

Evaluating the Success of Strategic Change Against Kotter's Eight Steps

In evaluating a change process, based on Kotter's "eight steps" for transforming organizations, undertaken at an institution based, the authors find that "key insights about the future of the organization" came from all levels and all units within the institution.

by Mark H. Spencer and Bradley A. Winn

Mark H. Spencer is currently associate commissioner for finance and facilities with the Utah System of Higher Education. He served previously as associate vice president for planning and information technology at Utah Valley State College (UVSC) and in other administrative positions at The Ohio State University, the College of Eastern Utah, and the University of Utah. He earned a Ph.D. in educational administration from The Ohio State University.

Bradley A. Winn is currently provost and vice president for academic affairs at Snow College in Ephraim, Utah. He served previously as vice president at UVSC, as assistant commissioner for academic affairs with the Utah System of Higher Education, and in other administrative and teaching positions at the University of Michigan and the University of Utah. He has also served as the Utah governor's policy analyst for higher education. He earned his Ph.D. from the University of Michigan.

John Kotter (1995) has written widely on leadership and is recognized for his understanding of how organizations actually "do" change.¹ His step-by-step analysis of the change process provides a useful framework for understanding change in organizations. He identifies eight steps to guide the design of planned change initiatives in various organizational settings; this framework also can be used to assess change processes in higher education.

This article evaluates a change process undertaken at a higher education institution in terms of Kotter's suggested eight steps for transforming organizations. We made two assumptions in adopting the Kotter framework as a tool for evaluating the strategic change process in higher education. First, we believe that the condition and performance of higher education will increasingly be externally evaluated using corporate models. We believe that corporate terms such as accountability, assessment, performance measurement, and Baldrige-type quality reviews will continue to find acceptance within higher education. Second, we believe that "change management" and "leading change" in the private sector are ultimately comparable to "strategic planning" in higher education, especially when it occurs as Kotter defined it: "to make fundamental changes in how

business is conducted in order to help cope with a new, more challenging market environment" (1995, p. 59).

The Kotter model is particularly appropriate for Utah Valley State College (UVSC), with its recent history of dramatic change. The rapid enrollment growth and expansion in role and mission during the 1990s created pressures for change from multiple directions. In this article, we provide an overview of UVSC and the history of the strategic planning process. We then discuss Kotter's eight steps as applied to the UVSC strategic planning process and evaluate the success of the planning process at each step. Finally, we review the lessons learned from the UVSC change process.

Profile of Utah Valley State College

During the 1990s and into 2004, UVSC was Utah's fastest-growing college, averaging annual enrollment growth of 11 percent. Fall 2003 head count enrollment was 23,803, while full-time equivalent enrollment was 16,258. First chartered in 1941 as a regional vocational school, UVSC evolved to become a baccalaureate-granting state college. Today the college offers 33 vocational programs, 36 certificates and diplomas, 79 associate degree programs, and 31 baccalaureate degree programs, and was recently listed by *U.S. News & World Report* in its 2005 edition of "America's Best Colleges" as one of the four top public comprehensive colleges-bachelor's (in western United States).

Strategic Planning Process at UVSC

The college president at UVSC initiated the strategic planning process in the spring of 2000 with a letter sent to all faculty, staff, students, and selected community leaders. All were invited to respond to four planning questions:

- What are the two or three major issues and concerns facing UVSC now and in the short term? (These may be college-wide issues or departmental.)
- What are the two or three biggest problems the college faces in meeting the needs and expectations of the community? (Whether or not the expectations are realistic is really not the issue.)
- What are we doing that we should do differently or better?

- What are we missing? What two or three things should we be doing that we are not? (These can be new degrees or majors or they can be services or functions.)

