Facilitating Strategic Success
Oregon State University

I. Background and Objectives

Based on recommendations endorsed by President Ed Ray, leaders at Oregon State University are charged with developing strategies, recommending leadership options, proposing structures and processes and implementing actions to enhance the future direction and strategic success of OSU. The purpose of this guide is to offer direction for initiating effective leadership conversations and achieving outcomes consistent with strategic priorities. It is intended to be used as administrative entities (such as newly formed divisional structures) initiate the planning process that will meet the budgetary and strategic challenges facing OSU.

There are a number of assumptions imbedded in this guide. These assumptions are important, as they represent a point of departure for defining accountability and expectations and constructing appropriate leadership processes. Among the assumptions influencing the development of this guide are:

A. Shared leadership is a core value of Oregon State University, thus we will rely upon peer-led processes as a key component of the success of our leadership culture. However, it must be recognized that the President’s decision on the future budgetary and strategic direction that the University takes is a necessary first step, and that leaders will need to foster collaborative working relationships to move the university forward;

B. All leaders have distinct areas of professional competence, however not all leaders currently possess the backgrounds and orientations needed to achieve effective leadership in the context of institutional transformation. In some situations further leadership competence may need to be developed so that all leaders feel confident and capable of moving groups towards successful outcomes;

C. Faculty and administrative leaders must be publicly committed to institutional effectiveness and success and want to use their skills to advance the university. In order to achieve success we need to construct focused conversations, engaging processes, and relatively rapid decision making approaches;

D. Leaders need a “safe” environment in which to make difficult decisions, learn along the way, and be able to explore issues, uncover personal challenges, and increase individual and group leadership effectiveness.

Individual leaders and workgroups should articulate any assumptions they bring to the leadership/planning process.

II. Expectations of Leaders

Leading institutional change can be both challenging and fulfilling. While the process can mean moving away from the comfort of what is known, it can also allow leaders and stakeholders to discover new possibilities for unprecedented success and innovation.

- Assume responsibility for your area(s) of accountability
- Work to meet all established deadlines, metrics, and expectations
- Submit “summaries of progress” at regularly designated intervals
- Manage emotions created by uncertainty
- Stay focused on organizational priorities
- Resist the urge to blame (it is what it is)
- Focus on the future (rather than being anchored to the past)
• Be committed to change, and not undermine processes by engaging in politically charged private conversations
• Share your best thinking
• Support your colleagues
• Ask for the support you need
• Ask for clarification you may need
• Check your assumptions
• Hold needed conversations in the room, not outside
• Be inclusive and use the views of employees to guide final recommendations.

III. Key Organizing Questions

Following are key questions and process suggestions leaders may want to consider as exploration of institutional change begins. It is important to be sensitive to the diversity among cultures and differences in organizational dynamics within the university. With this awareness comes acknowledgment that each leadership group will pursue its work in a way that best fits its unique situation. The following questions and recommendations are stated in general terms in hopes they will support successful leadership.

A. Who will convene and facilitate leadership conversations?

Every group/team must have an identified convener for the effort. The convener is not necessarily the person who will serve as facilitator of the leadership conversation. To initiate the planning process both a convener and a facilitator will be identified.

The conversation convener should be the person within the group who is best positioned to get all of the necessary parties together.

The facilitator should be an individual who has the skills and credibility to establish a positive environment to enable the group to advance its work and manage interpersonal and group dynamics.

*Important consideration*: The group process should allow for the full participation of all key leaders. In this regard, it is important to decide whether the process will be well served by having a key leader facilitate the conversation or some other individual. Often it is difficult for the conversation facilitator to also be a full participant in the conversation.

B. Who will participate?

Each leadership team or work group will need to determine who will participate in the work/planning conversation(s). The project leader should work with others to define criteria for determining the level at which others will participate in leadership activities.

