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Orchestrating Change at the Departmental Level:

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Introduction

Academic leaders in higher education must increasingly deal with demands from stakeholders such as students, parents, and government at the same time that they are held accountable for the curriculum and student learning environment (Newman, Couturier & Scurry, 2004; Smith, 2004). In addition, new types of higher education institutions, i.e. the for-profit schools, purport to be more agile in responding to the needs of these various constituencies, putting more pressure on the traditional colleges and universities to react more quickly. Gone are the days of unhurried deliberations and incremental changes that could take years to institute. The loosely coupled organizational nature of traditional colleges and universities results in a lack of authority for the very individuals who are responsible for the curriculum and learning environment at the school and department level, the deans and academic chairs (Glassman, 1973; Weick, 1978). Faculty, whose role is to develop curriculum and teach in the classroom, tend to be reluctant change agents and typically prefer that the Chair keep the business of the department running as usual. This makes gaining faculty support for the necessary responses to changing student needs both crucial and difficult.

The current model of leadership in the academy, which focuses on the delicate balance of collegiality between faculty members, can lead to an outcome of satisfying faculty needs rather than incorporating the needs of the overall university or taking into account the external environment (Raelin, 1995). It is necessary to challenge the present leadership model in the university setting. The Chair and Dean must find methods with which to achieve faculty commitment to consider the importance of the other stakeholders' needs and to accept that change is critical for the overall health and vibrancy of the department, the school and the university in general. Heifetz's model of adaptive leadership, which considers leadership as a process (1994; 2002), provides guidance that we believe is effective for Chairs and Deans to garner support from faculty to make the essential changes needed to respond to the various stakeholders. The purpose of this paper is to examine Heifetz's model of adaptive leadership and to provide an example of one situation in which the adaptive leadership model was implemented, resulting in deep rooted, long-term change that was ultimately initiated and enacted from faculty participating in the leadership process.

Adaptive Leadership Model

Higher education leaders can only address these external needs if there is a willingness by the faculty to envision taking a proactive role in the change process, whether creating a more responsive curriculum or a more supportive learning environment. Adaptive leadership requires people to concentrate their attention on the specific problem at hand and to modify the way they have worked in the past. In other words, adaptive leadership requires that all who have a vested interest in addressing the problem and moving towards a change be part of the leadership process. This means that faculty must acknowledge the need to respond to the demands from the external environment, take charge of the change and understand that adjustments in their behavior and attitude will be required. A seemingly impossible feat, yet Heifetz's model offers a route around historical constraints that reinforce the adage

"we've always done it this way."

According to the adaptive leadership model, leaders are confronted by two types of problems—technical and adaptive. Technical problems have known solutions and typically require technical expertise or knowledge of established standard operating procedures, given that the problem is considered to be routine. In higher education a technical problem could be handling a student grievance of a course grade. The procedures are known as to how to handle it, although the solution is *not* known, i. e. whether or not the student will receive an adjusted grade.

We are focusing on the second type of problem—adaptive. Adaptive challenges are not well defined, generally impact a variety of stakeholders, each with their own interpretation of the issue, and the solution to an adaptive challenge requires change in attitudes and priorities by some, if not all, of the stakeholders (Heifetz, Kania & Kramer, 2004). The types of challenges that require long term, deep change are adaptive in nature and are the problems that leaders in higher education need to grapple with in order to address the changing demands of stakeholders. The process of adaptive leadership requires six steps, which, if followed, will provide the requisite guidance for leaders in higher education in their efforts to resolve the complex problems presently confronted by departments and schools within universities. We will explore each of the steps and provide examples from a sample situation that was handled using Heifetz's leadership model.

Brief Description of Situation

In this situation, the academic Chair of a department was faced with an increasingly new and important student demographic for a graduate program. New students were more often working adults who desired a program flexible enough to suit their time constraints. However, the faculty believed that offering the department's courses in the evening and having materials offered on the web was the most flexibility that could be offered without impacting the academic integrity of the program. Student surveys made it clear that the traditional 12 or 15 week course was not sufficiently flexible. Students wanted more concentrated courses offered in a shorter time frame.

Over the previous five years there had been a decline in new students entering the program and the adult student population had a high rate of "stop-outs," i.e. students who were not taking at least one course per semester. The number of adult students who had not taken a course over a consecutive three-semester period was increasing as well.

Typically, a "stop-out" who did not register for three consecutive semesters was a student that was about to drop out of the program completely. The Chair recognized that there would eventually be dire financial consequences for the department if a solution was not found.

The Chair in this case adhered to the steps of Heifetz's model to develop a course of action that would effectively address the adaptive problem facing the Department. The steps she took are described below.

Identify the Challenge

Leadership must recognize that the challenge confronted by the academic department or school is a problem that will require more than a technical solution. This is one of the more difficult steps, as there

is a tendency to want to consider a problem as having a simple, easily resolvable solution. However, identifying a challenge as technical when it is in reality an adaptive challenge will often result in a temporary or short term solution. In actuality, the problem will not be thoroughly solved and will rear its head again, possibly worse than the first time.

