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Briefing Paper
Leading Disruptive Change

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*SUMS is a membership-based higher education consultancy, a registered charity and not-for-profit organisation that provides expert consulting to universities across all professional service areas. On 27th November 2020, we hosted the SUMS Annual Conference. Themed ‘**Opportunities to Transform the Sector**’, the event featured several presentations and panel discussions.*

Here, we share highlights from our panel discussion on leading disruptive change.

Disruptive change occurs when business models need to be fundamentally challenged, changed and re-invented due to external factors. HE change leads¹ and members of the conference’s *Leading Disruptive Change Discussion Panel* refer to a range of disruptive changes faced by the sector in the 21st century – for example, the massification of education, fee changes, and introduction of the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) and Office for Students (OfS). In 2020 the Higher Education sector, along with all sectors across the UK and beyond, experienced the disruption brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic. There will, no doubt, be further disruptive change in the future which the sector needs to be open to and prepare for.

Drawing on past experiences of disruption, as well as that brought about by Covid-19, panel members and delegates shared thoughts on lessons learned, do’s and don’ts, and critical success factors.

We consider leadership style and leadership qualities, culture and ways of working, and the unique characteristics of the HE sector that make leading through disruption challenging - yet fulfilling when executed successfully.

Almost all of the contents of this briefing paper are based on views and quotes from panel members and delegates who attended the Leading Disruptive Change Discussion Panel.

Many thanks to members of the panel, Associate Consultants Debbie England, Felicity Gasparro, Graeme Sloan, Nick Skelton; Lee Norris, Director of Strategic Programmes Office at the University of the West of England, Bristol; and all delegates who attended and contributed to the discussion, and by extension, this briefing paper.

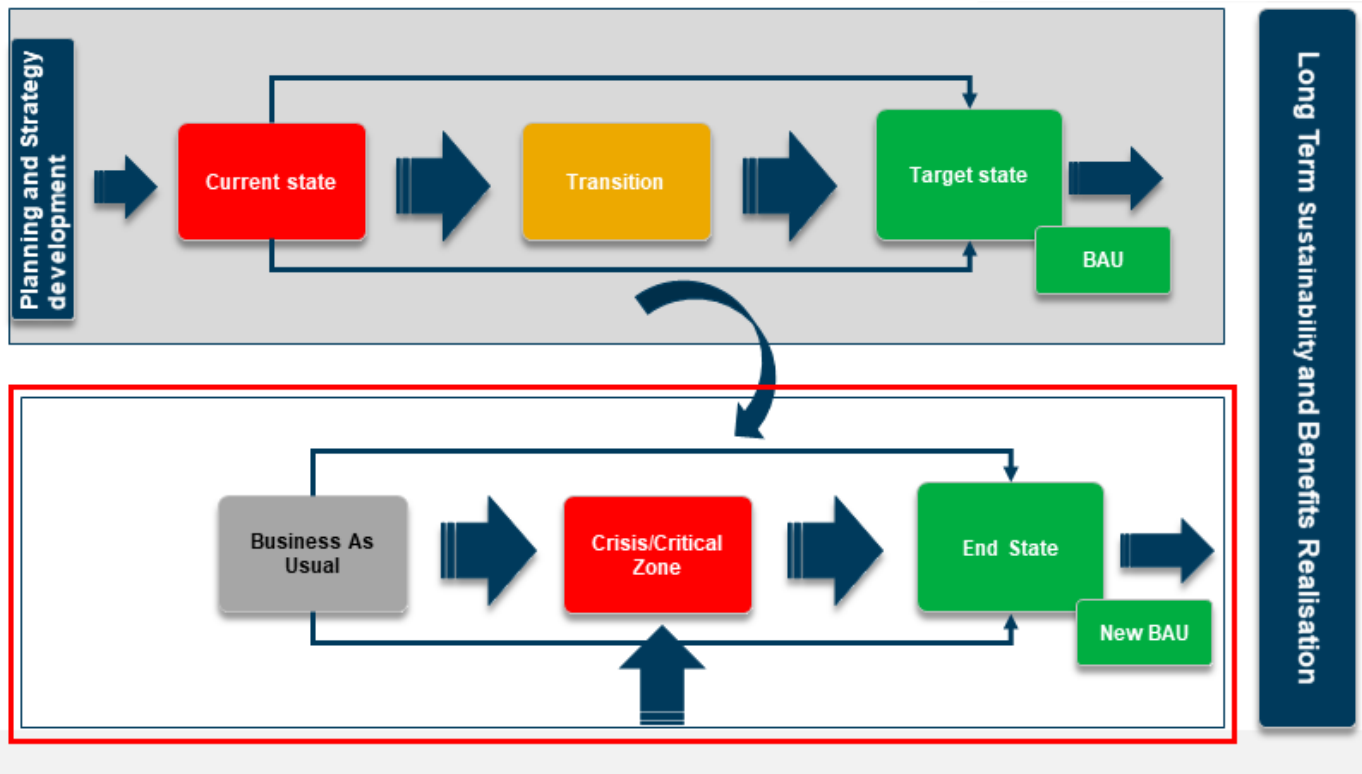
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¹ The SUMS Change Management Community of Practice

