



Professional Development for Change

Clifford Baden

Director

Programs in Professional Education
Harvard Graduate School of Education

Leaders in higher education — whatever their institution or their title — face a complex set of challenges at the end of the 1990s:

- changing student populations — students who are older, often employed part time or full time, more diverse in terms of ethnicity, level of preparation, etc.;
- increasing expectations that higher education will provide workforce preparation, with a concomitant challenge to long-held notions of what higher education is meant to be;
- greater public calls for accountability, increasing faculty productivity, and lower costs;
- information technology that is evolving at a rate that outpaces campus leaders' ability to keep up with it, much less manage it; and
- a heightened awareness that boundaries and "service areas" no longer have any meaning, and many providers are competing for the same market of students.

Harvard's Institute for the Management of Lifelong Education (MLE) was created twenty years ago to meet the needs of college and university leaders who are responsible for grappling with these very issues. MLE is an intensive, two-week, residential program held each summer on the campus of Harvard University. Approximately seventy-five administrators are admitted to the program each year. The program is designed, according to its literature, "for those whose role is to think strategically about where their institution is going — about new alliances and partnerships, the impact of new delivery mechanisms, and how to serve new student populations."

In the early years of the program, the overwhelming majority of MLE participants were deans or directors of continuing education, extension, or outreach units on their campuses. These units were the locus of each institution's change agenda. Continuing-education leaders were the people designated to develop institutional responses to "nontraditional" learners, requests for training in business and

industry, needs for off-campus locations and correspondence courses, etc.

By the mid-1990s, MLE clientele had changed dramatically; this change reflected shifts in the academy. Increasingly, change is recognized as being everyone's business. Adult and part-time learners are everywhere on campus; they are no longer relegated to the continuing-education or evening divisions. Faculty in the traditional academic units on campus are teaching in the evenings, or at satellite campuses, or by technology. Issues and functions that used to be handled by continuing-education units are now dealt with by many more people on campus, including central administrators. Accordingly, the MLE participant group mirrors these changes. About one-third of each year's class are deans and directors of continuing education; and two-thirds are presidents and vice presidents, provosts and vice provosts, and department and division heads from traditional academic units.

Program Design

What kind of professional development does MLE offer to this eclectic group of campus leaders, all of whom share an interest in and responsibility for leading transformation and change at their institutions?

**Adult and part-time
learners are everywhere
on campus; they
are no longer relegated
to continuing-education
or evening divisions.**

It may help to begin by describing what MLE does *not* do. The MLE program does not offer a series of speakers who make formal presentations on each of the discrete topics in the higher education change agenda. Also, the MLE program does not attempt to be prescriptive, telling participants what they should do to respond to specific challenges or to better manage their institutions. The fact that participants come from

such diverse campus settings — large and small, public and private, two-year and four-year, undergraduate and graduate, and professional, etc. — precludes any approach that presumes to tell people what they should do. Participants in the program are skilled, experienced leaders. Good practice of adult education (and common sense) dictates that the most effective thing one can do is to create an environment in which participants can learn from each other.

To help these leaders meet the challenges of the future, MLE builds a learning community. This community includes the faculty and the administrative staff, to be sure, but at the heart of the community are MLE participants. They live together and they eat

together. They work and learn together in small groups and in large groups. As in any intensive residential program,

Participants interact differently with one another, as normal roles and learned behaviors are dropped. . . . Participants develop a sense of safety and security among them as they have an experience from which the rest of the world is excluded. . . . [They] become immersed in their experiences, able to focus on and concentrate on their learning, their relationships, and themselves (Anderson 1996, 360).

In this environment, the faculty's role is to give the participants rich, provocative issues to contemplate, but the entire program is structured to maximize the opportunities for participants to learn with and from each other.

In the MLE classroom, many sessions are taught using the case method. Case studies — many of which are written specifically for the MLE program — describe situations in real organizations that present interesting challenges to leadership. These cases describe situations that are complex, messy, and ambiguous. They do not lend themselves to a single “right” solution:

Cases attempt to digest reality, with all of its deceptions, contradictions, discrepancies of perception, and general resistance to orderly analysis. Their irreducible core of ambiguity is one reason that they are usually fun to discuss. In fact, fun, with its concomitant energy, is a major advantage of the case method. Controversy is another (Barnes, Christensen, and Hansen 1994, 72).

Different people bring their own experiences to bear in analyzing and discussing these cases, and those different points of view provide the fodder for rich conversations both in and out of class. “If a focused, well-moderated discussion lures biases into the light for examination and assessment, it will have served a useful purpose” (Barnes, Christensen, and Hansen 1994, 72).

Curriculum

It is important to acknowledge the ways in which the MLE curriculum has changed over the twenty-year life of the program. In the early years, the program included separate modules on marketing, financial management, design of a continuing-education unit, development of partnerships with external clients, etc. In recent years, some of these topics have disappeared from the curriculum, and others have merged with other topics. Among the topics in 1998 are the challenges of corporate/university collaboration; realigning colleges and universities; “dominant design” in higher education;

educating for constructive pluralism; and leadership and retrenchment.

