

Transformative Leadership

Bruce M. Mackh, PhD

Universities have existed for more than a thousand years, and this long history comes with no small measure of tradition, history, and honored legacies. At the same time, universities are the birthplace of new ideas and the launching pad from which graduates go forth full of bright hopes and fresh energies, ready to change the world. How can educational administrators negotiate between these two poles? The answer lies in transformative leadership.

1. Creativity: The central characteristic of innovation is creativity—beginning with something old and making it new.
2. Respiration: Innovation is to an organization as breathing is to an organism—we must bring new ideas in, while also pushing our ideas out into the world.
3. Selectivity: Not every idea is good, and not every good idea can be acted upon. We must be intelligently selective, but then fully support the ideas that we choose.
4. Judgment: Innovation requires an open mind—we must be able to hold our own ideas in reserve, being willing to look, listen, watch, and remain silent in order to learn what others have to offer.
5. Irritants: Ideas often come from sources we don't expect. Seek to interact with people who make you uncomfortable, who challenge your core beliefs, who you think are wrong, or whose ideas seem strange. Just as a pearl begins with the irritant of a single grain of sand inside the oyster's shell, the most transformative ideas may be equally unsettling.
6. Radical teams: The strongest teams are comprised of both veterans and newcomers, of people with opposing points of view and divergent disciplinary backgrounds. Homogenous grouping may not yield anything but more of the same—the antithesis of transformation.
7. Human-Centric: Innovation requires thoughtful consideration, reflective contemplation, and a conscious effort to include all stakeholders.
 - a. We must always place human considerations first, using empathy and understanding to guide our actions.
 - b. In higher education, this means bearing in mind that faculty members are as loyal to their disciplinary fields as they are to their institution. Therefore, we must support transformation of the institution while also ensuring that change will not erode their academic domains.
 - c. Transformation must occur steadily, gently, and respectfully. It must be transparent and consciously include all stakeholders without impeding progress.
8. Doing: We must have a bias towards action, placing doing above thinking, planning, or maintaining. We should reward those who take action—whether successful or not—above those who chose the status quo. It's not enough to think about thinking, or to spend time planning to plan. We must act, then evaluate, then act again.
9. Why? How? What? Stakeholders need to be persuaded that change is necessary, good, and desirable. They must be convinced and in support of the Why (the reason for embracing change) before they can accept the How (planning for implementation). After that, deciding

together on the What (concrete actions) becomes simple. People must come to see that change has personal benefit and that their participation will be rewarded.

10. Actionable: Innovation must be able to be implemented—no matter how good the idea, if it cannot be put into practice, it goes nowhere.
11. Reward Risk: A sense of safety is essential to the willingness to engage in risk. Celebrate intelligent failure, expressing a dissenting opinion, or arguing for an opposing point of view. Use failure as feedback mechanism and a learning tool. Assure others that engaging in risk is of greater benefit than choosing to do nothing.
12. Hire Strategically: People should be brought into your team because they offer something new and can contribute to your organizational transformation, not because they already fit comfortably in the same mold as the rest of your members. If you're looking to fill a position with someone who's an exact copy of the previous holder of that job, your goal is not truly to achieve innovation.
13. Navigation: As educational leaders, our task is to motivate and guide. When you don't know where you're going, any road will get you there. If we're serious about achieving transformation, we need to set a destination and purposefully lead our organization towards that goal. This requires focus and determination.
14. Legacy: A university setting bears a tremendous weight of legacy in its history, traditions, and human resources. We must honor those characteristics without being bound by them. We must nurture innovation while also working within existing institutional contexts, systems, and missions.
15. Dedication: Change is hard. There are no two ways around this basic truth. But it's sometimes also good, not to mention inevitable. Is it without risk? No. But without risk, there is no progress. Change is upon us. The question is: are you ready to be a transformative leader? Do you have the perseverance and dedication to see this through to the end, no matter how much it upsets the status quo? Are you in it for the long haul?