
Changing and Leading Staff Members of Higher Education in Rural District. Case Study: Mount Zion College of Engineering and Technology

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Abstract -

Higher education on a global scale experienced extraordinary change during the past 150 years in response to internal intellectual trends as well as external societal forces (Robinson, 2002). As Eckel et al (2000) argue, Universities and colleges have some particular attributes that make any change process different from other types of organizations. Changes occur in any environment, thus influencing educational institutions, it is essential for educational institutions to be able to cope with environmental change (internal or external) affecting day to day operations. In order to assess if change is always necessary, managers need to take two critical steps. One is to recognize the possible need for change and to correctly assess the strength of that need. The other is to accurately diagnose the problems and issues that the change or changes should address (Black and Porter, 2000). If this is not done, it could be argued that change may fail. This study deals with leading and changing the educational environment of staff members at Mount Zion College of Engineering and Technology, Pudukottai, one of the backward districts in Tamil Nadu. The internal and external environments have ‘forced’ a change and the authors have realized the change is required for the college to progress and future success.

1. What to change?
2. What to change to?
3. How to change?

While answering these three deep questions about the future of the college, the authors looked carefully at the present situation.

Staff members tend to see their responsibilities as limited to the boundaries of their position. When they focus only on their position, they have little sense of responsibility for the results produced when all positions interact. Instead of discussing and accepting the changes, they started becoming “Skilled Incompetence”- (Peter, 2006, p25). Learning stretches personally, and it is always easier to stay in comfort zone.

The authors are committed to educate the staff members by organizational change. They explained why change is required, what is expected by it. Through this education staff members were more understanding and created a sense of trust. The authors conducted a staff meeting every week to facilitate the dialogue & discussion and team learning.

The staff meeting and administering the examinations became the practice field. It offers a very different environment, where staff members are actively doing what they want to be able to do well and talking about what’s working and what isn’t and gradually developing a greater ability for effective action in the “performance fields”, where results matter.

Staff members experienced their responsibilities which are not only include as teacher, but also includes as counselor, mentor, facilitator, coach and many more. Staff members identified there is a need for change in teaching learning process and life long learning. Staff members had grown less afraid of change, learning the specific steps needed to make any large adjustment to new circumstances, worked well together to keep leaping into a better and better future.

Creating practice fields and establishing a regular rhythm of practice and performance has become a common strategy. Change leads to another change **Keywords: EM Cluster, Univariate outlier, Grubb test, Continuous variables**

1. Introduction

Higher education on a global scale experienced extraordinary change during the past 150 years in response to internal intellectual trends as well as external societal forces (Robinson, 2002). Universities are social organizations that operate in a wider environmental system, thus being affected by various pressures occurring inside or outside the entity. However, as Eckel et al (2000) argue, Universities and colleges have some particular attributes that make any change process different from other types of organizations.

Educational Institutions globally – it could be argued – are part of a wider system. Curtis (1992) defines a system as a collection of interrelated parts which taken together forms a whole such that: (a) The collection has some purpose and (b) a change in any of the parts leads to or results from a change in some other part or parts. Within this framework, it is argued that social organizations such as businesses, Universities, colleges and other types are by definition open systems, which implies that they can be affected by environmental influences.

Changes occur in any environment, thus influencing educational institutions, it is essential for educational institutions to be able to cope with environmental change (internal or external) affecting day to day operations. Change, basically, can be viewed as a process that turns a steady-state system to a new steady-state system. In order for this to be

done however, it is essential for educational institutions (or its individuals) to manage the transition from one state to another.

Whatever the context or framework, change can almost certainly happen. It is usually stimulated by “triggers”. Change is often an outcome of the strategic process of a company / organization, especially if a company operates in a dynamic environment. Change can derive from two broad distinct environments such as the external and internal environments of any organization.

It is believed that the culture of an organization can influence how individuals behave at work and hence will affect both individual and organizational performances. According to Black and Porter (2000), the culture of the organization is a potential focus for change in organizations.

