



# Spiraling Organizational Change: A Campus Conversion to Online Programming

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## Introduction

Educational institutions face many social, political, and environmental influences that affect their operations. For example, higher education programs have remained competitive by launching online educational opportunities. As a result, institutions are now able to reach a maximum audience, increasing both accessibility for students and profitability for education providers. Social work has embraced online education in part to respond to the increasing demand for master's level social workers (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2017) and as a way to increase the number of social work professionals in previously underserved rural and remote communities (Cummings, Chaffin & Cockerham, 2015; Reinsmith-Jones, Kibbe, Crayton & Campbell, 2015). As with most businesses, schools of social work must be aware of the external environment and act nimbly if they wish to maximize quality and minimize barriers for students. As social work education relies heavily on the goodwill of community-based agencies to host students for their 900-hour internship requirement (CSWE, 2015), social work administrators need to pay attention to the impact of their own internal organizational changes on external agency partners. Additionally, change in the structure of external agency partners necessitates change in the social work program (Rothwell, Sullivan, Kim, Park, & Donahue, 2015).

Using change management theory to navigate organizational change, the authors explore and apply three frameworks to one case study. This article illustrates a Master of Social Work (MSW) program's transition from a traditional campus-based learning environment to an online format. Overall, the authors suggest that change is ever present, in essence spiraling, and that planning and applying change management

strategies facilitates a more thoughtful and less stressful undertaking. Specific scenarios will illustrate how the Action Research Model, Resistance to Change, and Consensus Organizing are effective leadership and management approaches in organizational environments experiencing multiple simultaneous changes.

## Background

A school of social work in the American Southwest made the decision to close a satellite campus after eight years of operation. The satellite initially opened to attract students who could not relocate to the main campus and to provide some specialty options related to particular populations prevalent in that community. Shortly after opening the satellite, the school launched an online MSW program that served the entire nation and inevitably attracted students from the same locale as the satellite campus. After seven years of operating both virtual and campus-based programs in the same community, it was determined that the school would close the satellite the following year and only offer the online program. This decision was a reorientation of the delivery method of the MSW program with the basic objective to adopt a more efficient and effective overall structure (Appelbaum, Everard, & Hung, 1999). This large-scale reorientation required the management of multiple significant changes occurring concurrently that affected many workgroups. For the purposes of this discussion, the focus is on the field education team. The authors represent various perspectives of this change, as one was hired specifically to lead the regional field team in the online program, another was the satellite campus director (and member of the field faculty), and the third was an employee who transitioned from the campus to the online program during the change process.

During the first seven years of operation, the field team at the satellite campus built traditional relationships with community partners to develop a pool of quality field placements across many disciplines. Research faculty applied for and received grants to implement programs in the region that included student intern placements, thereby providing an opportunity to demonstrate the value of social workers to the organizations. Via this grant funding, agencies were provided with paid field instructors who guided students to perform in a social work role within the host agency and to develop mastery in the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) defined social work competencies (CSWE, 2015). Within 2-4 years, many of these organizations hired MSW graduates to work full time in their agencies with the goal of sustaining a steady stream of additional interns to support and enhance their operations. Faculty prepared and supported students who participated in the grant programming to be future field instructors. The reciprocity between the school and agencies was based on a mutual understanding of the value of social work students to their agency. Funding provided by the research grants created an even deeper level of interdependence between the campus field faculty and agency personnel and created a

strong sense of allegiance to the satellite campus.

At the same time, the online program, which was expected to grow slowly, took off at a tremendous pace and the school needed to hire a separate field faculty team to work specifically with the online students. The campus field faculty were responsible for matching students with two placements (foundational and advanced) aligned with the traditional school year, while the online placement team worked virtually securing year-round placements with three different start times throughout the year. As the two placement teams were developing agency partnerships and placing students in the same geographic area, they needed to develop a collegial and cooperative working relationship. This was challenging at times when the campus faculty were reluctant to promote online students to existing partner agencies. To overcome faculty resistance to online education, the satellite campus faculty were encouraged to teach online courses over the summer to become more familiar with the virtual learning environment. This turned out to be essential for faculty buy in and furthermore helped smooth the way for the eventual transition away from campus-based education once the satellite closed.

