

# FROM STRUGGLING TO THRIVING

YOUR STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE  
TO A 120-DAY CAMPUS  
TURNAROUND

*Transform Your Campus.  
Engage Your Team.  
Elevate Student Success  
in Just 120 Days*

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## Chapter

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## INTRODUCTION

### *The 120-Day Mandate*

Every campus tells a story. Some are stories of momentum, some high energy, some strong enrollment, some faculty and staff aligned around a shared purpose. But many campuses today are facing a different reality. Enrollment is slipping and Morale is low. Processes are outdated, Departments operate in silos and often unintentionally working against each other. Prospective students experience confusion and Staff feel overwhelmed. Leaders feel pressure without a clear path forward.

When you step onto a failing campus, you can feel it immediately. The energy is heavy and the pace is slow. Communication is most always

inconsistent and meetings feel reactive. The team is working hard, but the results simply aren't matching the effort.

Most leaders know something must change but very few know where to begin.

That's why this book exists.

In higher education today, you don't have years to figure things out. You often don't even have one. You only really have **120 days** to diagnose, unify, inspire, rebuild, and set a new standard that the campus can sustain long after you're gone.

This book gives you the roadmap.

## Why Campuses Fail

Campuses don't fall apart because of one major catastrophe; they decline because of an accumulation of small, unaddressed issues. Enrollment decreases by a few students each term, processes become slightly longer, staff turnover gradually increases, interdepartmental frustrations go unresolved and student complaints become more common.

Over time, these small cracks merge into foundational damage.

Most campuses don't fail because the people are wrong, they fail because the **systems, relationships, and leadership rhythms** are either missing or outdated.

## Why Most Turnarounds Fail

Leaders often make three predictable mistakes:

### 1. They attack numbers instead of people.

They set aggressive enrollment targets without addressing the morale, confidence, and alignment of the staff responsible for achieving them.

### 2. They try to fix everything at once.

A failing campus does not need chaos, it needs clarity. Uncoordinated changes overwhelm staff and cause resistance rather than engagement.

### 3. They underestimate culture.

If the culture stays the same, the results will stay the same. Culture is not a “soft” element of the turnaround. It is the turnaround.

## The Four Pillars of This Book

This book centers around **four proven drivers of transformation**, each grounded in research and real-world practice:

### I. Kotter’s Model for Leading Change

John Kotter’s 8-step model, originally introduced in *Leading Change* (1996), remains the most influential framework for organizational transformation. In this book, you’ll see how to apply it specifically to higher education in a compressed 120-day window.

(Reference: Kotter, J. P. (1996). *Leading Change*. Harvard Business School Press.)

## **II. Relationship-Centered Leadership**

Turnarounds succeed when leaders intentionally build alignment across academics, admissions, financial aid, business office, career services, and student services. Relationships are not “nice to have”, they are operational assets. Without strong partnerships, the campus cannot produce consistent results.

## **III. Reverse Process Management**

This method flips traditional operational thinking by viewing every process through the student’s eyes. Instead of asking, “How do we currently do things?”, you ask, “How does a student experience this and how should it feel?”

This approach reduces friction, accelerates enrollment cycles, and dramatically improves student satisfaction.

## **IV. Empowerment Leadership**

Staff on a failing campus often feel defeated, unheard, or micromanaged. Empowerment leadership rebuilds ownership by elevating the strengths of every team member. Empowered people create momentum. Micromanaged people create burnouts.

## What You Will Accomplish in 120 Days

By following the roadmap in these pages, you will:

- Rebuild trust across all campus departments
- Establish clarity, urgency, and forward momentum
- Create processes that support, not hinder, student enrollment and success
- Identify and remove the barriers slowing the campus down
- Build a culture that thrives on empowerment, accountability, and collaboration
- Generating early wins that shift morale and confidence
- Anchor new systems so the campus doesn't slip backward

The goal is simple:

**to turn a struggling campus into a confident, unified, high-performance institution that students want to attend and staff are proud to serve.**

## A Leadership Invitation

You may be holding this book because you were asked to lead a turnaround.

Or because you inherited a campus in trouble.

Or because you want to transform a campus before it reaches crisis levels.

Whatever the reason, know this:

**You are capable of more than you realize.**

Over the next 120 days, you will not only change a campus,

**you will become the kind of leader who transforms institutions.**

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **Diagnosing the Truth: Understanding What's Really Broken**

A failing campus can look chaotic from the outside, missed enrollment goals, frustrated staff, and inconsistent student experiences, but beneath the symptoms lies a deeper reality. No campus fails overnight, decline is almost always the result of unexamined patterns, outdated processes, and a culture that has grown tolerant of underperformance.

If you begin a turnaround with assumptions instead of clarity, you will fix the wrong things, invest energy in the wrong places, and exhaust your team without producing meaningful results. The first 30 days are not about making noise; they are about finding the truth.

This chapter gives you a structured, strategic approach to diagnosing the actual state of the campus so every action you take in the next 120 days is grounded in accuracy, not urgency.

#### **SECTION I: Why an Accurate Diagnosis Matters**

Leaders often feel pressure to “act fast” the moment they arrive. They reorganize departments, change processes, tighten expectations, or introduce new data routines before understanding the problem. While this creates a burst of activity, it rarely produces long-term improvement.

An accurate diagnosis prevents three major mistakes:

### **1. Solving symptoms instead of causes**

If your admissions team is behind on starts, the cause may not be admissions. It may be process delays, weak cross-departmental communication, unclear handoffs, or academic scheduling issues.

### **2. Misjudging people**

It's easy to assume underperformance is tied to attitude, when in fact it's tied to lack of tools, training, clarity, or leadership.

### **3. Applying “fixes” that create new problems**

When leaders implement solutions too quickly, they often unintentionally increase friction. A new requirement, a new form, or a new meeting may make processes slower.

