

## ***Storytelling: Blue Ridge University, Jolene Crowder, President Choosing a Model for Leading and Navigating Transformative Change***

**Story Summary.** This story tells how the president of the hypothetical Blue Ridge University selected a model for leading and navigating transformative change at her institution.

**Why Read This?** This story demonstrates the process necessary to select and refine the right model for leading and navigating change

### ***The Story*** *(Referenced in Chapter III)*

#### **Selecting a Model for Leading and Navigating Transformative Change**

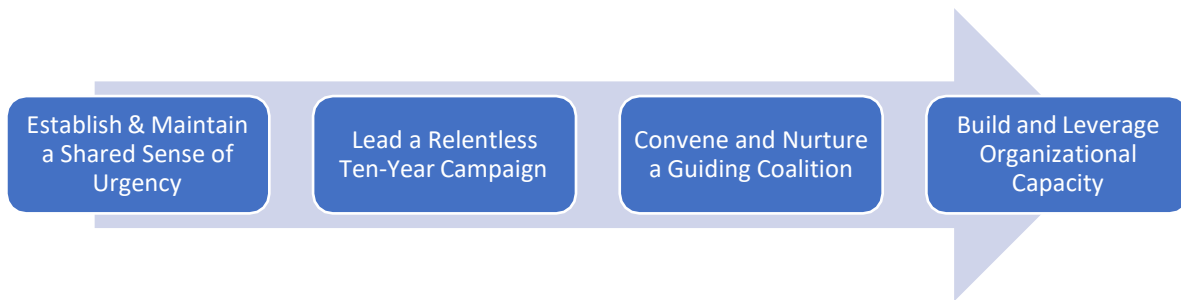
I have had the privilege of serving as President of Blue Ridge University in Carsonville, North Carolina for the last three years. It is a typical regional, comprehensive university with 6000 students on campus and 3000 off, the latter served either at our branch campus in Charlotte or online.

#### ***The Pandemic Strikes***

COVID-19 hit us like a ton of bricks. We met the challenge of pivoting to online instruction in Spring 2020, building on our online capacity developed through our off-campus programs. The COVID strike served to accelerate our realization of the existential challenges facing most of higher education: a broken financial model, declining demand, growing public dissatisfaction with our product, and an increasingly apparent disconnect between our programs and the needs of the workplace. And what, prior to COVID-19, had been a nagging feeling in the back of my head that we were in for a major reckoning became a huge headache that could not be ignored. With this epiphany, I immediately contacted my newly appointed Board Chair, Charles Powell, and, at his recommendation, our recently hired business school Dean, James Jenks. I leveled with them about my concerns about COVID-19, the looming disruptions facing Blue Ridge, and my capacity to provide transformative leadership. They graciously agreed to mentor me as I learned to lead and navigate the University through all of this.

#### ***Finding the Right Framework***

We completed a five-year strategic plan shortly after I arrived on campus in 2017. It was intended to carry us five years—2018-2022. It is most certainly not an adequate blueprint for these drastically disrupted times. We need a radical new strategy. Charles and James strongly recommended the framework for Leading and Navigating Transformative Change described in Chapter III of ***Transforming for Turbulent Times***. After reviewing it, I can see that it is the approach we should use at Blue Ridge. Let me explain by comparing it to the model we used in developing in the 2018-2022 Plan.



**Establish and Maintain a Shared Sense of Urgency.** We did a situational analysis when we developed the Plan, but I watered it down because I thought that a presentation that pulled no punches would threaten the University community too much. In addition, I presented the analysis only once as part of a campus-wide meeting on the entire plan. In no way did I establish a sense of urgency. Today, with COVID-19, I can see that the University community is hungering for the “brutal truths.”

The *Transforming for Turbulent Times* approach calls for a data and future-driven call to action that builds and maintains a clear understanding across the entire institution of the serious challenges it faces. The book also plainly states that a broadly shared understanding of the challenges facing an institution is essential to support for the large-scale transformations needed. This is the path we will take when we launch our efforts to address the challenges of COVID-19 and the highly turbulent future of the University will face in the Age of Accelerations.

**Transformation Demands Active Leadership throughout a Relentless Ten-Year Campaign.** In our 2018-2022 strategic planning effort, we defined five “strategic” initiatives that might have made a difference at the margins. But we didn’t organize well to implement them and they quickly languished. After the first year or so, the campus moved on to other, non-strategic issues. The Leading and Navigating Transformative Change approach makes it clear that organization-wide transformation takes time—at least a decade—and relentless focus to find the right path and complete a journey. As we reboot our strategy process, we will follow this approach, making certain that there are clear charges to the groups tasked with execution and that we closely track their progress, using the implementation practices and tools outlined in the *Transforming for Turbulent Times* and regularly adjust direction as conditions change.

**Form and Maintain a Guiding Coalition.** The 2018-2022 Plan and the five strategic initiatives had no committed organizational advocate. The initiatives were assigned to President’s Cabinet members who, after all was said and done, felt they had bigger fish to fry. The Leading and Navigating Transformative Change approach calls for the creation of a “Guiding Coalition” to bring together the best minds from all parts and levels of the organization to quickly find the best and most creative solutions to the existential challenges facing the institution. While the Coalition includes members of the hierarchy, it operates apart from it, and is much less formal and much more agile in its work. With the Guiding Coalition approach, the Coalition is continually dedicated, with the cooperation of the hierarchy, to the implementation of the transformative strategies. In its work, the Coalition can move much faster, has no hidden agenda, and can easily cross hierarchical lines to truly transform culture and processes.

**Build Organizational Capacity.** For the development and implementation of the 2018-22 Plan, we did nothing to develop our organizational capacity to plan or execute. Clearly with our lack of these skills and our inability to properly deploy the talent we did have, we were predestined to failure. The Leading and Navigating Transformative Change approach clearly calls for the development of the organizational capacity to transform an institution in turbulent times. These capabilities include strategic thinking, financial and policy analysis, planning, communicating, executing, innovating, resourcing and leading. In our new effort, we must make sure that the talent we have is deployed optimally and that we develop essential new capabilities where we need them. We are not merely better able to transform. We are honing our capacity to *regenerate*, as individuals, teams, organizations, and communities. Many of our people did not fully understand what that meant at the start of our campaign journey. But they surely do now,

I hope these reflections show how helpful the *Transforming for Turbulent Times* framework for Leading and Navigating Transformative Change is as we think about the steps we need to take to ensure that Blue Ridge University thrives over the next decade. The methodology is designed to help leaders transform their institutions in ways not previously attempted in higher education. When I compare this approach to our previous one, I can clearly see where we missed the boat.

Jolene Crowder  
President

