
An Organisational Change Management Framework for Sustainability

Julie Newman

Yale University, Office of Sustainability, USA

This article outlines a three-phase change management process for institutions committed to creating a trajectory towards a sustainable campus. For the purpose of this discussion an institution committed to sustainability is concerned with and responds to its impact on environmental and human health, locally to globally. There are three distinct phases to this framework: awakening, pioneering and transformation. A transitioning phase takes place between each of the phases, which has its own set of distinguishing characteristics. The purpose of the framework is twofold: to inform the institutional strategy by recognising key characteristics of the change management process for sustainability; and to prepare and enable the change management team (sustainability stakeholders) to recognise and thus guide the organisation through the processes. A successful change management process prepares the institution for course correction and the ability to continuously seek new solutions and set new goals over time.

- Sustainability
- Change management
- Organisational change
- Institutional strategy
- Campus sustainability
- Change manager
- Innovation
- Organisational development

Julie Newman, PhD, is the Director of the Office of Sustainability for Yale University and she holds a lecturer appointment with the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies. In 2004 Julie co-founded the Northeast Campus Sustainability Consortium, to advance education and action for sustainable development on university campuses in the northeast and maritime region.



✉ 70 Whitney Ave, New Haven, CT 06511, USA
💻 julie.newman@yale.edu

TODAY, UNIVERSITIES MUST COME TO terms with the fact that compliance as driven by state and federal regulations merely keeps our institutions from being overt polluters. Until such regulations are updated it is up to a university to figure out how best to contribute to a healthy environment rather than deplete it. This is the basis for the intersection between sustainability and higher education. Universities that are on the cutting edge of this field not only improve their practices but also develop models that bridge the operations and academic gap and find innovative ways in which sustainability advances the core mission of a university via research and scholarship.

As a sustainability director who facilitates this process of integrating sustainability into the institutional fabric at Yale, I am frequently asked if I am going to work myself out of a job once the university is 'sustainable'. There was a period of time when I too thought that might be the fate of a sustainability officer, with the assumption that once solar panels were on the roofs, biodiesel in the buses, organic food in the dining halls and zero waste to landfill, we could walk away thinking our work was done. That was a very short-lived vision.

What has become clear to me over the years is that we tend to be distracted by the visible indicators or the 'products' of a sustainability commitment in the form of renewable energy, organic food, alternative transportation and the like. In the long run, however, the underlying success of our sustainability initiatives is grounded in that which we are unable to detect with the naked eye and in time becomes embedded in the very fabric of the institution. These embedded changes will be reflected in areas such as policy and standards, institutional performance indicators, professional reviews, decision-making strategies, redefined positions and financial systems. A successful change management process will target both the visible and embedded arenas.

I recently began to work with a colleague to consider the change management process that underlies the ultimate success of our sustainability endeavours.¹ Together we reflected on our experiences from inception to implementation, and what was remarkable, though not surprising, was how similar (yet unique) our experiences had been despite how different our institutions appear to be. Not only was the university as an organisation evolving, so was our role in facilitating this transformation.

The proposed framework is an effort to frame and capture the organisational evolution that is a necessary part of building a sustainable organisation. Coming back to the first statement, it is very possible that sustainability officers work themselves out of a position, not through lack of work, but through not having the necessary skills to keep up with the evolved state of the institution. For the purpose of this brief introduction to the proposed framework, I reference my own personal experience at Yale by choosing examples that I have found to be quite universal in nature.

¹ Leith Sharp was the founding director of both the Harvard Green Campus Initiative and the Illinois Green Economy Network. She is the co-developer of this framework.

A change management for sustainability framework

The underlying premise of this discussion is that the organisations we are familiar with today have not been designed with sustainability in mind. The organisational conditions of our universities can either impede or enhance our best efforts to pursue sustainability depending on how well we, as sustainability officers, understand them. The application of sustainability principles to a university setting calls for an orchestrated response within operational systems (e.g. energy, water) and administrative systems (e.g. finance, procurement) and an expectation that these principles are reflected in the educational outcomes of the graduates.