Introduction: Planned Versus Disruptive Change

The Higher Education Sector has faced several fundamental changes in the 21st century and will no doubt continue to prepare for, and respond to, disruptive changes in the future.



However, there have been no changes more disruptive than the Covid-19 pandemic faced by the sector, the UK, and the world in 2020 (continuing in 2021).

Covid-19 has heightened the pressures and tensions brought about by change, emphasising the need for robust change leadership. The pandemic resulted in a change pathway where organisations were forced out of business-as-usual into crisis mode on the way to a new end state. In the Higher Education sector, this resulted in changes to approaches to teaching and learning, provision of professional support and leadership.

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic (as with most change brought about by disruption) there was no time for planning and strategy development as a starting point. Instead, leaders deployed emergency measures to maintain core elements of service provision, while starting to make plans for a new normal beyond the Covid-19 crisis. The level of disruption experienced by the sector resulted in heightened levels of anxiety and uncertainty about the future.

Change managers are familiar with the Kubler-Ross change curve, and how when a particular change event hits, emotions range from the initial shock through to gradual acceptance through to integrating this into a new normal. A major challenge during periods of disruption is the need to fast-track those negative emotions along the change curve by supporting and energising teams, to give hope and reassurance. Although challenging, leaders need to recognise that teams look to them to make decisions.

The *Leading Disruptive Change Discussion Panel* at the SUMS Annual Conference on 27th November 2020 explored a range of themes to highlight learning from disruption, the do's and don'ts of leading through disruption and some critical success factors.

Leadership Style and Qualities

Discussions highlighted several qualities of a successful leader with responsibility for leading through disruptive change. With a focus on getting the basics right, many of the qualities highlighted are similar to those that leaders should demonstrate through planned change: developing and communicating a **clear vision and strategy**; being people-centred, **engaging** wide and diverse groups and thinking; **supporting** people to get past resistance to change; and creating an environment of **trust**.

However, there were some words and phrases specifically relevant to leading through disruption. Leaders need to:

- Show **courage** – not being reckless or bullish but demonstrating **humility** and a recognition that no one person is an expert in every domain.
- Show a level of **comfort with ambiguity** - lead with positive intent and take people with them.
- Focus on current knowledge and act on it quickly - demonstrating **agile leadership**.
- Show **vulnerability** with staff - taking people on a journey, shoulder-to-shoulder.
- Be **open** with people and not wait to have all the answers before communicating.
- Stay **calm** in the face of difficulties.

There was a strong emphasis on the need for frequent two-way communication, listening and engagement, which are key to any change initiative. However, in leading through disruption, discussions focused on the need for leaders “...to think about how to communicate better, develop personal relationships, and **give staff the opportunity to talk**’ - noting that silence does not equal consent”.

Recognising the stress brought about by disruptive change and the “constant temptation to blame leaders for any distress”, conversations also turned to the need for leaders to “try to step back, not take things personally, and avoid being defensive”. Because of the ongoing questioning of leadership's ability during disruption, leaders are likely to require additional support, including coaching.

Leading through disruption requires leaders to make some unpopular decisions. However, it is essential that the message, regardless of how difficult it might be, is corporately consistent and compassionately delivered. This requires an ability to **communicate ‘the why’** compellingly, highlighting the broader benefits while also being **authentic about the potential consequences** and any impact this could have on individuals and teams.

“To achieve straightforward, open conversations is difficult in the HE sector. Universities need to become learning institutions where everybody is a learner.”

- Sector change manager

Comments also stressed the importance of the role of the line manager and the need to have “*genuine caring conversations, finding ways to stay connected while working remotely and good communication, which is multi-faceted to meet diverse people's needs*”.

Transition from crisis mode back to managing a new 'business-as-usual' needs to be led and managed carefully to keep everyone on board and feeling empowered.

