Fragmented services that create problems with access. Chronic disease management. Reduction of overcrowding in emergency rooms. Implementation of electronic health records. These are just a few of the critical challenges faced by healthcare leaders.

Some of these initiatives have been undertaken with mixed results, plagued by delays, budget overruns or missed expectations (Smith 2002). However, there have also been stunning successes. One of the key factors that make these initiatives so complex is the need for co-operation between functional areas and between internal and external stakeholders.

Not surprisingly, a 2003 study on initiatives with cross-functional and organizational boundaries identified leadership as a critical success factor to change (King 2003). As a follow-up to this study, Starfield Consulting initiated a research project that concentrated on leaders who had achieved proven success in these transformational initiatives.

The overriding objective was to discover what leadership behaviours and strategies were instrumental in achieving both short- and long-term success – the positive results had to be sustained. The research focused on real-world examples and results as opposed to traditional “change management theory.”

This is the first of four articles describing key strategies for success that were identified and described in the researcher’s resulting report, Bridging Boundaries: Lessons for Leaders (King and Peterson 2006). (A full copy of the report can be found at www.starfield.ca.) The current article outlines strategies to build and sustain momentum.

Building momentum is a key leadership role. Without sufficient momentum, the inertia and complexity of integrating existing processes and systems can overwhelm the energy for change.

**The Study: Methodology and Analysis**

Extensive interviews were undertaken with 40 senior leaders in the healthcare and public sectors. Those invited to participate had successfully led initiatives involving multiple organizations and were acknowledged as successful within the healthcare community. They were either strategic leaders who were accountable for the initiative or formal leaders above the initiative who were responsible for setting the context within which it was executed.

The research data were gathered through interviews with each leader using a common protocol. The research team included
senior professionals from a variety of relevant disciplines and reflected different theoretical backgrounds to reduce biases.

The study was specifically designed to be based on what leaders did in practice, rather than on proving or disproving specific leadership theories. Questions were designed to elicit descriptions of specific actions undertaken and the leadership qualities and strategies that were instrumental in achieving success. Themes and the associated patterns were discerned by the research team and validated using a line-by-line parsing of the interview notes.

The resulting report, *Bridging Boundaries: Lessons from Leaders* (King and Peterson 2006), profiles forward-thinking individuals who exhibited transformational leadership approaches. The findings highlight the importance of stepping outside the bounds of traditional thinking to create unique solutions to the significant challenges inherent in these complex projects. The report also presents strategies that can be adapted and used by leaders in any complex change initiative. Tools for achieving sustainable results where leaders do not possess formal authority over participants are also provided.

Synthesis of the results revealed common focal points, which were distilled into four areas required to ensure success as a transformational leader. First and foremost among them was the need to build and sustain momentum.

**Momentum Is Crucial to Success**
Building momentum is a key leadership role. Without sufficient momentum, the inertia and complexity of integrating existing processes and systems can overwhelm the energy for change.

In contrast, study results indicated that successful leaders generate sufficient momentum to achieve “critical mass,” the point at which ideas, energy and resources effortlessly begin to flow toward the initiative (King and Peterson 2006):

One leader was tasked with reducing overcrowding in the Emergency Room and was given a three month window to achieve results. From the beginning, the leader reframed the project away from being an Emergency Room problem. She started by engaging a large diversity of participants including physicians, nurses, occupational and physical therapists, Community Care Access Centres, long-term care facilities and staff from all the medical areas in the hospital. There were over 50 people on the core team [who] worked together to translate the objective of reducing the overcrowding in Emergency to the development of a practical shared vision.

They started by doing a SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) and, based on this, agreed on the nine areas where progress towards the objective could be made within the three month timeframe provided. These nine areas were tackled by nine sub-groups, populated by the 50 people originally involved, plus an expanded circle of stakeholders.

Each team developed strategies within [its] area that would help to achieve the overall objective. The leader’s role was to ensure that the subgroups and the collective maintained a strategic focus on what could be accomplished to make a significant difference in a short timeframe.

The result was a 70% decrease in the number of patients waiting in the Emergency Room for beds. Other improvements were also achieved. There has been a decrease in the average length of stay in the hospital. Discharges are occurring earlier in the morning and there is an increase in the number of discharges on the weekend.

