

5 Human Preconditions for Organizational Change & Sustainability

A Primer & Change Readiness Assessment



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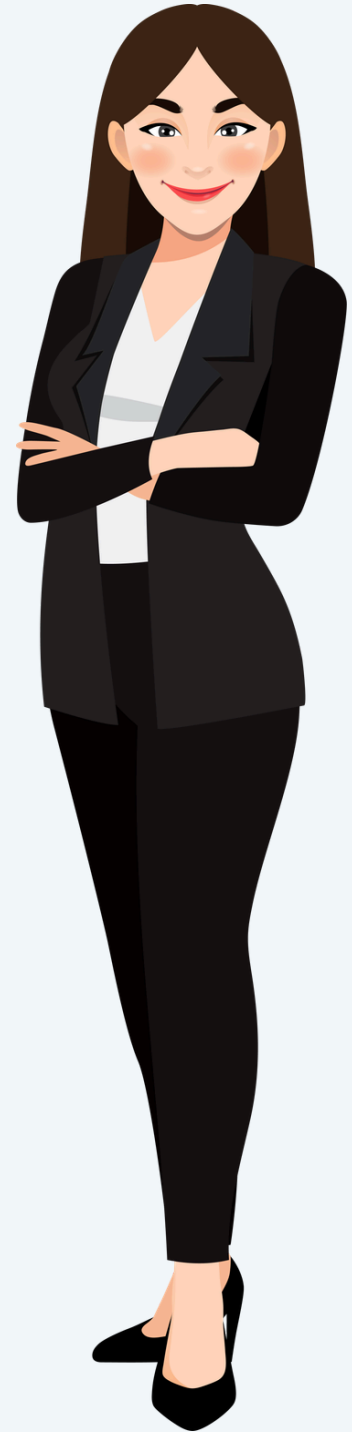
Welcome Message

The ability to change at the pace and scale necessary in today's higher education environment is critical to the vitality of any postsecondary organization. In the absence of bold, coordinated action, colleges and universities fail to thrive. This truth is met with the reality that institutional change is a daunting and resource-consuming challenge.

That's where we come in.

Higher Edgineer designs and delivers change solutions for organizations that want to align leadership, culture, strategy, and behaviors to improve institutional performance and achieve key priorities.

Powered by decades of successful change leadership experience, we will help your organization break the doldrum of the status quo and reach your strategic vision. Attain equitable student success, enhance employee engagement, modernize technology solutions – whatever your ambition – Higher Edgineer's integrated suite of services will help you optimize your organizational transformation efforts to achieve sustainable results.



Human-centered change leadership is the key differentiator between institutions that thrive in today's environment and those that flounder.

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The Higher Edgineer Difference

Make Changeability Your Superpower!

No matter where you are in your transformation journey, we will deliver services designed to advance your strategic priorities and help your college or university thrive in an ever-evolving higher education environment. We offer comprehensive, custom-made organizational change solutions that are responsive to your institutional context and culture. From beginning to end, we are your change collaborators, coaches, and confidants.

The Secret Sauce is Your People!

Higher education is a human enterprise, which makes change irreducibly social in nature. The ultimate outcome of any initiative depends on the aligned efforts of many individuals. Thus, our approach to facilitating change is decisively people-centered. We couple principles of behavioral science and organizational development with a healthy dose of common sense to create the conditions necessary for widespread engagement in and adoption of change, while equipping your employees with change leadership skills.

No Hero Complex Here!

Higher Edgineer is owned and operated by seasoned, passionate higher education scholar-practitioners. We are not here to oversell and under-deliver expensive technology, impose proprietary frameworks mismatched to your institutional context or culture, or force one-size-fits-all corporate methods of change onto your organization. Instead, we recognize that every postsecondary institution is unique in its makeup and mission.

We take time to understand your strategic priorities and the circumstances surrounding your initiatives, and then we create and facilitate change solutions tailormade for you.

Unlike other consultants who parachute in, apply uninformed band-aids, then abandon your institution without regard for the disruption they caused, we assume an approach grounded in respect and partnership. We have lived the challenges of change in higher education settings, and we know what it takes to navigate them with skill and fidelity.



HIGHER EDGINEER
Engineering Change Solutions for Higher Education

Our Services

1. Transformation Facilitation & Consultation

We offer two degrees of technical assistance to guide your transformation. Our hands-on facilitation walks your organization through each stage of the strategic change process. Our consultation option keeps you in the driver's seat as we co-pilot your strategy development and change management journeys. Most institutions choose a combination of both methods to achieve the best results.

2. Group Training & Individual Coaching

We blend theoretical insights with practical applications to enhance the change leadership competencies for employee groups of all types and sizes. We ensure every participant, from the C-suite to the frontlines, gains valuable knowledge and skills relevant to their professional contexts so your organization can thrive during ever-evolving times.