Change invariably creates conflict. It spawns a hotly contested tug – of war – to determine winners and losers (Boleman & Deal, 2003). As defined by Buchanan and Huczynski (1997), resistance to change is 'an ability, or an unwillingness, to discuss or to accept organisational changes that are perceived in some way damaging or threatening to the individual' (Organisational Behaviour, 1997). To cope with resistance and conflict, change agents need to display extraordinary skills and employ allies to the cause (Frost and Robinson,

1999).

The changes affecting educational organizations and education in general are numerous and managers as well as academics in leadership positions need to cope with these not only in a traditional academic manner but also in a business – oriented manner

When change is required, it is most likely that a trigger has ‘forced’ change or a leader has realized that this change is required for the organization to progress. According to Kotter (1990), in an article published in Harvard Business Review (“What leaders really do”), leadership is different from management, but not for the reasons most people think. Leading an organization to constructive change begins by setting a direction – developing a vision of the future, along with strategies for producing the changes needed to achieve that vision (Kotter, 1990, p. 41). It is argued that the change agent needs to be a combination of a manager and a leader.

In order to assess if change is always necessary, leaders need to take two critical steps. One is to recognize the possible need for change and to correctly assess the strength of that need. The other is to accurately diagnose the problems and issues that the change or changes should address (Black and Porter, 2000). If this is not done, it could be argued that change may fail.

In essence, our planet has changed, businesses have changed, products and services always change, tastes change, governments change, almost everything changes. We are living in a world of constant change and it could be argued that the speed of change has also reinforced the issue additionally.

2. Mount Zion College of Engineering and Technology

This study deals with leading and changing the educational environment of staff members at Mount Zion College of Engineering and Technology, Pudukottai, one of the

backward districts in Tamil Nadu. The college is self financing, approved by All India Council for Technical Education, New Delhi and affiliated to Anna University Tiruchirappalli, Tiruchirappalli. The college offers seven under graduate engineering programs with 1350 students and 117 teaching staff members.

2.1. Need for change

Growing competition – it is argued – changed the way students are perceived by a growing percentage of educational institutions. This change has been driven by the desire to improve the efficiency and quality of provision in order to meet the changing needs of the global market place. Increasing competition implies that the student is expecting top quality service. Customer service has been one of the most important areas for organizations in every industry.

Over the past 20 years, virtually every college and university has implemented a quality initiative of some sort. Many institutions can point to more than one such initiative, with varying results (Bontrager 2004). Bontrager continues, effective enrolment management requires that institutions take their commitment to top quality service to a higher level (College and University Journal, p. 13).

As Mullins (1996) suggests, an organization can only perform effectively through interactions with the broader external environment of which it is part. In order to help ensure the organization’s survival and future success, the organization must be readily adaptable to the external demands placed upon it. Mullins argues that the environmental pressures are probably the most important and any organization should give great attention to these pressures in order to ensure it is not affected negatively.

The need of the change was derived from the change in the external environment such as increasing competition via more number of new colleges in the district, comparison of pass percentage and comparison of employment skill of students

among the colleges in the district, and the change in the internal environment such as the management of the college, difficulty in admissions, financial problem which questions the future of the college.

“A spirited attack on the idea of the student as customer went down a storm with academics assembled at the recent British Academy of Management conference. It was argued in the same management conference according to the same article that as students are paying higher fees, they are putting more pressure on academics to meet their short-term demands. Student-customers are trying to negotiate almost everything e.g. course content, forms of assessment and assignment deadlines.

(<http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/mortarboard/2007/sep/24/aspiritedattackonthe>)

Due to the environmental influences in the rural district, staff members are putting more pressure on academics to meet their short-term demands. Staff members are trying to negotiate almost everything e.g. syllabus coverage, lesson plan, teaching learning process and assessment.

