

Tips for Survival in a Forest of Change

By Randall J. VanWagoner

On a daily basis, how much of your time is spent putting out fires? How many times has your progress been inhibited by unforeseen barriers or events? A few years ago while doing some research on organizational change, I came across an article that addressed these realities in a unique manner. Karl Weick's article "Fighting Fires in Educational Administration" (1996), applied his research on wildfire fighting in forests to create an insightful metaphor for life as an educational administrator.

Having gone through two significant and successful reorganizations at two different colleges and leading the implementation of several system redesigns, I began to recall barriers that impeded change efforts. These barriers could symbolize wildfires that can impede advancement and force travelers to alter their original path. This prompted for me a connection between organizational change and the image of a challenging journey through a forest, where, at times, survival is a primary mode of operating. The following principles were created with this image of navigating change as though charting a path through a forest.

Firefighting: The forest of change often has conditions that make it likely for fires to start. Colleagues initiating heated debates or taking issue with various changes can symbolize many fires. Successful firefighting comes by spending more time tending to the smoke and evaluating its intensity and potential damage. By getting to the point of origin quickly and dealing with the issues early, you gain respect and trust from those you will need later. However, some smoldering embers may develop into full-scale wildfires. Sometimes expressing concern about those wildfires will be enough to extinguish them with little damage to the forest. Failure to recognize the warning

signs early however, gives wildfires momentum that will drain time and energy from the surrounding area and prolong the negative impact that so many wildfires can create.

Controlled Burns: With an informed strategy in mind, intentionally setting a controlled burn can sometimes alter the local landscape. Over time, neglect and apathy can create excessive underbrush and unwanted growth in parts of the forest. However, by introducing new variables in the environment, fires can be used effectively to temporarily create disruption and clear away unwanted barriers. The challenge in a controlled burn is to anticipate the response and watch how some blazes become isolated and feed on themselves. By monitoring controlled burns from a distance, just enough to protect the rest of the forest, fires eventually burn out with no lasting damage to the local ecosystem.

Communication: It is important not to travel in the forest of change alone, so you must fully deploy communication mechanisms so others may join the journey. By effectively communicating via web, e-mail, newsletters, open forums, small group discussions (formal and informal), coordinated committee activities and direction, hand-written notes, walking around, and personal visits, you can keep spirits up and inform others so they can focus on making a positive difference. It's important for others to see how their input can help shape the path through the forest. The challenge then becomes integrating that input into the overall direction and clearly communicating to those you hope will join the journey. With so many potential obstacles, barriers, and distractions, constancy of purpose and message is the key to communicating change. Strategies and means may change periodically, but the original purpose for the journey must remain unchanged.

Leadership: Just like traveling with a group through the forest, a successful change effort requires good leaders and good followers. Identifying your change leaders early is important so that they can play key roles in communicating and keeping the morale high among the group, whether it's a department, program, committee, or an entire faculty. Consistent and accountable leadership creates a sense of trust and expands the number of followers willing to pursue an uncharted but important path.

Vision: Finally, know that you may have to alter your path along the way – it's a natural byproduct of good listening and intuition. However, if you keep the larger forest in mind, a few fallen trees won't clutter the trail. Keep your compass handy and always remember where you are headed so you can continue to make good choices. Your persistence and commitment to keeping those around you informed and focused on the larger picture will be noticed and respected over time.

These few survival tips apply to some common initiatives such as restructuring, outcomes assessment, curriculum systems, program development, and facility modifications. They have served me well over the years under some very trying circumstances. May your travels through the forest of change be challenging, worthwhile, and meaningful.

Reference:

Weick, K. (1996). Fighting Fires in Educational Administration. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 32 (4), 565-578.

Randall J. VanWagoner is Vice President of Educational Services at Metropolitan Community College in Omaha, Nebraska. He can be reached at rvanwagoner@metropo.mccneb.edu. ▼