Change@MIT: Final Report

December 2018

Prepared by the following members of the L2L Class of 2018:

Greg Eow
Shawn Ferullo
Kendra Leith
Joe Manok
Lilen Uchima

L2L Team Process Coach: Blanche Staton L2L ‘06
Project Sponsors: Glen Comiso L2L ‘12, and Kathryn Liede L2L ‘10
Executive Sponsor: Kirk Kolenbrander L2L ‘02

Project charge:

*Change in our industry, higher education, sometimes seems slower than that in other industries – especially change over the last 15-30 years. What about change at MIT? This team will explore the driving and restraining forces for change as perceived by one to three subsets within the Institute: faculty, students, and staff. Based on their findings, and perhaps comparing our industry with others, the team will offer its insights about implementing change at MIT.*
Part 1. Introduction

In line with its project charge, the Change@MIT L2L project examined the following question: what are the driving and restraining forces to implementing change at MIT? Throughout, our project was animated by the following questions and concerns: How successful is MIT as a community and as a culture at driving change and innovation? What are primary motivators and drivers for change at MIT? Conversely, what are the primary blockers to change implementation? The group also considered how is MIT similar to, or different from, peer institutions as well as industry in regard to change implementation.

Our approach to the project was wide-ranging, and we explored the phenomenon of change at MIT across multiple constituencies. Our methodology crossed all five of MIT’s schools, included perspectives from a wide array of departments and DLCs, and explored all manner of the MIT experience, including research and teaching, as well as community life and community well-being.

Through this project, we engaged a variety of stakeholders, including senior administration, faculty, staff and students (undergraduate and graduate), representing a wide array of departments and DLCs. In total, we held interviews with over 30 members of the MIT community. It is important to note that although we did interview representatives from multiple - though not all - constituencies, most of the interviews were with the Institute’s current and former senior leadership. We recognize that the data reflected in this work mostly represents the views and opinions of the change implementers at MIT.

The following key findings emerged through our project:

● Universal acknowledgment that change is essential yet difficult to implement
● Community engagement is critically important to successful change implementation at MIT
● There can exist in each leadership tenure moments requiring quick, top-down decisions mandating change. Top-down change implementation strategies should be used judiciously, as the occasions to rely on this tool successfully are in short supply.
There are several key recommendations that also emerged to guide those looking to implement change:

- **Engage broadly.** Establish a process through which people from all different constituencies can participate, provide input, get the information they need, and feel engaged.
- **Engage faculty effectively.** Set up a process to engage faculty in a way that is mindful of the system of incentives and reward structures in which they operate.
- **Ensure that the team can execute.** Ensure that champions for change are in place, and have the necessary resources for success.
- **Use data** to articulate the reason for change as well as to assess progress.
- **Build and leverage relationships.** Take the time to build relationships and utilize those relationships when applicable to help the change process.
- **Build change management skills and capacity** of leaders looking to drive change

The following report explores these findings, takeaways and recommendations in more detail. The hope is that by bringing data to bear on the study of change management at MIT, we can provide guidance for leaders at MIT who are looking to continue and build upon MIT’s tradition of innovation.1

**Part 2. Process and Methodology**

Beginning our work in Spring 2018, our L2L project team sought to obtain data to study the phenomenon of change at MIT from a capacious and varied set of perspectives. At the core of this report are the collective opinions, experiences, lessons learned and anecdotal accounts of several members of the MIT community and one industry partner that agreed to be interviewed for this project.

Our group sent out 37 requests for interviews, and successfully conducted 31 interviews and focus group sessions. Our process consisted of conducting sit down interviews with individuals and, in the case of students, one focus group each for graduates and undergraduates. Each interview with individuals lasted between 30-80 minutes based on the amount of time that was available. The same predefined questions were used for each interview to allow standardization and comparison of the responses that were obtained. In most instances, the list of questions was shared electronically with the interviewees prior to the session to allow time for them to think about their responses prior to the session. Often, this

---

1 See, for instance: Kaiser, David, *Becoming MIT: Moments of Decision*, MIT Press, 2010
allowed for a more complete conversation that also was able to get into higher level responses and discussions. The following predefined set of questions were used for the interview process:

1). Based on your experience, could you share with us 2-3 observations about change at MIT?
2). Could you share with us 2-3 change initiatives you have seen to be most important here at MIT (in the last 15 years)?
3). What were the driving (positively influences) and restraining forces (negative influences) of these change initiatives?
4). In your experience, is change at MIT unique compared to other higher education institutions? If so, how?
5). In your experience, is change at MIT unique compared to other non-academic entities? If so, how?