A strong diagnosis saves weeks, sometimes months, of wasted effort.

## **SECTION II: The 7-Day Campus Health Audit**

Your first week should be entirely focused on listening, observing, reviewing data, and mapping processes. You are not there to “prove yourself” but to understand the truth on the ground.

Next, we explore the structured audit used by high-performing turnaround leaders.



## **1. Review of the Hard Data**

Spend your first two days analyzing:

- Inquiry flow and lead sources
- Conversion rates at each stage
- Average response times
- Interview-to-application ratios
- Application-to-start ratios
- Financial aid processing time
- Student balance clearance delays
- Attendance and retention trends
- Student satisfaction reports
- Faculty evaluation insights

You're looking for patterns, not isolated incidents.

For example:

- A drop in applications is often caused by an earlier breakdown in outreach or lead management.
- Low show rates may reflect slow follow-up or unclear communication with students.
- Long financial aid cycle times often signal bottlenecks in verification or missing documents.

## **2. Listen to Your People**

The most underused data source is your staff.

In the first week, meet every team and every key leader individually:

- Admissions
- Financial Aid
- Academics
- Student Services
- Business Office
- Career Services
- Registrar
- Campus President or Director (if you're not in that role)
- Outreach partners
- Front desk and student-facing staff

Ask open-ended questions such as:

- “What do you believe is working well?”
- “Where do students experience the most frustration?”
- “What slows you down the most in your daily work?”
- “If you could fix one process today, what would it be?”
- “What’s something you used to do well that has slipped over time?”
- “How do you feel about communication between departments?”

These conversations reveal both factual insights and emotional climate.

### **3. Experience the Campus as a Student**

This is the foundation of **reverse process management**.

Complete the following yourself, as if you were a prospective student:

- Submit an online inquiry
- Call the campus
- Leave a voicemail
- Walk through a campus tour
- Sit in on a financial aid appointment
- Ask questions at the front desk
- Review the enrollment packet
- Try to schedule advising
- Navigate the student portal

Document **every friction point**, no matter how small:

- unclear instructions
- long wait times
- inconsistent information
- staff not knowing answers
- outdated forms
- confusing handoffs

These friction points are killing enrollment, retention, and student satisfaction, often silently.

## **4. Map the Enrollment and Student Journey**

Create a wall-sized map, notebook drawing or digital flowchart showing every step from inquiry to enrollment to early retention.

This includes:

- Initial outreach
- Interview
- Application
- Document collection
- Financial aid
- Advising
- Scheduling
- Orientation
- Start
- First 14 days
- First 30 days

Mark bottlenecks, delays, repeated steps, and unclear ownership.

You will likely discover:

- Duplicate steps that no longer make sense
- Processes that haven't been updated in years
- Steps designed for staff convenience, not student success
- Tasks that multiple departments assume "someone else" handles

**This is your evidence base for future changes.**

## 5. Evaluate Culture and Morale

Culture is often the strongest predictor of performance.

In the first 7 days, observe:

- Do staff seem tense or relaxed?
- Are meetings collaborative or adversarial?
- Are wins celebrated or ignored?
- Are problems addressed or avoided?
- Are departments siloed or unified?
- Do people speak freely or cautiously?

These clues tell you how difficult or easy the turnaround will be.

## SECTION III: Identifying Real Problems vs. the Symptoms

Once the audit is complete, begin sorting out your findings.

The key is simple:

**Symptoms are what you see.**

**Root causes are what you fix.**

### Common Symptoms

- Low applications
- Low show rates
- High no-start numbers
- Slow financial aid packaging
- High student complaints

- Poor retention
- Staff burnout

### **Common Root Causes**

- Outdated or unclear processes
- Lack of accountability or training
- Poor cross-departmental communication
- Complex financial aid paperwork
- Unrealistic workload distribution
- Cultural resistance to change
- Lack of urgency or direction
- Weak leadership alignment

Your job is to separate the two.

## **SECTION IV: Establishing Your Turnaround Truth Document**

At the end of your 7-day audit, create a single document summarizing:

- The top 10 strengths of the campus (every campus has them)
- The top 10 challenges
- The processes causing the most friction
- The key cultural barriers
- The areas with the least clarity
- Your initial insights on root causes
- Early opportunities for quick wins

This document will keep you grounded and guide every decision you make in the next three months. It becomes your **north star** for the turnaround.

## **SECTION V: Your Leadership Message for Week One**

At the end of your first week, deliver a clear, calm, confident message to the campus:

- You have listened.
- You understand the challenges.
- You see the strengths.
- You know what needs to improve.
- You believe the team is capable.
- You are committed to supporting them.
- You are ready to begin the turnaround—together.

Leaders who begin with empathy and clarity build trust faster than those who lead with pressure and mandates, because people naturally respond to feeling understood, supported, and informed. When team members know their leader genuinely cares about their challenges and communicates expectations transparently, they become more motivated, engaged, and willing to go the extra mile. In contrast, environments driven by force, fear, or ambiguity often create resistance, confusion, and shallow compliance rather than true commitment. Empathy invites connection, and clarity creates confidence—together, they form the foundation of sustainable, high-trust leadership.

This sets the tone for everything that follows

## CHAPTER TWO

### **Creating Urgency & Building the Leadership Coalition**

*(Kotter's Steps 1 & 2)*

A failing campus does not collapse because the people don't care, it collapses because the people no longer feel a sense of urgency, clarity, or unified purpose. When urgency fades, progress slows. When progress slows, morale drops. And when morale drops, departments retreat into survival mode.

Kotter's first two steps **Create a Sense of Urgency** and **Build a Guiding Coalition** are essential for any 120-day campus turnaround. Without them, every strategy that follows will feel forced, fragmented, or misunderstood.

This chapter shows you exactly how to start the turnaround with momentum, alignment, and belief.