In addition to this request to individuals, responses were formally solicited from all departments, the faculty senate, the staff organization, and the student body leaders. The president received 350 written responses. A working group of eight individuals, including faculty and staff, conducted a qualitative analysis of the 250 pages of comments and sorted responses into categories. The initial sorting resulted in a list of 50 subject categories. In a second sorting exercise, the working group agreed that most responses could be placed into one of nine general topics:

- Mission and core values
- Quality of instruction
- Enrollment management/growth
- Communication
- Service quality
- Athletics
- Funding sources
- Space
- Technology infrastructure

Planning staff suggested to the college executive committee that each general topic be assigned to a small group of selected faculty, staff, and students. Invitations to participate were sent jointly from the college president and the president of the faculty senate. The small-group discussions were called "campus conversations"; each started with a full-day retreat early in the summer of 2000. Each group was asked to present an interim report to an executive planning council by October 2000 on its assigned topic. In February 2001, the council reviewed the final reports. The nine reports were synthesized into one strategic plan, along with a mission statement, vision statement, and statement of values. The council reviewed the plan in April 2001 and forwarded its final recommendations to the president for his consideration. After some refinement by the president, the plan was discussed at a board of trustees retreat in the fall of 2001 and adopted by the board in November 2001.

Kotter's Framework for Understanding Change: The Eight Steps

A useful way to understand and evaluate the phases of the change process set in motion by these strategic planning activities at UVSC is to review them in terms of Kotter's framework. Kotter suggests two general principles: that most change processes go through a series of phases or steps over a considerable length of time, and that mistakes in any of the steps can create difficult problems for the entire change process. He identifies eight steps to provide a framework that can be used by an organization to compare its change process to the experience of other organizations. The eight steps are (1) establishing a sense of urgency that change is needed, (2) forming a powerful coalition to guide the change process, (3) creating a vision to guide the plan, (4) communicating the vision, (5) empowering others to act on the vision, (6) planning for and creating short-term successes, (7) consolidating improvements and producing still more change, and (8) institutionalizing new approaches.

Most change processes go through a series of phases or steps over a considerable length of time, and mistakes in any of the steps can create difficult problems for the entire change process.

Step 1: Establishing a sense of urgency. A sense of urgency usually occurs because of a crisis such as poor financial performance, decreased market share, or new competition. However, a potential crisis, a new technology, or a new business opportunity may also create a sense of urgency. UVSC was facing serious challenges of dramatic growth, both in the community as well as at the college. An unprecedented number of new faculty members had been hired in recent years, and many felt that the college should respond to needs for graduate education courses that were outside of the approved mission of the institution. Although most stakeholders would probably not have considered the situation to be a "crisis," the president and the planning staff thought that many faculty and staff would agree the college faced several significant issues, such as the challenges of growth, insufficient legislative funding, and lack of full understanding within the community

of where the college was heading. We decided to suggest that enrollment growth and mission expansion constituted an important strategic opportunity to establish a revised mission statement and new strategic plan to guide future growth. Having experienced mission expansion in the past, the college seemed eager to respond to community enthusiasm for adding graduate programs and potentially obtaining university status. We capitalized on this strategic opportunity by more clearly articulating the possibility of a new organizational form for UVSC. This opportunity captured the imagination of the campus and seemed to heighten a sense of urgency and interest in the planning process.

Planners at UVSC were convinced that a new strategic plan was needed. It had been more than 10 years since the previous plan was published. The institution had experienced historic enrollment growth through the decade and dramatic mission expansion. There was considerable sentiment that the institution was changing as a result of ad hoc decisions without the benefit of guidance from a consensus planning document. The president had been in place for the entire decade, and he was widely viewed both internally and externally as a successful president with good leadership skills. In fact, some said a new strategic plan did, in fact, exist but that it was in the president's head instead of written on paper.

If the volume of response to the president's e-mail is an accurate indication, we were successful in creating a sense of urgency. The responses conveyed a high level of interest in commenting on the future of the college. We gave ourselves a "B" in establishing a sense of the urgency for the need for change.

Step 2: Forming a powerful guiding coalition. Five factors helped us build a strong coalition to guide the strategic planning process. First, we made certain the president was absolutely committed to personally leading the revision of the mission statement and drafting a new strategic plan. He agreed to lead the planning efforts and assured us he was and would remain committed. He communicated that commitment to his executive staff and to the college community as a whole.

Second, we asked the president to affirm his commitment in front of his executive staff. He firmly stated that he wanted the process to succeed and that the results would affect future program, budget, and policy decisions. He asked vice presidents to spread the word to their staffs. The president also distributed a number of letters regarding the importance of the planning process to all faculty, staff, and students.

Third, we enlisted all senior staff to serve on an executive planning council. This included the president, vice presidents, deans, and all executives who reported directly to the president or the vice presidents. Also included were the faculty senate leaders and the elected representatives of the students and staff.