The undergraduate student focus group included six current or recently graduated undergraduate students, representing perspectives from a variety of different majors and MIT courses. The graduate student focus group included three students. Both focus groups took place in summer 2018, and featured the following questions:

1). In your time at MIT so far, what has been your experience with change at MIT?
2). In your experience, what are some of the driving (positive influences) and restraining forces (negative influences) for change at MIT?
3). In your opinion who drives change at MIT? Why?
4.) What would help drive change more effectively? (Round Robin question/answer)

Although our L2L Project Team team recognizes the limited nature of the information collected in such a small sample of MIT students, we do find the information gathered from the students to be illustrative, relevant, and useful for this report.

As a whole, the interviews the team conducted surfaced insightful, and at times profound, leadership reflections. Particularly relevant or pithy quotes can be found throughout the rest of this report, in italics, to highlight particular points. All quotes have been anonymized.

Note on Internal project group process and norms:

The L2L Change group initiated the process of looking at Change at MIT by holding weekly group meetings to determine the scope of the project and to strategically plan our
approach. The group began meeting for one hour per week in March 2018 and continued this process through the completion of the work in late Fall 2018.

The L2L project team agreed on processes and norms for the group’s work during the first meeting. We decided that a minimum of three group members needed to be in attendance in order to hold a team meeting. Each meeting had an assigned group leader who created the agenda, served as the moderator for the meeting and assured that the group stayed on task. Each meeting also had one group member assigned to note taking for the meeting while the other group members were participants in the meeting. A rotation was created such that each L2L Change member served equal time in each of the above roles. A shared cloud drive was created and all notes and other works for the project were transcribed and saved for all members to see and edit as desired and/or needed. Different “L2L session tools” were used over this process for practice and the education of our group members. Early group meetings consisted of discussing the scope of the project, and meeting with the project sponsors and our process coach.

The later meetings consisted of status updates, reviews of the recent interviews for the entire group and to define the work needed to be done. Tasks were then equally shared amongst our group members with each member having the opportunity to edit and/or review each set of tasks and to give each team member opportunities to try different leadership styles in accordance with the overarching goal of L2L to develop our individual and collection leadership capacity.

Part 3. Data Analysis: Identifying Change, Force Field Analysis and the Three Lenses:

Early in the group’s work, we realized that the information we were surfacing through our interviews was highly valuable, and we committed to significant time analyzing the data we had gathered from the interview process. To this end, we used qualitative content analysis to analyze the open-ended responses, identifying primary themes and sub-themes, as well as the number of times those themes appeared across the interviews. Below we will highlight the key findings of our data analysis.

Our interviewees identified a range of activities and initiatives as important changes at the Institute (Figure 1). Change initiatives spanned programmatic and curricular changes (eg. GIRs), dormitory and living group life changes (eg. Senior House), and real estate development (eg. Kendall Square). The full list of change initiatives demonstrates the sheer variety and breadth of change initiatives facing leadership at MIT.
Higher on the list of mentioned change initiatives were ones that involved academic changes such as: digital learning platforms (MITx and edX), change of GIRs and academic collaborations such as MItei or the Koch Institute. Of particular interest is the fact that some initiatives were also labeled as failures or successes. For example: the attempt to change the GIRs in 2008, SAP implementation, and the closing down of Bexley Hall were viewed as unsuccessful change initiatives, whereas changes like the closing down of Senior House, the Mind Hand Heart initiative, and the BSU and BGSA recommendations were catalogued as successful change initiatives for those who mentioned them.