#### **SECTION I: Why Urgency Must Come Before Action**

Most campuses in decline are busy, but not urgent. Teams hustle, but direction is unclear. Leaders work long hours, but initiatives are scattered. The result is a culture of "busy stagnation."

True urgency does three things:

##### **1. Wakes people up without shutting them down**



Staff should feel the seriousness of the challenge, but also the hope of the solution.

## **2. Creates shared ownership**

People move faster when they understand *why* change matters and what role they play in it.

## **3. Builds the energy required for a turnaround**

Without urgency, change feels optional. With urgency, change feels essential.

Kotter's research shows that more than 50% of organizational failures trace back to a weak or nonexistent sense of urgency.

*(Reference: Kotter, 1996)*

## **SECTION II: The Three-Layer Urgency Strategy**

Your goal is to communicate urgency with confidence, not fear. The message should be direct, honest, and motivational.

Use these three layers:

### **Layer 1: The Data Story**

People trust what they can *see*. Present the campus reality using clear, simple metrics:

- Enrollment trends over the past 2–3 start periods or YOY
- Conversion rates at each stage of the funnel

- Retention patterns
- Student satisfaction indicators
- Process cycle times
- Staff turnover

Do not overwhelm with numbers; use the **five most meaningful indicators**.

Your message should sound like this:

“These numbers do not define us, but they do describe where we are today and they show us exactly where we need to focus.”

## **Layer 2: The Human Story**

Data opens minds.

Stories open hearts.

Share direct feedback you’ve heard from:

- students
- staff
- faculty
- prospective students
- families

Example: “One student told me she waited three weeks to get a financial aid question answered. Another said she didn't understand the enrollment steps. These experiences matter.”

*When you honor lived experience, you build trust!*

### **Layer 3: The Opportunity Story**

Urgency without hope creates fear.

Urgency with opportunity creates momentum.

You shift the message from:

“We have a problem...”

to

“We have a window to transform this campus and we are ready.”

Use phrases like:

- “We have everything we need to turn this around.”
- “The next 120 days will define the next 5 years.”
- “This team is capable of more than our current results show.”

This balance is essential for morale and buy-in.

## **SECTION II: Building the Guiding Coalition**

Once urgency is established, you must immediately form your **Guiding Coalition**, the core group that will champion, communicate, and drive the turnaround.

Kotter states that effective coalitions have:

**power, credibility, expertise, and leadership.**

## Who Should Be in the Coalition?

Select individuals from:

- Admissions leadership
- Financial Aid leadership
- Academic Dean or Program Chairs
- Student Services leadership
- Business Office manager
- Registrar
- Campus President/Director (if not you)
- Career Services (if connected to early retention and outcomes)

Avoid selecting people solely because of title.

Choose based on **influence**, **attitude**, and **credibility**.

Turnaround campuses rely heavily on informal leaders, those who can shift culture with a conversation.

## The Profile of Coalition Members

You want people who:

- Are respected by peers
- Communicate clearly
- Think of solutions, not complaints
- Believe in the students and the mission
- Support the direction, even if it means hard conversations
- Model the behavior you want the culture to adopt.

## **SECTION IV: How to Launch the Coalition**

Hold your first coalition meeting within your **first 10–14 days**.

Your objectives are to:

- 1. Share the findings from your 7-Day Audit**
- 2. Establish the sense of urgency**
- 3. Set a shared leadership vision**
- 4. Define roles and expectations**
- 5. Create alignment on the next 30 days**

This meeting is not about blame.

It's about partnership.

### **The Coalition Leadership Script**

Here's an example of how to open the first meeting:

“I've gathered you here because you are the leaders who set the tone for this campus. You influence culture, processes, communication, and student experience.

Over the next 120 days, we have an opportunity to transform this campus, to rebuild our performance, elevate our student experience, and restore pride in what we do here.

I cannot do that alone. We will do it together.”

This message frames the coalition as a *team*, not a taskforce.

## **SECTION V: Establishing Shared Language & Direction**

Turnarounds require clarity.

Clarity requires shared language.

Introduce these foundational concepts:

### **1. Student-First Decision Making**

Every decision must answer the question:

**“How does this impact the student?”**

This becomes your campus filter.

### **2. Cross-Department Ownership**

No department “owns” the student more than another.

Enrollment and retention succeed when departments operate as a unified system.

### **3. Process Over Personality**

Issues must be solved systematically, not emotionally.

“We fix processes, not people.”

### **4. No Surprises Culture**

Information flows quickly.

Problems are raised early.

Leaders communicate consistently.

## **SECTION VI: Aligning the Coalition Around the Next 30 Days**

By the end of the meeting, you must leave with:

- Identified priorities for the next 30 days
- Short-term wins to target
- Clear decision rights
- Communication expectations
- Shared accountability

This creates the foundation for the momentum to come.

## **SECTION VII: The Campus Announcement: Setting the Tone for Change**

After the coalition meeting, deliver a campus-wide message:

- Thank the staff for their work
- Share the urgency (not panic)
- Affirm the coalition
- Define the next steps
- Inspire confidence and unity

Your message should feel hopeful, not heavy.

Example: “Today marks a turning point for our campus. We have identified our challenges, we have formed our leadership coalition, and we are ready to move forward together.”

This sets the emotional foundation for the turnaround

## CHAPTER THREE

### Relationship Building as the Non-Negotiable

#### *Why Turnarounds Rise or Fall on Cross-Campus Partnerships*

If Kotter's steps create the structure for change, and urgency sets the pace, then **relationships create the engine** that drives the entire 120-day turnaround. On a failing campus, the single biggest barrier is almost never lack of effort—it's lack of alignment.

- Admissions is pulling one direction.
- Financial Aid is overwhelmed.
- Academics feels disconnected from enrollment.
- Student Services is buried in student issues.
- The Business Office is enforcing compliance without context.
- Career Services feels irrelevant until graduation.

