

A HIGHER EDUCATION  
PRESIDENTIAL ESSAY SERIES



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2006 SERIES: "CREATING COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE"

– ESSAY 4 –

The Power of the Employee:  
Employee Management, Development, and Engagement

## The Power of the Employee: Employee Management, Development, and Engagement

“The reality is that creating a customer service-oriented culture and what it portends to bring to the academic enterprise is palpable in 2006”

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Whether the institution is an Ivy League university in the East, a small liberal arts college in the Midwest, a large majority institution, or a historically black college or university (HBCU)—they all share many common threads, challenges, and needs in the areas of aligning employees with the mission of the institution, employee engagement, and in building a heightened sense of purpose around issues of serving their primary customers: students.

Although the private sector has placed an increased priority on customer service as a competitive strategy, many academic environments find the notion of “student as customer” a rather difficult concept to embrace. The reality is that creating a customer service-oriented culture and what it portends to bring to the academic enterprise is palpable in 2006.

The key requirement for successfully executing the change management process is securing employee engagement, commitment, and support. With the right combination of leadership, vision, and employee engagement, transforming an organization is not only possible, but achievable—even in the face of the kind of challenges that existed at Clark Atlanta University (CAU) in 2002.

### Transformational Leadership

When I became president of CAU in August 2002, my vision was that the University would become student-centered and quality-driven in everything that we do. However, clearly, several challenges to the University achieving that vision existed in 2002.

Four years ago, the University was saddled with an operating deficit of \$7.5 million, a \$25 million cash flow deficit, and 90 academic programs. The University’s bond insurers were threatening to place the institution in receivership and they also required that the University engage educational consultants to help map out a plan for fiscal recovery. Therefore, one of the first orders of business was to ask for an organizational review by two well-respected educational consultants.

Also, a student satisfaction survey concerning customer service was conducted to give us a clear picture of how students currently viewed customer service at CAU.

The bottom line findings of the review and the survey were sobering. While there were and are many good things about CAU, there were serious shortcomings, including a lack of accountability, lacking to nonexistent financial controls, sub par scholarly productivity, and unremarkable retention rates.

From both the fiscal and organizational reviews, a set of recommendations was developed to strengthen the institution's financial position, restore academic primacy, and establish a customer service-oriented culture, and implementation began immediately.

Creating an environment where faculty and staff are truly engaged and committed to ensuring outstanding customer service is an ongoing process rather than an initiative that has a clear beginning and a clear end. However, CAU's progress in this area is notable and the institution's transformation is well underway.

Although many people, departments, and processes were critical elements of the change management process, this essay will highlight four divisions that directly impact students and required the leadership to engage their employees in the change management process to ensure success.

### Finding the Right Levers

#### Office of the Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs

The heartbeat of a college or university is the strength of its academic programs. When one considers that academic programs are a critical component in CAU's vision of becoming student-centered and quality-driven, ensuring academic primacy is a critical customer service requirement.

The provost and vice president for academic affairs had the difficult task of spearheading the phase-out of five academic programs and addressing opposition to the plan expressed by faculty, students, and external constituents. Following are several key steps that she and the administration used to manage employee relations and eventually win their cooperation:

- ◆ Demonstrated that decisions were based on data and on the interest of strengthening the institution for faculty, staff, and students.
- ◆ Communicated rationale for the decision to employees openly, honestly, and candidly.
- ◆ Discovered that listening a great deal and empathizing with concerns, when appropriate, was helpful.

- ◆ Learned not to take criticism personally, even when the attacks were personal.
- ◆ When faculty was recalcitrant, the leadership stayed focused, stayed the course, and drove home the belief that outstanding programs would attract and retain students.

Execution of these steps has made a measurable difference in the success of the phase-out strategy and, equally important, in securing the cooperation and, in some cases, support from faculty and staff.

### Enrollment Services and Student Affairs

Enrollment Services and Student Affairs is one of the units that serves as the first line of contact for the University's relations with students. The unit plays a critical role in CAU's recruitment and retention efforts. However, for several years, students had been the recipients of unsatisfactory service from an underperforming staff.

When our current vice president joined the University last December, he took a multi-pronged approach to transforming his staff and to improving customer service. His approach included an assessment of the unit's strengths and areas of needed improvement; allowing the staff to create the unit's mission as means of securing a stronger buy-in; matching employees' strengths with job functions; setting measurable outcomes; creating a culture of open communication at all levels; and leading by example.