This leader developed an intentional strategy to build and sustain momentum. Her strategy recognized the need to deliver results quickly to engage the commitment of those from whom action and support would be required.

**Achieving Momentum Requires Both Velocity and Mass**
In physics, momentum is the product of velocity and mass. This formula provides a useful structure when implementing complex changes. In such initiatives, velocity applies to the speed with which the tangible deliverables are created – the process maps, the information systems, the organizational charts and any other elements that executives can touch and feel that provide a sense of progress. Mass refers to the depth and breadth of commitment from the stakeholder community. Achieving optimal momentum involves paying attention to both velocity and mass – achieving velocity in delivering tangible products and developing a critical mass of support through an inclusive process.

Although timely deliverables are a key outcome in any initiative, in our study, strategies and attention to the development of stakeholder commitment were key aspects that set successful leaders apart. Leaders indicated that achieving a critical mass of support required that stakeholders believe that the benefits outweigh the risks involved, the vision is achievable and the leader and the leader’s process are trustworthy.

Creating the conditions that allow stakeholders to develop these convictions requires time and conversation. Moving forward without the necessary conversations may allow a leader...
Leaders invested their own time and effort to effectively engage stakeholders. The analysis showed that successful leaders focused on three key areas to make certain how and when they engage stakeholders. The leaders in this study did not make this mistake. They found ways to pay attention to and invest in both the attainment of speed and ensuring the necessary level of commitment.

Leaders are sometimes fearful that involving the necessary stakeholders to the extent required will introduce significant delays; yet, the opposite is normally the case. Moving too far too quickly without engaging a critical mass of stakeholders runs the risk of leaving key partners behind, creating resentment and the rejection of early-stage ideas. Ultimately, it can take far longer to bring stakeholders on side once negative opinions have been established. This was acknowledged by a study participant, who noted that to achieve real results, “It is important not to get too far ahead of the pack, to bring along others with knowledge sharing as you go. You need two or three groups between you (as the leaders) and the pack” (King and Peterson 2006).

Perhaps more critically, neglecting early stakeholder engagement prevents crucial learning opportunities, which can affect a stakeholder’s willingness to take action. A leader who advocated involving a critical mass of those affected early in the development of the vision advised: “It can’t be a blueprint. A vision needs to be like a mirage. It begins as a fuzzy image in the distance, and only gains clarity and detail as stakeholders become involved” (King and Peterson 2006).

### Leaders Invest Time in Developing Engagement Strategies

Study results showed that neither new engagement techniques nor the extent or magnitude of engagement activities undertaken are as important as the amount of thought leaders put into how and when they engage stakeholders. The analysis showed that successful leaders focused on three key areas to make certain stakeholders were effectively engaged:

1. **Analysis of stakeholder communities.** Leaders clearly identified the entire spectrum of stakeholders that they needed to engage by considering who would be affected by the changes, who could influence decisions and who could provide information.

2. **Understanding the stakeholders’ business challenges, both independent of the initiative and in relation to the initiative.** Collecting this information develops an understanding of the perspectives of the stakeholders as a group and those of key individuals within each stakeholder group. One leader in the study suggested that “coffee and scotch” were his most important tools. He used networking and information to prepare the way.

3. **Development of multi-faceted strategies for optimal resource allocation.** Leaders invested their own time and included their leadership teams in defining the strategy for stakeholder engagement. They knew that gaining the necessary level of commitment was just as important as producing the tangible deliverables.

   This marks a point of departure from most leadership teams, which focus their strategic thinking on what needs to be done and in what sequence. It confirms that developing strategies to create commitment is as important as developing strategies for what needs to be produced.

   Leaders of complex projects must be concerned about whom to engage and how to engage them. Words must also be supported by actions.

### Integrating Engagement with Deliverable Development

Study participants discussed the importance of integrating change leadership and stakeholder engagement with project planning and delivery. With every target deliverable, they found creative opportunities to generate commitment and dedication to action as a by-product of production (King and Peterson 2006):

One of the study participants implemented shared back office services among a number of organizations. A part of his strategy was to require each middle manager to go out and visit best practice sites and report back to the rest of the team. This work was needed in the design of the solution but is generally undertaken by consulting organizations. By having the managers do the work, both the intellectual and emotional impact of the learning was retained by the operational leaders who would be most affected by the change. This one simple strategy converted potential resistors into advocates for the new system.