Culture and Ways of Working

Universities often do not react well to change imposed from the top down. Culture is often siloed and individual loyalty is often to the faculty, school or department and not to the institution. Universities are about creating knowledge, and disseminating and engaging people in that creation in a way that most other organisations are not. These qualities all create a unique culture and way of working that can make managing change, in general, quite challenging.

Considering the cultural aspects of leading through *disruptive* change, most comments focused on the need to **avoid perfectionism** and the attempt to assign blame:

- 'Blame culture' and perfectionism culture are real barriers to change in the HE sector. To achieve success through disruption requires the adoption of a trial-and-error approach, while not criticising someone who is trying to find a solution.
- We need to embrace a culture where mistakes are acceptable. It is increasingly important to be comfortable with the 'untried and untested' and not to blame or penalise staff who take well-considered decisions that are not always as successful as they would have wished.
- Building trust allows people to adopt a fail-fast culture, keep learning, engage in open and honest discussion and focus on lessons learned - applying lessons to each iteration.
- As Universities are focused on research which instils a concept of trial and error, this concept should also apply to responding to disruptive change.

“Challenges were always there, so whilst the pandemic has had profound effect, challenges of communications, engagement and the perception of change done to them existed pre-pandemic. In order to be able to manage change, you need to be able to measure what you would like to change in the first place. This seems to be harder in HE than other industries.”

- Sector change manager

Coalition and Collaboration

Discussing the success of going through disruptive change, conversations focused on the importance of building a coalition – **removing the ‘us and them’** (academics, professional staff, students) and simply working together as people, teams, one community, one organisation.

Helping people to take ownership of a change at a local level ensures that they feel they are **part of the change** rather than it being **done to them**. It was considered important for leaders to share 'the problem' with staff and devolve responsibility for identifying solutions; mobilising individuals based on their strengths and weaknesses. This approach ensures that everyone impacted by the change is fully engaged and feels empowered to contribute towards a common goal.

Using the right language also helps to facilitate effective collaboration – for example, often anything involving an IT system is seen as an IT project. However, they are generally business projects with IT as an enabler - hanging the language to reflect this distinction enhances engagement.

"It has been amazing to see how we have all come together and worked as a team to get through this. In a crisis, everyone pulls together and will tolerate top-down decisions. But they'll smell a rat if the crisis is used as an excuse to introduce permanent change by the back door."

- Sector change manager

The Benefits and Critical Success Factors of Disruptive Change

Panellists and change managers highlighted that disruptive change has resulted in a number of benefits, which demonstrates that with the right effort, in spite of the unexpected nature of the disruption, there are **opportunities**:

- It has helped institutions to get rid of redundant processes and freed up time for added-value tasks; this includes automation resulting in the achievement of significant efficiencies.
- It has helped to accelerate the introduction of new ways of working with digital tools for students, professional and academic staff.
- Disruption has presented the opportunity for individuals to excel (people can achieve a lot when they need to) and to optimise the institution's internal expertise.
- Attitudes have changed about presenteeism, with a new focus on outputs.
- There has been a renewed focus on staff health, general well-being and remote working enablement.
- Institutions have learned to take calculated risks.

"The pandemic has proved that over-centralisation (PGE, PPE, Track & Trace) is problematic. Leaders need to trust people (i.e., academic units) to make decisions that are best for their students. The panel's 'tight-loose' philosophy is a good definition; general principles agreed and implemented locally. They own the change."