3. Organizational Capacity Building

We help college and university leaders prepare their environment and empower their people to foster adaptability and resilience. We partner with you to develop a change-ready infrastructure that promotes a culture of innovation, inspires continuous improvement, and unlocks the collective potential of executives, midlevel administrators, and individual contributors.

We provide a comprehensive suite of change leadership services that span the transformation lifecycle. Our methodology integrates the art of human-centered design with the sciences of business analysis, project management, and change management to accomplish your institutional goals.



Change Enabling Human Conditions

Successful strategies begin with leaders' ability to meet the change-related needs of their employees. Humans are unequivocally diverse and dynamic. However, five preconditions in particular enable most people to navigate and embrace transformation: coherence, purpose, belonging, support, and confidence. When leaders take responsibility for creating an environment where these conditions can materialize, they witness the emergence of shared understanding and collective action across individuals and groups within their organizations. This phenomenon fosters a state of readiness for change to occur through united commitment rather than reluctant, surface-level compliance.

How to Use the Readiness Assessments

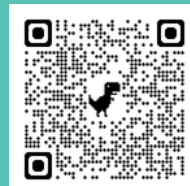
Project leaders should conduct routine change-readiness checks to identify which human preconditions for organizational change are not being met and which essential practices to deploy, as change-related needs shift throughout the change journey.

The prompts in the readiness assessments are not checklist items; rather, this appraisal should be used as a conversation starter. Plan follow-up activities to share anonymized responses, collectively unpack the results, and inclusively determine how gaps should be addressed.

When using these prompts, pairing Likert-scale responses with brief qualitative comments yields both measurable trends and actionable insights. Most importantly, results should not disappear into reports. Leaders should use the results to share themes, normalize the employee experience of navigating change, and co-create strategies to address gaps.

Depending on where an initiative is in its lifecycle, some of these prompts will be more salient than others. People leaders should use what seems relevant at a given point in time. Certain prompts should be revisited frequently to reinforce foundational elements of the initiative, measure effectiveness of interventions, and monitor trends over time.

For more information about organizational change leadership:
Gahagan, N. (2025). *Essential practices of higher education*.
Society for College and University Planning.



Coherence Creates Calm

By definition, organizational change disrupts the familiar. Despite senior leaders' best efforts to eloquently articulate a vision and compelling rationale for new strategies, learning of impending change is a disorienting experience for most employees. As initiatives unfold, people's understanding of and assurance about their jobs becomes strained. Stress ensues, people panic, and once promising ideas flounder. In these moments, the problem is rarely employees' motivation or capability – it is coherence.

High-level strategy often feels fragmented from the firsthand work employees know so well, and even the most dedicated professionals find it challenging to engage enthusiastically in change efforts when there seems to be so many unknowns. People leaders are often the first to observe this breakdown. Team members ask the same questions repeatedly, hesitate to act, or retreat to familiar ways of working despite clear direction.

A deliberate focus on establishing coherence remedies these issues. Coherence allows employees to make sense of what they are being asked to do. Coherence helps employees draw connections between abstract strategy and their day-to-day work, enhancing the likelihood for institutional initiatives to become operationalized.

Coherence is the workplace condition that enables people to translate institutional aspirations into comprehension on the ground so teams can see what is changing, why it matters, and how their work fits together with the many moving parts of organizational change. Coherence is a foundational human need that must be met for change to ultimately be embedded successfully into everyday practices.

Coherence as a Human Precondition for Change

Coherence, in the context of organizational change, is the state in which a new initiative, its implementation, and employees' lived experiences are sufficiently aligned to create shared meaning and synchronize collective action. It exists when people can integrate enterprise intent with local realities, so change can be planned, enacted, and sustained at scale rather than merely announced and left to chance.

Coherence is the output of sensemaking, the human process of making sense of the unknown by placing selected stimuli into a framework that enables individuals to comprehend, internalize, explain, and predict the ongoing complexity of their surroundings to inform behavior (Weick et al., 2005). Sensemaking allows people to interpret shifting circumstances, join new information with what they already know, and make meaning of it all to determine their response. When coherence is present, an internal story materializes to connect the seemingly disparate dots strongly enough to direct and energize one's engagement in organizational change.

In the absence of coherence, change is perceived as cognitively fragmented, structurally unstable, culturally mismatched, and behaviorally risky – regardless of the quality of the strategy itself – rendering it too precarious to engage in for most employees. Under these

circumstances, disengagement becomes a rational response to uncertainty rather than a lack of capability or commitment, and well-intended strategies struggle to take root.

Coherence allows people to move forward with clarity rather than caution. In practical terms, coherence exists when people can clearly and confidently answer three questions: What is changing and why? How does this impact my work? How does this all fit together?