Departments operate like islands, each doing what they believe is right, yet unintentionally slowing each other down.

A successful turnaround requires **one team, one mission, one student experience**.

That unity starts with you.

### SECTION I: The Reality of Silo Culture on Struggling Campuses

Before true relationship building occurs, leaders must understand the symptoms of siloed campuses:



## **1. Departments assume the worst about each other**

- ✓ Admissions thinks Financial Aid is slow.
- ✓ Financial Aid thinks Admissions submits incomplete files.
- ✓ Academics thinks Student Services doesn't enforce policies.
- ✓ Everyone thinks someone else is the bottleneck.

## **2. Information is hoarded, not shared**

People “protect” their department instead of protecting the student experience.

## **3. Processes are designed to make internal work easier, not to help students**

This is one of the biggest reasons enrollment and retention deteriorate.

## **4. Staff feel unrecognized, unseen, or undervalued**

Which leads to passive resistance, low morale, or quiet disengagement.

## **5. Students experience the disconnect most of all**

1. They receive inconsistent messages, repeated requests for documents, long waits, or unclear instructions.
2. Turnarounds fail when leaders attempt to fix processes before fixing relationships.
3. You can't change systems if the people running those systems don't trust each other.

## **SECTION II: Relationship Building Is a Leadership Responsibility, not a Personality Trait**

Many turnaround leaders say:

“Well, I’m not naturally warm or outgoing.”

But relationship building in a turnaround is not about being extroverted. It’s about being intentional.

In decline, campuses lose connection. You are rebuilding that connection strategically, consistently, and visibly.

**The four relationship pillars you must establish are:**

1. **Visibility**
2. **Credibility**
3. **Consistency**
4. **Empathy**

Let’s break these down.

### **SECTION III: Pillar One- Visibility**

On a struggling campus, people often feel abandoned by leadership. Your presence signals that change is coming *with* them, not *to* them.

**What this looks like:**

- Walking through each department daily
- Sitting in on a team huddle

- Asking questions about their workflow
- Observing the student experience firsthand
- Making yourself approachable and available

This is not micromanagement; it's leadership proximity.

Your job is to show:

**“I see you. I value you. I’m here to help.”**

## **SECTION IV: Pillar Two — Credibility**

Credibility on a failing campus is earned through action, not title.

**You build credibility when you:**

- Follow up quickly on concerns
- Remove barriers staff have been dealing with for months
- Fix one process early to show momentum
- Demonstrate understanding of their workload
- Act as a “translator” who helps departments understand each other

Credibility accelerates buy-in.

Buy-in accelerates results.

## **SECTION V: Pillar Three — Consistency**

Siloed campuses often suffer from leadership whiplash:

- New initiatives every month.
- Different priorities every week.

- Shifting expectations every day.
- Consistency rebuilds trust.

**Your consistency must show in:**

- How you communicate
- How you respond to problems
- How you support people under pressure
- How you reinforce standards
- How you celebrate progress

Consistency makes people feel safe.

People who feel safe perform better.

## **SECTION VI: Pillar Four — Empathy**

Empathy does not mean lowering the bar.

It means understanding the human experience behind the workload.

On struggling campuses, every department feels overwhelmed. Admissions with follow-up, financial aid with verification, academics with student issues, student services with crises.

When you show empathy, teams feel respected.

Respected teams go farther with you.

A simple phrase like:

“I can see how heavy this has been on your department, thank you for the work you’re doing. Let’s fix this together.” ...builds more trust than any motivational speech.

## **SECTION VII: The Cross-Campus Relationship Blueprint**

Below is the exact relationship structure you should build in your first 30 days.

Each department requires a different relational approach because their pressures and responsibilities differ.

### **1. Admissions — Your Frontline Energy Source**

Build relationships by:

- Attending morning huddles
- Listening to calls
- Sitting in on interviews
- Asking what slows them down
- Training with them, not at them

Admissions morale is often the first indicator of campus health.

When admissions feels supported, momentum grows.

### **2. Financial Aid — Your Enrollment Accelerator**

Most failing campuses have financial aid bottlenecks.

Build relationships by:

- Reviewing cycle times with them, not to them
- Mapping their workflow to understand true workload
- Eliminating unnecessary document requests

- Helping solve verification delays
- Standing up for them when other departments blame them unfairly

When Financial Aid feels understood, they move faster.

### **3. Academics — Your Retention Engine**

Academic teams often feel disconnected from enrollment goals.

Build relationships by:

- Attending academic meetings
- Asking about student concerns
- Supporting faculty needs
- Reinforcing the connection between start quality and retention
- Making academics a partner, not an afterthought

Retention begins in the academic classroom, not in Student Services.

### **4. Student Services — Your Student Experience Stabilizer**

Student Services absorb the emotional weight of the campus.

Build relationships by:

- Reviewing common student complaints
- Removing repetitive tasks that drain capacity
- Streamlining advising and scheduling
- Making early alerts a collaborative effort

When they feel empowered, students feel supported.

## **5. Business Office — Your Compliance & Barrier-Reduction Partner**

This department often feels isolated or misunderstood.

Build relationships by:

- Understanding their compliance pressures
- Clarifying balance communication standards
- Streamlining payment-plan conversations
- Helping them become student-friendly without sacrificing policy

When the Business Office trusts leadership, they shift from “No” to “Here’s how we can help.”

## **6. Career Services — Your Outcomes Advocates**

Bring them in early, not later.

Build relationships by:

- Connecting them to admissions and academics
- Positioning outcomes as part of the enrollment story
- Using employer insights to refine program strengths
- Highlighting alumni success

When career services are visible, the entire campus sees purpose.

## **SECTION VIII: The Relationship Meeting Structure**

During the first month, hold **department partnership meetings** with each area.

Structure:

1. **Appreciation**

("Here's what your department does exceptionally well.")

2. **Honest Reality**

("Here's what students are experiencing today.")

