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Leading Change in Higher Education

Leadership in the process of change is highlighted, which is often perceived to be the critical factor in ensuring successful change and

> "… essential in order to create vision, communicate policy and deploy strategy" (Davies et al., 2001, p. 1026).

Leadership is generally distinguished as being different from management in that the former is concerned with envisioning change. Middlehurst (1995) maintains that in order to achieve a shared vision, leadership needs to be in place at different levels within the organisation, and Gregory (1996), argues that owing to the complexity of change and the necessary activities that are required, then leadership should be shared (see Dewey, 1975; Giroux, 1994; Purpel, 1998 for their views on this). Further, Gregory contends that

> "… where justice, equality and participation are, key philosophical beliefs, ... the leadership itself needs to be participatory and democratic" (1996, p. 49).

An optimistic view is taken by Middlehurst (1989); Slowey (1995) and Gregory (1996), who see the potential in universities for managing change through 'dispersed leadership' based on collegiality, participation and collaboration. This may then return us to the issue of culture, which according to Johnson (1992), is represented by the core values, beliefs and attitudes held by employees. Accordingly, organisational change is more likely to be successfully implemented if it is in-line with the cultural norms. Weil (1999) concurs with this general position but disputes the idea that in higher education there is cultural unity, and she goes on to suggest that there needs to be incentives to support systemic learning rather than concentrating on the bureaucracy involved in quality initiatives. Systemic reform is supported by Fullan (1993) who believes there has to be a necessary relationship between culture and structure. Similarly, Seller, states:

"Restructuring and reculturing mean that the organisational manner of conducting business, as well as the values that underpin the operation, must both change" (2001, p. 256).

Blackwell & Preece (2001) consider that for internal change agents, the challenge has been the growing interest in government, triggered by the interest of the treasury to protect tax-payers' money, raise productivity and create a mass system whilst at the same time maintaining the three E's. As a result, academic staff feels that their professional autonomy and academic freedom are under threat. Senior managers are in the position of striving to protect their institutions whilst at the same time professing ownership of change which, in fact, hails from one of these external sources (Clarke & Newman, 1997). This may result in rivalries between disciplines and personal jockeying for position, especially for those within institutions, who aspire to positions of leadership, which in turn adds further pressure to the nature of change. The professional autonomy of staff and the fact that collegiality is entrenched may make it difficult to engender change, even if desirable, especially for change agents Blackwell & Preece (2001).

The management literature reveals that change is complex in nature and requires managers to employ a range of skills and abilities to enact the change process. The literature confirms that identifying the need to change is an essential requirement and once this has occurred then employing effective leadership strategies is vital. Where organisations require transformational change it is a case of deciding what not to change in order to engage with those factors that are in most need of it. In the incremental change process concern is levelled at environmental scanning and being clear about the sectoral developments and best practice. In both situations leadership qualities are essential and the literature reveals this to be the central pillar in successful implementation.

As revealed in the background to change Kotter's (1995) work identifies important steps in effecting change, and although derived from a business perspective, it may have validity for change in higher education, especially change of a transformational nature, which is apparent in the move from college to university status.

Effectively identifying the need to change goes to the very heart of leadership. In an organisation that only needs to respond slowly to an incrementally changing environment, then observation of the necessary conditions for change in the sector is the main requirement. In turbulent environments, it is more about deciding what not to change and later being capable of managing the multiple changes likely to be requires in order to maintain congruence with the sector's requirements.

Bridges (2003) and Jeffreys (1995), consider the notion of transition management, which examines the role of leaders in bringing about effective change through a transitional process. According to them, the transitional period is generally the phase during which people resist and it is not necessarily the change itself. They consider that change effectively involves shifts in the external environment that produce a significant impact on the organisation. In the transitional phase they appraise the psychological effects on people as they come to terms with the change, as a process of inner experience. In essence people resist giving up their identity as it is expressed in their current work, and resist the chaos and uncertainty that involves many change initiatives.

Bridges (2003) identifies three phases of the transition process, 1) endings, 2) neutral zone and 3) new beginnings. The role of the change agents is to nurture others throughout the transitional process toward new beginnings whilst maintaining the level of activity. This model and its implications reflect much of the work undertaken by Lewin (1951), in the development of his unfreeze/refreeze model. As such, like any organic process, change cannot be made to happen just by a word or act alone, it needs to be encouraged, supported and reinforced if it is to be successfully implemented.

Case Selection

There are 116 UK (12.01.2006) institutions with university status, however, there are provincial variations in regulatory structures and this research will concentrate on English universities within three conurbations to ensure that the national policy issues and factors affecting the group are common. Similarly, the project will consider those institutions offering services across a wide range of subject areas, rather than the smaller more focused institutions, that operate within the same funding and regulatory pool. With this in mind it was decided to select three institutions that, a) share a similar background of missions to disseminate knowledge through teaching, b) are

more vocationally orientated in choice of provision, and c) have similar resource endowments at the time of change. One large teaching and research institution was chosen in Manchester due to its recent merger and consequent change management issues, coupled with its considerable environmental affects on the two other northwest organisations to be studied.

The selection of universities chosen for this project reflects this approach. All are located in cities within the UK and face different local challenges, different competitive challenges and differing challenges in relation to major investments.

While the need for balance, diversity and learning opportunities are important considerations, difficulties of access meant that an opportunistic approach to selecting the cases also had to be taken. Since the researcher lived outside of the UK the research was undertaken when he and the individuals within the institutions were available, and contacts within the universities contributed to the choice.