Fourth, we made a substantial effort to involve a wide variety of participants in one-day summer planning retreats that began the campus conversations. Participating faculty not already on summer contract were provided a small stipend, as were students. The retreats were conducted at an attractive, off-campus location. Each campus conversation group was cochaired by an academic leader and a senior staff member from the executive planning council.

Finally, we made a positive estimation that the two key planning leaders (the authors of this article who were at the time a vice president and an associate vice president) were likely to be successful in leading the coalition. Although the vice president was new to the institution, it was widely known among senior campus leaders that he had been selected in part because of success in previous strategic planning initiatives. It was also widely known that he had been hired with a mandate to initiate strategic planning at UVSC. The associate vice president was previously an academic dean at the institution who had developed cordial working relationships with many of the 46 members of the executive planning council.

The planning process at UVSC began with a strong coalition in place. We gave ourselves an "A" for establishing an influential planning council with broad representation across the various key constituency groups and for establishing clear support from the president and executive officers of the college.

Step 3: Creating a vision. We endeavored to apply both a "content" and a "process" aspect to creating a vision. The content aspect emerged because of the importance of the topic assigned to the first of the campus conversation groups. Of the nine topical groups listed previously, the "mission and core values" group became the first among equals. It convened the greatest number of meetings and had the longest and most intense discussions. The previous college mission statement dated from the early 1990s. As we looked at examples of what other institutions were doing with regard to mission statements and strategic planning, we noticed that many used a "vision statement" and several also included a "statement of values." UVSC adopted both ideas. The vision statement

became the focal point for considerable discussion about the future of the college:

Utah Valley State College is committed to maintaining the responsiveness and flexibility of its traditional mission, while becoming a highly respected state college offering a comprehensive range of baccalaureate degrees and programs. UVSC anticipates the time when it will also respond to community needs for graduate courses and degrees as a metropolitan university. (Utah Valley State College Board of Trustees 2001, p. 4)

There are three key visionary topics imbedded in these two sentences. In the first sentence, we indicate that we intend to try to maintain the best features of both a community college and a comprehensive baccalaureate institution. In the second sentence, we raise, for the first time in print, the notion that we will, in the near future, transition to university status. (In Utah public higher education politics, an institution can be considered a teaching or metropolitan university when it offers graduate programs.)

We tried to establish a process aspect to the creation of the vision statement by clearly mapping out the grassroots, "bubble-up" approach that would be used to develop the vision. This included enumerating the several points for direct input from faculty, staff, students, and community as well as ensuring that individuals could provide input through the various representative committees. This process was consistent with the manner in which we began the strategic planning initiative. The president's first e-mail invitation for feedback seemed to be very well received and almost universally perceived as a legitimate request. When distilling the many comments into a workable set of issues, we continually reminded the campus community that the final list was really their list.

The new vision statement has become well known at the institution. We gave ourselves a "B+" in this step for defining a clear and inclusive process that resulted in statements of institutional vision, mission, and core values.

Step 4: Communicating the vision. Kotter emphasizes the need for both frequent and effective communication. Consequently, we used several approaches to ensure that we reached all audiences. We discovered that many faculty and staff selectively ignore mass e-mail notices. We decided,

Evaluating the Success of Strategic Change Against Kotter's Eight Steps

therefore, to frequently mail a printed progress report to all faculty, staff, and selected student leaders. As soon as a draft plan was available, hard copies were sent to all faculty and staff with a cover letter from the president. A total of three versions of the strategic plan were distributed. The second version was taken to the institutional board of trustees for their first reading. Because trustee meetings are open to the public and the media, there was considerable attention paid to the plan primarily because of the phrase "as a metropolitan university." Again, this was the first public statement by the college of aspirations to become a university. The trustees officially approved the third version of the plan at their next meeting.

The plan was also mentioned in two general campus meetings. At the general faculty meeting that traditionally opens the fall semester, the president discussed the plan and highlighted statements in the plan that might create some controversy. He also referred to the plan in a general meeting for all staff members.

Although it is difficult to communicate in ways that catch the attention of an entire campus, most faculty members, staff members, and student leaders were aware of the planning process and understood the key components of the institutional vision. We grade our communication efforts as "B+."

Step 5: Empowering others to act on the vision.