One leader in the study suggested that “coffee and scotch” were his most important tools.
Another leader needed to create alignment between the strategy of the Ministry and the strategy being developed within her organization. Her organization did not have a high degree of influence with the Ministry. She invited the lead from the Ministry to sit on an expert advisory panel for her project, and he agreed because of the level of influence and reputation of others on the panel. Having the Ministry person sit on the panel ensured that the perspectives and ideas provided by the experts would influence both projects, ensuring alignment without any extra effort on behalf of the leader.

In each of the above examples, a unique new process or technique did not create the difference. The key was to identify creative ways to involve stakeholders in activities that were required to create the project deliverables.

The strategic thinking that was invested in engaging stakeholder commitment was a key factor in enabling leaders to achieve successes such as the reduction in the number of people waiting for beds in emergency rooms, millions of dollars in savings due to the sharing of information and the integration of the business processes and information systems of 22 organizations.

Conclusions
Based on these real-world experiences, and the conclusion that investing in both velocity and mass is critical to success, it is possible to isolate engagement strategies that create real stakeholder commitment.

Step 1: Conduct a Stakeholder Analysis
Just as an information technology or business strategy begins with an environmental scan, a strategy for creating change needs to begin with an analysis of stakeholders and their perspectives. The study showed that while some leaders did this intuitively, using their knowledge of those affected as a basis for their strategies, others were more formal in the collection of information upon which their strategies were built. Regardless of whether a formal or informal process was used, leaders identified a number of key elements that should be addressed:

- The stakeholders or groups of stakeholders who will be affected, who can influence the project or who have important information to provide
- The business priorities of each stakeholder group or individual, independent of the initiative being implemented
- The potential impact of the initiative and the specific benefits, risks and objections that each stakeholder community will have
- Key individuals who will champion the initiative, throw roadblocks in its path or provide internal insights into the organization

Step 2: Involve the Leadership Team in Developing an Engagement Strategy
The engagement strategy process involves engaging the leadership team in conversations to develop approaches that maximize commitment levels and resources. During this process, the engagement strategy is integrated with the strategy for developing the deliverables.

Stakeholder engagement is not a separate process. The work in developing an effective strategy is the creative process of determining how to engage a sufficient number of stakeholders in a way that will both deliver a higher-quality product and deliver it faster. The following technique was used by a study participant to integrate stakeholder engagement with the development of deliverables: “In each organization, there was already someone who was thinking of the need to share data. They just couldn't figure out how. I tapped into these people and created a core advisory team of 40 or 50 influential thought leaders within their space who could not achieve success without coming together. This initiative resulted in millions of dollars of annual savings” (King and Peterson 2006).

The end result of this step is a strategy that indicates both who to engage and when to engage them. It also provides insight into where leaders need to invest their personal time and attention in order to ensure success.

Step 3: Implement the Engagement Strategy
Implementation of the engagement strategy requires careful planning and attention to detail:

- Guiding principles. Study participants stressed the importance of collectively developing guiding principles. These principles, developed and endorsed by all partners, became a key tool when navigating through conflicts in a collaborative manner.
- Governance structures. Governance and committee structures have a significant influence on the success and momentum of the undertaking.
Networking strategies. Networking strategies escalate commitment both internally and with partner organizations by developing relationships at multiple levels throughout the organization. These relationships help to accelerate the achievement of the tangible deliverables from the project.

Workshop planning. The planning for any workshops or forums is critical to the successful achievement of stakeholder engagement.

With momentum-building procedures in place, successful leaders were able to take advantage of other crucial principles and strategies. These principles and strategies, also distilled from the Starfield study, will be detailed in three future articles.

References


About the Authors
Sharon King, BMath, the lead researcher on this project, is the president of Starfield Consulting. Starfield’s expertise is in helping healthcare organizations develop and implement strategies to quickly create sustainable change. Contact Starfield Consulting Ltd. at 905-844-9518.

Larry Peterson, Eng, Rel.D, a contributing consultant on this article, is the co-author of Bridging Boundaries: Lessons from Leaders and a study researcher. Peterson is a Starfield Consulting associate.

Sign up to have the table of contents e-mailed to your inbox each time a new issue comes online.

www.longwoods.com