The Alamo Way provides a philosophy and district-wide strategies for the Alamo Colleges to achieve our vision of being the best community college in the nation in student success and performance excellence and to achieve our mission to empower our diverse communities for success. A particular aspect of this philosophy is Principle-Centered Leadership, and within this strategy we have embraced the idea of “A leader in every seat.” To help achieve this objective, we are striving to educate every employee in the 7 Habits of Highly Effective People; we have also created ALAS, Alamo Leadership Academy for Success; implemented a grassroots leadership initiative, Focus PDCA (Plan, Do, Check Act), within our Baldrige efforts; and have initiated The Four Disciplines of Execution (4DX), empowering each departmental team across the Alamo Colleges to take responsibility to lead in its own way initiatives that achieve our shared Institutional Wildly Important Goal (WIG).

One of the many examples of initiatives developing from the Alamo Way occurred last spring when four of our trustees, Dr. Sprague, Mr. Zárate, Mr. Alderete and Dr. Katz, attended the annual Achieving the Dream Board of Trustees Institute. This meeting followed shortly after our spring Board retreat where faculty presented strategies that are having positive and important impacts on student success. In fact, one of those strategies, expanding Service Learning, is currently being implemented by the recently established Office of Experiential Learning thanks to the leadership of Sabrina Hammel, Karla Kosub of NLC and Migdalia Garcia of NVC who presented at this retreat. We were all so impressed with the faculty-led initiatives and presentations at the Board retreat that the trustees identified a strategy they called AlamoENGAGE during the Achieving the Dream Board Institute to encourage and support additional faculty leadership initiatives across our enterprise. The entire Board then adopted this initiative and incorporated it into their Charges to the Chancellor in August.

Over the past several months, the PVC (presidents and vice chancellors), especially with the inclusion
of several new presidents, has taken the opportunity to review and re-establish the goal of increasing our effectiveness as a team and as an organization. Discussions with students, staff, faculty and administrators as well as training in The Speed of Trust, a FranklinCovey strategy to improve organizational effectiveness, led us to reassess our decision-making processes. Utilizing the principles of the Alamo Way and our Alamo Colleges’ values, we focused on strategies encouraging enhanced levels of stakeholder involvement in the development of solutions to the many challenges and opportunities we face, now and in the future. We believe that this “participatory leadership” approach, in policy and practice, will continue to set-the-stage for our enduring, collective success.

Our discussions over the summer concluded that we are still learning how to best implement the Alamo Way philosophy, including Principle-Centered Leadership, as we strive to balance the internal needs of participatory and collaborative design with the external expectations of immediate delivery and improved results. The complexity of our environment, and of our unique accrediting structure, has challenged us to look carefully at our intentions, strategies and behaviors and the gap that sometimes exists between them. We have learned that this gap has led to a perception by some that we are not fulfilling the potential of our philosophy of participatory leadership and that those who desire to collaborate on solutions to our collective challenges, including students, sometimes do not feel fully engaged.

On the plus side, we collaborated this year with student leaders to create the Student District Council and intentionally established the first Texas Community College Student Trustee in order to expand the voice of our students. Yet, we understand that despite these proactive efforts, some students continue to feel that their voices are unheard. Certainly, taking the time to engage many voices and perspectives in organizational decision-making processes can be managerially challenging. However, we agree that not only is public engagement necessary to achieve our student success commitments, it lays the foundation for trust-building that may actually increase the speed and efficiency of our implementation process, as outlined in The Speed of Trust model that guides us. We seek to transform our world by affirming our belief that every employee, every student, and every member of our stakeholder communities is a leader and, as such, has a commitment and responsibility to student success and to the Alamo Colleges’ mission of community empowerment. This is the essence of our definition of participatory leadership.

Therefore, we have embraced an expanded role for our internal and external communities to help us achieve more effective and efficient strategies to meet the needs of our diverse stakeholders and students, as well as to respond to the many changes that are driving the operational decisions we must make, almost every day, to achieve our mission.

Fundamentally, “participatory leadership” is based on higher education administration, project management, leadership and public engagement theory, research, and best practices (see references below), and emphasizes a five-step process of participatory engagement:

1. Emphasize the intent. Create awareness about the challenges and describe the problem or opportunity. Present the data and engage stakeholders through a variety of outreach efforts, engage stakeholders in order that they understand that the problem must be addressed/opportunity must be seized, because if the status quo is allowed to persist, students will be negatively impacted or denied opportunities; if we fail to act, we are in fact acting negligently, irresponsibly, or contrary to our organizational mission; to act is our moral imperative. Fundamentally, it is our duty, and we are the legitimate organization in our region to address this problem or opportunity;
2. Authentically engage stakeholders in the development of solutions to the problems posed through “structured, yet rigorous debate.” Seek to create a “culture of innovation” so that proposals evoke the best strategies that can be achieved through collective problem solving;

3. Establish “rules of engagement.” Develop a pre-defined public engagement period for major change initiatives so that balance can be achieved between reaping the benefits of our collective leadership and the necessity to act effectively;

4. Seek informed consent to collaborative solutions proposed through promotion of the understanding that the null alternative or refusing to act, while perhaps immediately less disruptive, ultimately is negligent with long-term negative implications; ensure that each of us is responsive and accountable to the public trust, that we are doing what is necessary to enhance our community/students, and acting on our organizational mission;

5. Be transparent and keep stakeholders updated during the execution/implementation process, share data about the effectiveness of implementation, and promote opportunities for stakeholder engagement throughout the implementation process.

Within the public engagement period, we will strive to proactively identify for each project all potentially affected interests as relevant stakeholders who should be engaged early and often so that they can help shape solutions to the problem or opportunity that frames a change initiative, and ultimately participate in project implementation. This process will help ensure the likelihood that stakeholders will support the implementation process, because they realize that the Alamo Colleges cares and is acting responsively and responsibly in its problem solving and opportunity-maximizing mission.

We understand that to be successful we must undertake two deliberate strategies that establish and nurture a culture of ownership and inclusion among our Alamo Colleges Family and stakeholders: 1) We must create broad-based community awareness of the challenges, external pressures, and opportunities faced by our organization (Please see the Chancellor’s Call to Action on my web page) and 2) We must proactively seek meaningful input and alternatives before completing our go-forward decisions. These strategies will further strengthen both the process and product of our decision-making efforts as we continue to work together towards our goal of becoming the best in the nation.

As a public-serving entity that is being required to transform itself, we realize that authentic, grassroots relationships and public engagement processes are requisite to the establishment of genuine public trust. As Covey contends in The Speed of Trust, “With people, slow is fast and fast is slow”. We recognize and embrace the philosophy that building trust through participatory leadership is a precursor to implementing change.

We welcome your comments and recommendations to strengthen this approach, both to support faculty, staff and student leadership and broad stakeholder participation as we begin to utilize it in the development of our ongoing student success agenda.

References


Publishing.


Dr. Bruce Leslie, Chancellor
Alamo Colleges
201 W. Sheridan, Bldg. A
San Antonio, TX 78204-1429
(210) 485-0020 (Phone)
(210) 486-9165 (Fax)

[Alamo Colleges Logo]

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