

Shaping Organizational Futures Through Generative Leadership

Community college leaders today face many new challenges not confronted by their predecessors. Issues around funding and enrolment have been common over time; however, an aging workforce, changing student demographics, and increasing public accountability are placing new stresses on post secondary institutions. Addressing these new realities requires a different approach to leading, thinking and dialoguing.

Generative leadership promotes generative thinking. Creating the kind of space where imaginative ideas can occur is important work for anyone charged with moving initiatives forward, evolving current practices or developing forward-looking solutions to demanding issues. Helping participants prepare for new ways of engaging in meaningful discussion is central to the objective of achieving innovative outcomes.

The Limits of Traditional Problem Solving

"If you want to understand an organization's culture, go to a meeting." (Shein, 1999) A community college is a single entity comprised of many different and often competing parts. In his book, "Solving Tough Problems", Adam Kahane suggests that old scripts and historical paradigms compromise effective decision-making.

Participants often "download an old file without alteration", dwelling in the past and reiterating the same scripts over and over again. As perspectives emerge around the table, open conflict can result, or politeness may mask underlying discord. Rather than listening to potential options, participants often spend time mentally preparing their rebuttals by "reloading". They become stuck in their own realities, unable to change the lens through which they view the issue.

Creative solutions often become mired in *adaptive* ways of thinking and dialoguing, resulting in the production of only incremental improvements within the current organizational paradigm. These coping strategies are usually grounded in well-established institutional knowledge and/or historical traditions and methodologies. The *generative* process requires the acquisition and application of other input fostered through new learning and different perspectives, effectively offering group members "new tools for their toolkits" in considering alternative possibilities.

The Role of the Leader

Setting the stage is critical to creating the environment for generative work to occur. The leader must challenge participants to recognize the lenses through which they view the organization and any personal biases or influences that may impact their thinking. A faculty member sees the institution differently than an administrator on the service side of the house; similarly senior team members must recognize the broader perspective provided to them by virtue of their positions. Illuminating these points of view before delving into significant dialogue promotes self-awareness and can help to lay the groundwork for generative thinking and innovative solutions. Further, clearly establishing the ground rules for discourse fosters a comfort level for participants. Group members are more likely to offer unique or non-traditional options if they are assured that all ideas are appreciated.

A by-product of this initial work is its influence on organizational culture. The leader's creation of a safe space for dialogue is a powerful testament to valuing the

diverse ideas and opinions of college stakeholders. The collective intelligence of a group is incredibly powerful in evolving deeper insights and unearthing opportunities and interdependencies. The ability to mine this wealth of experience and knowledge is an extraordinary asset; the leader who creates a climate of inclusion will reap the benefits of this encouraging environment.

Observation and Engagement—Seeing Things Differently

Openness to possibility is a key factor in promoting generative thinking; a healthy dose of shared curiosity is also an important ingredient. Additionally, the ability to suspend judgment while giving due consideration to new and different perspectives allows for emergent ideas to come to the table. Some leaders may find it difficult to cede control through this process, based on a natural tendency for evidence-based decision-making. Limiting the free flow of ideas can stifle the potential for unique options to be suggested; a diversity of opinions provides the starting point for identifying effective solutions. Leaders need to challenge participants to think beyond current constraints and redefine the boundaries that influence potential options. “Letting go” requires immense courage but is an important precursor to allowing new ideas come to light.

Another tool to promote alternative ways of seeing involves looking back from the future. The leader encourages participants to fast-forward ten, fifteen or more years to view the institution as it eventually could be. This allows group members to see and feel the organization’s potential and enables them to step outside of current realities and constraints. Figuring out the required steps to move from the present to the future begins to evolve the change strategies needed for this journey. The co-generation of ideas fosters a shared vision that is powerful in creating team cohesiveness and effectiveness.

Focused Listening and Reflection

Appreciating the diversity of innovative ideas and opinions relies on focused listening. Often an initial gut reaction grounded in experience can foster a stream of thinking that draws the listener away from the speaker. The mental work of constructing a defensive opinion or rebuttal is counter-productive to generative work. It is incumbent on the leader to encourage participants to be appreciative and non-judgmental to foster the broadest array of perspectives to surface. Ensuring that as many fresh ideas and as much new information as possible are presented is a first step in identifying innovative options.

In order to distill and appreciate the options that have been offered, participants need time to reflect on the inputs and discussion. Engaging both the head and the heart in the evaluative process provides for a deeper level of understanding; getting beyond the need for immediate (sometimes knee-jerk) reactions allows for the emergence of new and innovative possibilities. Time is a true commodity in higher education but reflection is critical; “letting come” happens when the mind is open and ready to accept new ideas.

Emergent Patterns

The key factor in seizing new opportunities is in recognizing patterns of change. With opportunities identified through focused listening and time for exploration of ideas through reflection, group members may now see and sense emerging patterns

and relationships. The leader facilitates dialogue that illuminates these future options and clarifies and paraphrases to enhance understanding; “gut feelings”, often called inspiration or intuition, provide valuable insights into new and different options. The deep conversation that results is much more meaningful than typical SWOT or environmental scanning discussions; participants have drawn on new information and their own analytical skills to come to agreement on what “could be”.

“Co-generation” of an organization’s future strategies and innovations through the generative process produces an ownership and a collective sense of purpose. This common view of reality creates a true shared vision, one that can be supported and promoted by group participants. Clarity of intent allows for concentration on identified goals minimizing the inclination to “tilt at windmills.” Agreement of stakeholders at the outset lays the groundwork for ease of conflict resolution should issues emerge as the group moves forward together.

Acting with Intention

With the crystallization of a future vision, immediacy of action is critical in capitalizing on developing opportunities. The leader guides group members in identifying steps that can be taken rapidly to pursue the shared reality they hope to create for their organization. Change is often sluggish in academic institutions, but small wins at the outset build momentum. The phrase “fail early, fail often” is another important mantra; abandoning unsuccessful attempts quickly allows for a return to the drawing board, minimizing organizational time and investment in untenable options. Learning is enhanced by making mistakes.

Although the models and prototypes developed throughout the organization may vary in type, the unifying factor is that they support the “whole”—the initial intent agreed upon by the group. As the work expands and deepens, a critical mass for change can occur. As pilot projects succeed and participation broadens, the opportunity exists for truly breakthrough ideas. Committed leaders throughout the institution invest time and effort in spreading innovations that represent real, positive change.

Conclusion

The generative process is similar to other planning methodologies; the recognition of stakeholder lenses and the establishment of a safe space for open dialogue are unique to this approach.

A generative leader creates the environment where people can do their best thinking by challenging habitual mindsets and limiting “old scripts.” By removing barriers that can hamper the birth of innovative ideas and promoting the acquisition of new information and perspectives, meetings become more meaningful and effective. The added dimension of reflective time promotes deep inquiry and can unearth spin-off ideas not initially suggested.

Effectively addressing contemporary organizational challenges comes from looking forward at emerging possibilities and acting with focused intent. Generative leadership is the cornerstone of fostering breakthrough outcomes that can result in innovation and institutional success into the future.

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