**Force Field Analysis**

The L2L project team relied on two L2L leadership tools in analyzing the data we captured in the interviews: Force Field Analysis and the Three Lenses.
In terms of driving forces (Figure 2), successful engagement with the right stakeholders (i.e., “engagement”) was the highest rated response from the interviews, being mentioned 37 times. Multiple interviewees stressed the critical importance of getting buy-in, building consensus, and developing and leveraging relationships in order to drive organizational change. Another aspect of engagement entailed the recognition of the importance of compromise and collaboration in order to gain community support. A leading lesson here is the need for leaders to design thoughtful processes in order to systematically solicit community and stakeholder input and to engage with constituencies.

The second largest category of driving forces in support of successful change management was communication - particularly communication that involves leadership actively listening and gathering input and feedback from stakeholders. Similarly, ensuring that there is an effective process for engaging key stakeholders can help drive change. Also important to note here is the importance of rhetoric: multiple interviewees suggested that it was more effective to use terms such as “experiment” or “evolution” rather than “change”, which can come across as potentially anxiety-producing or even threatening.
People champions for change were cited as another driver for change at MIT. Change champions can come from different constituent groups, including faculty and students, as well as other staff members, administration, and mid-level managers. Change champions can lead from the bottom up or the top down. Regardless of where they are in the organization, change champions have the appetite, vision, and stamina for change. To empower them, leadership needs to provide such change champions with the sufficient resources (financial, human, etc.) for success.

MIT is unique in a lot of ways when it comes to change. MIT’s strong mission and culture of innovation, curiosity, and exploration help to drive change. In particular, MIT’s has a culture that emphasizes data acquisition, data analysis, and continued learning, and this culture can be harnessed to drive change. At MIT, pilots or experiments are often effective mechanisms for trying something new and learning from the experience.

The findings also uncovered that it can be easier to initiate innovations that can readily appreciated as aligning with MIT’s mission and aspirations, such as the recent launch of the Stephen A. Schwarzman College of Computing. Cultural or social changes, such as changing policies around dorm life, can be more difficult to change and can take a longer periods of time to implement.

As the case elsewhere, change at MIT can also be driven by external factors such as tragedy, financial crises, or socio-political movements such as #metoo. In sum, the driving forces for change and innovation as MIT are myriad.

A number of restraining forces were noted in the interviews (Figure 3). In terms of restraining/hindering forces, a common observation among interviewees was that people tend to like familiarity and routine. By definition, inertia has a momentum of its own, and it takes action and stamina to successfully to alter the status quo. Resistance to change at MIT can at times be attributed to “excellence trap” - the thinking that since MIT is excellent in so many ways, why change? At MIT, there is also a desire to add new activities, while not always retiring or sunsetting existing programs. The disclination to sunset programs can lead to capacity restraints in regard to launching new programs and activities.

Above and beyond general inclinations to adhere to the status quo, the interviews revealed that in some instances, powerful incentive systems affect faculty member’s ability to engage effectively in change. Faculty are incentivized to research and publish in their fields, which can lead to loyalties in their own disciplinary work rather than to departments, schools, or to the Institute. In addition, governance structures and the size of the faculty may also restrain change. Change initiatives can also raise anxieties about funding and potential loss of resources, which can make change an unattractive or risky prospect.

Other restraining forces included the complexity of MIT and its decentralized nature, making it difficult and time-intensive to engage in robust and systematic community
engagement. Unclear messages and asymmetrical information distribution can unintentionally add to general feelings of skepticism and anxiety, placing restraining forces in the path of successful change management. Capacity, and the lack of it, was also mentioned as a constraint.

*Figure 3. Restraining forces for change at MIT by number of mentions each received throughout the interviews.*

Understanding what are the driving and restraining forces of change at MIT is crucial to better strategize, drive and implement future change processes. In addition, we were also charged with taking an extrospective look at how change at MIT compares to other institutions. To this end, we asked our interviewees to share how change at MIT was unique compared to other academic and non-academic institutions.