The Threat of Incoherence

Humans are hardwired to favor predictability. The ability to anticipate what lies ahead provides a sense of safety. Patterns and routines in the workplace create familiarity and stability, offering a version of coherence that employees unconsciously rely on to perform their work efficiently, effectively, and with confidence. Organizational change, by definition, disrupts this equilibrium. Yesterday's coherence dissolves, stripping away individuals' ability to predict what's coming tomorrow.

Change activates the brain's threat response, pushes people into survival mode, and consumes cognitive resources. When coherence is absent, employees' capacity to think, innovate, adapt, and collaborate – precisely the capabilities and behaviors required for successful organizational change – is compromised. Pragmatically, the loss of coherence may

show up as frustration with ambiguity, reliance on legacy processes, re-litigation of decisions, and withdrawal from change-related activities. These behaviors are often mischaracterized as resistance when they are actually symptomatic of an unmet human precondition for organizational change.

Communication Does Not Equal Coherence

An energized employee corps is the aspiration of every senior leader after launching a new initiative. Yet, too few intentionally focus on facilitating sensemaking to generate coherence. Instead, they lean in to broadcasting rationale – assuming that if employees understand the logic behind an initiative, their allegiance will follow. This approach falls short because it fails to secure the sustained agreement and attention of individuals who are not decision-makers at the strategy level. Ironically, these are the very individuals asked to accept change and adapt in order to operationalize it.

Communication is frequently mistaken as a direct path to coherence. Unfortunately, a leader explaining strategy does not guarantee others can make sense of how the change intersects with their unique responsibilities, relationships, and constraints now and in the future. Whereas communication transmits information, coherence facilitates meaning-making. Without focused and relevant sensemaking

efforts, information alone rarely translates into actionable data that fuels inspired and aligned employee engagement.

Broadcasted messages typically reflect a distant, enterprise-level point of view that does not convert cleanly or evenly into localized contexts across the frontlines, where the most transformation must occur for strategy to become operationalized. When employees cannot reconcile an espoused strategy with the realities of the work they know intimately, a cavernous gap opens between strategic intent and actual outcomes. This gap quickly swallows any potential for interest, trust, momentum, and value realization.



Coherence occurs when individuals understand the premise of the strategic change and can make sense of how its various elements, including their unique role during and after the transition, integrate to form a united whole. This comprehension happens when people can associate the change with what they already know, see, feel, and believe.

Change makes sense and feels coherent when it is commensurate with institutional constructs such as mission, vision, values, and other strategic initiatives. Coherence is further strengthened when individuals are aware of (or, better yet, involved in shaping) the implementation roadmap and know how they will contribute to carrying out the strategy, making their employee experience predictable. Predictability in the employee experience, even amid uncertainty, enables people to direct their energy toward productive collective action rather than self-protective behaviors.

A People Leader's Role in Cultivating Coherence

People leaders play a critical role in building bridges between employees' current perspectives (which naturally protect the status quo) and their adoption of new mindsets necessary to foster fresh ways of thinking and doing at scale. The work of cultivating coherence cannot be delegated to a project communication plan alone. It requires ongoing, proximate attention to how people are making sense of the change throughout its lifecycle – and people leaders are uniquely positioned to accurately assess and address employees' coherence in real time.

Cultivating coherence entails continuously ensuring that strategy is translated into meaning within local contexts, that assumptions are surfaced and examined, and that people can see how their efforts contribute to a shared direction. Coherence is not something leaders deliver once; it is something they must deliberately and repeatedly develop through regular interactions as initiatives evolve and uncertainty lingers.

To support this work, the following prompts can be used throughout an initiative's lifecycle to assess how well the organization, project leaders, and people leaders are fostering an environment that empowers individual and collective change journeys through coherence. The results will inform where deliberate investments and targeted interventions are needed to strengthen change readiness, facilitate adoption, and ensure sustainability.

- I know the problem the organization wants to solve and/or the opportunity the organization wants to optimize.
- I understand how the initiative reinforces the organization's mission, vision, and values.
- I can make sense of how internal and/or external factors influencing the organization logically led to the decision to initiate change.
- I agree that the benefits of the change outweigh the risks.
- My organization is taking a systematic approach to addressing the issues prompting this strategic change.
- I agree that the project plan includes logical steps that will lead to sustainable changes necessary to embed the solution in operational practices.
- I understand what is changing and what is not at both the organizational level and within my local context.
- I can envision how new ways of thinking about and performing work collectively will lead to the intended outcomes.
- I can explain how the change impacts me/the way I perform my work.
- I can explain how the change impacts my team, how we work together, and how we work with others.
- The initiative is integrated into my department's strategic plan.
- The expectations about what needs to change, why we are changing, and how we should make changes are clear enough for me to engage in productive change-related activities.
- I can focus on what needs to be done to carry out my role in implementing change.

