Empowering Faculty to Facilitate Distance Education

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Recommended Citation
Arenas, Jane; Gray, Henry; and Hamner, Paulette (2009) "Empowering Faculty to Facilitate Distance Education," Academic Leadership: The Online Journal: Vol. 7: Iss. 1, Article 18.
DOI: 10.58809/UNPU5762
Available at: https://scholars.fhsu.edu/alj/vol7/iss1/18

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Academic Leadership Journal

Introduction

Traditional education has undergone major changes over the past decade. Higher education has evolved from brick and mortar to virtual campuses. Technological advancements in communication have changed the way information is presented. The manner in which students learn has also evolved. Educational leaders must also evolve to meet the needs of both students and faculty because, faculty members struggle with changing curricula, non-traditional learning environments and new technology. They need their leaders to assist them with the transitions (Tjosvold 2006). This paper attempts to provide a research-based framework through which educational leaders might empower faculty to better meet the mission, purpose and needs of the institutions based upon established leadership theories. This topic is important because by empowering faculty, it enables them to take on roles in leadership and improve the educational system. It encourages ownership for the faculty with greater participation in school governing and a more positive attitude. Additionally, “When employees perform at a high level, managers may well find they can easily support and encourage their employee” (Tjosvold 2006).

Significance of Faculty Empowerment

Empowerment is giving an individual the opportunity to grow and to use his or her experiences to contribute to decision-making processes. Parmar (2003) defines empowerment as the process in which one discovers internal strength and the ability to influence change within one’s organization. Empowerment is not granted overnight. Empowerment involves a personal evolution incorporating experiences that shape each person’s identity. Parmar notes that first the individual needs to develop a sense of self and a sense of his or her relationship with others. Next, active participation in the process of considering change and enacting change needs to take place. An effective leader must provide the opportunity to develop and hone critical thinking skills so that the individual can have the tools needed to resolve problems and conflicts.

To empower faculty, an educational leader can consider how he or she will be able to energize the team and inspire individuals. Fazzi (2008) wrote about the effectiveness of motivation through hope, vision, meaning, and purpose. Fazzi cites McKee, Boyatzis and Johnston (2004) for defining resonance as a collective energy that supports higher productivity. Gersh (2006) wrote about how R. Greenleaf introduced the philosophy of servant-leadership as a conscious choice to place others’ needs as the highest priority. According to Gersh, Greenleaf asserted that leadership grows out of service and that effective leadership is measured by whether those the leader serve become more autonomous as they become more likely themselves to serve. In doing so, the effective leader empowers the team members.

Carey and Ness (2001) defined professionalism as a display of attitudes and behaviors that embody traits that individuals in a discipline of study and practice value. An effective educational leader should personify professionalism and in doing so he or she would inherently promote collaborative...
cooperation amongst team members. Team effort strengthens the group and unifies efforts towards the common goal. The servant-leader also leads by example. In doing so, not only is the educator empowered, he or she can model behavior after the leader whose actions match his or her words. Communication can be improved because these actions fortify the leader’s vision, allowing the team to stay synchronized with the educational institution’s mission statement.

Leadership Model that Supports Faculty Empowerment

Empowerment of faculty begins with the leader. Many different leadership theories and models are appropriate for the empowerment of faculty but servant leadership, as outlined by Greenleaf (1977), provides the support and encouragement necessary to build a community of leaders within the educational institute (Laub 1999). “Servant-Leadership intends to empower employees, students, and citizens, emphasizing the roles of service, support, stewardship, and facilitation in leadership” (Hays 2008, 113).

A vision of what empowerment is must first be developed before implementation can take place: this means the servant leader must first understand the faculty and know the needs of each. Yet awareness of the needs of others is not the sole focus of the leader. Servant-leaders must be acutely aware of personal needs as well as the needs of others, and be mindful of what may be happening in the immediate and broader environment before being able to empower faculty (Hays 2008). This concept of servant leadership emphasizes the interests, personal and professional development, and the empowerment of followers which ultimately leads to achievement of a shared vision for the organization (Gersh 2006).

To inspire and empower faculty, the servant leader must take an active role in the organization, discovering the weaknesses of the existing system, and inviting others to participate in the development of a community that shares power and a collective vision. By promoting participative decision making, the servant leader builds the confidence of faculty and helps develop self-efficacy, with the process allowing leaders and followers to raise one another to higher levels of motivation and achievement (Humphries 2005). Servant-leaders have a role unlike traditional leadership. Servant leadership promotes the development of people through the sharing of power and community building (Laub 1999). These leaders do not push faculty or make demands, but instead pull faculty, guiding each person to a higher level of achievement. A servant leader offers support and guidance, invites faculty to participate and take the role of leadership alongside the servant leader, and encourages faculty in personal fulfillment and development. Servant leaders spend time discussing issues and listening to what others say. The servant-leader persuades and influences faculty by discussing what matters, what is important to the leader, and why, while in turn hearing what is important to the followers and why. “The servant-leader is always concerned about doing the right thing for the greater good” (Hays 2008, 124).