When compared to other peer academic institutions, we learned that the top uniqueness about change at MIT is that we are viewed as less decentralized than some peer institutions, such as Harvard. Those interviewees who shared this response cited MIT’s more centralized resource structure and having fewer schools and colleges as possible reasons. The next top answer was regarding the decision-making process at MIT. This change process is
different at MIT in that it involves consultation of multiple constituencies, stakeholders and/or the formation of committees. In addition, some interviewees mentioned the higher than usual involvement of students in decision-making at MIT, and also the fact that MIT is willing to take risks with its decisions. Another highlight of the uniqueness of change at MIT was the perception that the process happens faster at MIT than in other higher education institutions. Some of the reasons for MIT’s nimbleness include: the focus of MIT students and faculty on changing the world and that power at MIT is more centralized than in other peer academic institutions. We should note that some interviewees did not comment on this aspect of change and/or did not think that MIT has a unique or different change process when compared to peer institutions. Interestingly, some interviewees noted that in general change in higher education is hard and MIT is not exempt from this reality; there are common challenges that all institutions in higher education have to face when trying to implement change.

Comparing MIT’s change process to non-academic institutions, the majority of our interviewees mentioned that change at MIT is slower than in industry. The reasons for this include: the rapid demands and discipline of the market, the fact that industries have more flexibility in hiring and retention, less need for consensus-based decision-making, and more ability to adopt top-down organizational structures. This last point was also mentioned several times outside of the context of industry having a faster environment for change. For example, several of our interviewees mentioned that the top-down management structure in industry allows for a command and control approach which is in direct opposition to MIT’s “learning organization” approach to leadership. The decision-making process made the list of top mentions again, this time when compared to non-academic institutions. Another difference of change at MIT compared to industry that is worth highlighting, is that MIT’s change process is mostly driven by the Institute’s mission and not by profits or market-logic.

**The Three Lenses of Organizational Awareness:**

“The Three Lenses Approach to Organizational Analysis” model based on the work of Deborah Ancona, Tom Kochan, John Van Maanen, and Eleanor Westney was also useful in analyzing the interviews. The three lenses in this model are as follows: strategic, political, and cultural. The “strategic” lens analyzes an organization based on formal aspects of organizational design, such as organizational charts and reporting lines. The “political” lens, looks at power dynamics, which are not always captured in formal organizational structures. And the “cultural” lens uses a frame of analysis that captures symbols, artifacts, and traditions that also play important roles in organizational life.

---

Using the strategic lens - the leader as organizational architect - to parse the interview data, one appreciates the need to thoughtfully plan to engage the stakeholder community that makes up the organizational context in which the leader operates. For instance, MIT is comprised of multiple communities - faculty and students of course, but also administrators, staff, alumni, and trustees. The incentive structures, focus of attention, and perspectives of these groups are only intermittently aligned, and an Institute-wide change initiative would have to plan an engagement process that gathers the input of all of these constituencies.

One of our interviewees suggested that having different constituencies agree on a framework for change could be an effective way for expediting change, as coming to broad agreement around a framework allows groups to tackle problems efficiently and to spend time addressing core issues, rather than rehashing rudimentary issues again and again. For instance, a framework could make clear from the start that a discussion of an issue would methodically address the perspectives of specific constituencies (eg. fundraising, student life, facilities, etc.) minimizing the time constituencies would need to spend articulating that they need to be included.

As one of the interviewees put it, “People generally care and want to do the right thing, but there are a 1,000 faculty, and you need to bring them together, get them to think together.’”
In terms of the political lens, one of our interviewees mused: “Change is hard, and everything is political.” It is through the judicious use of the political lens of analysis that a leader appreciates the role of interests, coalitions, and maps of influence in an organization in serving as drivers or restraining forces to change. A few key themes emerged in our interviews regarding a political lens evaluation of the MIT context. The most important, perhaps, is the power and influence of faculty at MIT. In a great many interviews, respondents observed that full professors have the most influence at the Institute. MIT faculty having deep and abiding influence at the Institute makes sense on multiple levels, though one should keep in mind that faculty operate within incentive structures that make faculty time and attention an especially rare and precious commodity, and which often prioritizes faculty commitment to research and publishing over other forms of service. It can be hard to get faculty attention for new initiatives, and change initiatives and timelines need to take this into account.