Coherence is foundational to and intertwined with all other human preconditions for organizational change. When people can make sense of what is changing, how it impacts them, and how it fits into a larger whole, they regain the cognitive and emotional stability needed to engage constructively. Yet coherence alone is not enough to endure the trials and tribulations of organizational change. To ignite the passion necessary to mobilize a critical mass of employees and maintain their interest, a deeper question must be answered: Why does this change matter to me? Intersecting with establishing coherence, people want to live out purpose – the personal significance that ignites commitment and joins individual effort with united ambition. That is where we turn next.

Purpose is Paramount

When higher education institutions launch new initiatives—whether academic, technological, or operational—leaders tend to focus on what is changing and how it will be implemented. Yet the success of transformation often hinges on something more fundamental: why the change matters to the institution and to the people expected to carry it forward. A clear and compelling “why” illuminates purpose, and purpose is paramount to sustainable change.

Purpose inspires the collective effort required to move a strategy from aspiration to action. In his breakout book, *Start with Why*, Simon Sinek (2009) implored his audience to “start with why” whenever leading others. As Sinek notes, starting with “why” is more than a rhetorical gimmick; it is part of a conceptual framework grounded in the tenets of human decision-making. “why” evokes emotion, and emotion plays a decisive role in whether employees commit their time, energy, and creativity to a change...or subtly disengage.

Effective people leaders do not merely communicate direction—they activate meaning. A clear and compelling “why” that resonates across constituent groups generates shared purpose, and this synergy transforms mandates into movements by helping people see change-related work as sensible and worthy. In contrast, when purpose is unclear, abstract, or too distant, even well-designed initiatives falter – not because employees lack understanding or goodwill, but because they cannot locate what they value in the change.

Most organizations trip over themselves to cultivate employee engagement. However, of all the investments leaders make to build buzz around new initiatives, attempting to motivate employees to behave in ways that advance enterprise-level goals, purpose is too often overlooked. Purpose, the fiber that weaves institutional goals and individual motivation together, is frequently assumed rather than intentionally nurtured.

Sinek, S. (2009). *Start with why: How great leaders inspire everyone to take action*. New York, NY: Portfolio.



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Purpose to the Nth Degree

Purpose begins at the individual level and becomes an intrinsically motivating force “when a person is doing what they do best to further what they care about most” (Herway, 2021, para. 2). In postsecondary settings, this often includes commitments to students, equity, disciplinary excellence, community impact, and public good.

During organizational change, a sense of ownership emerges when employees can see themselves in the work required to accomplish outcomes that matter – both to them and the institution. Leaders foster this ownership by helping employees connect their unique contributions to a cause larger than their job descriptions and by creating opportunities to act on that connection. When enough people attach their passion, expertise, and talent to the organization’s goal, individual purpose melds into a shared purpose.

Purpose is not a “nice to have.” It is a performance driver. Gallup’s research (n.d.) identified purpose as one of five essential workplace conditions for deep dedication and sustained contribution to the organization. Even modest gains count: a 10 percent improvement in employees’ internalization of organizational purpose leads to an 8.1 percent decrease in turnover and a 4.4 percent increase in productivity – two key elements necessary for accomplishing organizational change that sticks (Herway, 2021, para. 4). In an era of constrained resources and rising

expectations, these products of purpose are especially consequential for higher education institutions navigating complex change.

Importantly, shared purpose does not require uniformity. Individuals may hold nuanced interpretations of what the initiative means or why it matters. What must be united, though, is the existence of an emotional connection to the work at scale. Emotional attachment is what allows diverse motivations to coalesce around a common direction. Without it, engagement remains superficial and change efforts lose traction.



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Purpose-generating Leadership

Cultivating shared purpose is an active, ongoing leadership responsibility—not a one-time message delivered at a project’s launch. Leaders at all levels play distinct but complementary roles in aligning individual purpose with institutional goals.

Executives and senior leaders shape purpose by:

- Articulating a clear, values-based “why” that links the initiative to institutional mission, student success, and long-term stewardship.
- Demonstrating coherence between the stated purpose of the initiative and decision-making, especially when trade-offs arise.
- Equipping managers and other people leaders with the context and language to translate institutional goals into departmental meaning.

When executives and senior leaders consistently anchor strategy in purpose, they signal that the change is not arbitrary or transient—but mission-critical.

Middle managers and other people leaders are the primary translators of purpose. Their proximity to both strategy and day-to-day operations positions them to:

- Localize the institutional “why” by explaining how it applies within specific functions, disciplines, or student-facing contexts.
- Model personal alignment by articulating how the initiative links to their own professional values.
- Create space for dialogue, reflection, and sensemaking within their teams.

Because trust is often strongest between employees and immediate supervisors, employees look to their managers for cues about whether the stated purpose is authentic and actionable. In practice, supervisors reinforce purpose through fundamental leadership behaviors such as 1) asking employees what they care about and what gives their work meaning; 2) helping individuals see how their contributions support students, colleagues, or communities; and 3) recognizing and rewarding purpose-aligned behaviors during the change process.