The environmental influences examine the intensity of rivalry amongst existing colleges, the threat of entry by new colleges, the pressure from possible substitute products and / or services, the bargaining power of students and finally the bargaining power of prospective employers.

These internal and external environments have ‘forced’ a change and the authors have realized the change is required for the college to progress and future success.

1. What to change?
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While answering these three deep questions about the future of the college, the authors looking carefully the present situation.

By analyzing the previous semesters end semester examinations results, authors observed that the continuous assessment marks plays a major role in pass percentage. For all theory courses, the continuous assessment shall be for a maximum of 20 marks (consisting of 15 marks for tests/experiments and 5 marks for attendance) out of 100 marks, there is no system has been followed for awarding the continuous assessment marks. The continuous assessment marks awarded between 14 and 20, where as in some cases the students scored end semester examination less than 20 and in some cases scored less than 50, which is the minimum pass mark. The authors concluded that unless we formulated the system of awarding the continuous assessment marks, continuously through out the semester, not at the end of the semester, by making the students to study, there will not be any improvement in pass percentage.

Management can get started in results – driven programmes (Schaffer and Thomson 1992), in four (4) ways:

1. Ask each unit to set and achieve a few ambitious short term performance goals;
2. Periodically review progress, capture the essential learning, and reformulate strategy.
3. Institutionalize the changes that work - and discard the rest and
4. Create the context and identify the crucial business challenges (p. 89).

The authors have identified the following to change initially.

- a. To change the culture of awarding the continuous assessment marks to the students by staff members (biased), as part of the curriculum into earning the same by the students with respect to the University regulations and make it transparent to the stake holders.
- b. To change the culture of administering the examinations (internal and external) by non-teaching staff in the exam cell into developing teaching staff members skill to administer the examinations (internal and external)

c. To develop the skill of analyzing the examination results (Internal and external).

d. To create the culture of life long learning through Faculty Development Programmes

2.2. Staff Culture:

According to Black and Porter (2000), the culture of the organization is a potential focus for change in organizations. In a way, as Black and Porter suggest “changing an organization’s culture can be as potent in its consequences as making major changes in technology”. Given the difficulty in being able to change an organization’s culture, one may begin to understand how culture – if rigid – can affect change be implemented.

Given that culture has also been associated with the strategy of a company (Vecchio, 1991), its importance as a parameter to take under consideration when organizations intend to change is reinforced.

Staff members tend to see their responsibilities as limited to the boundaries of their position. When they focus only on their position, they have little sense of responsibility for the results produced when all positions interact. Because they become their position, they do not see how their actions and inactions affect the other positions. Consequently, when problems arise, they quickly blame each other.

As defined by Buchanan and Huczynski (1997), resistance to change is 'an ability, or an unwillingness, to discuss or to accept organizational changes that are perceived in some way damaging or threatening to the individual' (Organizational Behaviour, 1996).

Change invariably creates conflict. It spawns a hotly contested tug – of war – to determine winners and losers (Boleman & Deal, 2003). Some individuals and groups support the change while others oppose.

Since staff members were not interested to come out of the “Comfort Zone”, and having low tolerance for change they expressed their resistance through absenting themselves frequently. Instead of discussing and accepting the changes, they started becoming “Skilled Incompetence”- staff members who are incredibly proficient at keeping themselves from learning (Peter, 2006, p25). Learning stretches personally, and it is always easier to stay in comfort zone.

Organizational culture needs to be taken into consideration when changes occur not only because the type of culture may play a role in ‘accepting’ or ‘resisting’ the change, but also because the chances of the change to be implemented rely on it.

3. Leading the process of change

The change goals must consider how individual faculty members are receiving and interpreting messages or signals from institutional leaders (New educator, college of education, Fall 1999).

Leading an organization to constructive change begins by setting a direction – developing a vision of the future, along with strategies for producing the changes needed to achieve that vision (Kotter, 1990, p. 41).

The authors have developed a vision of the future, along with strategies for producing the changes needed to achieve that vision.