Partner agencies responded in different ways to the transition. While some organizations already hosted students from the online program, many had remained committed to solely accepting campus students. For some, the traditional school year of the satellite campus fit best with their organizational structure, e.g. agencies often operated at lower staffing levels over the summer months when students were on break. Other agencies had established onboarding and training routines around the academic year schedule that they were initially unwilling to adapt to the year-round placement model of the online program. Additionally, agencies who had primarily collaborated with a specific campus faculty member felt a stronger allegiance to that individual and had to adjust to both a personal and an organizational change.

### **Change Management: Action Research**

There is a distinction in the way in which knowledge about a social system can be generated while at the same time attempting to change it (Babbie, 2010). The “change competencies” and skills once desirable in the days of incremental change are still beneficial, but transformative and continuous change calls for a new type of direction (Worley & Mohrman, 2015). While there are numerous change management frameworks, the authors found that an evolving Action Research Model was most applicable in higher education when transitioning away from the traditional paradigm and moving into an online learning environment (Nunes & McPherson, 2003).

Change within an organization is much more common than previously thought and the frequency of multiple change efforts happening at the same time precludes people

from being able to focus on any one change or remember all the changes occurring at one time (Burke, 2017). Traditional Action Research has been historically described as a single change occurring in a linear fashion. Today, however, organizations experience change as a “spiral” with ongoing evaluation and feedback constantly informing the change process (Rothwell et al., 2015). What is learned both from internal and external stakeholders at each stage is then incorporated into additional change efforts. In essence, change in one organization or part of an organization influences other organizations or workgroups, creating additional changes throughout the organization(s) simultaneously. This model is very applicable to the change process encountered by the authors during their transition to an online learning environment. While not a linear process, Rothwell et al. (2015) recommended Burke’s (2014) three phases of organizational change (“pre-launch,” “launch,” and “post-launch”) as an applicable framework for the “evolving” Action Research approach.

### **Action Research Phase One: Pre-Launch**

During pre-launch, the stakeholders develop an understanding of themselves, their environment, the need for change, and clear direction on where they are going (Rothwell et al., 2015). In this case study, this was the time when upper administration determined that there were organizational benefits to closing the satellite campus and serving the geographic area solely through the online program. Once this decision was shared with key faculty and staff (and they were reassured of their continued job security), the director of the satellite campus and the field faculty created a team to plan communication strategies for both internal and external stakeholders. Regular meetings addressed the direction and timing for announcements. The online placement team contributed with data collection and decision making, but followed the lead of the campus team who had the primary relationships with the majority of the field agencies.

The pre-launch activities included the collection and analysis of significant data points such as student profiles and campus choice. The satellite and online field teams also compiled a profile of every agency partner, including key factors such as length of affiliation, how many campus and online students they had hosted (and student feedback), provision of stipends, and faculty involvement with the agency. The communication plan included working with field agency partners to facilitate a smooth transition for existing campus-based students as well as to retain field partnerships after the physical campus closed. To ensure this communication was effective, all faculty needed to have consistent messaging throughout the transition. This was when the prior exposure to the online platform and students helped significantly, as faculty were able to accurately communicate with field agencies regarding the online format, culture, and technology.

## **Action Research-Phase Two: Launch**

The launch phase is when organizations communicate the need for the change, develop and then act upon the change (Rothwell et al., 2015). The school recognized that aside from faculty and staff, the most critical stakeholders during the launch phase were the currently enrolled students at the satellite center and the agency-based field instructors.