Strategies for Successful Faculty Transition to Distance Learning

The transition process from face-to-face instruction to distance education is a major paradigm shift for faculty members. A study exploring faculty perception of the usefulness of distance education programs (Gibson, Harris, and Colaric 2008) indicated a strong correlation between faculty acceptance of online programs and the perceived usefulness. Professors also have concerns about losing intimate interactions with their students in the online environment (Sugar, Martindale, and Crawley 2007).
Colleges and universities need to have substantial professional development opportunities to assist in shifting faculty perception and provide training for effective alternative teaching strategies.

Four components of the servant leadership model can be used in professional development programs. These include listening, conceptualization, commitment to the groups of others, and building a community (Crippen 2006). Actively listening to staff concerns will offer opportunities to share experiences from staff members who had similar fears prior to the initiation of distance education programs. For example, a graduate nurse educator transitioning to online teaching commented that the “lack of face-to-face interaction is offset by the higher caliber of discussion in the asynchronous environment” (Johnson 2008, 19). Faculty may also be reassured that many traditional teaching strategies can be transformed to distance teaching models (Sugar, Martindle, and Crawley 2007). Course materials are easily transferable to online HTML documents. Dynamic small and large group discussions can occur in online asynchronous formats. Faculty can continue to interact with students through various communication tools such as discussion boards, instant messaging, and blogs. To enhance student-teacher interactions, audio and video may be utilized in either synchronous or asynchronous environments. Online simulations can provide students the ability to view real world scenarios that may not be possible in traditional classrooms. Providing faculty with a picture of what distance education can look like is essential in altering perceptions of its usefulness.

There exists a steep learning curve when faculty transition from traditional to distance education programs (Sugar, Martindle, and Crawley 2007). Administrators must provide significant opportunities for training and professional development. Eib and Miller (2006) indicate that many distance education faculty members experience a sense of isolation. The authors recommend that institutions develop a professional development community program that spans a minimum of an academic school year. A social work program located in Western Canada implemented a three phased professional development institute with significant faculty satisfaction. The program commenced with a pre-planning stage where faculty had opportunities to develop individualized project proposals. Phase two of the institute included a multi-day training conference where faculty attended small and large group sessions of choice. The final phase of the institute concluded with faculty workshop and presentation of individual outcomes. Although the institute had concluded, the faculty still continued with ongoing collaboration and professional development. Ongoing faculty development to support distance education faculty should include online synchronous tools such as Blackboard, videoconferencing, and audio-graphic conferencing.

Eib and Miller (2006) offer several recommendations for developing effective professional development learning communities. The following eight strategies for creating distance education professional development programs incorporated Eib and Miller’s suggestions:

1. A team should be created that have core members who are experienced with distance education practices and philosophy. These members will help orient individuals who are not familiar with distance learning practices. Members should include faculty from a variety of academic areas.

2. Extrinsic incentives, including monetary bonuses, may be used if there is a need for increased faculty participation.

3. Participation can include e-mails and phone calls, but should also include face to face interaction when available. Requirements for participation should be clearly identified. Allow for varied
participation from faculty as some may desire more or less involvement.

4. Faculty should be actively involved in preplanning to personalize training. Technology such as wikis and blogs can be used during this process to assist in practice and application of technology tools. Faculty should write at least one personal technology goal prior to the start of the professional development program.

5. The program should include diverse professional development activities such as video presentations, online discussions, and small face to face group discussion to encourage deeper levels of analysis and synthesis.

6. Professional development activities may consist of how to develop online lesson presentations, how to facilitate synchronous discussions, how to present a live video lecture, how to create engaging distance education lessons, and how to assess online participation. Research based practices should be utilized.

7. There should be many opportunities for faculty to interact in synchronous sessions to learn from each other. Dialogue should be free-flowing. The goal is to have faculty learn from each other rather than from an outside expert.

8. The end of the professional development program should be highlighted with a significant culminating activity. Faculty can present their personal goals and discuss individual progress. Institutions should offer ongoing opportunities for distance education professional development that includes the latest educational technology and current distance education practices.