3. **Shared Priorities**

("Here are the top 3 improvements that will help us all.")

4. **Collaborative Problem Solving**

("How do we fix these together?")

5. **Next Steps**

Clear, time-bound, assigned.

This consistent rhythm transforms culture faster than any initiative.

## **SECTION IX: How Relationship Building Enables the Rest of the Turnaround**

Once you have strong relationships:

- Process changes take weeks instead of months
- Communication becomes natural, not forced
- Resistance decreases
- Accountability increases
- People begin solving problems *before* they escalate



- Students feel the difference immediately
- Early wins appear faster

Relationships are not “soft leadership.”

They are the infrastructure that makes every metric move.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### **Reverse Process Management: Seeing the Campus Through the Student’s Eyes**

When a campus is struggling, most leaders instinctively look inward—at staff performance, internal workflows, and operational bottlenecks. But turnarounds accelerate dramatically when leaders shift their perspective outward and ask a transformational question:

**“What does this experience feel like for the student?”**

Reverse Process Management (RPM) is the discipline of rebuilding every process *backward*—not from the institution’s priorities but from the student’s reality. By adopting the student’s point of view, campuses uncover friction, confusion, and delays that have been normalized internally for years.

If Kotter’s change model creates momentum, and relationship-building builds alignment, then Reverse Process Management creates *clarity*. It ensures that every department’s work leads to one central outcome:

## **A seamless, confident, supportive pathway from inquiry to graduation.**

This chapter will teach you how to build a student-centered campus in 120 days by redesigning processes with intention, empathy, and operational discipline.

### **Why Reverse Process Management Works**

Behind every failing campus is the same root issue:

**The institution's internal processes have become more important than the student experience.**

Staff follow steps because “that’s how we do it.”

Departments create rules to protect themselves from mistakes.

Forms multiply. Approvals become layered.

A simple student request turns into a maze.

Meanwhile, prospective students, many already anxious or uncertain, face a journey that is slower, more confusing, and more frustrating than it needs to be.

Research in higher education operations consistently shows that **students with smoother enrollment experience are far more likely to persist, start classes, and remain enrolled** (Noel-Levitz, 2023).

*(Reference: Ruffalo Noel Levitz. “2023 Student Enrollment and Retention Benchmarks.”)*

Reverse Process Management removes friction by returning to the core truth:

**Processes exist to serve the student, not the other way around.**

## **The RPM Mindset Shift**

RPM is not just a tool; it is a mindset.

### **Traditional Process Thinking**

- “What does our department need?”
- “How do we currently do this?”
- “Who must approve this step?”
- “How do we protect ourselves from errors?”

### **Reverse Process Management Thinking**

- “What does the student need right now?”
- “What would the ideal experience feel like?”
- “How can we make this simpler and faster?”
- “What steps add no value and should be removed?”

This perspective shift is the beginning of operational transformation.

### **Step I: Map the Student Journey (As It Actually Exists)**

To fix a broken campus, you must see the truth, not theory, not assumptions, not what the handbook claims the workflow should be.

You need the real student journey.

You gather your directors, admissions team, financial aid team, registrars, academic leadership, and student services staff. In a conference room or virtual workspace, you map out the student journey from:

**Inquiry → Interview → Application → Financial Aid → Enrollment → Orientation → Day 1**

For each step, ask:

- What does the student do here?
- What does the staff member do here?
- How long does this step usually take?
- Where do most students get stuck?
- Where do we lose the most students?
- What causes delay?
- What frustrates students the most?

**Be ready for surprises.**

On many failing campuses, leaders discover:

- Duplicate documentation requests
- Unnecessary signatures
- Unclear handoffs
- Gaps where “no one owns that step”
- Conflicting information across departments
- Delays caused by outdated software settings
- Long wait times for financial aid appointment availability

The point of this exercise is not to assign blame.

The point is to see what is really happening.

## **Step II: Step Into the Student Experience**

Once you have the map, you elevate your process evaluation through empathy.

Choose a staff member (or yourself) to play the role of a prospective student.

Have them walk through:

- The website
- The request for information form
- The scheduling process
- The campus tour
- The admissions interview
- Financial aid
- Student services
- Registration
- First-day walk-through

This exercise often reveals issues that have been invisible for years:

- Hard-to-find contact information
- Staff using jargon students don't understand
- Inconsistent follow-up timelines
- Long gaps between steps
- Conflicting answers when calling different departments

You cannot fix what you do not feel.

RPM makes you feel the student's experience.

### **Step III: Identify Friction Points and Remove Them**

Friction is anything that:

- Slows the student down
- Confuses the student
- Adds extra steps
- Requires unnecessary decisions
- Creates delays between departments
- Adds administrative burden without adding value

Examples of common friction points on failing campuses:

- Requests for documents not required for compliance
- Financial aid appointments scheduled weeks out
- Advisors who only meet with students on select days
- Admissions reps handling non-admissions tasks
- Forms that are unclear or outdated
- Students having to repeat their story to multiple staff members

Removing friction is one of the fastest ways to improve enrollment and morale.

### **Step 4: Rebuild Processes Backward**

Now you redesign processes using reverse sequencing:

**Start with the ideal end outcome → design backward to today.**

Example:

You want a student to enroll smoothly within 72 hours of inquiry.

So you work backward:

- What must occur before enrollment?
- What must occur before financial aid?
- What must occur before interview?
- What must occur at inquiry?

Backwards design forces clarity and eliminates unnecessary steps.

## **Step V: Create Clear, Student-Centered SOPs**

Every streamlined process needs documentation.

But not binders.

Not 30-page PDFs no one reads.

**You need simple, visual SOPs.**

Each SOP must answer:

- Who owns this step?
- What is the student experiencing here?
- What is the expected timeline?
- How does the next department know the step is complete?
- What are the common failure points and how do we prevent them?

