Five principles for change in theological schools

By Frank Yamada

This article was excerpted from a presentation given at the ATS Presidential Leadership Intensive Conference on December 6, 2017, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

We are living in an accelerated time,[1] where change is not just an addition to our life but is a multiplying factor. Change is happening at a faster pace, increasing our ability to do certain things and complicating our lives exponentially in other ways. This is not just a change from a post-industrial economy to a tech economy. This is a new world.

Theological education is not only embroiled in these broad societal changes but is also at the crossroads of major shifts both in higher education and in the church. In navigating this new world, how do theological schools embrace a "bifocal" vision, a sightline that embraces both our legacy and the need for change in our schools?

At ATS, we support and nurture innovation within our schools as they bend toward change in business models, in delivery and educational models, and in audiences. We share a collective wisdom—learning from one another what is working and not working in our schools and also leveraging the data that we see across the schools.

As schools work to adapt, I offer five principles of leading through change:

1. Conduct a sober assessment of your current situation.

"Confront the brutal facts" of your reality,[2] challenge your assumptions,- and question solutions that may be unrealistic. Chris Meinzer, senior director of administration and CFO at ATS, has given multiple presentations to schools about their current enrollments and financial realities. In many cases, schools are left with the reality that they will not grow their way out through enrollment, raise their way out of a deficit-laden balance sheet through an angel investor, or cut away their expenses to a better picture. The work of change is usually a multi-pronged and sustained discipline that is developed over time. A coordinated approach can include a combination of factors that include reducing liabilities (debt or deferred maintenance) through hard decisions, expanding and cultivating fatigued donor bases, or recruiting more diverse student bodies to enhance the mission of the school. At the same time, many schools continue to think about more transformative change possibilities—changes such as institutional or organizational partnerships, selling of underused property, or building efficiencies through

1 Thomas Friedman, *Thanks for Being Late: An Optimist's Guide to Thriving in an Age of Accelerations* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2016).

2 Jim Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap . . . And Others Don't* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001).

shared services with other schools or organizations—all the while considering what those changes might mean for the mission of the school going forward.

2. Get the right people on board in the right places doing the right things.

Jim Collins, in *Good to Great*,[3] advises leaders to tend to the *who* before tackling the *what*. Begin by creating a strong administrative team and faculty who are committed to the school's vision and can get things done. Getting the right people on board, doing the right things, helps to shift an organization's culture and effectiveness. This does not mean that one can come to an institution and make draconian shifts in personnel to suit that leader's style and agenda. It does mean that strategic and thoughtful decisions about "who" should be doing "what" can lead to organizational transformation.

As opportunities arise, seek faculty and staff who are passionate about the school's ethos and mission and seek out team members who are highly effective in fulfilling their particular functions or roles. Recruit strong board leadership with the talent and resources the school most needs. With the team in place, invest time in professional development—including those events that ATS offers—while also looking outside of theological education for resources that can help to advance the effectiveness of the team.

3. Often change starts on the margins, not at the center.

Gary Okihiro has argued that American history demonstrates that our country's core values emerge most strongly not from the center or the mainstream of society but from the margins.[4] For example, the Civil Rights Movement did not begin first as a legislative act in Congress, but it began among grass roots organizations and churches from communities of color. Similarly, the inertia for organizational change does not start from the core but often emerges from the margins or periphery of the institution. In the world of business, Clayton

Christensen has described how disruptive innovation begins "down market" of an industry, where a company is able to produce more efficiently and at lower cost, or leverage a particular innovation to transform an industry (e.g., the effect of the online distribution of music and books on bricks and mortar books and music stores). The major movers within these industries tend to overlook these trends because, initially, they do not perceive them to be worth the time or investment.[5] In these examples, changes take root from the periphery and move inward or migrate from the bottom up.

Traditionally, in most of higher education, new programs begin at the core with the faculty and the curriculum. However, when I served as president at one of our ATS schools, the creative energy for most of our new programs was generated through a synergy between the school's racial/ethnic centers, which did significant outreach in congregations of color, and key members of the faculty. The creative process started outward and moved inward.

4. Change is difficult for everyone.

Know that you will be spending a lot of time listening to the whole system and how it is adjusting to change. It is important to do this to maintain and build trust in the system; and it is not easy. For a president, this will probably be the biggest tax on your time and emotional energy. When institutions change, they do so with difficulty. For the process to be healthy, leaders must plan to do a lot of listening as the organizational system seeks to become something different.

5. We're in this together.

A lot of leadership literature focuses on the individual leader and what he or she can do or be. The reality is that both the fields you are tending and the seeds of change have likely preceded your leadership. There are change agents around you. In many cases, you are simply the catalyst for change that has already been cultivated. Harnessing the energy and direction of those change

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3 Ibid.
4 Gary Okihiro, *Margins and Mainstreams: Asians in American History and Culture* (New York: University of Washington Press, 1994).

5 Clayton Christensen, *The Innovator's Dilemma: When New Technologies Cause Great Firms to Fail* (Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing, 1997).

agents—what John Kotter calls "form(ing) a powerful guiding coalition"—is critically important to build lasting change.[6]

I also benefitted from the creation of a group of forward-thinking presidents who were willing to be colleagues with me (and not view one another as competition). What we shared was a common commitment to not be satisfied with the status quo of theological education. Foster thinking partners and create a *learning hive*—a group of leaders who can take time to look at the horizon of theological education from an elevated perspective.

In this good work that we do together, know that we are not alone. We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses who are present among us now, who preceded our own work, and who will come after us.

Most importantly, remember that God is with us, even in times of great change and transition. In his great commission, Jesus addressed the disciples in a time of great transition—his ascension—a period when they would take leadership over the next chapter of God's mission to the world. He addressed not only

"I am with you always until the end of the age."
—Matthew 28:20

their mission imperative but also their existential fear of being on their own. Likewise, Moses addressed the people of God prior to his death by reminding them that God would neither fail nor forsake them (Deut 31:6). In times of significant change and transition, God assures us that we are not alone. God's name is Immanuel. God is with us.

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6 John P. Kotter, *Leading Change* (Brighton, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2012).

Frank Yamada *joined ATS as executive director in July 2017, after six years as president of McCormick Theological Seminary. He was the first Asian American to serve a Presbyterian Church USA seminary and the first person of color to serve in this role at the seminary.*

Resources for Leading Organizational Change

- Clayton Christensen, *The Innovator's Dilemma: When New Technologies Cause Great Firms to Fail* (Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing, 1997).

- Jim Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap...And Others Don't* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001).

- Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, David Maxfield, Ron McMillan, and Al Switzler, *Influencer: the Power to Change Anything*, 2nd ed (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2013).

- Chip Heath and Dan Heath, *Switch: How to Change Things When Change is Hard* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2010).

- John P. Kotter, *Leading Change* (Brighton, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2012).

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JANUARY 2018

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