To create a customer service mindset among the staff, the vice president and his senior staff members clearly communicated to the unit that students are the number one priority. The unit also started improving customer service from the inside out by viewing other CAU divisions as internal customers and applying service-oriented principles to other units.

Employee contributions to the unit's mission have risen, greater accountability is now the norm, the concept of "student as customer" is widely accepted, and most notably student satisfaction indicators have markedly improved.

## Management Services

Nearly every experience that a student has at a college or university involves management services in some shape or form, or at some level. At CAU, Management Services includes human resources, public safety, physical plant, property management, and auxiliary services such as the bookstore, food service, parking, and more.

When a former IBM executive came aboard as assistant to the president for Management Services, his approach to creating employee commitment was to hold work sessions to understand how employees saw their roles, identify and understand any resistance to change, and most importantly, elicit ideas on how to manage change. These meetings also netted improvement initiatives and performance improvement standards with clear, measurable outcomes.

Next, he determined the mission, goal, and vision for his division with input from his six direct reports and a 100-member staff. They asked tough questions of themselves every step of the way such as “who is the customer?” and “do we have the needed capabilities to achieve the goals?” He then defined what success would look like for his division, set improvement-oriented objectives with action steps, and developed a set of metrics for continuous measurement and improvement.

To date, the measurement data (from primary and secondary research with internal customers and students) is showing that the unit is moving closer to their vision of excellence in every area of Management Services.

## Office of Finance and Administration

The backbone of any organization is in its financial strength. In 2002, CAU’s financial condition was bleak and the University’s continued existence rested heavily on the University’s ability to achieve financial recovery.

That task was led by the vice president for finance and administration and his team. He knew that success rested with the total commitment of his staff and the cooperation of the entire CAU family.

The vice president and his team developed and executed the following steps to achieve financial recovery:

- ◆ Assessed organizational attitudes and behaviors regarding finances.
- ◆ Instilled a University-wide sense of urgency around the notion that every dollar spent must be for the delivery of education and services to students.
- ◆ Developed and executed a strategic plan for recovery, including cost-cutting measures.
- ◆ Conducted ongoing research and analysis to monitor incremental change, progress, and needed adjustments to the plan.
- ◆ Developed a new system for managing student accounts, which has made tremendous improvements in customer service.

Executions of the financial recovery strategies have thus far yielded \$4.5 million in savings (although it will be two years before all of the savings are realized). Today, CAU’s cash flow deficit is approximately \$6 million—a very different picture than in 2002. The University still has a ways to go, but it has turned the corner and the change is evident to faculty, staff, and students.

## Sustaining Success

CAU has maintained a balance budget since 2004 due to the execution of stringent financial recovery strategies and the cooperation of a supportive employee body. When greater accountability became a requirement and leadership’s efforts to empower and engage employees were viewed as sincere and consistent, employees began to model desired behaviors.

What is the long-term prognosis? As stated, transformation is a work in progress and sustainability has no clear beginning or clear ending. Today, CAU is forging ahead with plans to make excellent customer service the foundation of the students’ experience.

Following are five “CAU Success Strategies” that other higher education institutions can use to engage employees in change management:

1. *Creating a customer service-focused environment requires transformational leadership.*

Transformational leaders have the ability to create a vision of where the organization is headed, articulate the goals, and inspire employees to embrace them.

2. *Break the silos: create connectivity.*

There must be vertical and horizontal connectivity between all people, departments, functions, and divisions across the entire system and a strong connectivity to internalization of the institution's values.

3. *A breakthrough strategy is needed to translate the vision and change management priorities into specific employee behaviors.*

Leaders must first define a vision, communicate it, and inspire others to commit to achieving it.

4. *Exploit key levers of change and transformation.*

Levers are critically important parts of the system that can be used to change and control the system. Identify them and maximize their usefulness.

5. *Focus on people.*

Make employees a priority and they often make the organization's needs their priority.

In conclusion, it is important to note that when employees (both faculty and staff) are properly trained, engaged, and leveraged, they can be an all-powerful source of an institution's ability to increase its value, while contemporaneously contributing to its strength, competitiveness, and longevity.

*Walter D. Broadnax became president of Clark Atlanta University (CAU) in August 2002.*

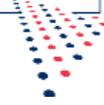
*He has held senior level positions in the public sector and academia for more than 35 years including Deputy Secretary and Chief Operating Officer of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; Director of Children, Youth, and Adult Services (State of Kansas); and President of the New York State Civil Service Commission.*

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