These SOPs reinforce consistency and reduce confusion, especially for new staff.

## **Step VI: Train, Launch, and Reinforce**

Process change without training is wishful thinking.

You must:

- Train every department on the new workflow
- Ensure clarity of expectations
- Role-play student interactions
- Adjust job duties if needed
- Align interdepartmental communication
- Monitor for slippage
- Hold people accountable with kindness and clarity

Most campuses fail at this step because they launch the new processes... but do not reinforce them.

Turnarounds require *continuous reinforcement*.

## **Step VII: Measure What Matters**

To keep processes healthy, you track only the metrics that indicate student experience success:

- **Inquiry-to-appointment conversion**
- **Appointment shows**
- **Time from inquiry to enrollment**
- **Financial aid wait times**
- **Application completion rate**
- **Melt (students who enroll but do not start)**



These metrics tell you not only whether processes are being followed—they tell you how students are experiencing them.

## **The Psychological Benefit of RPM**

Beyond the operational gains, RPM dramatically improves morale.

Why?

Because staff members finally see:

- How their work impacts the student
- How other departments rely on them
- That they are part of a shared mission
- That the campus is simplifying, not complicating, their job
- That leadership wants clarity and support, not perfection

## **Real Transformation Happens Here**

The moment you adopt RPM, everything changes:

- Waiting times drop
- Enrollment increases
- Staff communication improves
- Students feel guided instead of lost
- The campus becomes easier to lead
- The team becomes more unified

Reverse Process Management is not just a tool

**It is how struggling campuses become exceptional campuses.**

## CHAPTER FIVE

### **Empowerment Leadership: Building a High-Ownership Culture**

A campus turnaround is never accomplished by one leader, one office, or one department. It requires a unified team that believes in the mission, trusts each other, and feels empowered to make decisions that move the campus forward.

In a failing campus, the opposite environment usually exists:

- Staff feel micromanaged
- Communication is top-down and reactive
- People are afraid to make decisions
- Departments operate in protective silos
- Morale is low
- Innovation is rare
- Burnout is high

These symptoms don't reflect a lack of talent.

They reflect a lack of **empowerment**.

Empowerment Leadership is the antidote. It transforms a fatigued, uncertain team into a confident, high-ownership culture capable of executing the 120-day turnaround with energy and commitment.

This chapter will show you how to build a team that not only supports change—but drives it.

## What Empowerment Really Means

Empowerment is often misunderstood as “letting people do whatever they want.”

But true empowerment has two parts:

1. **Clear expectations**
2. **Full ownership in how to meet them**

Empowerment is not permission — it is **trust with accountability**.

In a turnaround environment, empowerment restores three critical things:

- **Belief:** “I can succeed here.”
- **Voice:** “My ideas matter.”
- **Ownership:** “This is my campus too.”

When people feel empowered, they stop waiting for instructions and start creating solutions

**The Psychology of Empowerment** : Research in organizational behavior consistently shows that empowerment increases:

- Intrinsic motivation
- Job satisfaction
- Organizational commitment
- Innovation
- Performance outcomes

(Reference: Spreitzer, G. M. “Psychological Empowerment in the Workplace,” *Academy of Management Journal*, 1995.)

In the context of higher education, empowerment becomes even more powerful because:

- Staff often work in emotionally intense roles
- Students depend heavily on staff guidance
- Daily decisions directly affect student retention and enrollment

When employees feel they have control and impact, the campus becomes more responsive, more proactive, and more student-centered.

## **The Four Pillars of Empowerment Leadership**

### **1. Clarity: People cannot own what they do not understand**

Empowerment begins with clear expectations.

On a failing campus, staff often feel confused about:

- What success looks like
- What the priorities really are
- Who owns which tasks
- What they are being evaluated on
- How success is measured

Before you empower, you simplify.

Staff need:

- Clear KPIs
- Clear job roles
- Clear handoffs between departments

- Clear daily and weekly expectations
- Clear definitions of success

Clarity removes fear, which creates room for ownership.

## **2. Competence: People need the tools and training to succeed**

Empowerment without training is abandonment.

You must ensure your team has:

- Skill-based training
- Role-play development
- Cross-departmental shadowing
- Updated SOPs
- Technology training
- Coaching, not just directives

Competence creates confidence.

Confidence creates initiative.

## **3. Autonomy: Trust your team to make decisions**

Once clarity and competence are established, autonomy becomes safe and strategic.

You empower staff by:

- Allowing decisions at the lowest appropriate level
- Encouraging solutions, not just problem reporting
- Removing unnecessary approvals

- Giving flexibility in how goals are met
- Encouraging creativity and professional judgment

Autonomy frees staff to act quickly, support students more effectively, and experiment with better ways of working.

#### **4. Recognition: Reinforce the behaviors you want repeated**

Empowered teams flourish when leadership recognizes:

- Initiative
- Problem-solving
- Collaboration
- Student-centered thinking
- Ownership of outcomes
- Early wins

Recognition does more than feel good—it establishes cultural norms.

What you celebrate becomes what the campus repeats.

### **How to Empower a Struggling Campus in 120 Days**

Below is the exact blueprint you'll use during the turnaround.

#### **Step I: Stabilize Trust**

A failing campus almost always carries wounds:

- Staff have been blamed for declining numbers

- Talented people feel overlooked
- Leadership turnover has caused skepticism
- People doubt promises of “change”

You rebuild trust through:

- Transparency
- Consistent communication
- Active listening
- Removing fear-driven messaging
- Following through on every commitment

Trust is the soil where empowerment grows.

## **Step II: Reassign Responsibility Where Needed**

Sometimes staff are underutilized or misaligned. Empowerment requires putting the right people in the right roles.

You may need to:

- Consolidate duties
- Rebalance caseloads
- Promote hidden talent
- Remove tasks that do not serve the mission
- Reduce unnecessary meetings
- Shift leadership responsibilities

The goal is to create roles where people can shine, not survive.