Participants in the planning process must have a sense of ownership of the process and the vision; they must feel empowered to contribute to the process and the outcomes. This meant that obstacles that would prevent faculty and staff from being fully informed about the new vision had to be removed. Therefore, the UVSC planning staff sent copies of the plan to all full-time faculty and staff to ensure that access to a copy of the plan would not be an obstacle. We alerted deans, chairs, and directors that extra copies of the plan were available for their use when they conducted organizational and department planning meetings. The vice president overseeing planning obtained permission to

structure weekly vice president meetings around the five strategic priorities adopted through the planning process. The planning vice president and associate vice president also took the five strategic priorities and shortened them to a few words for ease of use during planning discussions throughout the college (see figure 1).

The strategic plan, which included the institutional vision, mission, and values, was forwarded to every possible group, and support was offered to help these groups interpret and act on the new vision. The plan was sent to the student body council, which passed a resolution of support. The academic deans used the framework of the plan to develop a next level of detail for the academic programs of the college. No one was actually able to act on the full vision because this would have required starting a graduate program. However, the fact that they could begin openly talking about that prospect, as well as working on the other issues identified, seemed to empower staff and faculty to begin building foundational structures that would potentially transform the college yet again. We gave ourselves an "A-" for Step 5.

Step 6: Planning for and creating short-term wins.

Short-term "wins" are needed to demonstrate progress in the strategic planning process. There were several wins that helped to build confidence in the process.

The first short-term win was the early and consistent leadership of the college president. His e-mail request for input would not have generated the same volume of response if it had come from a relatively new vice president, an associate vice president, or a committee. In fact, a number of staff and faculty commented that they responded because they knew the e-mail was going directly back to the president's computer—not to a staff member. They thought the president would at least glance at the comments before forwarding them. In fact, the president reported he read every comment before forwarding the e-mail messages to the planning office. This commitment from the president helped the strategic planning process begin with a strong push.

Figure 1 Shortened Versions of UVSC's Strategic Priorities

Five Strategic Priorities	Short Version
1. Attract, retain, and promote excellent students, faculty, and staff	= People
2. Create a quality teaching and learning environment	= Learning
3. Create a supportive student campus environment	= Student Environment
4. Create a collaborative and effective work environment	= Work Environment
5. Develop a quality infrastructure	= Infrastructure

Another early short-term win was the ability to publish all comments on the college's Web site. Members of the college community were able to see all 350 written responses that became nine general study topics. Staff and faculty seemed pleased by the apparent openness of the process.

The campus conversations were a modest win. We scheduled full-day summer planning retreats for the nine campus conversation groups with some trepidation. Would people really show up? Would they talk? Would the groups sustain energy throughout the day and into subsequent meetings? Thankfully, all nine sessions went very well. Certainly, the attractive off-site location helped, as did the promise of fine food and financial stipends for faculty and students. However, we attribute the success of these sessions to the overall goodwill built up by the whole planning process. People seemed convinced that the process was legitimate and worth their time.

The next short-term win was hard to achieve and was only a partial win. We pushed each of the campus conversation groups for an interim report within three months of their start date. Several groups were quickly able to determine a structure and direction for their work, several were able to do so with some assistance, and several enjoyed ample discussions but really struggled to put something on paper. We witnessed broad differences of leadership styles among the group cochairs and observed that some groups seemed to coalesce and some struggled. Cochairs were selected by the president upon recommendation of the planning staff and discussion among the president's executive staff. Several criteria were loosely used in the selection process, including appointing one of the cochairs with expertise and the other with less direct expertise but with credibility among some key college constituency group. Better facilitation from the planning staff may have been helpful in bringing focus to some of the campus conversation groups. However, each group did produce an interim report although not all were equally useful in developing the strategic plan.

The "mission and core values" campus conversation group had a difficult and important assignment. This group met most often, encountered the most contention, and worked through the most compromises of any of the groups. Members of this group finally emerged with a proposed vision, mission, and statement of values that were ultimately adopted with relatively few changes. This process was difficult, and many of these meetings did not appear to be wins, but the end product, the new mission

and vision statement, was an especially impressive short-term win.