One of our interviewees suggested that in order to plan to address political challenges related to a change initiative one should focus first to “build a sense of why before initiating change,” and that one should separate the questions of “Why?” something should happen and the “How?” something could be implemented. The reason being that you can often find a consensus that something needs to be done; but the question of how to implement can be controversial, and sidetrack or confuse fundamental questions of whether a path should be pursued or not.

Unlike the political lens, which focuses on power and maps of influence, the cultural lens helps a leader diagnose their situation by appreciating the artifacts and unspoken rules, norms, and customs that influence behavior within an organization. Here symbols and artifacts are important, and MIT has a number of these which collectively contribute to creating the cultural firmament of MIT. For instance, to name but two examples, the “mens et manus” motto, and the Beaver mascot. Throughout our interviews, the Change@MIT team noted the strong effect and role of cultural artifacts at MIT. Repeatedly in our interviews, while talking to people from different disciplinary backgrounds or representing different constituencies from the MIT community (eg. faculty, students, staff, etc.), interviewees would reference MIT’s culture as being one that, at least in aspiration, does the following:

- MIT culture embraces new ideas/better ways to do things.
- Strong sense of “ONE MIT” (very different than other academic institutions)
- Strong sense of doing “what is right” can bring people together for progress.
- Data driven, supportive data can be a strong influence.

An amusing and accurate observation from one of the leaders we interviewed, captured exactly how leaders who understand how to use the cultural lens of analysis to help change can
use it to move things forward. The observation was that if you want to initiate a change at MIT, “Do not use the word change. Use experiment.”

Part 4: Recommendations:

Based on the data surfaced in the interviews, analyzed and sorted through the Force Field Analysis and the Three Lenses Tools, are L2L project team identifies the following eight recommendations to MIT leaders looking to launch and successfully implement change at MIT.

1.) Engage all constituents --- Establish a process through which people from all different constituents can participate, provide input, get the information they need, and feel engaged.
  - Identify who needs to be engaged, when, why, and how.
  - Be clear about how the process is going work. How are the decisions going to be made, when, and by whom?
  - Consider adopting a change framework for MIT that outlines the process.

We heard many times that the final product of the change initiative ends up being better than first anticipated due to the feedback and suggestions that are incorporated from the different constituent groups.

2.) Engage faculty effectively --- Set up a process to engage faculty in a way that is mindful of the system of incentives and reward structures in which they operate.

At times there is a systems issue that gets in the way of faculty having the bandwidth to engage in change initiatives. Faculty are busy engaging in research, publications to advance their field of study, running labs, teaching students, and at times extensive travels. When change initiatives present themselves, there is not always the time to “drop” what they are doing to attend a meeting or to participate in conversations.

3.) Ensure that the team can execute
  - Make sure that you have the right leaders in place to champion and advance the vision.
  - Communicate how each constituent fits into this vision and how it will affect their activities.
  - Identify the human, financial, space, materials, and equipment resources needed to initiate and implement the change and make sure that they are available.
4.) Define roles and ensure accountability--- Clearly define the roles and responsibilities for implementing the change initiative and set up a system for holding leaders and implementers accountable.
   ● Develop a system for holding those leaders and implementers accountable such as setting targets, measuring the results and creating an advisory group (with members who are internal and external to MIT) that provides feedback and evaluates progress at least twice a year.
   ● Ensure that there is adequate staff support to execute on that strategy.

5.) Use data
   ● Use data to help explain the reason for initiating change and for reflecting on how effective the change initiative was implemented in practice.
   ● Experiments are an effective way to test an idea and reflect on what worked and what could be improved. By including assessment and reflection, MIT is more likely to be an organization that continuously learns.

6.) Build and leverage relationships --- Take the time to build relationships and utilize those relationships when applicable to help the change process.

    --- Change is partly social at MIT. Sometimes the process is more important than the outcome. The relationships that are built before or as part of the change process help the current initiative but also lay the groundwork for future change initiatives.

