A Case Study, Initiating a Peer Mentoring Program at a State University with a Diverse Student Body

Frank Andrews

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholars.fhsu.edu/alj

Part of the Educational Leadership Commons, Higher Education Commons, and the Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholars.fhsu.edu/alj/vol3/iss2/2

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by FHSU Scholars Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Academic Leadership: The Online Journal by an authorized editor of FHSU Scholars Repository.
Introduction

implementing change in any organization has been the topic of much research. Hall and Hord (2001) describe the implementation of change as a “…process through which people and organizations move as they gradually come to understand, and become skilled and competent in the use of new ways.” Hall and Hord seem to be saying that there are fundamental changes principles embedded in the process that hold true for all cases.

On the other hand, Bridges (2003) describes change as situational, for example moving from Ohio to Massachusetts, or getting a promotion, and that the outcome that the change produces is what most individuals and organizations focus on. He goes on to say, that transition is the resultant psychological three step phase that begins with the ending that the change produces. Bridges is saying that effective change is due to effective transition management and that change fails when organizations do not plan to manage the impact on people. (p.37)

Fullan (2004) describes change as rapid, nonlinear which creates messiness. He goes on say that change cannot be managed but it can be understood and possibly led. His emphasis seems to be that effective change results from those individuals in a position of leadership who understand the change process is elusive but can be directed.

The focus of this paper is on leading and guiding the change process as it applies to a Peer Mentoring Program begun this semester in the College of Management (CoM) at U.Mass Lowell (UML). Specifically, this paper will discuss the fieldwork with respect to the initiation and adoption of the program. A second case paper will look at the actual implementation and hopefully institutionalization of the program.

The Mentor Program: A Culture of Change

The Mentor Program is designed with the intention of accomplishing a number of goals;

1. We in the COM are dedicated to the proposition of helping our students graduate in a timely fashion. As a team, we in the Dean’s office believe that the Mentor Program will give our students another resource with which to succeed,

2. We believe that a well run Mentor Program will help our retention rate, which is already the highest at UML,

3. We also believe that the Mentor Program is another asset with which we can help The Admissions group to proactively market our program to parents and prospective students.

The establishment of a Peer Mentoring Program in the CoM will be a significant change in the student-to-teacher and student-to-student partnerships as they existed before the program. This program will
contribute to the building of social capital as well as social competence. Fullan (2004, p.77) cites many studies that support the theory that successful leaders in any organization strive to develop relationships that help to produce desired results, a sense of “connectedness” to something larger. Fullan (2004, p.93-94) writes that one very important element when leading in a culture of change is building relationships, as through a student-to-student partnership, the social awareness (of others’ needs, etc.) and relationship management (developing a rapport with a diverse group) will hopefully be one outcome of the Peer Mentoring Program. In order to be effective in initiating change a leader should strive to build “relational trust”.

Bryk and Schneider (2002) suggested that “…relational trust facilitates the development of beliefs, values, organizational routines…that instrumentally affect…engagement and learning” (p.115). Relational trust includes:

1. competence,
2. respect,
3. personal regard for others, and
4. integrity.

All of these characteristics that Bryk and Schneider suggest constitute relationship trust are perquisites for mentoring. This paper will focus on the change in relationships and the leadership required to not only implementing a Mentor Program but also to be a mentor.

Fullan (2004, p.97-101) describes many research studies that show the nature of change may create anxiety, fear, and numerous other concerns that could easily create an environment of resistance even when establishing something as benign as a Mentor Program. In fact Hall and Hord (2001) describe change on all levels as being “…highly complex, multivariate, and dynamic” (p.4).

In order for one to effectively lead in a culture of change one must be able to proactively create the trust necessary to ensure a successful change. Bryk and Schneider (2002) have shown that high trust environments produce the necessary features for working through the change process: they (1) enable risk and effort; (2) facilitate problem solving; (3) coordinate clear, collective action; and (4) sustain ethical and moral imperative. These building blocks that enable an organization to effectively work through the change process all have relevance to the Mentor Program to varying degrees.

The environment in this situation is defined as the partnership that will be established between the Dean’s office in the CoM and the students invited to be mentors. There is certainly some risk on the part of the mentors, they don’t know the character of the individual Freshmen to whom they will be acting as mentors. In this day and age, that is a legitimate concern. Additionally, any new relationship or partnership requires some commitment of time and effort. What we in the CoM would like to see the mentors provide in this role would be the following;

1. provide advice on courses to be taken;
2. the instructors who the students feel are the “best”;
3. college wide activities that the mentees should be aware of;
4. be able to help with friendly reminders to the mentees on important academic dates, drop/add, etc.;
5. act as a role-model, show the younger students what it takes to succeed in the COM;
6. drop them the occasional note saying “hello and how are things going?”

In short, as Bryk and Schneider (2002) claim keeping open a channel of communication may help to “create a moral resource” and aid in increasing Freshman retention.

Initiation and Adoption: The Impact on the Students

The initiation of the mentor program began this summer at orientation. At three freshman orientations in June 2004 the incoming CoM freshmen were asked whether or not they would like to have to a CoM mentor. The advantages of having a mentor were made clear; the mentor is a resource person for you, someone who can provide advice, there’s no time commitment and you have an immediate upperclassman “buddy”. Out of 185 incoming CoM freshmen only 85 expressed a desire to have a mentor.

On the other side of the equation the CoM wanted to have mentors who would “…evidence moral purpose, display emotional intelligence, and foster caring relationships…” (Fullan, p.196) As result, a stringent criteria was established; GPA >=3.0, 85 to 100 credit hours completed, and above all, a good reputation with CoM faculty, we had only 52 upperclassmen who could be mentors. Letters were sent to each possible mentor asking them to consider the program. Of the 52 upperclassmen contacted, 22 students agreed to be in the program as mentors.

Conclusion

Hall and Hord (2001) have identified what they refer to as the seven “Stages of Concern” (SoC) with respect to the early phase of an innovation or change. The idea of addressing one’s feelings as “concerns” was the original work of Frances Fuller (1969). Fuller essentially said that facilitators of the change process need to be reflective of the concerns of those individuals engaged with the innovation and those considering its use. In other words, effective facilitators know that “…the same pattern of concerns, unrelated, self, task and impact pattern, is found in people involved with all types of innovations and change processes” (Hall & Hord, p.60). The emphasis of this research seems to be, there will be concerns on the part of all stakeholders whenever an innovation occurs.

Hall and Hord also show that the developmental path through these concerns can take as long as three to five years. With respect to this program, the time line is somewhat more condensed. The mentor program moved into the implementation phase approximately four months after initiation and two months after adoption. There are “self concerns” (Hall and Hord, 2001) at this point in the program. Specifically, personal concerns, some of the mentors are uncertain with respect to their adequacy in meeting the demands of this new innovation, i.e. their capability when it comes to answering mentees questions.

The CoM has had a couple of social functions in order to bring the mentors and mentees together, a pizza party, and a hockey game. The purpose of the social get-togethers was to establish a connection and help open the door to make it easier for all stakeholders to trust the program. Covey (1989)
describes an “Emotional Bank Account” that reflects the amount of trust that builds up in relationship. How this metaphor is applied to the peer mentoring program is that by being proactive, bringing mentors and mentees together, opening the lines of communication, and showing a genuine commitment to their needs and concerns, the level of influence with all people in the process becomes more powerful. That is when real mentoring can begin and “transformational leadership” (Covey, p.222) that transforms the individuals involved as well as the relationship, can start.

References


VN:R_U [1.9.11_1134]