Twelve months into the planning process, a draft strategic plan was mailed to every full-time faculty and staff member. An accompanying cover letter from the president invited further comment and input. This mailing provided some closure to the initial phase of the project but did not provide the big splash for which we had hoped. The plan is bulky because of an attempt to include most ideas that emerged from the campus conversations. The five major priorities are further divided into 16 goals and 69 objectives. We have heard of many people who read the first few pages, including the vision and mission. They would then get bogged down as they started into the goals and objectives. Also, we sensed there was some hesitancy to fully engage with the document because it was still a draft, subject to change by the president and the trustees.

Eighteen months into the planning process, the board of trustees agreed to discuss the proposed plan at a half-day retreat. The trustees rarely retreat in this manner, and their willingness to address the plan was significant. Before the retreat, the planning vice president met individually with each trustee to review the plan. As a result, the retreat went very well. Trustees engaged in lively conversation but essentially endorsed the plan as written. In their next public meeting, the trustees officially approved the plan.

Overall, we evaluated our efforts during this step as a "B+."

Step 7: Consolidating improvements and producing still more change. Kotter advises leaders to avoid declaring victory too soon. He suggests leaders should use the impetus of a series of short-term wins to tackle additional, related change efforts. He reminds us that changing an organization can take years, not months.

UVSC might have been tempted to declare an early victory during the first year of the process. This was not done because the state's tax revenue picture turned bleak, and the governor mandated midyear budget cuts with slim prospects for new annual appropriations. However, the economic downturn actually presented an opportunity to slowly find ways to incorporate the vision, mission, and plan into the structure of the college. That is, expectations for imminent implementation of the plan were lowered. This new environment caused the institution to focus on consolidating improvements or producing changes that would not make the news headlines but would be supportive of future significant changes.

Evaluating the Success of Strategic Change Against Kotter's Eight Steps

The planning staff quietly initiated a few elements of the strategic plan. A new advisory committee was implemented to advise our human resources office on more effective hiring practices. A service committee was created to do training and assessment with regard to improving services to students among all college entities. The athletic department executives began activities that moved them from junior college to NCAA Division I athletic competition. Instruments were developed to broaden the means by which we assess ourselves, such as with a new student satisfaction survey.

Although this step is still in process, we have evaluated it to date as a "B-."

Step 8: Institutionalizing new approaches.

Institutionalizing new approaches can also be stated as anchoring change in the organizational culture. If the change comes to be seen as how things are normally done, then the change becomes institutionalized. In the process, the organizational culture also may be changed.

Although deep change at UVSC has yet to be fully tested, many of the key elements of the strategic plan have been implemented or remain as top-priority items, including the push for university status and the interest in inclusive planning processes. The strategic plan, including vision and mission statements, has attracted attention in every major management gathering on campus. However, the nonprofit higher education sector lacks some of the verifiable positive indices that could manifest themselves in the corporate for-profit sector, such as increased profitability or higher stock price. Consequently, a college must look for evidence of success that is subtle. For example, several of the strategic priorities and elements of the vision statement have begun to appear in new campus publications and have surfaced in budget and policy discussions.

The rubric of the five strategic priorities now provides the structure for the basic agenda for weekly cabinet meetings where accountability for each planning component has been assigned to appropriate executives. Posters and other graphic art utilizing the new mission, vision, and values statements have been drafted. Many departments and divisions of the college have developed unit-level strategic plans under the umbrella of the new institutional vision and strategic plan. The ideals developed in the statement of values occupy the most prominent position on the institution's Web home page, and a series of monthly symposia are planned to discuss these value statements. As these continue, we will have enjoyed a measure of success.

Step 8 continues to be a work in progress. It is premature to give ourselves a final grade, but on the midterm, we scored a "B."

Lessons Learned

Kotter identified eight steps that serve as aids to design organizational planned change. Yet his framework also can be used to assess change processes. Although not all aspects of Kotter's business model make the transition into higher education, the eight steps nonetheless are important additions to the lexicon of higher education strategic planning. The strategic planning process at UVSC provides insights that are useful to other planners in higher education.

First, including evaluations of the institutional change initiative in the planning process can reveal critical insights helpful for the ongoing cycles of planning. Steps 7 and 8 focus on "consolidating" and "institutionalizing." This places the emphasis on whether a change process has really taken hold within an institution. Planners at UVSC found that acceptance of new directions, and a new mission statement, became validated as a result of the deliberateness of the process.

