

Leading During Re-Organizations

George P. Tvelia
Associate Dean
Suffolk County Community College

Administrative reorganizations in higher education can be considered either a blessing or bane for the institution based on the reason for the change, the process used to accomplish the objective, and the support provided by the internal leaders of the institution. The literature on this subject reveals many different reasons for initiating reorganizations but very little is mentioned about the role played by organizational culture or the importance of leadership during the process. The focus of this paper is to identify the type of leadership required during an administrative reorganization to ensure the proper handling of existing operations during the period of change.

Reasons for Reorganizations

The following list captures some of the logic behind administrative reorganizations:

- Fiscal constraints facing the entire institution.
- Change in mission of the institution.
- Workload issues under current structure.
- Mismatch of current administrators and their skills.
- Development of new functions or responsibilities or the centralization of existing ones.
- Separation of functions or responsibilities due to the size of the institution.
- The introduction of new technology and methods.
- Attempt to get around individuals rather than to fire, retire, or discipline them.
- To obtain or retain personalities or stars.
- The addition of new units (institutes, centers, departments).
- The addition of new programs of study due to external pressure.
- To encourage greater diversity.
- To achieve unity of focus.
- To imitate successful changes in other institutions.
- A new president may find dissatisfaction with current structure because it does not accommodate personal views and previous experience.
- To gain attention as an expert in institutional organization (Dressel, 1987).

This list shows the breadth of reasons for change –none of which may be bad, but a difference between public appearance and real intent can occur, oftentimes with disastrous results. In, “Mission, Organization, and Leadership”, Dressel writes:

The difficulty arises when one or more of them, while remaining covert, become the primary factors in a decision, publicly justified on other grounds. This it is that close analysis of the factors involved in the generation of a

proposal for organizational change may be difficult. It is likely to be provocative to suggest that the proposed changes are for other reasons than those stated. The identification of underlying and unrevealed factors can generate denial, irritation, and possibly retribution (Dressel, 1987).

When participants in reorganizations conducted for covert reasons become incredulous about the new structure and its over-all ability to achieve the publicly stated goals, confidence in the plan wanes and the existing leadership has to choose whether to continue with the effort or to move on to a new plan of action. Dressel suggests, “much of what happens depends on the personalities involved (Dressel, 1987).” Either way confidence in the new organizational structure will suffer and the institution loses valuable time to establish a structure that is well designed and effective.

Reorganizations must be designed using SMART planning: Specific intentions; Measurable outcomes; Agreed upon structures; Realistic workloads; and they need Time to succeed. For example, Leeward Community College in Hawaii proposed an administrative reorganization designed to place Leeward in a position to more effectively promote student learning. This proposed reorganization focuses on the administrative echelon of the College in response to several identified challenges identified by external agencies or campus self-study initiatives (University of Hawaii Board of Regents, 2002). The plan is specific and has a measurable outcome in the form of student learning; was agreed upon by the Leeward Community College Strategic Plan and several years of campus input and discussion; it took into account the workload of the administrators involved; and finally provided sufficient time to succeed. In the absence of such planning any reorganization is doomed to constant second-guessing, low morale, and then phase two of yet another administrative change.

Controversy in academe is not uncommon especially when a planned reorganization impacts faculty and students. The removal of popular deans or the dismantling of academic programs are examples of at least two actions that will spark protests and lead to demands for reinstatement of the status quo. A quick search of the archives in the Chronicle of Higher Education reveals upheaval in the faculty/student ranks when new organizational plans were revealed without input from the stakeholders. Rockland Community College (Evelyn, 2002), Diablo Valley College, Bennington College (Magner, 1994), University of Maryland (Lively, 1993), University of Rochester (McMillen), and a host of other colleges and universities across the nation have been embroiled in flawed or poorly communicated plans for change.

Communication Plan

Restructuring management in any organization, private or public, requires careful thought about the benefit versus the financial, psychological and emotional cost associated with the process. In higher education, where discussion and input in the decision-making process is so much the culture of each institution, the impact administrative changes make on the emotions of existing personnel cannot be ignored. Therefore, the institution must develop an effective communication plan designed to enlist the support of a diverse group of people who are involved in the change. To underline the importance of

developing a good communication plan remember that nearly 70% of change initiatives fail (Orr, 2006).

The essential part of any communication plan is identifying the reason for the change. Changes based on real need are difficult to dispute and can be quickly embraced by the members of the academic community. Sudden financial shortfalls for example can oftentimes be managed with a shifting of responsibilities or a streamlining of administrative positions, without direct impact on faculty, students, and academic programs. Most times, however, the reason for the proposed administrative change is not that clear, and in these cases the academic community needs to be fully briefed about problems facing the institution before any planned restructuring is announced. Identifying a problem and announcing the solution at the same time leaves no room for discussion or input, and leaves the entire decision-making process vulnerable to criticism no matter how sound the final decision.