Whatever the titles, almost every class session at MLE is meant to provide insights on the core issues of leadership and organizational strategy. Several MLE case studies present challenges posed by technology, faculty issues, inter-institutional alliances, and for-profit providers; but these issues are not the focus of the discussion. Instead, they provide an up-to-date context for exploring the challenges of larger leadership issues.

Faculty and participants describe the newer case studies as "harder" and more complex than earlier case studies. The curriculum reflects the fact that the changes in higher education have produced interesting, knotty leadership challenges. These challenges are complex. They typically involve multiple issues (e.g., marketing, finance, mission, faculty, and technology). As a result, the MLE curriculum today feels less like a series of discrete modules and more like a continuing conversation that brings in new voices and new points of view over the course of the two-week program.

Change: Principles and Design Implications

The design and delivery of Harvard's MLE program is based on two core beliefs about change. These beliefs have implications for the design of any program that intends to enhance leaders' capacities to deal with change effectively.

1. *Any change that is significant will not be easy.* The change will be difficult for institutions and for individuals. People will not have all the information they would like in order to make good decisions. Smart people, of good will, look at the same data and reach different conclusions. Tensions between the values of the past and the opportunities of the future will be very real. This kind of change is difficult; yet, it appropriately commands the attention of today's leaders.

In the face of such complexity, it is wise to be leery of presenters who offer "how-to" lists or who propose specific techniques for resolving problems. Experienced leaders know most problems are context-dependent. They know that problems have a disconcerting way of changing over time. Colleges and universities, no less than other organizations, are complex systems wherein a change in one area will have consequences (often unintended) in other areas. Experienced leaders know that significant change cannot be managed by using the latest set of buzzwords or through the application of some purportedly fail-proof technique.

The MLE curriculum is delivered each year by approximately ten faculty members. While most faculty have worked together at MLE for many years, they represent ten teaching styles. What they have in common as teachers is that they do not attempt to be prescriptive: Rather than propose solutions, they pose questions. Their goal is not to narrow the participants' range of responses to one "preferred" way; rather, it is to expand the learners' repertoire of responses. For

example, the work of Bolman and Deal has been a part of the MLE curriculum for more than ten years. This work presents four different ways of understanding organizations, leadership, and change (Bolman and Deal 1991). It serves to expand the participants' repertoire of useful ideas and approaches to leadership challenges.

One sign of a good professional development program is that the learners will leave with more options than they had when they arrived. Good faculty, good materials, and good conversations can make this happen.

**Colleges and universities,
no less than other
organizations, are
complex systems
wherein a change
in one area will
have consequences
(often unintended)
in other areas.**

2. *Significant change involves not only objective, organizational change, but also subjective, personal change.* For the leader, change implicates the self as well as others. Many questions may occur to the person who is trying to lead in a period of significant change: "How comfortable will I be, working in a changed organization?" "Is this the way I want to be spending my time?" "What new skills or strengths will a change require of me?" "Why am I finding this

transition so difficult?" "What impact is this change likely to have on my colleagues, my friends, or my family?"

Too often, change is described dispassionately: It is "out there." Leaders are expected to figure out how to manage it rationally. But those men and women to whom we look for leadership of change have needs, expectations, internal conflicts, fears, and hopes. A program that intends to help leaders deal with a changing environment or with institutional transformation also must acknowledge the personal side of change. Leaders need opportunities to reflect on "who I am," "what I value," and "what I hope to do and be."

This is the "hidden curriculum" of the MLE program. It is raised, explicitly, in a few sessions on the topic of adult development. But it also emerges when participants discuss case studies that give them insights into how other leaders confront complex problems and how they manage their time. It happens "spontaneously" every time MLE brings seventy-five talented people together for two weeks and invites them to think about good problems.

Conclusion

Many observers of organizational change have suggested that change is most likely to be successful if it is built on some core

beliefs about the organization's mission, history, purpose, or vision. In other words, the organization needs to have a clear sense of what it is all about and what it is trying to accomplish. That holds true for colleges and universities. It also holds true for the MLE program or any other successful professional development program. At MLE, the curriculum has changed over time, and the composition of the participant group has changed over time. What has remained constant is the commitment to supporting campus leaders in their efforts to understand and manage change successfully. ■

References

- Anderson, J.E. 1996. Participant perceptions of residential learning. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Northern Colorado. 360-361.
- Barnes, L.B., C.R. Christensen, and A.J. Hansen. 1994. Teaching and the case method. Boston: Harvard Business School Press. 72.
- Bolman, L.G. and T.E. Deal. 1991. *Reframing organizations: Artistry, choice, and leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

About the Author

Clifford Baden (MBA, Harvard University) is director of Programs in Professional Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, where he is responsible for the design and delivery of more than twenty-five professional development programs each year. He has served since 1984 as director of Harvard's Institute for the Management of Lifelong Education. He has taught courses on adult and continuing education at Harvard, has led workshops on teaching by the case method, and has consulted with national associations on the design of educational programs. His most recent publication is *Delivering Association Education: Models for Good Practice*, published by the American Society of Association Executives in 1997. In 1996, he received the Association for Continuing Higher Education Leadership Award in recognition of "extraordinary contributions to the general field of continuing higher education on a national or international level."