Using Purpose Prompts to Spark Dialogue

Notably, many employees are rarely asked what they care about beyond the hiring process. Purpose erodes when people feel unseen or when initiatives arrive without regard for professional identity or values. One of the most effective, low-cost ways to cultivate purpose during change is to invite reflection through targeted prompts. These questions are most powerful when used as conversation starters rather than survey items alone - particularly in supervisor-led discussions.

The following prompts can help surface employees' alignment, concerns, and opportunities to connect with institutional purpose:

- I trust that the leaders of this initiative have the best interests of the organization and its stakeholders at the center of their decision-making.
- The organizational “why” translates to and resonates within my local context(s).
- My supervisor demonstrates an understanding of and identification with the "why" for this change.
- I feel inspired by the "why" for this initiative because it resonates with my "why" for performing the work I do and/or working at this organization.
- I feel like I am supporting the organizational mission and living out our values by participating in this change.
- I can identify something meaningful and worthwhile in the initiative.
- The initiative upholds my professional values.
- I can envision how this initiative benefits my department and the people we serve.
- I believe I can contribute to the bigger picture of this change initiative.
- I want to contribute to the success of this initiative because the change process and/or outcomes affect people or things I care about.

A Note about Purpose as a Precondition

The synergy between individual purpose and institutional goals is not static. As initiatives evolve, leaders should conduct routine readiness checks to assess whether this human precondition for change is being met. Purpose becomes real not through declarations, but through dialogue and behavior. When leaders intentionally help align individual purpose with institutional goals, they do more than increase engagement—they create the conditions for change that endures the turbulence of higher education.

Purpose answers the question why this change matters, but belonging determines whether people feel they have a welcomed place in carrying it forward. When individuals can see their purpose reflected—and respected—within the collective effort, commitment deepens. And when people know they are safe, seen, and significant within the context of the change, they are more willing to learn and adapt in concert with others despite uncertainty. In the next section, we explore belonging as the social condition that transforms shared purpose into lasting, integrated action.

Belonging Begets Believing

At the heart of every successful change effort is a simple human truth: people must feel like they belong before they can believe that change is both possible and worthwhile.

Organizational change succeeds or fails not because of strategy alone, but because of the psychological, social, and emotional experiences of the people expected to carry it out. These experiences shape how employees interpret change and whether they believe it is achievable and justified. When belief is rooted in belonging, change becomes something people willingly participate in rather than something that begrudgingly happens to them.



Belonging is a fundamental human need. People are hardwired to seek it out, particularly during times of uncertainty.

Belonging can be understood as being treated and feeling like a full member of a community in which one can thrive (Harvard Business Review, 2021). In the context of organizational change, belonging becomes the connective tissue that turns organizational intent into collective action. When people feel safe, seen, and significant, they are far more willing to adapt, take risks, and persist through ambiguity. Belonging enables collaborative change through a “We can do this together!” creed and should be intentionally fostered by leaders.

Safe

Safety is foundational to belonging. Amy Edmondson’s (2019) research on psychological safety demonstrates that people are more inclined to share ideas, ask questions, experiment, and make mistakes when they do not fear embarrassment or retribution. This type of atmosphere is essential during organizational change when learning, collaboration, and ingenuity are required to navigate unfamiliar terrain.

The ambiguity and instability that change introduces in our lives can be deeply unsettling – especially in the workplace. Employment is more than a transactional relationship with an employer. Work is closely tied to purpose, identity, community, financial security, and access to healthcare. When these foundations feel threatened by organizational change, fear and anxiety naturally rise. In response, people often default to fight, flight, freeze, or other change-resistant behaviors as a means of self-protection.

This is precisely why people leaders play a critical role as regulators of safety. When leaders acknowledge uncertainty, normalize discomfort, and respond with curiosity rather than defensiveness, they create conditions that allow people to remain engaged rather than retreat inward. Psychological safety reassures employees that they can navigate change without risking their self-esteem and belonging.

Seen

Belonging deepens when people feel seen. Caroline Fleck's (2025) research on validation adds an important dimension to the relationship between belonging and organizational change. Validation occurs when leaders acknowledge both the reality of a situation and the legitimacy of an individual's emotional response to it. Not everyone will agree with or enjoy change – and they do not need to in order to contribute meaningfully.

Validation does not require leaders to endorse resistance or abandon tough decisions. Rather, it communicates that employees' reactions are understandable and accepted without judgment or repercussion. Neurologically, feeling understood activates the brain's reward centers and supports social harmony. Validation conveys mindfulness, empathy, and respect, which send signals to the brain that reinforce trust and strengthen interpersonal bonds. When employees feel seen, they no longer need to mask doubt and discomfort to remain included. This openness reduces conflict, increases the availability of cognitive resources, and allows teams to work through challenges together rather than avoiding them. In this way, validation supports both healthy dissent and sustained engagement during change.