Institutional Infrastructures

Perhaps the most challenging transition that faculty must make is that from traditional education to distance education. In making the transition, the infrastructure to support the new teaching and learning strategies must represent a gradual shift from one form of delivery to the next. Some technological infrastructures are learning management systems (LMS), content management systems (CMS), computer mediated commutation (CMC), local area network (LAN), wide area networks (WAN), multimedia laboratories, broadband Internet services, technology equipped classrooms which caters to the requirements for some learners with special needs, financial administration portals, technical support team and a faculty and student help desk.

In preventing faculty resentment, the technological infrastructure must be configured with faculty inputs and a faculty training plan for gradual phasing into mainstream teaching and learning. This is supported by Jamtsho and Bullen (2007) who made the point that “the practical implications of this for the distance teacher education program project are that information and communication technologies must be introduced gradually, and learning activities that use them must take this limited access into account” (Jamtsho and Bullen 2007, 4). Limited access means that faculty gradually gains optimal access and comfort level over time.

Infrastructure must also support multicultural learning communities. According to Chávez, (2007), dynamics necessary for college professors to develop and facilitate empowering multicultural learning communities are a “(a) climate of safety, (b) spirit of risk taking, (c) congruence, (d) reciprocal
relationships and roles, (e) multiplicity, and (f) reciprocity” (Chavez 2007, 4). In preparing the training plan for ensuring that faculty manages the usage of the infrastructure, the abovementioned six dynamics must be manifested in the empowerment objectives or the training plan to enable faculty usage of the infrastructure.

The need for training of faculty to interface with the infrastructure was one of the findings from the distance teacher education program project. Infrastructure support training must be done with faculty to design, create, and manage learning resources for the LMS, CMS and CMC (Jamtsho and Bullen 2007, 4). In preparing faculty to use the LMS, learning outcomes should incorporate setting up programs and courses, scheduling courses, and managing the actual delivery processes. On the other hand the training to use the CMS involves training to setup file structure and file formatting, developing multimedia learning objects, which includes short videos and flash movie files and setting up of quizzes and other assessment contents. The development of these learning objects was achieved through collaborative team efforts using community of practice sessions geared at group strengthening with each team member supporting each other.

Faculty Empowerment and Financial Support

The Human Employment and Resources Training (HEART) in Jamaica implemented an integrated learning management system. According to W. Malabver, Chief Information Officer (personal communication, October 14, 2008), the following implementation cost of a typical higher education distance learning project was explained. To design and implement an LMS for 5,000 learners and 1,000 faculty cost a sum of $75 million. This system was designed as a robust system that was outsourced to universities and community colleges and was integrated with the CMS and the CMC.

During the first two years of implementation, the designers were contracted to work with the faculty to use the integrated LMS for HEART. The system is now called the Competency-Based Learning and Assessment System (CLAS). The maintenance cost from the year 2001 to 2003 was $4 million. Maintenance involved user acceptance implementation into the faculty curriculum and troubleshooting implementation issues at all 26 adult learning institutions, three teachers colleges and one university. Critical to the maintenance contract was the training of a cadre of support staff that took over the maintenance of the integrated system after the designers’ contract expired. Integration of existing systems such as the Great Plains accounting system, Knowledge Management Systems and faculty library cost $3 million. This cost structure was one of the most important financial support interventions.

This represents a critical and compact synopsis of the magnitude of responsibilities involved in implementing a distance education system support infrastructure for faculty empowerment. In preparing for faculty empowerment, the process of budgeting incorporates a listing of all the faculty empowerment initiatives to take place on a year by year basis. Configuring and implementing the infrastructure is also a budget item of which the faculty must be engaged in. This cooperative approach to planning augurs well for servant leadership. In these circumstances faculty members empower each other for the greater good in higher level institutions of learning.

Conclusion

Changes to education, advanced by rapidly evolving technology, have the potential to leave faculty struggling to keep up with these changes while still meeting the needs of their students and their
organizations. Empowering faculty to better meet the mission and purpose of the institution, and therefore, the needs of the students, is a crucial role for today’s educational leaders. While many leadership theories might be used as an approach for empowering faculty, servant leadership was used as a model because of its emphasis on the interests, personal and professional development, and the empowerment of followers.

Transitioning from a classroom education to a distance education format can be a difficult challenge for some faculty members who may resist the loss of face-to-face interaction. Using the servant leadership components of listening, conceptualizing, and commitment to the group and the community, leaders can empower faculty to take ownership of the process. Providing adequate professional development opportunities for faculty who require them and appropriate infrastructure, while potentially expensive, is a necessary and worthwhile investment for the organization attempting to develop a distance education program. Faculty empowerment is an important role for educational leaders as they strive to meet the needs students, educational institutions, and the communities that they serve.

References


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