C. How will the work and conversation be framed?

Participants will need to be invited to participate in the work of the group. When the invitation is offered it will be important to inform participants of the nature of the assignment. At this point it may be important to distinguish what type of effort you are convening (e.g., is it a meeting, work session, retreat). How the experience is framed will likely influence the mindset that participants bring to the conversation. In the framing it is also important to give some sense of the major goals for the experience (e.g., to create leadership alignment relative to a particular area of strategic importance). Examples of possible goals for the group include:
Explore and recommend possible structures for particular aspects of the university, relative to the strategic plans;

Engage in meaningful conversations about the implications of those recommendations for our campus or a unit;

Explore “hard questions” related to the future direction of Oregon State University in a particular area:

Exchange ideas on approaches to increase individual and shared capacity for leadership;

Build capacity for more meaningful partnerships, relationships, and work;

Develop specific structure, goals, commitments, outcomes, and accountability for individuals and units.

The invitation to participate should offer as much detail as necessary to prepare leaders and committee members for full, undistracted participation.

D. When will the conversation commence and what is the timeline/deadline for the group’s work?

Leaders should be sensitive to the timing of conversations, the amount of time participants are asked to participate, but also recognize the relatively short time frame associated with budget realities that will require relatively rapid decision making. Time is a delicate issue for many leaders, simply because there is not enough of it in relation to all of the demands they face. At the same time, issues of the magnitude we will be undertaking can only be explored effectively with sufficient time and focused attention. The challenge is to convene the group during a time when schedules will be cleared to allow focused energy for the work at hand.

The convener should communicate to participants the expectations that they attend group work sessions, as much as possible and to participate in ways to help facilitate moving the group’s efforts to conclusion. The convener should communicate the start and end time for the gatherings and strictly honor those time parameters.

Sufficient time should be set aside to allow for full treatment of the topic. In the case of leadership transformation, of the magnitude we are pursuing, numerous conversations will need to be scheduled well in advance in order to secure time on participants’ schedules.

*Important consideration:* The behaviors of leaders during times of uncertainty and change send powerful messages. For this reason the convener and facilitator need to reinforce to the group the importance of modeling commitment to institutional growth and success, first by committing to being disciplined in the conversation and secondly by honoring time and deadline commitments.

E. Where will the conversation(s) take place?

The conversation(s) should be scheduled for a setting that will allow for face-to-face interaction and sharing. While the group experience will focus on specific problem solving, planning, execution and accountability, it should also allow for participants to share experiences, explore ideas and cultivate more positive collegial relationships. An appropriate location should be selected to accommodate the group and the desired group activities. (More details on environment provided later in this guide)
F. What “pre-work” will be required of participants?

In order to ensure full engagement by all participants there should be a shared background of understanding regarding the work of the group. It is recommended that all participants read the OSU Strategic Plan and relevant materials from the ACBSP. Each participant may need guidance on how to best represent their particular sphere of interest (particularly if they were selected to represent a specific constituent group).

In some cases there may be other materials the group wishes to use to provide common orientation for participants. Those materials should be agreed upon by participants. In any case, shared knowledge and orientation will be very important to initiating shared leadership.

*Important consideration:* The convener should emphasize to invitees the importance of advance preparation and the need for all to be ready to fully participate in the entire experience.

III. Conversation design considerations

The workgroup/team will be much more successful if its time together is thoughtfully planned, which means creating a process and design that attends to dynamics that are likely to emerge. Following are a number of issues leaders should consider that may help make a major difference in the quality of the experience and success of the effort.

