

Valuing Differences and Forging Partnerships with Ethical Leadership

Karen Spellacy, Dean – School of Business and Public Service, SUNY Canton, NY

Rosanna Moser, Professor/Department Chair – School of Business and Public Service, SUNY Canton, NY

William Fassinger, Assistant Professor – Public Service Department, SUNY Canton, NY

Jonathan Gueverra, Provost, Northern Virginia Community College, VA

Janice Robinson, Associate Professor, School of Business and Public Service, SUNY Canton, NY

This essay is a cursory glance at the accomplishments of a dean and his leadership team's collaborative, ethical approach to restore faith and confidence in a hostile environment with low faculty morale as the institution attempted to become a baccalaureate institution. The views are solely those of the authors.

IN THE BEGINNING

The faculty of The School of Business and Public Service had survived the appointment and demise of a dean who worked part time, had no stake in the college, faculty, community, or its students. This dean was involved in obscure business ventures and cleverly managed to concurrently maintain a full time position with another academic institution, in violation of state ethics policies.

THE SEARCH

Search processes are long and tedious. They are often dishonest as institutions rarely provide the full story to candidates and candidates sometimes embellish to earn the job. This venture needed to yield a candidate who possessed the will to put the pieces of the school back together and restore the faith of the faculty and students. Of course, the road ahead will be very rocky. If for no other reason, the unique blend of disciplines (business and public service) results in an enigmatic milieu. While the new dean will have his agenda, without flexibility and creativity, the turnaround task becomes even more complicated.

THE CHOSEN

The new dean reminded one of a cross between Jack Welsh, Steven Covey, Donald Trump, and Sidney Poitier (with a bit of Al Green kicked in for good measure)!¹ He seemed gutsy but apprehensive. These qualities paid dividends as he navigated the complex political and bureaucratic maze of this campus. This new administrator must accurately appraise the faculty in his charge to begin rebuilding the focus and integrity of the school. For the most part, the faculty was justifiably wary of his motives. They had lived through the “we care about you and the students” speeches. Now it was the time for management to deliver.

The “Major League Players” included the following:

1. Frank Day – tenured, 30+ years of teaching experience, strong connection to community organizations, graduate of local institutions, local businessman, family members held administrative positions at the college, College Foundation board member, doesn't like change or technology, exploring the idea of retirement
2. Dr. Dave Thomas – tenured, previous department chair, student oriented attitude, distinguished faculty award, corporate and academic background, afraid of change
3. Susan Kitman – tenured, faculty senator, curriculum committee chair, previous department chair, online learning task force member and the list of service goes on, transfer from the Social Science Department, the only female in The School of Business and Public Service for many years, background predominantly in academia, not used to being confrontational
4. Mary Rodman – tenured, previously retrenched, current department chair, detail oriented, has a hard time letting go of program she revitalized, also exploring the idea of retirement

¹ This view is the opinion of one writer.

5. Pat Jordan – untenured, transfer from a local (now defunct) religious college, needs self confidence and room to grow
6. Robin Johnson – untenured, 25+ years in the business world, relatively new to academia, member of online learning task force, curriculum committee, honor society advisor, detail oriented, not well received by male faculty
7. Gene Smith – untenured, professional background in law enforcement, intense personality, could be categorized as an alpha male
8. Mike Taft – tenured, soft spoken but outspoken, background in law enforcement, student centered, has the college's best interest at heart
9. Carrie Lone – untenured, only female in the Public Service division, previous law enforcement background, affirmative action committee member, faculty governance committee member, student centered

Questions facing the new dean:

- Should those members who are contemplating retirement be encouraged to do so?
- How do you encourage faculty to participate in the development and delivery of online courses when some of them have not conquered answering an email?
- Is the gender barrier really about gender or territory?
- How do I get faculty to participate in the creation of new programs when they were never asked to participate in those types of endeavors previously?
- From where are my students coming and what are their needs?
- What type(s) of support will be needed as the college transitions to a four-year institution?

THINGS THAT WORKED

The faculty had no real political agenda; most wanted to be good teachers and to be appreciated for their efforts. Certainly, some needed jump-starting. Some of the tenured faculty felt that they had paid their dues and did not need to produce. Thus, it was important not to give them repetitious tasks. They needed encouragement to take risks, to try new things like coordinating internships for the new programs, and to develop and deliver online courses.

When one feels valued, one dredges up renewed energy to take risks. Nevertheless, it was important to take baby steps. It was essential that no one felt overwhelmed or experienced failure. Every faculty member needed to realize that she/he was in the same position as many of our students. They needed to be reminded to listen to the ideas of others and to be respectful when someone disagreed with their position. Most people worked in earnest and brought a strong sense of ethics and loyalty to the projects. They focused on the needs of students. This dogged focus on students provided the impetus for the dean to make a solid bond with and between the entire faculty. He reminded himself and each staff member that everyone can make a positive contribution.

New and diverse faculty members were hired during his appointment. They sparked fresh ideas and reduced the undercurrents of the effects that gender and race had promulgated and plagued many departments of the institution. In addition to its quest to morph from a two-year technical college to a baccalaureate, the institution needed to do more to value diversity and expand its horizons. Beyond the new hires that helped to add diversity, the school agreed to support a reorganization plan that changed the

composition of the leadership team from 12 to 50 percent female. Although the dean has moved on to a position at another institution, his contributions will not be forgotten.