Regarding current campus students, a date was set after which no more students were admitted, and existing students were informed of the closure after the final matriculation date. The student announcement came both in person and in writing. Field faculty were on hand to answer questions and support understandable reactions of shock, anger, and sadness. The campus director and the field director then immediately sent a joint formal announcement to all the field agencies followed by phone calls and emails from the field faculty members who had the closest relationships with the agency. Despite their own mixed feelings, the field faculty stayed on message regarding the transition from campus to virtual education and remained available and highly engaged in dialogue. They were honest about the fact that the pool of potential interns would decrease, but they went to great lengths to make a “warm hand off” from the campus field team to a pre-identified virtual field team member.

Leadership revisited decisions regarding the transition based upon the reaction and response of the students and agency partners. For example, some stakeholders initially perceived the closing of the satellite campus as due to a lack of success of the educational institution. In response, events were identified and promoted as times to celebrate the achievements of the satellite program. The final students to attend the satellite campus received special recognition and were offered opportunities to become involved directly with the planning of the closure. This spiraling evaluation and response resulted in students and agency partners being involved in the change process in ways that were not initially anticipated.

While it was forecasted during pre-launch that some agency partners would resist the change, it was only after the initial communication to external stakeholders that the field faculty could gauge the level of resistance and understand specific concerns. New messaging was then created to address the apprehension and field faculty took extra time with field instructors outside of student meetings to discuss individual agency needs, to problem solve alternatives, and to introduce the field instructors to the online platform firsthand. At the annual Field Instructor luncheon, representatives from agencies who already had student interns attending virtual classes were purposefully seated next to those agency representatives who were reticent about online education. They were asked to share their experience of working entirely online with field faculty

within a virtual field department. Members of the online field team also attended the luncheon and were introduced in person. Agencies were encouraged to share their reservations with the larger group and as worries were expressed, solutions surfaced and an openness emerged. Similar discussions were facilitated at Field Instructor trainings on campus where additional exposure was provided to the online education format, content, and faculty. Connecting ground and online partners created opportunities for agency partners to work together in different ways and to explore new approaches to doing business.

Following the Action Research Model, the field faculty monitored the reaction of external stakeholders on an ongoing basis and responded with new messages disseminated via email and face-to-face meetings. Emerging from this process, another unanticipated change “spiraled” during the launch phase. As the team learned about community concerns regarding the school’s commitment to current and future students and the geographic region, they developed a series of new community activities designed to maintain a tangible presence over time. To underscore support for this strategy, upper administration from the larger institution attended key events to demonstrate leadership and provide institutional reassurance. The efforts undertaken by the field faculty during the launch phase yielded positive results, as field agency partners increasingly requested to host online students.

### **Action Research Phase Three: Post-Launch**

The post-launch phase focuses on sustaining the change effort over time through persistence, moving people beyond their comfort level, and managing avoidance mechanisms (Rothwell et al., 2015). After the formal closure, many field agencies were still hesitant to accept online students, but did not disengage from the program completely. In order to maintain agency engagement and a community presence in the post-launch phase, field faculty who lived locally and now worked online planned for ongoing community engagement. They continued to: collaborate with other local social work programs to plan activities for Social Work Awareness Month, promote student participation and attendance at social work job fairs, and participate in community volunteer efforts such as the Homeless Point in Time Count. This persistence was designed to maintain the visibility of the larger school and the positive relationships built by the satellite program. It also signified an ongoing commitment by the educational institution to be active community partners.

An unexpected outcome of pushing the agencies out of their comfort level was that a number of agency partners adapted their internship programs to accommodate the online placement process and include the summer months. Many agencies that had traditionally not hosted students year-round discovered the advantage of providing continuity of care to clients when interns are in field for an extended period. Hosting

students year-round resulted in programmatic change at multiple levels in the agencies, even affecting constituents outside of the immediate change environment (e.g. clients). For the school, despite the discomfort of undertaking such a huge change, administration began to plan the transition of another satellite campus to online education. Change was “spiraling” across all of the organizations creating new changes that subsequently influenced employees and faculty previously uninvolved in this initial change effort.