Significant

While validation affirms employees' internal experiences, mattering ensures they can engage in the unknown externally without jeopardizing their sense of worth. Mattering allows people to share ideas that aren't fully formed and try new things in unfamiliar environments. People take personal and professional risks for the sake of the greater good.

When employees believe their work has purpose and impact, they demonstrate greater engagement and perseverance, especially during complex or disruptive change efforts. Feeling needed deepens emotional commitment and relational cohesion, both of which are critical to long-term transformation.

Zach Mercurio's (2025) *The Power of Mattering* shows that people are more motivated to commit to their workplaces when they believe they are a necessary piece of the puzzle and their contributions make a difference. Mattering expands belonging from "I fit here," to "I am essential here." This sentiment is key to mobilizing employee engagement during organizational change.

Leaders reinforce mattering by involving employees meaningfully, not performatively, in discovery, design, and decision-making. Authentic inclusion signifies that employees' expertise, identities, and lived experiences shape both the process and outcomes of change. These actions communicate faith in people's capacity to contribute to the institution's future and invite shared ownership of the change itself.

Belonging as Change Infrastructure

Belonging – bolstered by safety, validation, and mattering – exerts profound influence on the success of organizational change. It

forms the psychological, social, and emotional infrastructure that makes coordinated transformation possible and rewarding. When employees feel connected to one another, understood in their experiences, and assured that their contributions count, they engage more fully, communicate more openly, and sustain change more effectively.

For leaders, fostering belonging is not an interpersonal nicety—it is a critical responsibility. When people feel safe, seen, and significant, their belief in the change follows. And when people believe, they act.

Belonging Precondition Prompts

Successful strategies depend on leaders' ability to meet the shifting needs of their employees. The prompts below can help leaders assess whether employees feel a sense of belonging. Employees' responses offer a strong starting point for leaders to conduct conversations about belonging and organizational change.

- I feel informed enough about the change to feel included in what is happening across the organization.
- I can ask questions, provide feedback, and even disagree without fear of negative consequences.
- I have been treated fairly during this change initiative.
- I feel like someone cares about my thoughts and emotions related to this change.
- My voice is represented and considered during the change process.
- I am involved in conversations, activities, or other opportunities for collaboration that allow me to share my point of view and learn from others.
- I am invited to shape the initiative and/or change process by sharing my ideas, expertise, or experience.
- I can see how my contribution positively impacts this change.
- I believe there is a place for my continued employment at this organization after the change initiative is completed.
- I feel connected to others who are experiencing this change alongside me.
- I share a sense of purpose with others as we move through this change.
- My colleagues are committed to doing quality work related to this change.

Support Sustains Resilience

When strategic change is introduced in the workplace, employees often ask a simple but fundamental question: Will I be supported through this? If the answer is unclear or delayed, survival instincts take over and change resistance emerges. Even among dedicated professionals, uncertainty can trigger an “everyone for themselves” mindset that undermines collaboration, slows adoption, and diminishes the promise of the initiative itself.

To minimize the perception of threat and subsequent self-protecting behaviors that organizational change tends to elicit, people need to know they will not be left stranded to figure out the change on their own; they must believe they will be supported. Organizational support is not a peripheral activity. It is a core condition that enables employees to endure the vulnerability necessary to transform how work gets done. In other words, organizational support enables employee transformation.

Support Smooths Change

Support serves as a lifeline for employees navigating new strategies. When employees know that resources, guidance, and care are available, they are far better equipped to persist through the ambiguity and strain that accompany organizational change. In higher education, where workloads are already heavy and professional identities are deeply tied to mission and professional disciplines, support mitigates the fear and insecurity that often arise when long-standing systems, roles, or practices are disrupted.



Importantly, support does not remove all challenges; it makes challenges doable. Support creates the psychological and practical conditions under which people can let go of old ways of working without losing themselves or facing imminent failure. They can experiment, learn, and adapt because resources that enable productive participation in change are readily accessible.

Support

Support is Not One-Size-Fits-All

Support comes in many forms, and the type of support desired by individuals depends on personal preferences and immediate circumstances. What feels useful to one person may feel insufficient or overwhelming to another. Some stakeholders need timely information, training, and accessible tools. Others look for clarity: defined expectations, decision-making structures, and success metrics. Still others draw support primarily from relationships with supervisors, peers, and cross-functional partners.

For people leaders, this variability is consequential. Providing support is less about deploying a fixed set of interventions and more about remaining attentive to evolving needs. As initiatives progress, the type, intensity, and source of support employees require will shift. Leaders who assess support needs early and revisit the topic often are better positioned to align resources with real, lived experience.