Today the higher education sector is arguably the most important and dynamic sector in society to lead the way on institutionalising sustainability as it sits at the crossroads of research, scholarship, curriculum and extension. Contributions include everything from training environmental professionals and citizens to conducting critical interdisciplinary research in almost every field related to the development of new business, investment, leadership and governance models. Our university systems, regardless of cultural context, are set up to endure over time, withstand change and short-lived crisis but they are not set up for a quick and easy transformation towards sustainability. This article outlines a three-phase change management process that captures the multidimensional progression for organisations committed to creating a sustainable organisation.

A successful change management process prepares the institution for course correction and the ability to continuously set new goals and seek new solutions. The purpose of the framework is to inform the organisational strategy by recognising key characteristics of each phase to assess whether progress is being made and where to leverage the next move(s). The purpose of the framework is twofold: to inform the organisational strategy by recognising key characteristics of the change management process for sustainability; and to prepare and enable the change management team (sustainability stakeholders) or leader to recognise and thus guide the organisation through the processes. Additionally, though presented sequentially, the framework is not intended to be interpreted as a linear process over time but to capture the iterative nature of the change management process at the institutional and the project level. The three distinct phases to this framework are: **awakening**, **pioneering** and **transformation**. Found between each of these phases is a **transition** phase with its own unique attributes.

- ▶ The **awakening** phase positions the issue of sustainability as a point of central importance for the organisation. Despite its origins, this phase often leads to the establishment of a change management role (e.g. sustainability officer), a sustainability committee or task force and a series of pilot projects, in no particular order
- ▶ The **pioneering** phase demonstrates a new level of institutional leadership, vision, direction and a problem definition. Attributes of the pioneering

phase suggest that the organisation is motivated to strive towards a different and potentially better future. Innovation, whether process or technological, and accountability become a fundamental aspect of the decision process. In this phase, the stakeholders themselves may not be identified as pioneers, yet they recognise and work to advance the institutional commitment

- ▶ The **transformation** phase manifests in new organisational processes and structures driven by sustainability principles that are now integrated into the primary functions and desired outcomes of the organisation
- ▶ Between each of these phases is a **transitioning** phase. This is a tenuous moment in which the process shifts from a pilot phase or singular focus to become the responsibility of targeted stakeholders across the institution

At the meta-level a university may be identified as demonstrating attributes of a certain phase. For example, a sustainability director may assert that she is leading the way at an institution that is in the transformation phase while another director may believe that she is facilitating the awakening phase at a different institution. When applied at the project-level it should be possible to explain the status of a project or progress towards a goal based on specified characteristics. If you are working for an organisation that you suspect has already experienced the pioneering phase and is prepared and well-suited to embrace transformation, then this may be an easier concept for you to embrace. If you are working for an organisation that is just awakening then the transformation stage may be at first glance more difficult for you to conceptualise. If the latter, then approach this paper with a sense of looking into what the future could potentially have in store for your organisation and then think back to what it will take to reach this point and thrive in the transformation phase.

Change management for sustainability

Change management is a complex and non-linear endeavour. A strong sense of imagination, creativity and patience is required if one is to persevere through the process. The change management process for sustainability attempts to realign its demands and impacts both locally and globally, upstream and downstream within the limitations of the Earth's natural resource base.

What is often understated and at times misunderstood when a university commits to 'sustainability' is that most to all of the operational functions that a sustainability programme is expected to influence (e.g. energy, design and construction, custodial services, transportation) are not accountable to the sustainability officer. In turn, the change manager (sustainability officer)² must make it her business to know the organisation, how it functions, how decisions

² For the purpose of this discussion the terms 'sustainability officer' and 'change manager' will be used interchangeably.

are made, how leadership is defined and where the leverage points are. This position is responsible for fostering and sustaining a continuous process that drives organisational learning, innovation, systems thinking and continuous improvement towards sustainability. A successful sustainability officer will become the conductor and diplomat by setting the cadence and direction of the process. The cadence will be influenced depending on where the position is situated within the hierarchy and how the position is financed. To be successful in this position, the change manager must establish a strategy that builds bridges between institutional functions and the office of sustainability (or equivalent). A successful programme will have an implicit system of accountability to ensure that goals are being met in the short and long term.