In this example and as further explicated in Table I, the department Chair had to determine whether the need to design a program that would be more flexible for the growing adult student population was technical or adaptive. Since schedule changes are routine, what was recommended by the student survey might be considered technical. However, the Chair understood that the proposed change in schedule format meant that faculty had to redesign course content and possibly needed to change course delivery methods. Also, the faculty considered the curriculum and the classroom experience to be their responsibility and receiving input from students about how to format the program was considered by some faculty to be inappropriate. The Chair decided that the solution to this problem of increasing student dissatisfaction and "stop-out" was more than scheduling and that it involved multiple important stakeholders who were all critical to the well-being of the department. The complexity of the challenge identified it as adaptive.

Unbundle Issues

Issues tend to get muddied with opinion and rumor especially when multiple stakeholders are involved, the solution is not known and the solution will potentially require changes in attitudes and behavior by the involved parties. According to Heifetz's model, it is critical that the *key* issues are clearly communicated to all stakeholders. This may require that the issues are unbundled in such a way as to separate the critical from the more emotive issues at hand. In this example, the Chair had to understand the concerns and important issues of both the adult student population and the faculty. On the faculty side, the issues involved the potential impact on academic integrity, potential detractions to the student learning experience and possible changes in their teaching and advising routines.

Framing the Issues and Focusing Attention

In the Heifetz model, the process of leadership is to not only communicate the issues clearly, but to ensure that the stakeholders understand that the challenge needs to be addressed. This must be done in such a manner that it is understood that change must occur and that the stakeholders are an important part of this change effort. The leader must also constantly remind the stakeholders to focus their attention on the issues, not on innuendos or side concerns.

After clearly communicating the issues, the Chair held a number of individual and group meetings with the faculty to remind them that the student population was increasingly constituted of older students whose life circumstances required more flexibility and that the complaints were not the "whining" of students who wanted to make the graduate program easier. The Chair also framed the issue with the adult students, ensuring that they understood the faculty concerns of creating a quality program such that the students would achieve their learning outcomes, rather than creating an overly flexible program that could lead to disappointment because of insufficient academic rigor. The Chair also had to keep both groups focused on the severity of the challenge facing the department. The Chair communicated constantly, using a variety of venues to focus stakeholders on the need to respond to an important constituency that was reflecting the changing needs of the external community while maintaining the integrity of the academic program.

Secure Ownership

The goal of this leadership model is to create an environment in which the key stakeholders of the adaptive challenge become the leaders in the change initiative. It is hoped that this type of participation in the change process will result in the change being both deep and long term. Deep and long term change requires examination of attitudes and behaviors in order to change perceptions about roles in the workplace and to provide the foundation with which people will be able to make "out-of-the-box" solutions. The goal of the Chair in this example was to have the faculty take ownership of the change initiative for the program. Based on Heifetz's model the change must be perceived to be non-threatening to those involved in executing it (Heifetz, Kania & Kramer, 2004).

The Chair needed the key faculty to take responsibility for problem solving. These key faculty were the most senior faculty, who understood the culture and the politics of the department. One of the senior faculty led a work group to focus on the challenges presented by the student survey. This person brought some of the adult students in to talk with the faculty group about their concerns so that the faculty could understand from another source (i.e. not just from the Chair) the importance of addressing them. This work group became the focal point from which to gain faculty buy-in. It was important for faculty to take the leadership role and for the Chair to step aside.

Manage Stakeholder Conflict and Maintain Stress

Despite stepping aside, the Chair had to remain in involved in order to arbitrate conflict within the work group and with the faculty who were not part of this process. According to the model, one should plan on there being conflict during the process. There will invariably be conflict when people are asked to adjust their attitudes about work life roles and expectations (Heifitz & Linsky, 2002). As Heifetz and Linsky state, the leader needs to be able to "listen to the songs beneath the words" in order to address the fears and conflicts that the group is facing(Heifetz and Linsky, 2002: 73-74). Following the model, this Chair had to be the objective arbiter in the conflict, refocusing faculty attention toward the challenges facing the department and maintaining a sense of urgency for the development of a long-term solution. It is during these times of conflict that people will want to slow the change process and the Chair will need to remind the faculty of the potential consequences of inaction. In this example, the Chair kept providing the statistics of increasing stop-outs and lower enrollments of the program to the faculty.

Create a Safe Haven

As a part of adaptive change process, there needs to be a "space" where people are able to discuss their disparate perspectives without fear of a negative impact on their work lives. This is vital, as people will not buy-in to the proposed change if they do not believe that all voices are at least heard by people in authority, if not acted upon. The consequence of not having created this safe haven is that when the time comes for implementation, people may cause a derailment of the recommended change.

In this situation, the non-tenured, junior faculty who taught a number of the courses in the program often felt reluctant to express their opinions for fear of retribution at time of promotion. The Chair had to build trust with the junior faculty, assuring them of complete confidentiality while encouraging them to express

their concerns so that issues specific to non-tenured faculty would be considered in the decision making for the final program recommendations. This was indeed a balancing act for the Chair, but it was important to provide this safe environment as many of the innovative, out-of-the-box ideas often come from the more silent members of the group.

Conclusion

By following the six steps of the adaptive leadership model for this situation, we have seen that the Chair was able to manage the difficult change process that the department had to move through while gaining the faculty support necessary for successful implementation. In the end, the department changed the course offerings from a 15-week format to 7-week formats and weekend formats, which provided more flexibility for the adult students but retained the academic integrity of the program.

Leaders in higher education are facing challenges that require deep change and take into account various stakeholders. Knowing when and how to lead adaptively will enable academic departments and the university to address growing demands from all stakeholders: faculty, students and the community.

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