
STARTING A CHANGE PROJECT

A Tip Sheet from Revolutionizing Engineering Departments

Congratulations! You have decided to begin an academic change project. It might target students' learning, or faculty development, or curriculum reform, or any other worthy initiative. Every change project needs to begin with a solid foundation to ensure success all along the way. This tip sheet presents strategies for starting a change project, using research findings resulting from focus group discussions and conference calls with the National Science Foundation's Revolutionizing Engineering Departments (RED) grantees. The quotes from research participants highlight these findings. Contact us at redpar@rose-hulman.edu for additional information.

Form and/or Recompose the Team

The initial conceptualization for a change project is often done by a small group of individuals. Once the decision is made to start the project, however, you may need to either form a team or recompose and expand your team in order to bring together the right individuals to do the work. A collection of individuals working together on a project doesn't necessarily make a team. To become a team, individuals need to work together toward common goals and objectives. Each person must feel that they are contributing something of value and that their identity, skills, and expertise are valued by the team.

➔ **TIP:** Take time early in the initial phase to form the project team. Consider who you are inviting to be on the team: are you considering the expertise, experience, and other contributions each individual brings to the team, or are you primarily choosing individuals based on who you believe is easy to work with? You should consider the value each person adds to the team, their past work, their professional backgrounds, and their personal interests that can be of use to the team and on the project. Remember that your project will be stronger and more successful if you bring together individuals with diverse tools, techniques, skillsets, and knowledge.

"If you think that you're prepared for a major change agent process like this, you're deluding yourself. I think you pull together the right thing, the right people, create strengths in areas where you need strengths, and then you pursue even a flexible one, you change your own structure, your own approach to things as you go along." **Quote from the Panel Discussion or RED Research**

Set Short Term Goals for the Project and for Team Members

Early wins for your project can help motivate team members and demonstrate the feasibility of the project to stakeholders. Consider creating a few goals that are achievable in the first year. Be sure that the entire team has a chance to contribute their ideas about what the project should achieve. As a way to ensure each team member creates their own stake in the project, ask them to create individual goals that align with the project.

➔ **TIP:** Working together as a team, draft a description of what the project will achieve based on input from all team members. In addition, give each team member the opportunity to create a set of personal goals that they can achieve while working on the project, such as moving forward their own research agenda, expanding their professional network, etc. Establish an accountability system, such as a Gantt chart, Microsoft Teams group, or Google form. This will provide all team members with a shared space in which to update the team on their work and make progress toward the first year goals.

“[S]ome of the conversations we had . . . where we were trying to talk to each other and get down on paper with drawings and so forth what this project was about helped us to kind of lay a foundation for working together, which I think was effective.”

“It was great putting together a schedule and putting that on a Google drive. It was great to see who’s doing what and be able to keep any eye on the bottlenecks.” [Quotes from the Panel Discussion or RED Research](#)

Reflect on Opportunities and Challenges

While the start of the change project is likely to be an exciting time, you should also spend time with your team to identify specific opportunities and challenges that could be encountered as an individual contributor and/or as a team. Together the team can discuss: what are the top challenges? What are the top opportunities for the project and for the team? Working on a new change project is sure to bring some worries and challenges, especially in the first year. Take comfort in knowing that change project teams have gone through many of the same challenges that you anticipate encountering. These teams find that sharing knowledge about those challenges, both on your campus and across institutional boundaries ,can be very helpful.

➔ **TIP:** Encourage your team to identify opportunities and challenges at the start of the project. It is important to reach out to others, either on your own campus or in your professional network, to learn from them about the opportunities and challenges they encountered in their first year.

“What we [different RED teams] share is about organizational change. We all face the same difficulties and setbacks, and hearing that from the rest of the cohort makes me feel much better. It helps us cope with the issues that we deal with.”

“To me the most valuable, was mapping out who we need to be concerned about, who’s powerful, who’s on board, and then coming up with how to engage with those folks. Having some sense of a game plan. Even just in the past month, we’ve realized, oops, we missed someone. That was valuable.” [Quotes from the Panel Discussion or RED Research](#)

Check out other REDPAR Tip Sheets that can help:

Communicating Change, Creating Shared Vision, Creating Strategic Partnerships, and Forming Teams, available at academicchange.org

Material for this Tip Sheet is drawn from:

Harvard Business Review. 2013. *On Teams*. Harvard Business Review Press, Boston, MA.

London, J.S., Berger, E.J., Margherio, C., Litzler, E., and Branstad, J. 2017. The RED Teams as Institutional Mentors: Advice from the First Year of the “Revolution”. In ASEE Annual Conference and Exposition, Conference Proceedings. <https://peer.asee.org/28997>