In the next three sections, I will reference Yale University as a case example to highlight the three phases of the change management process described above.

Awakening to sustainability

In 1994, at Yale University, a group of students set out to influence and improve the ecological impacts of the institution. In an effort to raise awareness around Yale's environmental impacts and bring their concerns to the attention of the administration, these students sought funding from the Heinz Family Foundation to support a dialogue on campus sustainability. Heinz challenged the students to 'put the focus on problem solving, and you've got a deal'.³ In the end, 500 faculty, staff and student leaders representing 160 institutions, 22 countries and all 50 states attended the (Yale University) Campus Earth Summit. The Summit led to the creation of the *Blueprint for a Green Campus*, which is framed as 'a set of recommendations for higher-education institutions across the globe to work toward an environmentally sustainable future' (Heinz Family Foundation 1995). These recommendations were shaped by input from well-known environmental leaders including Teresa Heinz, Amory Lovins, Carol Browner, Denis Hayes, William Reilly, Thomas Lovejoy, Anthony Cortese, David Orr, Stephen Viederman, William McDonough and Paul Hawken. Even Al Gore made a video conferencing appearance reinforcing that campuses had a role to play in the struggle for global sustainable development. The final *Blueprint* was grounded in two fundamental principles which still hold true today:

- ▶ That as multi-billion-dollar consumers of higher education's services, students have the power to demand a more environmentally responsible campus and curriculum
- ▶ Faculty and staff can influence society by turning out environmentally literate citizens and by demanding environmentally sound goods and services

³ Heinz Family Foundation website: www.heinzfamily.org (accessed 7 March 2012).

The Summit demonstrated leadership on the part of the students, staff and faculty and was no doubt a strong catalyst for *awakening* interest and commitment to the environment at Yale.

The initial leadership for a university to commit to the path of sustainability may be found almost anywhere within the vertical or horizontal hierarchy. Irrespective of whether it is public or private, large or small, an organisation may be awakened in a variety of manners. The manner in which the organisation is awakened to the challenge and vision of sustainability unequivocally influences the success of the early stages of bringing the commitment to the forefront of the university's agenda. Two common pathways of initial leadership tend to be an individual champion (or more than one) and/or the creation of a diversely populated committee.

Moreover, a university may be awakened from internal or external factors. The Campus Earth Summit is an example of an internal process driven by students. The Earth Summit alone did not awaken Yale to sustainability; however, it was an initial step. Until the founding of the office of sustainability in 2005, students continued to raise awareness and seek the attention of the administration with tactics that ranged from petitions to well-crafted reports. Other institutions have awakened to external influences by, for example, becoming a signatory of the Talloires Declaration or, more recently, the American College and University President's Climate Commitment (ACUPCC). Both are examples in which a signature of a university president is required signalling administrative endorsement of the agenda. In other instances, the awakening process may be influenced by a sense of urgency around a topical area, a change in leadership, an administrative commitment or a grass-roots collective of voices. Regardless of how the process commences, this phase will require identifying and expanding the base of early champions while analysing the leverage points for future success.

Awakening is not intended to be a one-time experience or a single event for the institution. Awakening an institution evokes the need to acknowledge sustainability and the change that is needed to set and achieve certain goals. Once the initial 'awakening' has occurred and sustainability projects have begun to be implemented by early champions, the journey continues, bringing forth opportunities to awaken the system to new ideas, engage new people or involve departments that have yet to be impacted. The process of awakening will be an ongoing experience for the university at the institutional, departmental and individual level. Reflecting on the initial awakening phase, the early leaders may begin to become more in tune with how to engage the hierarchy and overcome some of the early obstacles. The goal is to keep the university from postponing ongoing levels of dialogue and action beyond the early wins.

A successful awakening process ought to:

- Move campus sustainability on to the organisation's agenda and towards a point of central importance

- ▶ Begin the process of building sustainability capital⁴
- ▶ Identify and expand the base of early champions
- ▶ Break through the initial inertia with some early project and programme successes

Goals are essential to the strategic planning of a sustainable university. One of the most complex tasks affiliated with a commitment to sustainability is understanding and in essence calculating metrics that will be both quantifiable (e.g. energy, waste) and at times conceptual (e.g. planning). The process of setting broad-based goals for a system requires a baseline understanding of how the university performs and projected trends over time. Laying the foundation for this process tends to be part of the awakening phase.

