



Transformational Leadership and Institutional Discernment

A conversation with Dr. Nathan O. Hatch, President Emeritus, Wake Forest University

Introduction

Earlier this year at the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities International conference in Dallas, CarterBaldwin partners Bill Peterson and Andrea McDaniel Smith led a workshop on the distinction between hiring managers and transformational leaders. This interview continues that work with Dr. Nathan Hatch.

Drawing from his experience and his book *The Gift of Transformative Leaders*, Dr. Hatch reinforces a central premise: in a season where many institutions feel pressure to change, the language of transformation is everywhere. Yet meaningful change is more complex, more patient, and more grounded than commonly assumed. He reflects on what enables transformation, what undermines it, and how leaders and boards can better discern what their institution truly needs. This conversation has been edited for clarity, length, and flow.

The Conversation

Q. Many leaders feel pressure to drive transformation early. What is misunderstood?

A. Transformation begins with understanding, not action. Leaders who move too quickly often lack the credibility required to lead change. Trust must be built first, or even the right changes will be resisted.

Q. Why do you think leaders feel this pressure?

A. The pressure is real. In many cases, it reflects expectations from boards and stakeholders to see progress quickly, as well as a leader's own desire to demonstrate momentum early. There is an assumption that action signals strength.

But moving too quickly can undermine the very change a leader is trying to achieve. People need to know that you understand the institution and value what has come before. Without that foundation, even the right changes can be resisted. Trust is not something you earn after transformation. It is what makes transformation possible.

“Transformation is not imposed, it is earned through trust and understanding.”

Q. How should boards think about transformation vs stewardship?

A. Not every institution requires transformation, but every institution requires clarity. Boards must understand the institution’s identity before determining direction, or risk misalignment and unrealistic expectations.

In many cases, the work is not transformation in a dramatic sense, but disciplined stewardship, strengthening what already exists while making thoughtful, well-timed adjustments.

Q. What drives meaningful transformation?

A. At the end of the day, you are betting on people, not strategies. Strategy matters, but it is only as effective as the people responsible for carrying it forward.

In practice, the most significant inflection points are not tied to new plans, but to the strength and alignment of the leadership team. When the right leaders are in place, aligned around a shared vision, the institution gains momentum that strategy alone cannot produce. Without that alignment, even strong plans tend to stall.

Q. Why do strategies fall short?

A. Strategy is necessary, but it is rarely sufficient. Most strategies do not fail because of poor design, but rather because of misalignment.

Strategy can create clarity, but it does not resolve issues of trust, culture, or leadership. Those factors determine whether a plan gains traction. When the right people are in place and aligned, strategy works. Without that, even strong plans fall short.

“You bet on people, not strategies.”

Q. What role does the board play?

A. Boards must become students of the institution. Without a clear understanding of its history, culture, and mission, it is difficult to make sound decisions about leadership or direction.

When boards are aligned and informed, they provide clarity and reinforce priorities in a way that supports the president and leadership team. When they are not, they can unintentionally create confusion, set unrealistic expectations, or pull the institution in competing directions. Alignment at the board level often determines whether progress can be sustained.

Q. How should leaders think about pace?

A. Culture determines pace. Every institution has a capacity for change shaped by its history, relationships, and level of trust. Moving faster than that capacity allows often creates resistance, even when the direction is right.

Effective leaders learn to read the organization and sequence change accordingly. They balance urgency with patience, recognizing that sustainable progress depends not just on what changes are made, but on how well those changes are understood and embraced.

Q. How long does transformation take?

A. It takes longer than most people expect. The early years are typically focused on learning the institution, building relationships, and establishing trust. That work is not always visible, but it is essential to everything that follows.

Only after that foundation is in place does alignment begin to take hold and real traction emerge. Even then, progress builds over time. Transformation is not an event; it is a process that unfolds across years, often a decade or more.

“After five years, I was just getting up to speed.”

Q. What is the unique role of a president?

A. The most important question a president can ask is, what is it that only I can do? The role is not to manage every function of the institution, but to focus on the areas where leadership is most needed.

That includes defining institutional reality, clarifying direction and priorities, building and aligning a strong leadership team, and articulating a vision the community can understand and embrace. When those responsibilities are handled well, the institution gains coherence and momentum.



CarterBaldwin Perspective

Discernment Before Transformation

Begins with clarity, not ambition. Institutions often feel pressure to change, but the more important question is whether transformation is required or whether disciplined stewardship is needed.

What Enables Transformation

Driven by leadership, alignment, and readiness. The right leaders, aligned with the board and grounded in institutional context, determine whether change gains traction.

The Long Arc of Leadership

Unfolds over time. Early trust enables later traction, and sustained impact requires patience and continuity.

Key Takeaways

- Transformation is a function of alignment, not urgency
- Leadership selection is the most strategic inflection point
- Culture determines pace more than strategy
- Enduring impact requires patience and disciplined execution



CarterBaldwin Conversations is a series of interviews with key executive leadership in nonprofits and higher education. For more information on CarterBaldwin's unique experience in nonprofit and higher education executive search, contact Bill Peterson at bpeterson@carterbaldwin.com.