall, seven strategic planning task forces were established, and five of the task forces mirrored the topics of the READI survey. Each task force had access to all the READI survey responses and the complete reports that were the basis of the facts shared that summer.

The task forces were asked to gather additional information and deliver three key findings directly tied to the data and READI survey responses in two months. In addition, the task forces provided two recommendations related to the READI topics for the leadership team to consider during its strategic planning retreat.

CONCLUSION

When a leadership team demonstrates that it has identified vital emerging data and invites its employees to provide analysis, a sense of belonging increases; allowing everyone to participate is equally as important as the themes identified in the study of the responses.

Leadership teams can build an inclusive environment by providing all employees an opportunity to set the stage for a new initiative or planning cycle. The summer email series described functions as a simple inclusiveness tool to build trust by deliberately asking for employee insights about student needs.

REFERENCES

Hagemann, Bonnie, S. Vetter, and J. Maketa. 2017. *Leading with Vision: The Leader's Blueprint for Creating a Compelling Vision and Engaging the Workforce*. Boston, MA. Nicholas Brealey.

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