The most important step of the implementation phase is actually the participatory nature of the design phase that creates the understanding and acceptance necessary for implementation.

Second, many institutions approach planned change in two phases: (1) design of the plan and (2) implementation of the plan. Although an institution's internal and external environments affect the specifics of an institutional change process, we learned that the most important step of the implementation phase is actually the participatory nature of the design phase that creates the understanding and acceptance necessary for implementation. Faculty, staff, and students were generally supportive of implementing the plan because they had a part in its creation. Conversations about the future and purpose of the institution produce common understandings, which in turn produce a natural ability for the institution to move forward in a new direction.

Third, small wins along the way are critical because the time frame for college-wide planned change typically lasts several years. Collecting input, organizing the players and committees, engaging key constituents with the input data, organizing and articulating conclusions and compromises, and communicating new directions will maintain better momentum if a concerted effort is made to celebrate milestones along the way.

Fourth, strategic planning, with its implementation and assessment, is a one-time event only if your environment is static. In the "real world" of higher education the environment, internal and external, is constantly changing, and thus planning is a dynamic, ongoing activity. When the environments change, the plans necessarily must change. We estimate that the shelf life of the goals and objectives will be approximately two years and the shelf life of the vision, mission, and values will be no more than five years. Establishing the idea that planning is an ongoing activity within the culture of an institution will make the next round much more tolerable and successful.

Fifth, once the final "t" is crossed and "i" dotted, there is a tendency for strategic plans and mission statements to end up on the shelf. The efficacy of a plan is really contingent on how well its words find a place in the hearts and minds of the college community. In most cases, it is unusual for a strategic plan to find its way into the imaginations of faculty and staff if their only encounter with it is by reading it on the institutional Web site. The campus conversations are really more important than the resulting written plan, because it is in these discussions that different views and proposals can be argued, new ideas can be created, and a greater consensus about future directions can be reached. We learned that the plan is important, but the conversations are critical.

Sixth, in one of Kotter's concluding comments, he states, "In reality, even successful change efforts are messy and full of surprises" (1995, p. 67). We agree, and we would add that it is often the surprises that make the change process so compelling. We were surprised by the willingness of many faculty, staff, and students to invest time and effort in the planning process. We were surprised at the widespread acceptance of a brief vision statement. We were surprised (although we probably should not have

been) to learn that most people on campus would read a two-page document but would not read eight pages. We were surprised that key insights about the future of the college came from all levels of the organization, from all constituency groups including students and community, and from all divisions—from the frontline cashier to the president.

**We learned that the plan is important,
but the conversations are critical.**

Finally, although we reviewed Kotter's suggested steps for change after we completed the planning process, we were surprised that we had actually unknowingly followed many of those steps in our process. Based on our experience, we encourage other planners to review the Kotter model before initiating a change process to enhance their chances for success. ❏

Notes

1. The article "Leading Change: Why Transformation Efforts Fail" by John P. Kotter (published in the March–April 1995 issue of the *Harvard Business Review*) is often referenced as a guide to strategic change in organizations. Kotter is the former Konosuke Matsushita Professor of Leadership at the Harvard Business School. His recent books include *The Heart of Change: Real-Life Stories on How People Change Their Organizations* (2002), *John P. Kotter on What Leaders Really Do* (1999), *Matsushita Leadership* (1997), and *Leading Change* (1996).

References

- Kotter, J. P. 1995. Leading Change: Why Transformation Efforts Fail. *Harvard Business Review* 73: 59–67.
- Utah Valley State College Board of Trustees. 2001. *Strategic Plan 2001*. Retrieved October 19, 2004, from the World Wide Web: www.uvsc.edu/planning/StrategicPlan8-28-02.pdf.

A vertical bar on the left side of the page, consisting of a series of colored squares (yellow, orange, red) and a small red diamond at the top.

COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

TITLE: Evaluating the Success of Strategic Change Against
Kotter's Eight Steps

SOURCE: Plann Higher Educ 33 no2 D 2004/F 2005

WN: 0434601195002

The magazine publisher is the copyright holder of this article and it is reproduced with permission. Further reproduction of this article in violation of the copyright is prohibited.

Copyright 1982-2005 The H.W. Wilson Company. All rights reserved.