A. Ensure a comfortable, appropriate physical environment that pays attention to:

- Group size
- Location and room size
- Aesthetics (how formal or informal)
- Comfortable seating arrangements conducive to the format
- Opportunity for eye contact/sight lines
- Provides moveable furniture
- Offers writing surface for those who need it
- Necessary equipment/supplies (e.g., markers, flip chart, projectors)
- Name tags (if group members don’t know each other)

B. Relationships encouraged

The conversation design and group process should allow for leaders to build on their pre-existing relationships. While the major goal of the conversation is planning for change, an added outcome should be stronger relationships among leaders. It may be helpful to begin the experience with an “icebreaker” exercise to help participants become familiar with each other. The icebreaker need not be “touchy-feely” but it should require a level of sharing that encourages modest risk taking (e.g. “what goals do you have for this process?”, “what knowledge or skills do you have that will enhance the success of this group?”)
C. Communication is multidirectional

Design an experience that builds upon the full involvement of all participants. The design should allow participants to solicit input from others, as well as share perspectives with each other. It is important that all leaders be involved in contributing to the effort, and that knowledge and perspectives are valued.

D. Build trust and acceptance

Organizational change conversations often generate anxiety for participants. For this reason it will be essential to design a process that builds trust among participants and promotes acceptance of the unique gifts, knowledge, talents and challenges participants bring to the process. A vital feature of building trust is the establishment of ground rules among participants. The facilitator should offer specific ground rules for the process, while also soliciting additional ground rules from participants. (Sample facilitator question to participants: "What ground rules will best support us in establishing a climate of trust and risk-taking while also allowing us to pursue innovation and strategic success?")

Sample ground rules:

- Share only what you feel comfortable
- Avoid side conversations
- Treat the conversation as you would one that matters
- Involve yourself as if your participation is the key to the group’s success
- Listen generously
- Support each other
- Share openly and honestly
- Hold needed conversations in the room, not out
- Honor confidentiality when agreed upon
- Don’t subvert the process through leaking information to outside groups

The role of the facilitator is to support the group in adhering to the ground rules it establishes.

E. Design Questions

The facilitator should consider the following questions as she/he contemplates how to design the conversation. In addition, the facilitator will want to work directly with the convener to decide the details and sequence of the group’s work.

1. What will be the focus/topic of the group’s work?

2. How much time has been set aside for the work?
3. Who will convene and facilitate?
4. How will each meeting begin and end?
5. Where will the meetings take place?
6. What types of activities will be included?
7. How will activities be sequenced?
8. What can the facilitator do to encourage participants to be reflective?
9. What can the facilitator do to promote the learning of new information?
10. What can the facilitator do to maximize interaction among participants?
11. What can the facilitator do to create opportunities to practice new behaviors and acquire new knowledge?
12. What can the facilitator do to encourage participants to apply new knowledge to future possibilities?
13. What can the facilitator do to help participants design recommendations?
14. Who will be responsible for follow up?
15. What will be the means of communication between meetings?
16. How will technology be used in the process and to support the group’s work?

IV. Initiating and Conducting the Conversation

A. Setting up the conversation

The convener should begin the conversation with a warm and enthusiastic welcome to participants. At this point it is imperative for the convener to communicate their enthusiasm and hopefulness for the process. In addition, specifically the convener should:

1. Set the context – The convener should set the context for why the group has been brought together and describe what the group is expected (trying) to produce. Part of the context is acknowledging concerns, issues and thoughts about the current conditions and the challenges associated with change... It would be helpful if the convener makes a few comments about the desired environment for the conversation and the level of energy she/he would like people to bring to the process.

2. Introduce the facilitator – the convener should introduce the facilitator, describe why a facilitator is being utilized for the process, and why that person was chosen to facilitate (or why the convener has decided to also serve as facilitator, if that is the case)

B. Establishing ground rules
The facilitator should emphasize the importance of creating an environment in which all participants can communicate fully and openly. The facilitator may begin by offering examples of ground rules or by soliciting recommended ground rules from participants. Whatever approach is used the group should agree to a set of ground rules to use in managing the conversation and group dynamics.

C. Icebreaker

A simple icebreaker should be used to help participants prepare for interacting with each other and engaging with the issues at hand. Generally, facilitators or others on campus can offer examples of low-high risk icebreakers. While all participants will not be outwardly enthusiastic about icebreakers, this activity will be immensely important to establishing the necessary climate of trust and risk taking.