Here are the steps institutions should follow when creating their communication plans:

- Identify the problem that warrants putting the institution through reorganization.
- Frontload the communication process--Discuss the problem at every convenient venue throughout the institution to ensure widespread knowledge of the problem (Orr, 2006).
- Establish line-manager buy-in—If the direct managers do not understand or support the plan it is unreasonable to expect their subordinates to trust the proposal.
- Provide enough time for the academic community to fully understand the issues involved.
- Meet with all of the stakeholder groups to solicit their input before steps are taken to correct the problem.
- Announce the plan indicating the impact on the institution.
- During the first two years of the change hold meetings to discuss how the new structure is doing and be prepared to modify the plan by accepting and welcoming changes proposed by the stakeholders.

Impact of institutional culture on leadership during change

Tierney (1988) contends that leadership within the walls of higher education will to some extent be determined by the organizational culture of the institution. Knowledge of institutional culture allows us to understand how things really get done despite what the organizational chart seems to imply.

...administrators often have only an intuitive grasp of the cultural conditions and influences that enter into their daily decision-making. In this respect they are not unlike most of us who have a dim, passive awareness of cultural codes, symbols, and conventions that are at work in society at large. Only when we break these codes and conventions are we forcibly reminded of their presence and considerable power (Tierney, 1988).

Organizational culture can be based on the college mission, shared values, defined organizational charts, or strong personalities (Tierney, 1988). Those cultures built on college mission and shared values will experience faster stakeholder buy-in and thereby empower internal leaders to guide the institution during the proposed restructuring.

Cultures based on strong personalities or bureaucratic foundations face a more tumultuous course during periods of change. In this case each of the personalities involved modifies the plan consistent with their powerbase and knowledge of the institution. This process is not unlike amendments to simple bills proposed on the floor of Congress. Oftentimes there is little resemblance to the original bill after the final law is enacted.

To maintain effectiveness during reorganizations leaders must be well aware of their institutional culture and how to work within the constraints imposed. Personality driven cultures become more apparent “after an administrator has transgressed its bounds and severe conflicts or adverse relationships ensue” (Tierney, 1988). Knowledge of the culture does not automatically lead to a quick resolution of all problems leaders face when confronted with plans for reorganization, but it does provide a framework in which the leader can operate to ensure movement toward the desired goal.

Leading during the change—A Tale of Three Presidents

Over the past fifteen years Suffolk County Community College has undergone three reorganizations under the tutelage of three different college presidents. Working within the same organizational culture each president faced rational reasons for administrative reorganization: enrollment pressure, college-wide mandates, and micromanagement by a Board of Trustees. The end result of each new structure has been higher administrative costs and blurred lines of authority.

Each of the three presidents has struggled with the problem of exempt (non union supervisory employees) salaries not keeping pace with negotiated agreements with other college employees. The gap between these groups continues to narrow, and in some cases middle-management subordinates earn more than their exempt supervisors. This has caused tremendous resentment by those exempts who surrendered their tenure for career tracks with high levels of responsibility. Making things worse, union contracts have a thirty-five hour week, compared to the forty plus hours expected of exempt personnel. As the terms and conditions of employment for middle-management improve, it makes it nearly impossible to attract well-trained internal candidates for exempt positions.

President A in this study was the first externally selected president. His SCCC faculty and administration saw president A as a weak president with little knowledge about the college culture, surrounded by strong senior management

personalities. This president viewed himself as a change agent charged to confront two issues: move the college from a highly centralized to decentralized structure and to address the needs of the student services area of the college by increasing the number of twelve-month administrators. To accomplish this he empowered his internal management team to construct a new administrative structure to accomplish both goals. The new structure dismantled a structure that was in place for over twenty years forcing the strong senior officials of each campus to battle each other for precious resources. In addition, senior middle management officials had to either accept new twelve-month positions or resign their administrative positions and return to the classroom. This particular case is an example of how reorganizations built with covert intentions lead to organizational failures.

In this instance the people charged with creating a new organizational structure were dissatisfied with their compensation and terms and conditions of employment, so they used this opportunity to create new exempt job titles in an effort to secure salary increases. To gain the twelve-month administrative coverage not won in the contract negotiations with the middle-management labor union, the middle-management organizational structure was changed. Both actions were done for covert reasons and have had a negative impact on the institution ever since.

The changes initiated by President A embroiled him in controversy during his six year term and he left prematurely before the test of time could judge the value of the change.