Throughout all three phases, the transition team was very attentive to managing avoidance. Regardless of how an organization manages change, resistance is inevitable for all stakeholders. Fortunately, as those directly involved were all social workers by profession, they were able to leverage both clinical and community organizing skills to help manage this change process.

### **Considerations for a Change Management Strategy: Address Resistance**

In order to avoid failure, organizational leaders should expect that when employees and community partners are asked to go from the known to the unknown they will likely have a reaction. Research suggests that 30-60% of organizational change efforts are thwarted (Gilley, Gilley, & McMillan, 2009) and that resistance to change is a critical concept that is often overlooked (Bateh, Castaneda, & Farah, 2013). Resistance was a recurrent theme throughout the three phases and was one of the aspects of spiraling change that led to some unexpected impacts on different stakeholder groups or change processes. Some resistance was anticipated e.g., faculty would need time to process their loss and overcome their resistance before they could be expected to guide and support the students and partner agencies. Other times it came in waves, especially for the field agencies who digested the news and the implications at different times and in different ways.

Much of the literature on resistance to organizational change focuses on employees and suggests various approaches that supervisors and managers can take to manage resistance (Wittig, 2012). In the current scenario, the authors saw parallels between the recommendations provided to supervisors and managers and their work with agency partners and field instructors. Wittig (2012) describes the three dimensions of employee reactions as thoughts and feelings, communication, and shared decision-making. Wittig (2012) points out that organizational leaders too often underestimate the importance of the affective and cognitive experience of change for employees, as well as the need for ongoing clear, respectful, and positive communication. The field team observed that these same three dimensions were at play for field agency partners.

While not universal, there was a general perception among the field agencies who worked with the campus-based social work programs that online education is less

rigorous and of a lower quality than campus-based education (Cummings, Chaffin, & Cockerham, 2015). Some assumptions heard by the authors included that online students are less committed to the profession and their education, less well supervised or guided by faculty, and that the overall quality of the students is subpar. The campus faculty had shared similar misperceptions that adjusted after their experience teaching in the online environment. Therefore, after listening to agency concerns, campus faculty were able to challenge faulty beliefs and provide personal testimony to contradict misinformation. In addition to anecdotal stories, they shared research that demonstrated that the type of online education provided was as effective as that offered on campus (Phillips et al., 2017).

The social work profession is rooted in empathy and compassion, so faculty were well positioned to process feelings of loss and were keenly attentive to field instructor expressions of anger, frustration, disappointment, and sadness. They allowed time to listen and reflect without rushing to reassure. An unexpected consequence of this process was that despite the inevitable shift in their working relationship, personal connections were made as field partners expressed worry for the future of the faculty, and in some instances reached out with job offers and reassurances. This process of mutual support helped secure professional connectivity and compensated for the fears of losing personal relationships through the connection with the physical campus.

To address the need for communication and shared decision-making, the field faculty identified numerous opportunities to connect with those who were reluctant or unexpectedly silent. As described above, they found ways to demonstrate the online experience by sharing curriculum content of online materials (asynchronous material) and the live virtual classroom (synchronous), and to generate excitement around the transition. Faculty engaged in active problem solving with agencies to address their specific barriers. While in reality neither the faculty nor the field partners had any say in the decision to transition the satellite campus to online, the faculty supported the field agencies in determining whether and how to engage with the virtual program or maintain a partnership with the larger university in other ways. Even those completely resistant to online students found ways to create a new relationship with the university in support of the local community and the profession.

### **Considerations for a Change Management Strategy: Consensus Organizing**

Developed by Mike Eichler in the early 1980s, “consensus organizing” is a tool used to address the divisiveness of “conflict organizing” – where one side must win and the other must lose. While there might be an initial tendency to navigate away from applying a community organizing technique to an organizational change process, this particular approach emphasizes understanding self-interest, creating mutual understanding, and activating reciprocity. These main components, if applied as a

strategy in change management, can help prevent stakeholders from disengaging during the change process. Disengagement, including resistance (discussed above) and non-compliance with new change, ultimately impacts the outcome and maintenance of a calculated change (Eichler, 2007).