Support Makes Change Stick

Without intentionally designed and consistently delivered support, employees' divergence from the north star is almost inevitable. People will interpret communication differently, adopt changes unevenly, and revert to old but familiar practices under pressure. That is, in stressful situations void of systematic support, the likelihood that the strategic change becomes embedded as standard practice is low.

By contrast, when leaders invest in supporting employees' change journeys, they strengthen the institution's overall capacity for transformation. Support enables alignment, reinforces trust, and sustains momentum long after the initial enthusiasm fades. What is needed will vary across roles, departments, and moments in time—but asking the right questions, and acting on what is learned, is a critical first step toward delivering the right support at the right time.

Deciphering Support Needs through Deliberate Dialogue

One of the most effective ways to understand whether support is landing is through structured, ongoing conversation. The following prompts can help leaders assess the adequacy and effectiveness of organizational support while also signaling care, accountability, and shared ownership of the change:

- I observe executive/senior leaders actively engaged in ensuring this initiative is successful.
- I am aware of the change management plan and when I should expect to have my change-related needs met.
- I agree that the available forms of support facilitate desired employee behaviors related to this initiative.
- I have the opportunity to grow professionally in important ways during this strategic change process.
- My ability to think about and perform my work differently is bolstered by organizational and team culture.
- The organization assumes responsibility for my well-being during this strategic change process by encouraging paid time-off, cross-training, creating capacity in my workload, or through similarly focused efforts.
- The organization nurtures workplace joy throughout this change process by providing bonus compensation, hosting celebrations, and other forms of individual/team recognition.
- In the last month, my supervisor or someone else has talked to me about how the strategic change impacts me, what is expected of me, and how I am feeling about it.
- I have go-to people with whom I feel comfortable discussing my ideas, concerns, or questions related to this initiative.
- The organization has provided documentation, such as a project charter, guiding principles, role descriptions, and/or other sources of truth I can reference regularly to inform my decisions and behaviors.



Confidence Cements Commitment

In the quiet corners of organizational change, confidence is often fragile. Employees question whether they will be successful, whether mistakes will be visible and costly, or whether their expertise will still matter. These doubts are rarely spoken aloud. Instead, they surface as resistance that can be difficult for an organization to overcome. Cultivating employees' confidence, therefore, is not a “soft” or secondary concern; it is a strategic imperative and should be a core leadership responsibility during organizational change.

Organizational change seldom fails because employees lack potential to change the way they work; it fails because employee confidence got dimmed along the way and no one stepped in to reignite it. Colleges and universities are rich with capable, mission-driven professionals. Yet even the most competent and dedicated faculty and staff can hesitate when their confidence is undermined by ambiguity, shifting expectations, or perceived risk.

In the absence of confidence, employees wait for certainty before acting – certainty that rarely appears during transformation. In the presence of confidence, action becomes the mechanism through which certainty is created. Momentum builds, and change begins to move. When leaders intentionally strengthen confidence, they transform uncertainty into commitment and enable change that endures.

Change Compromises Confidence

In higher education, an occupation represents far more than a job description. Many faculty, staff, and administrators feel called to their careers and invest substantial time, money, and energy developing the knowledge and skills required to establish competence and bring value to their field, students, and institution.

Consistently demonstrating mastery and being recognized for their expertise brings considerable joy to the higher education employee experience. When organizational change disrupts familiar roles, routines, or measures of success, however, it can destabilize that sense of professional grounding. In these moments, even highly capable employees may experience uncertainty about their future relevance, credibility, or accomplishments. Professional ambiguity and instability creep in and confidence becomes difficult to muster precisely when it is needed the most.

The previous section explored how support equips people with the capability to carry out change. Importantly, confidence is not synonymous with aptitude. Employees may be capable but still hesitant, trained but not yet sure. Training, tools, and resources make change doable, but they do not automatically make change feel okay. In other words, organizational support is necessary, but not sufficient. Employees still need confidence to step up and move forward.



The Criticality of Confidence

Confidence serves as the psychological bridge between the doability of a change and an individual's readiness to see it through. Confidence is not understanding every intricate detail of a change or having control over the outcomes. Rather, it is the conviction that one can overcome the challenges of transformation and the willingness to act accordingly – trusting that certainty follows action, not the other way around. Confidence reflects a belief that one can navigate ambiguity, learn while doing, and recover from missteps along the way.

It is important for people leaders to recognize that confidence is not an individual trait to be summoned under pressure. It is a workplace condition, deliberately created (or quietly eroded) by organizational systems, structures, and leadership behaviors.

When confidence is absent, fear is amplified and self-protective behaviors transpire, undermining any chance for commitment to engaging in or adopting change. In these circumstances, the perceived risks of change outweigh the promised rewards. Employees cling tightly to what is comfortable, because that familiarity is what allowed them to maintain confidence previously. Of course, succumbing to the status quo does not advance the organization nor the professional development of its employees and is what most leaders wish to avoid.