- Sector change manager

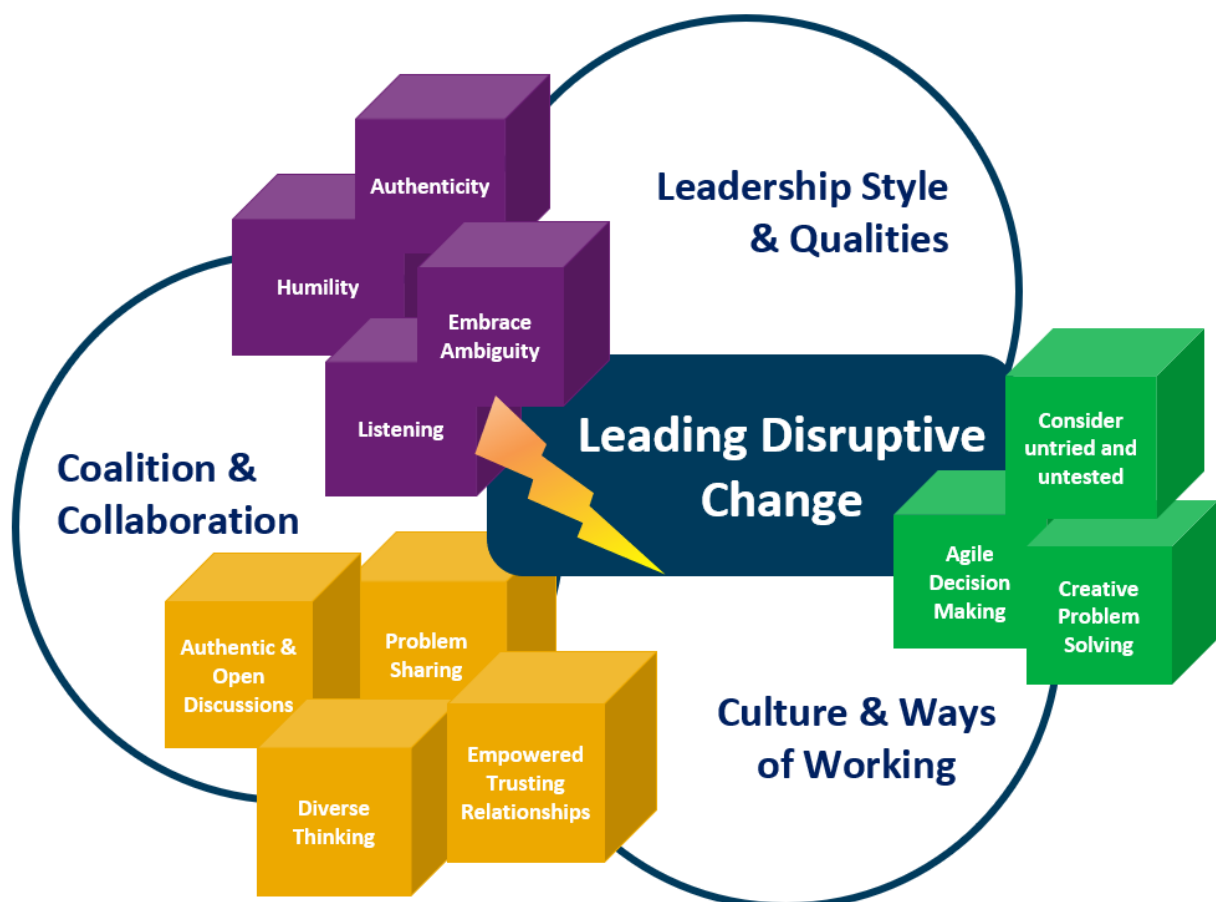
The change community discussed the key success factors needed when leading disruptive change and all comments focused on the **need for trust** - also a key word used when describing planned change. One could say that there is the need for *enhanced* trust when working through disruption. The key elements required are:

- Enabling freedom within a framework: trusting staff to go forward and do the right thing; adoption of tight principles and values, while being loose on the detail (tight-and-loose philosophy).
- Getting a diverse group of people to work together to develop solutions; this includes involving critics, bringing them into the team and making them partially responsible for solving the problem rather than criticising from the side-lines.
- Involving student interns and reverse mentoring also indicate a successful approach.
- Taking the students along.
- Adopting a commercial mindset.
- Keeping an eye on what the competition is doing and turning in the opposite direction, if appropriate (zigging and zagging) - leaning into the challenges to achieve successful outcomes.
- Reward and recognition are considered key to improving staff morale, which can be fragile during periods of disruption.

With the move towards more agile development and change, one of the consequences of rapid change is that some projects will fail. **Success means being comfortable with the 'untried and untested' concept.**

Conclusion

The principles of leading through disruptive change are not dis-similar from those required for leading planned change. However, feelings and tensions are heightened, which results in an increase in the challenges of managing change within institutions, although the basic capabilities remain the same.



As a result, institutions that have a mature approach to change management, including strong sponsorship, engagement, a focus on customer benefits and strong decision-making are likely to achieve success in leading disruptive change.

Sustained disruption leads to burn out; there needs to be a recognition that it is not possible to sustain the energy required to cope with disruption indefinitely. This should be acknowledged when there are comments demanding change along the lines of *"well you managed to change things quickly for Covid-19, why can't you change things quickly for 'x' "*.

Managing expectations as we move through disruption to a new normal is critical. However, learning from disruptive change does show that decision-making can be more agile, leaders can be more visible, and it is possible to break down existing silos to work collaboratively when there is a will to do so.