### **Step III: Move Decision-Making Closer to the Student**

The most valuable decisions happen at the front line.

Empower:

- Admissions reps to resolve common student barriers
- Financial aid advisors to accelerate award steps
- Student services to address issues without escalation
- Academic advisors to proactively intervene on at-risk students

Campus efficiency skyrockets when decision-making happens quickly and authentically.

### **Step IV: Replace Control with Coaching**

Micromanagement suffocates a turnaround. Coaching accelerates it.

Shift your leadership voice from:

- “Why didn’t you do this?”  
**to**  
“Let’s walk through how we can do this together.”
- “Don’t do it that way.”  
**to**  
“What led to that decision, and what are some alternatives?”
- “That’s not the process.”  
**to**  
“How can we simplify the process to make this easier?”



## **Step V: Create a Culture of Shared Ownership**

The most successful campuses operate with one united principle:

**Everyone owns enrollment. Everyone owns retention.**

This requires eliminating the “that’s not my department” mentality by:

- Cross-functional trainings
- Joint accountability meetings
- Shared KPIs
- Respectful, transparent communication
- Celebrating wins across departments
  
- ❖ When admissions wins, academics wins.
- ❖ When academics wins, student services wins.
- ❖ When financial aid improves, the whole campus rises.

Ownership becomes cultural.

## **Step VI: Encourage Innovation**

Empowered teams innovate naturally.

You encourage innovation by asking:

- “What is slowing you down?”
- “What would make your job easier?”
- “If you could redesign one process, what would it be?”
- “What frustrates students the most?”
- “What would the ideal student experience look like?”

Then here's the key!

You implement the best ideas *quickly* to show the team their voice matters.

Quick wins build belief.

## **Step VII: Reinforce Accountability as a Supportive Practice**

Accountability is not punishment.

It is clarity + support + follow-through.

Empowerment leadership holds people accountable by:

- Setting clear expectations
- Reviewing performance regularly
- Offering coaching before criticism
- Addressing issues early
- Celebrating improvement
- Removing barriers to success

Empowerment without accountability creates chaos.

Accountability without empowerment creates fear.

Together, they create high performance.

## **Empowerment Creates Momentum**

As empowerment takes hold, you will see the campus shift:

- Staff become more proactive
- Students feel more supported
- Processes move faster
- Departments collaborate willingly

- Morale increases
- Innovation becomes common
- Results improve organically

Empowered people create empowered campuses.

Disempowered people create failing campuses.

This is the point in the turnaround where the campus begins to feel alive again.

### **The True Goal of Empowerment Leadership**

The real purpose of empowerment is not just better performance, it is transformation.

- ✓ You don't just build a high-functioning team.
- ✓ You build a high-belief team.
- ✓ A high-ownership team.
- ✓ A high-purpose team.

A team capable of sustaining success long after the 120-day turnaround is complete.

Empowerment leadership ensures the campus doesn't just change; **it evolves.**

## CHAPTER SIX

### **The 120-Day Turnaround Blueprint: A Day-by-Day Transformation Plan**

The previous chapters gave you the framework, the leadership mindset, the relational structure, and the student-centered operational approach needed to transform a failing campus. This final chapter translates everything into a **120-day execution plan**, a clear roadmap you can begin using immediately.

Turnarounds fail when the strategy is inspiring but the execution is unclear. This plan removes the guesswork.

It gives you exact steps, in the exact order, over the exact timeline, to stabilize, rebuild, empower, and accelerate a struggling campus.

Your mission:

**Transform a failing campus into a unified, high-performance, student-centered institution in four months.**

Let's break it down.

#### **THE 120-DAY CAMPUS TURNAROUND ROADMAP**

##### **PHASE I: DAYS 1–30 — Diagnose, Stabilize, and Build Trust**

The first 30 days are about clarity, transparency, urgency, and alignment. You are not fixing everything, yet you are building the foundation that makes fixing possible.

## **Your Core Goals in Phase I:**

- Understand the truth
- Remove fear from the culture
- Build cross-departmental relationships
- Establish urgency (Kotter Step 1)
- Align leadership around the 120-day plan
- Map the student journey
- Address the most painful bottlenecks

## **Top Actions (Days 1–30):**

### **1. Conduct the Full Campus Diagnostic**

- Audit enrollment performance
- Review department-level KPIs
- Interview directors and staff privately
- Observe front-line operations
- Listen to live admissions calls
- Sit in on financial aid appointments
- Walk through the campus as a student
- Review marketing performance and inquiry flow

**Your goal: understand reality without judgment.**

## **2. Launch the Leadership Alignment Meeting**

Hold a direct, transparent session with directors and key team members.

Deliver three messages clearly:

1. *“We will turn this campus around, and we will do it together.”*
2. *“Here is our 120-day plan, with roles and responsibilities.”*
3. *“Every department impacts enrollment and retention.”*

This meeting is your first cultural reset.

## **3. Map the Student Journey (Actual, Not Ideal)**

Gather every department to document:

- Inquiry
- Interview
- Application
- Financial Aid
- Enrollment
- Registration
- Orientation
- First Week Experience

Identify friction, delays, confusion, and broken handoffs.

This becomes the blueprint for Reverse Process Management.

## **4. Begin Relationship Building Across Campus**

You initiate the partnerships, including:

- Dean / Academic leadership
- Financial aid director
- Admissions team
- Business office
- Student services
- Career services
- Registrars

Your approach:

**No one is the problem. The system is the problem.**

## **5. Clarify Initial KPIs and Expectations**

Every team member needs to know:

- What success looks like
- What they're responsible for
- How they are supported
- How and when performance is reviewed

**Clarity reduces fear and builds empowerment.**

## **6. Implement Quick Wins**

You must create visible momentum within 30 days.