At Yale, it took another eight years after the initial Campus Sustainability Summit for the position of director of sustainability to be appointed, fully funded, hired and tasked to centralise and guide the process. The Yale campus had been partially awakened by the initial gathering of students and activists in 1994, but the interest and commitment remained decentralised through the work of champions, early adopters and the committee structure, which governed the process from 2000 through 2004. The commitment to institutionalise sustainability as a university-wide endeavour was formalised with the creation of this position. The director quickly became responsible for institutionalising the awakening process and preparing the university to move beyond the initial phase.

The awakening phase may lead to a state of uncertainty in that it is possible to stay in this place for years or even decades if there is not a deliberate attempt to move the process along. It is equally possible to awaken a unit within your organisation (e.g. waste, energy, dining) and see that through to transformation without ever awakening the entire system. When successful, the organisation will evolve from awakening to pioneering seamlessly. In this transition new resistances will emerge along with new allies. The change manager is poised to position the organisation to move into the pioneering phase by demonstrating organisational commitment, achieving critical financial and staffing resource levels, engagement, attitudinal shifts, institutionalised targets or standards.

Organisation as pioneer

In the context of this framework, it could be argued that Yale shifted from a state of awakening to pioneering when it released the Yale Sustainability Strategic Plan in autumn 2010. The Plan is a set of 45 goals, both quantitative and conceptual in nature, to be achieved between 2010 and 2013. Yale as pioneer

⁴ **Sustainability capital** refers to the relationships that have been built and the funds that have been leveraged which advance sustainability in your organisation.

is committed to a process of continuous improvement and is committed to producing a follow up three-year plan before the 2013 deadline. The plan demonstrates a comprehensive commitment to sustainability that sets goals across all operational divisions. One of the most unique aspects to the plan which sets Yale apart as a pioneer is the system of accountability that has been institutionalised to ensure that progress towards the goals is measured, tracked and reported publicly. The conceptual goals range in nature from building design and sustainable landscape standards to the establishment of an ecosystem services framework.

The foundation of the plan was set five years prior to this when Yale committed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 43% below a 2005 baseline by 2020. After the goal was set all energy decisions were required to calculate related carbon emissions and the financial implications of these projected emissions. We learned that a publicly stated greenhouse gas goal compels the university to rethink and reshape the way it thinks about energy, design and construction, transportation and material goods. At the time that Yale may have moved to the pioneering phase with respect to greenhouse gas emissions we were still laying the foundation and in essence still awakening the remaining operational systems. This example demonstrates how it is feasible to have current change management cycles taking place within the same institution.

A pioneering university demonstrates a new level of sustainability leadership, integrates a system of accountability and ownership of responsibility, and has a clear vision and direction. An indicator of success is when innovation becomes a fundamental aspect of the decision and solution process. This phase expands across all areas of the organisation but does not have the benefit of wide-scale alignment and leverage and so can flatline. Some of the attributes of the pioneering phase are as follows:

- ▶ Change management function is institutionalised
- ▶ Significant expansion of active engagement across the campus
- ▶ Proliferation of projects and programmes across the campus
- ▶ Increased institutionalised policies and practices
- ▶ Broader range of commitment bridging operations and academics
- ▶ Development of new capacities, attitudinal shifts and confidence
- ▶ Sustainability commitment has moved beyond the single point of instigation

A distinguishing factor between the awakening and pioneering phases is the tangible attributes of the breadth of people involved and the increased rate of change. The pioneering phase is marked by a clear movement beyond the single point of instigation to a diffused state of ownership and initiative across the organisation. The work of pioneering calls for the change manager to focus on action and identify and develop new capacities. A successful change manager at this stage will learn to assess the state of the university and successfully manage

the tension that emerges from the process. During the pioneering phase there will be more prevalent examples of distributed responsibility and ownership of the goals. This may even manifest in the development of sustainability-specific roles. Stakeholders will become more versed at sustainability transactions. These are defined as exchanges between a combination of faculty, staff and/or students around a defined sustainability issue on campus and a process of solution development.