CHANGE AS OPPORTUNITY RENEWS AND REVITALIZES FACULTY

The School of Business and Public Service redefined its mission. This was a major piece in the transformational puzzle. Each department chair worked with respective faculty to arrive at common goals and objectives for their respective programs. By having a “shared vision,” faculty was now working together to meet the objectives and thus felt more satisfied and pleased with the successes they helped to craft.

One of the many challenges was the assessment and review of the various programs that were not evaluated in several years. Under the direction of a faculty member (without extra compensation) in the respective programs, the faculty was encouraged to take ownership and evaluate the degree programs in their entirety (course titles, content, objectives, sequencing, new courses, deleting courses, etc.). Faculty took on the responsibility of evaluating respective program (four disciplines) to meet state mandated guidelines. This process was consuming and intense as the four faculty members who were assigned to this project were also teaching 12 credits per semester.

With the help of Advisory Boards and input from the community, four new bachelor degree programs received state approval. A fifth was being prepared for submission at the time of this writing. Over the last two years, each faculty member with the exception of one has developed one or more online courses in the two- and four-year programs. The four-year programs are 100 percent online. The program development activities that required frequent interaction and involvement has built a stronger relationship with and among the faculty. Board members have asked to be more involved in the campus.

The School of Business and Public Service has the highest percentage of online courses at the institution. These developments crossed over into the creation of various dual degree agreements with a number of universities abroad and within the U.S. Thus, there is a notable increase in student diversity and significant increases in winter and summer enrollment.

During this period, the student retention rate increased, the turnover among faculty was lowest compared to the rest of the institution and the school embarked on several fundraising projects that will result in endowed scholarships for deserving students.

LEADERSHIP STRATEGY

Many will remember his engaging style, honest and collaborative approach and willingness to take the risks necessary to move the institution forward. The dean encouraged interaction among all constituents, even when they were opposed to each other’s ideas. He created a climate of relationship building; faculty and staff talked with each other and in groups. It was important for him that people established good rapport with colleagues on a horizontal basis whereby each person was given the opportunity for contributing to the subject under discussion. Retreats, in particular were very helpful.

Leading by example, his hands-on approach also gave the chairs confidence to do tasks that were not visible to the faculty. The little things meant a great deal. It was important to not “sweat the small stuff.” On the other, the details were significant and received appropriate attention. Everyone was responsible for his/her share if the school was going to succeed. Thus, everyone was held accountable and the notion of “us”, “we” and team was reinforced at all times.

The procurement and distribution of resources are very important to the success of any endeavor. As a result, the dean worked with the department chairs and other administrators to support a number of initiatives. Instructors who were completing terminal degrees received one-course reductions. This was not an official college policy, but it made a significant difference in the quality of faculty work lives. Faculty received much support and training for online course development. In one case, beyond everyone’s

expectations, a faculty member who could barely read email developed and taught two online courses that received some of the highest ratings from reviewers and students.

RESULTS AND IMPACT OF CHANGE

Some view change with apathy, skepticism, scorn, fear and some see losses. Others can see forests where there once were only trees. For everyone in a leadership position, it is important to first understand the reason for the apathy and skepticism. It is also crucial that leaders understand the origins of the fear and to present the vision of change in a manner that highlights the opportunities for all involved. At the same juncture, one would be foolhardy to promise that everything in the plan would come to fruition like a well-orchestrated symphony. Change is risky business that is fraught with unpredictable volcanic eruptions. Leaders must be ethical and must learn to trust team members. This will result in members' willingness to follow, to give candid, expert advice and to lead when opportunities present themselves. The synergistic effect of working together produced the following:

In two years, the school cut the average attrition from 30 percent to 18 percent and intends to cut this by 50 percent. A professional development series, an intensive schedule model and a college success initiative are major components to the list of activities that contributed to retention.

The school established a scholarship fund and a second fund to further student and faculty development. As part of its fundraising program, the school initiated an outstanding alumni awards program.

The school's faculty is twenty percent minority because of strategic hires resulting from a staffing plan that was developed to coincide with the university's strategic plan for the year 2010. The plan includes increasing the number of faculty with terminal degrees.

After consultation and input from the faculty and staff, female faculty now occupies two of the four leadership positions. Before the new dean's appointment, male employees occupied seven of the eight leadership positions in the school.

Using a collaborative team-centered approach, the school developed over 40 articulation agreements with Community Colleges, well in excess of its targeted objective and more than the combined total of the other schools at the institution.

Instituted St. Lawrence County's only Volunteer Income Tax Assistance Program (VITA); the VITA program is being developed as a service learning program for the accounting curriculum.

Developed 4 + 1 MBA and MS in accounting programs to allow students to complete graduate work without leaving the campus.

The school cemented dual degree programs with the faculty of math and computational cybernetics at Moscow State University in Russia, and Kherson State University in the Ukraine.

Developed four new baccalaureate programs; a fifth program is currently under review.

Every faculty member with the exception of one has developed and/or taught at least one online course.

The faculty is more engaged and they quadrupled the number of faculty presentations and papers at regional and national conferences. There is also tenured faculty pursuing terminal degrees.

While these are highlights of the major accomplishments, they do not begin to document the difficult times that accompany the commencement of surgical change. The major lesson from this experience suggests that leaders cannot be change agents if they attempt to model the "knight in shining armor" behavior. The modern organization and its environment are far too complex and the players are perceptive and educated. Sustained change requires the collective efforts of all participants even if their only role is that of a conscientious objector.