Examples:

- Reduce financial aid wait times
- Update front desk communication
- Streamline unnecessary forms
- Improve inquiry response time
- Correct scheduling issues

Quick wins build trust and confidence.

## **PHASE II: DAYS 31–60 — Rebuild the Systems**

This is where Reverse Process Management and stability work convert into operational reform.

### **Your Core Goals in Phase 2:**

- Redesign inefficient or outdated processes
- Rebuild workflows with student-centered simplicity
- Train teams on new SOPs
- Create cross-departmental alignment
- Begin implementing Kotter Steps 2–5



## **Top Actions (Days 31–60):**

### **1. Launch RPM Workshops**

Using the friction points identified in Phase 1, you know:

- Re-engineer the admissions workflow
- Redesign the financial aid process
- Create standardized handoffs across departments
- Remove unnecessary approvals
- Simplify documentation
- Establish student-first process expectations

This is where you see the campus start to operate differently.

### **2. Build Department-Level SOPs**

You create simple, clear, visual SOPs for:

- Inquiry management
- Appointment scheduling
- Admissions interviewing
- Application processing
- Financial aid steps
- Enrollment certification
- Orientation onboarding

Staff now know *exactly* how to support students.

### **3. Launch Training (Not Just Telling)**

Every affected process needs training that includes:

- Walkthroughs
- Role-playing
- Shadowing
- Feedback loops

Training converts process into execution.

### **4. Establish Cross-Department Accountability Loops**

Your new weekly structure:

- **Admissions + FA sync (30 minutes)**
- **Admissions + Academics sync**
- **Student Services + Registrar touchpoint**
- **Campus leadership roundtable**

These meetings eliminate silos and maintain alignment.

### **5. Reinforce Early Wins Publicly**

Highlight:

- Staff initiative
- Process improvements
- Faster student movement
- Increased morale

Recognition accelerates cultural change.

### **PHASE III: DAYS 61–90 — Empowerment and High-Performance Culture**

This is where the campus starts to feel the lift. Processes are clearer, communication is better, and the team is more confident. Now you deepen empowerment and tighten performance.

#### **Your Core Goals in Phase III:**

- Shift decisions closer to the student
- Strengthen ownership across departments
- Coach staff into higher confidence
- Establish new leadership rhythms
- Generate visible progress toward metrics
- Anchor change into daily habits

#### **Top Actions (Days 61–90):**

##### **1. Implement Empowerment Leadership Fully**

You reduce bottlenecks by empowering staff to:

- Resolve predictable student barriers
- Make time-sensitive decisions
- Suggest process improvements
- Escalate issues faster

This unlocks speed and innovation.

## **2. Hold Weekly Performance Coaching**

Not punitive supportive.

You review:

- Conversions
- Communication delays
- Melt prevention
- Process adherence
- Team morale

Coaching builds capability and trust.

## **3. Celebrate Breakthrough Metrics**

By this phase, you should see measurable improvement in:

- Inquiry-to-appointment conversion
- Show rate
- Application completions
- Financial aid progression
- Enrollment velocity
- Start rate

Celebrate each one. The campus needs to feel the momentum.

## **4. Launch Student Experience Enhancements**

Small but powerful improvements:

- Orientation redesign
- Personalized welcome flow
- Communication templates that reduce anxiety
- Faster follow-up
- Proactive service rather than reactive service

Students feel the difference and word spreads.

## **5. Reinforce Cultural Standards**

You hold everyone to:

- Professional excellence
- Student-first decisions
- Transparent communication
- Shared ownership
- Cross-department support

This becomes the identity of the campus.

## **PHASE IV: DAYS 91–120 — Deepen, Anchor, and Sustain**

This final phase locks in the new culture and prepares the campus for long-term success beyond your leadership.

### **Your Core Goals in Phase 4:**

- Anchor the new culture into systems
- Finalize long-term SOPs
- Solidify leadership ownership
- Celebrate the turnaround
- Transition from change to stability and growth

### **Top Actions (Days 91–120):**

#### **1. Establish Long-Term Leadership Rhythms**

You implement durable systems:

- Weekly KPI leadership meeting
- Monthly campus performance review
- Quarterly cross-department planning
- Standardized new-hire training
- Continuing education for directors

This ensures the campus cannot regress.

## **2. Document the “Campus Playbook”**

This becomes the institution’s operating manual.

It includes:

- All processes
- All SOPs
- All performance expectations
- All cross-department agreements
- Communication workflows
- Student experience philosophy

This anchors the new culture into structure.

## **3. Reinforce Kotter Step 8: Anchor New Behavior in Campus Culture**

You align:

- Job descriptions
- Performance reviews
- Rewards systems
- Accountability measures
- Recognition structures

The new campus is not a project; it’s a standard.

## **4. Celebrate the Turnaround**

Celebrate publicly and loudly.

You want:

- Staff recognition
- Success stories
- Positive student feedback
- Shared pride
- Visible confidence

Celebration signals that transformation is real—not temporary.

## **5. Transition From Turnaround to Growth**

The final step is to shift the campus mindset from:

**“We’re fixing a problem.”**

to

**“We’re building something great.”**

You are no longer rescuing a campus, you are leading an institution into its strongest era.



## **THE TURNAROUND COMPLETES WITH YOU, BUT CONTINUES WITHOUT YOU**

The goal of a 120-day turnaround is not only to fix the systems, it is to:

- Elevate the people
- Strengthen the culture
- Create a campus identity of excellence
- Build leaders at every level
- Make student success effortless and consistent
- Ensure sustainability

A failing campus can transform faster than most people believe.

Not through pressure.

Not through fear.

Not through top-down commands.

But through:

- Clarity
- Relationships
- Student-centered systems
- Empowerment
- Culture
- Leadership

You now hold the blueprint.

You hold the strategy.

You hold the mindset.

The next 120 days are yours to write  
and they will change everything.

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