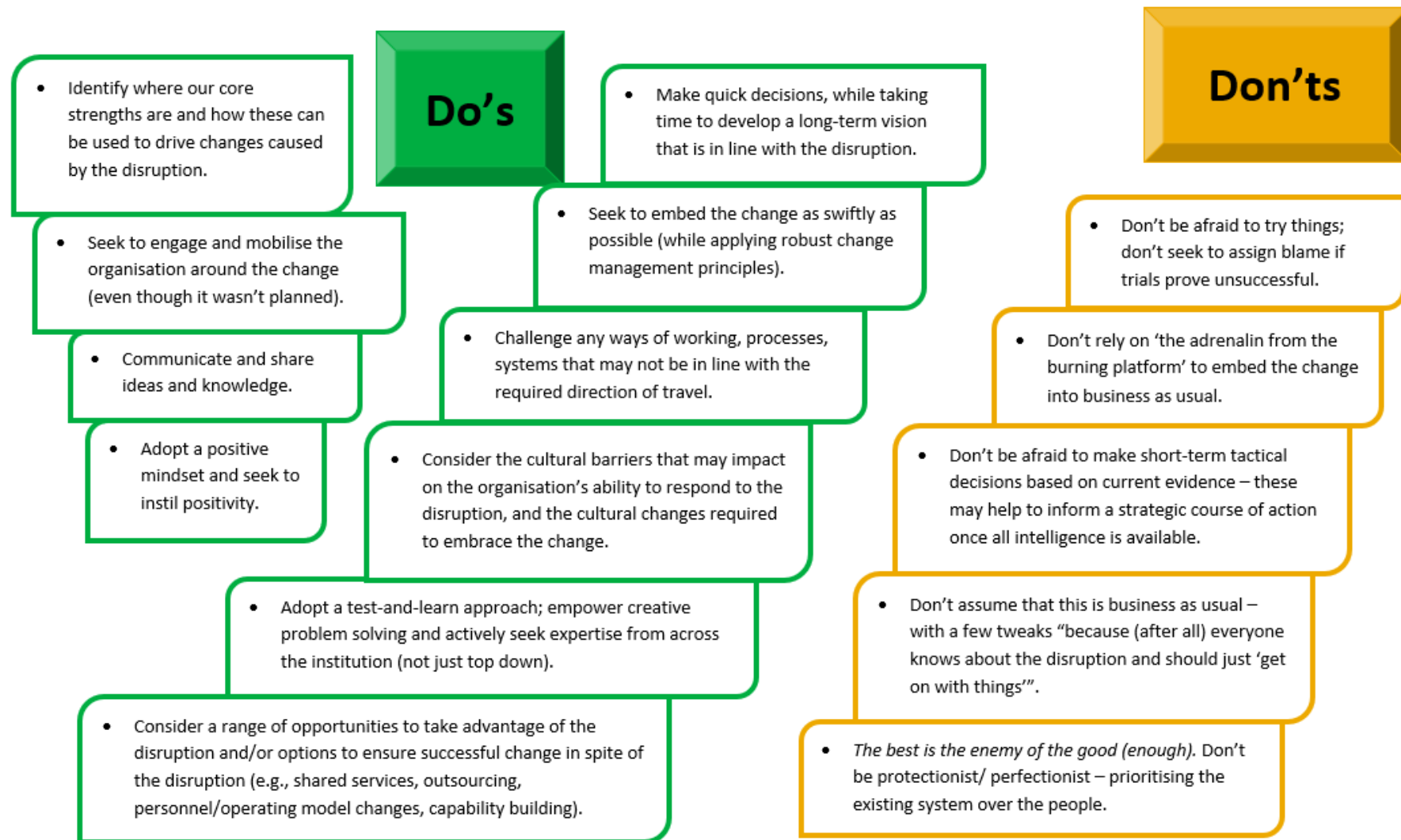
As we start 2021, the lessons learned from responding to the Covid-19 pandemic should not be lost as we develop or implement new operating models and/or new ways of working to meet identified needs for students, academics, researchers and professional staff within our institutions.

Many thanks to delegates who joined the discussion, and members of the Leading Disruptive Change Panel:

Name	Role/Area of specialism
Tina Yu	Procurement Specialist and Practitioner (Corporate and HE Sector)
Fola Ikpehai	Transformation and Change
Debbie England	HR and OD Specialist (Finance and HE Sector)
Felicity Gasparro	Employee Engagement (Retail and HE Sector)
Graeme Sloan	Procurement Modernisation (Private, Corporate and HE Sector)
Nick Skelton	Digital Transformation (HE Sector)
Lee Norris	Director, Strategic Programmes Office, UWE, Bristol

For support in ensuring your university successfully responds to, and continues to manage, both disruptive and planned change, contact us at sums@reading.ac.uk

Appendix: Leading Disruptive Change – Summary of Do's and Don'ts



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