These are exciting, challenging and treacherous times for leaders in higher education, according to Rodney Napier, President of the Napier Group, an organizational consulting firm specializing in change management. They are exciting because virtually every tradition, convention or practice is open to question. They are challenging because the climate demands change and flexibility, caution and risk taking. They are treacherous because of the many obstacles in the form of defensiveness and resistance among those without whose support change cannot come about. If successful change is to occur, several aspects of leadership and the higher education environment must be addressed.

Seduction of the Leader

Leaders can be seduced by themselves and by others. Leaders of colleges and universities particularly are under intense pressure and scrutiny as they attempt to fill the many roles their positions demand. The result can be an unwillingness to appear fallible and seek the help they need, as well as a lack of openness to feedback. Such leaders eventually may begin to deny the obvious and avoid tough issues. Even leaders who work hard to avoid these pitfalls are subject to seduction by others, who may not communicate honestly or candidly with those to whom they report. Those who report directly to leaders often have just as high a need to look good and achieve as their supervisors. They need to be liked and appear competent; fear of failing to do so works against open communication and trust. The result is that leaders—so dependent upon those who report to them for good information—may find themselves the victims of half-truths and deceptions.

Closely tied to seduction is the common tendency to avoid conflict: in most personal relations and within most organizations, individuals struggle to avert conflict whenever possible. It is better and safer to be nice, bright and polite. Thus, behavior tends to become predictable as caution and fear deter open discussion.

Consensus Building

The real or imagined risks that lead to seduction and conflict aversion must be minimized for meaningful change to occur. The nature of change is such that those involved will tend to feel vulnerable and inadequate as they attempt to transition from the known to the unknown, from the comfortable to the unfamiliar. A safe climate must be established so that open dialogue and full participation are encouraged. Strategic action involving data gathering, structured problem solving, and team building can lead to successful consensus building on the part of those who must support and implement change.

True consensus building is based in honesty and security. Advocating one’s position requires trust that you can express yourself without repercussions; being open to conflict assumes losing is acceptable; and taking the time to work through issues assumes people will leave their egos behind and move toward an outcome that is best for the organization.

Finally, the gap between faculties and administrators must be lessened before the necessary changes facing much of higher education can be addressed. The cycle of alienation and disillusionment between
the two groups easily can become dysfunctional. One problem is the unrelenting interest in what appear to be irresolvable issues, a sort of masochistic inclination to continue pursuing issues where there is little room or desire for compromise. In recent years, great progress has been made in strategies for bringing skeptical

pressiveness outcomes of such efforts, planning as a management practice is by most measures a failure. The basic problem is that too often traditional planning efforts are undertaken without open communication and trust among key leaders and various stakeholders in the institution. Planning usually involves change, and

change implies conflict. Without trust, conflict will be convoluted at best. The result is a lack of real support of the planning outcomes on the part of those who eventually must implement the proposed changes.

Traditional leadership over the past 25 years has been predicated on a transactive model of organizational relationships. Simply put, it is based on workers doing what they have agreed to do, and being rewarded for doing so by their bosses.

More recently, however, a transformative model of leadership has gained firm footing in American business. It is based upon the assumption that building an organization around ideals, support, shared outcomes, and the challenge of a compelling vision of the future moves people to a higher level of commitment and performance. Planning based on this model exploits the positive benefits of the vision and values aspect of this approach, since it provides focus and measured outcomes against which to motivate people.

Successful planning engages many individuals from across campus in important dialogues concerning the vision, values and goals of the institution, while legitimizing open expression in the process. It is particularly important to involve large numbers of faculty if any significant change effort is to be successful. Institutional change also requires organization, discipline, commitment, and a clear sense of purpose. Finally, monitoring methods must be clear and individuals should be held accountable for doing what they agree to do.

Conclusion

Colleges and universities are more than serendipitous collections of individuals that can be changed only by altering the composition of their members. They also are organizations subject to manageable processes and outcomes, wherein seduction of the leader can be diminished, trust can be enhanced, and fundamental change and improvement can be achieved.

Rodney Napier is a national authority on system change and processes and President of the Napier Group, an organizational consulting firm specializing in change management. He has worked closely with many colleges and universities and also has counseled many corporate and nonprofit organizations. He is author of several books, including *Groups: Theory and Experience* and *Making Groups Work*.