Confidence is deeply intertwined with psychological safety. In low-confidence or low-psychologically safe environments, employees often wait for perfect clarity and explicit permission before acting. Anxiety festers and employees' cognitive and emotional bandwidth is depleted, squandering knowledge and skill-building opportunities. Even with robust communication and training, adoption falters and "shadow systems" materialize, preventing the organization from realizing the intended benefits of change.

Conversely, when confidence is nurtured, employees recognize change as manageable rather than menacing. Confidence reduces the self-doubt that often accompanies transformation: Will I be competent? Will I fail publicly? Will I lose credibility or status? Confidence lowers perceived risk and allows loss-based questions like these to give way to growth mindsets.

Confident employees feel secure enough to try new ways of thinking about and performing work. Psychological safety allows individuals to direct their energy toward learning, unlearning, and managing the emotional demands of change rather than toward self-protection. Employees with moderate to high confidence believe, "I can do this," and that belief fuels the behaviors that ultimately lead to change adoption, including trying, adjusting, persisting.

Confidence also reinforces faith in leaders and in the strategy itself. Employees frequently interpret their own confidence (or lack thereof) as a signal about leaders' competence and the legitimacy of the change initiative. When organizations intentionally cultivate confidence, they replace questions of "Will I flop?" with reassurances such as "Leadership empowered us to succeed," and "This change is worth my effort."



Confidence as a Collective Force

Beyond individual mindsets and behaviors, confidence accelerates a collective commitment to change through social influence. Confident employees are more likely to act autonomously, and autonomy strengthens intrinsic motivation and engagement. As these employees model curiosity and courage while navigating the change process and testing out new ways of working, they normalize learning-in-progress and reduce the stigma associated with mistakes.

Confident employees emerge as informal peer coaches and champions. Through trusted relationships, they extend support and strengthen local change networks that are often more responsive and contextually relevant than formal, top-down mechanisms. For those in proximity to these employees, change is visible and perceived as possible, making commitment to it contagious.

Confidence is key to reinforcing employees' engagement in and ownership of change. Employees can comply without confidence, but they cannot commit. And without collective employee commitment, the organization will not achieve the intended outcomes of its strategic initiatives.

Assessing Confidence

Confidence should be continually assessed, not assumed. It ebbs and flows as initiatives progress, milestones are reached, and new demands emerge. People leaders play a critical role in noticing where confidence is flourishing and where it is crumbling.



The following prompts can be used in one-on-one conversations, team reflections, pulse surveys, or retrospectives to surface confidence-related insights and initiate meaningful dialogue:

- Overall, the organization will be better because of this change.
- I see college leaders modeling the behavior required for change adoption and sustainability.
- The organization helps employees navigate the unknown and build certainty throughout the change process.
- I know what is expected of me during and after the change process and am ready to meet those expectations.
- I am encouraged to lean into my strengths as I navigate and contribute to this strategic change.
- In the last month, I have received recognition or praise for contributing input or participating in conversations, activities, or other opportunities for collaboration related to this change.
- My colleagues and I set, accomplished, and celebrated small goals in the context of this strategic change.
- I received adequate training, job aids, and other resources to perform my job competently in the future state.
- I feel safe taking risks, making mistakes, and learning lessons as I adapt to new circumstances.
- I have access to policy and process documentation, training materials, and other critical reference resources to succeed in my role.
- My expertise and/or new knowledge and skills are relevant in the future state.
- The organization has provided enough infrastructure to sustain and improve the change.

Employees' change journeys inevitably include peaks and valleys of confidence. What builds confidence will vary across individuals, roles, and departments. For leaders, the work is not to eliminate uncertainty, but to create conditions where people are convinced they can navigate it successfully. The prompts above and the critical dialogue they ignite will help to ensure employees have the confidence they need to adopt new ways of thinking about and performing their work so that the strategic change is operationalized and sustained.

Change Leadership Capacity-Building Opportunities

The volume and pace of change present on today's college campuses require everyone to possess the foundational knowledge and skills necessary to facilitate transformation from wherever they sit in the institution. Understanding how to manage change for yourself and others in a human-centered manner helps to increase employee buy-in, decrease initiative fatigue, address change resistance, and achieve the outcomes you desire.

Higher Edgineer is here to accelerate and enhance your organization's change leadership development efforts. Receive training and expert advice from Dr. Nicole H. Gahagan, an internationally renowned organizational change professional who has more than 20 years of experience in higher education. Nicole offers webinars, workshops, and coaching tailored for your specific initiative in the context of your institutional culture. Whether you select from the popular trainings below, seek one-on-one consultation, or need hands-on change management support, Higher Edgineer is ready to serve!

If you're ready to transform your college or university into an institution that is ready for change and masters adaptability, reach out to receive a quote today!



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