7.) Communicate clearly and be mindful of the vocabulary used
   ● Determine which information needs to be communicated, to whom, when, and how.
   ● Clearly communicate the required information.
   ● Make sure you communicate the same information multiple times and using different venues as it sometimes take multiple instances for people to internalize change.
   ● Consider the vocabulary for describing change. When possible, use words like experiment, or evolution, or pilot, rather than change.

8.) Create Capacity --- Build change management into leadership programs and training programs across the Institute, including L2L.

Part 5. Leadership Lessons:
The L2L program’s focus on leadership and leadership development ensured that throughout our project, we considered our work and our findings through the lens of leadership lessons. Our group identified the following six leadership lessons as being especially important takeaways from our group’s work:

**Leadership Lesson One: Leaders Listen:** Listening is a core leadership skill, and effective change management almost always requires that leaders actively gather and listen to feedback. The feedback might not affect the change that you wish you implement, but active listening builds trust and increases knowledge sharing. So important is listening that one of our interviewees described it as follows: “Listening is a skill that takes practice to master. Organizations suffer when people don’t listen.”

**Leadership Lesson Two: Lead with Integrity:** A key function of leadership is to build the platform and create the spaces in which people can contribute to a shared environment of learning, creativity, and growth. The tone that the leader sets is very important, and leaders need to lead with integrity in order to create and foster an environment that brings out the best in people. As one of our interviewees put it, “What makes a good leader? The people I have seen and admired here are the folks who take risks because they believe it’s the right thing to do. They stick to principle, and do so with courage and integrity.”

**Leadership Lesson Three: Leaders are Accountable and Available:** While leaders set a vision and are not necessarily or even often engaged with operational level work, leaders should be available enough to demonstrate that they themselves are present and engaged through the change process and, if need be, are ready to do the work if it is required. A particularly simple yet powerful insight from one of the interviews was as follows: “Respond to people. Whoever calls us, they are calling with the biggest issue on their mind that day.”

**Leadership Lesson Four: Leaders Plan for Engagement:** Community engagement is so critically important to successful change implementation at MIT, leaders have to spend time thoughtfully planning how they are going to strategically and methodically engage with different constituencies that make up their organizational context. Successful engagements maximize chances for consensus and share understanding.

**Leadership Lesson Five: Leaders Sometimes Need to Mandate Change:** Listening and widespread community engagement is ideally the way to socialize and lead change initiatives. That said, there are times in a leader’s tenure when change needs to be mandated, and hard calls have to be made quickly without a robust engagement process in place. In these situations, the best process the leader can do is to plan for managing the fallout and negative
response to the change decision. One of our interviewees described such a process as “planning for a controlled explosion.” Another one of our interviewees described such moments are the lonely times in a leaders tenure. To use a term acquired in L2L, such moments can constitute a “leadership crucible.”

**Leadership Lesson Six: Effective Teams Leverage the Strengths of Their Members:** This final lesson relates to the L2L lesson we learned through the Strengths Finder Tool, and the lesson is this: all leaders have their own unique set of strengths and there is no one single model for effective leadership. Throughout our team’s work, we learned to harness the different array of strengths, insights, and expertise of our team’s members. As a result, we worked efficiently and effectively as a team, where the total was much more than the sum of our constituent parts. This was a powerful lesson, and one that needs to be included in our list of leadership lessons. In the words of one of the interviewees, “A leader builds her team and hires people who can be strong team members.”

**Part 6: Conclusion:**

Initiating, driving, and sustaining change is the work of leadership, and we have been honored to have this rare opportunity to study and learn from the perspectives on change management from extraordinary members of the MIT community. It would be impossible to overstate the importance of building the culture and leadership competencies to drive innovation and change at MIT. As one of the leaders in our interviews succinctly put it, “Staying at the top, means continually innovating and taking risks.”

Throughout its history, leaders have demonstrated that they are willing to take risks in pursuit of excellence and innovation. Today is no different, as the bold creation of the newly announced Stephen A. Schwarzman College of Computing demonstrates.

Our L2L project team submits this report in appreciation for MIT and the L2L community. We hope this report contributes to maintaining, fostering, and growing a leadership culture equipped with the tools to continue to drive innovation, learning, and growth, aligned with the boundless aspirations of MIT.