The pioneering organisation knows how to use the campus itself as a living laboratory for teaching, communicating, researching and operationalising sustainability. The organisation as pioneer is capable of remaining on the frontier of sustainability best practice for decades to come. The pioneering phase lays the groundwork for organisational transformation. A university is well into pioneering once there is a commitment to developing a campus-wide vision and strategic plan, which leads to the development of short-term (initially) and long-term goals that are backed by financial resources such as demonstrated by the Yale Sustainability Strategic Plan.

Transformation

Transformation changes the fundamental nature of our organisations. At this stage, the organisation has demonstrated the ability to adapt the organisational systems to attributes of sustainability without destabilising the institution. A university has been transformed by sustainability if sustainability principles and practices are undoubtedly integrated into the organisational fabric. At this stage in the change management process the pace (rate of change for complex systems), the volume (the number of people involved and the amount and impact of projects) and now diversity (the increase in interaction between systems) have all increased.

A successful transformation leads to new organisational processes, structures and decision-making that may not be recognised today—embedded in a new cultural context that relies on new habits. The transformed system is deliberate about the strategic interaction and alignment between human behaviour, professional capacity and organisational systems. Organisations change and evolve along with new regulations, new trends and new leadership, but few to none are transformed. Transformation calls for systems (e.g. energy) to work in tandem with other systems (e.g. finance).

Transformation calls for changing not just the end decisions being made but the very nature of the decision-making process. This phase calls on a complex organisational response and a realignment of goals at the systems level. In this process we will need to recognise and respond to the inherent limits, internal and external, of the organisational systems. These inherent limits emerge in the form of human aptitudes and systems design. For example, a university may not have the professional capacity to respond to new demands and tasks. While

goals at the organisational level are being set, systems to train the personnel at the ground level must be put in place concurrently. The reference to the limits of systems design is a reminder that our institutions were not established with sustainability goals in mind. Our university systems tend to be siloed by nature whereas sustainability calls on a systems response, which is difficult to command and achieve in its current state.

Failing to embark on systems transformation and failing to correlate organisational impacts with the Earth's capacity would be tragic. Nevertheless, organisational transformation is difficult. Without a doubt it is easier to remain with the status quo, disregarding the overall organisational impacts—particularly the ones that you or the system are unable to see, feel, touch, understand and possibly even measure. There is also no doubt that it is just easier to proceed with basic organisational change in which the players may stay the same, some organisational hierarchy may shift around, some new goals may be set or even a new leadership team brought in. But when you look again, it's just a new and improved version of the same organisation. That is not what this framework is calling for. There is also no doubt that the current organisational structure, whether a university or corporation, has limitations in its current form when it comes to aligning organisational systems' impacts with earth systems' capacities.

As in any change management process, there are going to be learning cycles and unanticipated barriers along the way, which may cause the pace to slow down. Once the organisation reaches this point though, the commitment to sustainability is institutionalised and the comfort to respond to dynamic conditions, new knowledge, new technology, and new regulations and policies becomes an aspect of the dynamic interaction between the organisation on the ground and its surroundings. At this point the organisational gears should be well lubricated; the change management cycles active and working in sync. This will then engage the much needed commitment and cycle of continuous improvement and innovation.

Conclusion

So what is it going to take? How can we be sure that 20, 30 or 40 years from now we will not be reflecting on an even worse state of the world? What have we given up in some cases and what have we gained in others in order to actualise the goal of organisational systems alignment with the Earth's natural resource base? If we are a species that is so capable, so creative and embodies collective intelligence, why is it that we are unable to transform our organisations so as not to deplete and pollute the environment?

The change management process for sustainability will only be as successful as the commitment is to being an ongoing process of continuous improvement, learning and systemic reform. If successful, the change management process

will prepare our organisations for the change in culture driven by sustainability principles while ensuring organisational stability. A successful change management process prepares the institution for course correction and the ability to continuously seek new solutions over time.

Reference

Heinz Family Foundation (1995) 'Blueprint for a Green Campus'; www.heinzfamily.org/pdfs/Blueprint-For-Green-Campus.pdf, accessed 7 March 2012.