In the context of a large organization with unique stakeholders experiencing multiple significant changes, leaders often overlook key elements such as individual self-interest. In this situation, if the decision makers had identified early on the self-interest of faculty and staff in relation to the change, they would have learned that many were worried about losing their job. Instead, worry began to infiltrate the proverbial watercooler and decision makers were forced to address the issue. Unfortunately, employees spent valuable time thinking and processing their response to potentially losing their job and this inevitably permeated the campus climate and employee morale. Proactive identification of this self-interest could have alleviated personal and organizational stress and provided transparency to a process that until that point felt closed off to interaction. Once the concern was identified, in addition to group messaging, leadership also addressed faculty and staff concerns individually. For those who were at risk of losing their job, leadership explored possible options for alternative jobs or severance packages. When leaders identify the self-interests of employees they can understand employees' unique motivations and develop mutual understanding even when the goals are different (Eichler, 2007; Putnam, 2001).

A more effective use of "consensus organizing" occurred when the field faculty proactively identified and responded to the self-interest of a hospital partner who had hosted large cohorts of second year advanced interns from the satellite campus. Anticipating that this agency would be reluctant to accept year-round students, field faculty set up a series of meetings to plan for change management together. The school was invested in retaining this placement, as it was very desirable for students and often resulted in employment for graduates. The hospital was invested in creating an employee pipeline. As a result of the meetings, the hospital identified one area of their operations to experiment with a new internship model designed to meet the online student learning and timing needs. The hospital was open to expanding this model if the plan was effective and there was sufficient student interest. By identifying mutual understanding or obligations as actions for one another, the partners were able to foster reciprocity and create a sustainable partnership (Putnam, 2001).

## Conclusion

In the ideal world, change would be linear, and organizations would have plenty of time to identify partners, explore potential impacts, and seek out information proactively. However, the reality is that change is constant and ever present (Worley & Mohrman, 2015). The case example described in this article demonstrates how

spiraling change often occurs quickly, decisions in response to one change yield yet more change, and organizational homeostasis is significantly disturbed. However, not all aspects of the Action Research Model with regards to change are disruptive. Rapid and consistent change might feel chaotic, but as the authors describe above, several positive outcomes emerged during the process. Responding to the myriad of challenges sometimes led to new strategies and ultimately a more engaged faculty, alumni, and community. The authors believe if special attention is also given to resistance and self-interest, spiraling success can result from spiraling change.

Based on their experience, the authors suggest that organizations considering similar transformative changes should ask the following questions:

1. Can you predict the extent of the change impact on internal and external stakeholders? If not, is it possible to test out part of the change versus implementing the entire change to monitor the potential impact over time?
2. Have you considered all of the “moving parts” associated with the change? If not, how will you identify who and what is involved? How will you link all the moving parts together to minimize disruption?
3. Will this change maintain the current organizational culture? If not, how are you going to influence the new culture?
4. What change framework will guide your process?

Identifying answers to the above questions will not alleviate stress in times of spiraling change; however, an intentional approach will address resistance proactively and inspire others to become champions for the change.

### **Afterthought**

The specific experience described in this article occurred due to multiple factors, the primary one being the unanticipated popularity of online education by social work students. The social work profession’s focus on human relationships has tended to favor physical face-to-face contact over technology-supported interactions. However, schools of social work who fail to explore the potential of technology in social work education soon may find that their eventual embrace of online education will be all the more disruptive for the delay. As technology continues to advance, schools of social work should consider the value of applying the Action Research Model to the inevitable cascading organizational changes. While few social workers have the kind of workload that allows time to reflect and plan, to heed our own advice, the authors suggest contemplating the following questions:

1. Are we anticipating the influence of how our digital society consumes information and exists in a constant state of “updating” and “posting our status” on our profession?
2. Is the profession proactively creating change in response to the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare’s Grand Challenge for Social Work, “to harness technology for the social good?” If not, why not?

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