President B, an internal candidate, led the charge for campus autonomy (SCCC is a multi-campus institution) during President A's tenure and was one of President A's confidantes. President B, rose through the academic and administrative ranks during his thirty plus years at the college and was well aware of the institutional culture and had broad faculty and administrative support. President B was a strong president with intimate knowledge of the institution and each of the important stakeholders. Modifications to the administrative structure were negotiated with the middle-management union with the intent to gain more professional coverage from Department Chairs while closing gaps in the structure inherited from President A. In addition, he advocated a move back to a more centralized college structure. In this new structure assistant deans of faculty on each campus became college-wide associate deans of specific schools (Nursing, Humanities, Math and Science, Library, Performing Arts, Distance Education, Adjunct Services). This new structure came very close to the original administrative set-up that ran the college successfully for over twenty years. The failure in this plan was the lines of authority. While each associate dean was responsible for their respective academic school, they had no authority to directly manage the department chairs within their school. Instead, a matrix system of authority was created with each associate dean having multiple supervisors. President B retired from the college before he had the opportunity to correct the flaws in matrix management.

President C is another external president who is now in her third year at SCCC. President C is well received by the college community due to the time she spends learning about each of the constituencies and the major stakeholders of the institution. President C spends a year to learn the strengths and weaknesses of her team of senior officials then begins to make changes consistent with her goals for the institution. Changes in the exempt team are made and for the first time senior and junior members of the exempt team are advising a new president at SCCC. President C is considered a strong president for two reasons: she spent the time to learn and work within the organizational culture, and by her data driven decision-making.

President C inherits the flawed matrix structure left by her predecessor. After a year of uncertainty with that structure a decision is made to once again reorganize middle management by abandoning the former structure to create new associate dean positions consistent with the needs of the over-all institution without the loss of jobs. The task to accomplish this is delegated to two members of her senior staff who meet with stakeholders to identify what jobs need to be done and the right people for each position. Information about the plan is then disseminated to those directly affected with little time for input.

Each of the three reorganizations briefly outlined above contain their own flaws, yet the college continued to function—thanks to a core of veteran internal leaders who were willing to step-in to quickly identify built-in problems in the planned organizational flow, or willing to modify the structure based on last minute input. Every institution has its core of senior exempt and middle management personnel who know the history of the institution and are familiar with, and comfortable working within the culture of the organization. These are the same individuals to whom members of the academic community turn when something needs to be done. Given their prominence in the institution it is important that they use their influence and communication skills to fine-tune reorganization plans to ensure their success in the long run.

In Leadership Challenge, Kouzes and Posner indicate that for “people to follow someone willingly, the majority of constituents must believe the leader is honest, forward-looking, competent, and inspiring”(Kouzes, 2002). So it is not surprising to see faculty looking to veteran administrators with these qualities to guide their college during periods of change.

Comparing institutions to ecosystems where everything is interconnected, Hargreaves and Fink follow the energy flows that transform an institution from stress to renewal (Hargreaves and Fink 2006). Energy during reorganizations can be traced through trust, confidence, and emotions of the people involved, and will take different forms depending on the communications plan that is in place. Well - defined communications will require more initial energy to gather the stakeholder input to build the plan of action, but later in the process conserve energy that is wasted in the form of human emotions when no real communications plan exists.

In the absence of a well -defined communications plan the veteran leaders at SCCC played a significant role in maintaining trust and confidence in the newly defined structure to avoid an unnecessary drain on the energy of the institution. Using our internal network each new job description was analyzed to ensure that all of the work the institution needed to be done was covered. When gaps were discovered, we informally discussed how the system could be improved to ensure success. We then asked spokespersons to bring our concerns to management’s attention and had the jobs redefined for reasonable workloads that fit the needs of the institution.

Conclusion

Leading during a reorganization is challenging when the environment in which one has successfully operated dramatically changes and when the organizational culture is driven by strong personalities. Here are a few steps leaders should consider when they face their next reorganization:

- Carefully, and accurately identify the problem that needs to be addressed before announcing the steps that are being considered—when the problem is identified be sure there are no hidden agendas built-into the plan.
- Insist that a well-developed communication plan be developed—this will engage the entire academic community in the discussion.
- Frame a series of solutions to the problem in anticipation of the input you will be requested to provide—well-conceived thoughts are certainly more appreciated than flip comments.
- Consider potential consequences of the proposal—many times reorganizations have consequences that no one has considered that in the long run prove to be detrimental to the goal.
- Meet with your peers to discuss the merits of the proposal—open and frank group discussions can reveal many strengths and weaknesses that any one individual would not have realized.
- Prepare a course of action in the event the new structure fails—what are we going to do now?
- Examine the proposal relative to the college mission—as a leader you will need to explain to your subordinates how this new structure is consistent with a mission they support.
- Examine the proposal’s stated goal—down the line we need to measure the effectiveness of the plan so be sure that the goal can be measured.
- Forward any concerns about the proposed structure before they are finalized—the level of persistence required will vary with your organizational culture.
- Assist in identifying the internal personnel with the required skill-sets for any new positions—oftentimes we know the strengths and weaknesses of our colleagues better than our supervisors. This information should always be forwarded when it is helpful to the plan.
- Listen carefully to the opinion of each stakeholder and try to clearly understand their perspective before suggesting changes in the plan—there may be very valid reasons why the proposed plan is not good for many

other areas of the college. This will only be understood when people in a trusting relationship carefully share their perspective.

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