When placed in the same system, people, however different, tend to produce similar results.

The authors adopted a clear defined strategy for the initiation of change since resistance to change will never cease completely. The authors are committed to educate the staff members by organizational change. Authors have explained

why change is required, what is expected by it. Through this education, staff members were more understanding and created a sense of trust. The authors conducted a staff meeting every week to facilitate the dialogue and team learning.

Organizations have a tendency to change incrementally, not radically (Beech, 2001), despite the growing number of challenges affecting any organization operating in a non – static environment.

Staff members worry about what effects any change will have for them personally in most of the cases, as change may affect their pay, their career prospects, the overall status quo in the college, their position, title, knowledge etc. Quite understandably, people within the change process are far more likely to embrace change if they feel it will make them better off.

3.1. Team Learning

Team Learning (Peter, 2006, p218) is the process of aligning and developing the capacity of a team to create the results its members truly desire. Team learning involves mastering the practices of dialogue and discussion. In dialogue, there is free and creative exploration of complex and subtle issues, a deep “listening” to one another and suspending of one’s own views. By contrast, in discussion different views are presented and defended and there is a search for the best view to support decisions that must be made at this time. Dialogue and discussion are potentially complementary.

3.2. Dialogue and Discussion

Furthermore, staff members’ views asked through dialogue, for a change based on their potential, which is acceptable by all the staff members to gain further involvement and commitment to the change itself. The purpose of dialogue is to go beyond any one staff understanding, is to reveal the incoherence in staff members

thought, is to become observers of staff members own thinking. The authors act as a “facilitator” who “holds the context” of dialogue. Authors have identified the following two basic conditions necessary for dialogue. 1. Suspending assumption. 2. Seeing each other as colleagues.

To suspend one’s assumptions means constantly accessible to questioning and observation. It means being aware our assumptions and holding them up for examinations. Willingness and treating each other as colleagues acknowledges the mutual risk and establishes the sense of safety in facing the risk. As a facilitator, the authors, helped the staff members maintain ownership of the change process and the outcomes – we are responsible for what is happening.

It is staff members’ thoughts and the way they hold on to them that are in conflict, not staff members. Once staff members see the participatory nature of their thought, they begin to separate themselves from their thought. They begin to take a more creative, less reactive stance toward their thought. Through dialogue staff members can help each other to become aware of the incoherence in each other’s thoughts, and in this way the collective thought becomes more and more coherent.

In a dialogue, different views are presented as a means toward discovering a new view. It was more like loud debate, heated discussions and healthy conflict, with staff engaged in a search for the best acceptable answer. There are two interesting constructive statement made by the staff in the staff meeting. First, “We have met the enemy and he is us”. Second, “Why can’t we do good works at work?”

The affiliating University formulated the guidelines, for all theory courses, the continuous assessment shall be for a maximum of 20 marks (consisting of 15 marks for tests/experiments and 5 marks for attendance) out of 100 marks. So, first authors have decided to formulate the system

for the same. Staff members recommended after the dialogue in the staff meeting,

1. Administering unit tests after completing every unit of syllabus.
2. Calculating continuous assessment marks 20 (consisting of 10 marks for the unit test and 10 marks for attendance) for each subject.
3. Analyzing the unit test results after every unit test to identify & help the slow learners
4. Conducting the coaching class and retest for slow learners

These systems were communicated to the staff and students at the beginning of the semester in the staff meeting and in all the classes and ensure that every one would understand and accept it.

3.3.Practice field

We have developed the discipline of “Team Learning”, which requires practice. It is very difficult to learn anything new without the opportunity for practice. The process whereby such teams learn is through continual movement between practice and performance, practice , performance, practice again, perform again. The staff meeting and administering the examinations became the practice field. It offers a very different environment, where staff members are actively doing what they want to be able to do well and talking about what’s working and what isn’t and gradually developing a greater ability for effective action in the “performance fields”, where results matter.