D. Engaging in work of institutional change

The facilitator should review the charge to the group and its relationship to the OSU Strategic Plan and strategic priorities.

1. Opening the conversation

In small groups of 4-5 participants have each person share (no more than 5 minutes) their responses to the charge. One person in each group should be identified to capture the aggregate responses of the small group. The goal of this activity is to help participants begin sharing and gain insight into the perspectives other leaders bring to the process.

The questions provided in advance are:

a. What are your feelings about the charge to this group;
b. What challenges will the group faces in pursuing this work;
c. What concerns you about institutional change
d. What strengths does the university have that can support future innovation and success in the area we are charged with pursuing; and
e. What specific help (information, training, non-financial resources) will we need to move our work forward.

45-60 minutes should be allotted for this activity.

2. Defining goals, commitments and accountability

The facilitator should design a process by which leaders explore the group’s charge in aggregate and individually. The process should allow for the creation of a broad vision for the group’s success relative to the charge, as well as a focus on specific goals, commitments and accountability for the areas under the group’s purview. The recommendations, desired outcomes, commitments, and accountabilities should be:

a. Positive  
b. Realistic  
c. Relevant  
d. Specific  
e. Measurable  
f. Financially responsible
g. Respond specifically to the charge

The facilitator will need to determine the best format for advancing this work. In some cases large group conversations will work best, in other situations small groups will be most appropriate. The end result of the effort should be greater clarity and alignment about the agreed upon future direction. Again, this work will likely take a number of gatherings to achieve this outcome.

E. Reviewing achievements

At various points during the conversation the facilitator should do a “check-in” with the group to determine how it is doing and how participants are feeling about the experience.

Prior to the end of the experience the facilitator should review and summarize the specific commitments, timelines and completion dates for the group’s work. The group should be informed of “next steps” relative to its work. It is very important for the group to see concrete outcomes from its work. The facilitator should solicit from participants their observations on concrete outcomes and the positive benefits of the experience.

**Important consideration:** This activity can serve as a powerful illustration of the group’s ability to do concrete work related to institutional change. It is important that the work produced be concrete and that the process ends with a clear demonstration of positive achievements.

F. Closing activity

Prior to adjourning for the final time the group should have the opportunity to reflect on its work and interaction with each other. A simple activity is to give participants the opportunity to offer “acknowledgments” and “appreciations” to others. This activity allows participants to share observations about the positive contributions of others and reinforce those behaviors that are important to building a successful leadership team. A skilled facilitator will be aware of how to facilitate an activity of this type.

It is important that the convener offer a few thoughts about the performance of the group and his/her commitments regarding the group’s efforts.

V. Process Evaluation

At the conclusion of the process participants should have the opportunity to evaluate the experience. The following questions may serve as a guide to the evaluation process. The context of each conversation will differ, so too should the questions used to evaluate the group process. Suggested question include:

A. What concrete outcomes have been produced as a result of our planning efforts?

B. What aspects of the planning process went well for us?

C. Where did we appear to struggle most during the planning process? Were there any impediments to the planning process?

D. If we were to repeat the planning process what would you recommend that we do differently?

E. If we were to repeat the planning process what would you recommend that we not alter?
F. What was your most significant personal learning experience during the planning process?

G. What aspects/outcomes of our planning process do you think is most worthy of being shared with others groups/institutions (what would others most benefit from seeing or knowing)?

H. What do you believe will be our greatest challenges as we move forward?

I. What one or two pieces of advice would you offer your colleagues as they work to provide leadership for the institution’s strategic change efforts?

J. Are there any other thoughts you have about the planning process that you’d like to share?

VI. **Next Steps**

There must be a process for following up on the work done by the various groups. In this case the results of planning meetings must be documented and shared with participants. In addition, the Provost should offer clear direction about how the work and recommendations of groups will be managed/decided upon.