Based on, Kotter and Schlesinger (1979), Buchanan and Huczynski (1996), it is important for the change agent and / or the leaders in charge to educate and commit those affected by organizational change.

The authors educated the staff members on administering the examinations and explained in detail the importance of scheduling & seating arrangements, preparation and making

sufficient copies of question papers, distribution and collection of question paper & answer scripts, importance of invigilation, paper correction and timely distribution of marks. Each department staff conducted each unit test to practice the skill of administering the examinations. This helps the understanding and enmeshing the team work among the staff.

After every unit test, staff members analyzed the results to identify the fast, medium and slow learners.

These results have been presented in the class as well as in the staff meeting for further analysis to improve the result in the ensuing unit tests and ultimately in the end semester examinations. The further analysis reveals that staff members have more responsibility in identifying and helping the slow learners in imparting the knowledge and skill to improve their pass percentage. These responsibilities includes not only they act as teacher, but also act as counselor, mentor, facilitator, coach and many more. There is a need for change in teaching learning process and life long learning.

The traditional learning objectives (Linda.V et al., 2009) of engineering curricula have focused on fundamental knowledge, computational skills and their application. We started using Anderson et al.’s (2001) taxonomy, which helps staff members make sense of the curriculum, plan instruction and design assessment that are aligned with the objectives inherent in the curriculum and ultimately improve their teaching quality. We are not discussing here in detail about the change in teaching learning process.

3.4. Life long learning

Organizations learn and grow only through individuals who learn. Individual learning does not guarantee organizational learning. But without it no organizational learning occurs. Learning in this context does not mean acquiring more information, but expanding the ability to produce the results people truly want in life.

Learning (www.solonline.org) is a process of enhancing learner's capacity, individually and collectively, to produce results they truly want to produce. This definition has been helpful because it emphasizes two crucial features of learning that are often misunderstood: 1. the building of capacity for effective action, as opposed to intellectual understanding only; and 2. the fact that this capacity builds over considerable time.

Learning always has two levels (Peter, 2006). At one level, all learning is judged by what the learner can do, the results they produce. On the deeper level, learning is about developing a capacity to reliably produce a certain quality of results.

4. Findings and discussion

Support, guidance and training provided to staff members to those that need assistance, negotiation and agreement took place with potential resisters as they had important power within the organization.

Staff members experienced their responsibilities after analyzing the results of unit tests, it not only includes as teacher, but also includes as counselor, mentor, facilitator, coach and many more. Staff members identified there is a need for change in teaching learning process and life long learning.

The authors have identified three categories of staff members after providing guidance and training. First category, the staff members who can discharge the duty as a teacher by understanding their responsibility, without follow-up, second, with follow-up and third who can find it very difficult to discharge the duty as a teacher even with repeated follow-up and training.

The first category staff members learned to identify and

minimize resistance and thus become more effective change agents. The second category staff members strengthen the change process, where as the third category staff members slowly left the college due to low tolerance for change, questionable adaptability and learning disabilities. All the time and energy we spend on third category staff siphons energy away from developing and working with first and second category staff.

We establish regular practice field for sharing information and enabling staff members to connect with each other more easily.

5. Conclusion

Schaffer and Thomson (1992), suggest that management needs to recognize that there is abundance of both underexploited capability and dissipated resources in the organization. In their article which was published in the Harvard Business review in 1992 "Critical Success Factors (CSFs) in change", the authors argue that the most important point in any change process is to focus on results rather than activities.

Staff members became more skilled, had grown less afraid of change, learning the specific steps needed to make any large adjustment to new circumstances, worked well together to keep leaping into a better and better future. They ensured that the changes would not be overcome by stubborn, hard-to-die traditions.

Creating practice fields and establishing a regular rhythm of practice and performance has become a common strategy. Change leads to another change. We will achieve homeostasis – the ability to maintain conditions for survival in a changing environment.

Key words: Change, team learning, lead, culture, dialogue, practice field

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