Change management processes are examined in four universities. To undertake more might threaten the validity of the evaluations due to the overwhelming volume of data gathered. . A small study may produce this. Eisenhardt (1989b) and Yin (1994) argue that

> "analytic generalization can be used whether your case study involves one
> or several cases"(Yin, 1994, p. 31).

In addition, although the number of cases to be researched is small, the examination of more than one case will improve internal validity.

As previously considered, the universities in the UK have generally been subject to high levels of change in recent years and change appears, more than ever before, to be permanently on the agenda for this group of institutions. The complex environment is largely public sector and highly regulated. This group operates within a different national culture and is largely people and services based, and as such the group can be said to be substantially different from commercial companies.

When events reoccurred at least three times during interviews with individual interviewees from within the same institution or with three individual interviewees

from different institutions they were considered to be a possible theme. The implication was that some measure of significance was placed on the issue in the minds of the senior managers being interviewed. The often repeated issues raised were subsequently aggregated into strong themes or sub-themes which revealed a link to the main theme but were less frequently discussed, or were mentioned using different terminology.

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Findings

There were major issues relating to the type and size of the institutions; for instance the major research organisations generally had a different agenda to post-1992 and new universities. The pre-1992 institutions perceived their role differently in the sense that it was expected that they might recruit the more able students. This in turn transmuted the ability to attract a more 'able' staff with the necessary research skills. Whereas the size of the institution, both in number and budget terms meant that managing the change process would appear more difficult and additional effort would be required to convince staff that change was actually needed, those institutions who had to compete for market share may already have the change processes in place which could enable them to be more flexible and attuned to the external environment

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The main themes are offered explained below in order to provide some order to the issues raised, together with the effect and impact that each theme has on the management of change in the organisation:

Status is concerned with how the internal and external stakeholders viewed the institution with respect to its position in the environment with particular emphasis on the title university and how long it had been established.

> "… there was a perception, however vague that hanging on to college of HE status would relegate us in the marketplace."
> **University D Interview 4**

Reputation, although closely linked to status, it may at times be used interchangeably, but in this project it relates to the recognition of academic activity by various external stakeholders.

> "What we are trying to do is build a reputation to meet the demands of the customer and provide an exceptionally high quality of service."
> **University D Interview 1**

Massification is the demand placed on the sector by government to increase the number of students in higher education to 50 per cent.

> "… better value for money and seeking to strip the amount of state contribution to HE and, therefore, what you have to have had over the years is students numbers going up but actual cash going down …"
> **University A Interview 1**

Market Needs. The attempt to anticipate what the demands are likely to be in the future for graduates on completion of their studies.

> "I think it is a combination of astute reading of the kind of market potential and where the gaps are but also recognising that we are in a very fortunate position …"
> **University D Interview 3**

Market Segments. The aim of institutions to identify niche markets that may be under-represented in the sector and might well allow them to grow and be able to meet their target numbers.

Customers are viewed by the universities to be all of those stakeholders who may wish to use the university, for example, as students, consultants or various organisations for research purposes.

> "The organisation is much more customer driven than when I first joined over thirty years ago."
> **University A Interview 1**

Recruitment and Growth is linked to massification and is concerned with meeting targets and increasing the number of students in the sector.

> "… what we are saying now is go for growth but do not under recruit …"
> **University A Interview 1**

Competition. Individual universities used in the case study completed an analysis of what others were doing in the sector and linked this back to status and market needs

> "A major reason for bringing the two institutions together, even though we worked closely together in the past, was to maintain a competitive edge with those in the region but more essentially nationally and internationally."
> **University C Interview 1**

Cultural Change is an important aspect of the change process and is concerned with moving the institution's values and belief systems towards creating a desire to change the way people may behave within the organisation.

> "Culture is a major issue in change, bringing together belief systems and values is important."
> **University C Interview 1**

Change Process is the enactment of change through the improvement of organisational performance.

> "Initially the change process was quite transformational but now I believe [it] will be emergent in the future."
> **University E Interview 1**

Management and Staff Engagement. The necessity for managers to engage fully with faculty and staff in order to gain commitment to the change process.

Strategic Planning is a logical and developed plan of action that holds credibility to those who must implement it and is the basis for the change programme.

> "… I felt that although we had a strategic plan ... it really didn't have ownership – and ownership is an issue."
> **University A Interview 1**

Leadership defines those managers who are acting as change agents, are designated to implement the plan, and who are committed to guide others to the new desired position.

> "From a senior management viewpoint it is necessary to have transparent and close leadership … in order to inculcate shared values."
> **University D Interview 1**

Communication is the ability of the leaders to transfer the message of change.

> "… the team knew and supported the direction that we needed to take and were able to answer questions clearly and with clarity in order to reduce any barriers that might exist."
> **University E Interview 1**

Role Modelling is an example set by the leaders to act as they would want others to act in the changed environment.

> "It takes five years [to make change]. You've got to get ownership down there. It's no good having ownership up here. You've got to get each admission's tutor knowing what the targets are and if he doesn't meet that target, knowing that it has knock-on consequences … you've got to have very 'savvy' deans and heads of department."
> **University A Interview 1**

Academic Perspective. The way in which academics view the institution and perceive their professional freedom.

> "… loyalty to the institution is an international phenomenon … they [academics] are just not involved in the university and this is a very real problem … then building up of loyalty is very hard."

University B Interview 1

When the interview data were submitted to computer analysis using NUD*IST, a pattern of nodes emerged which appeared to relate to several principal groupings of: context, substance and stewardship of change.. Context – adapted from Pettigrew's (1985) work – refers to the internal and external environments and, therefore, is the operational environment of the institution as it evolves temporally. The substance of change refers to what changes were made, whether to the organisation's size or the way its activities were conducted, and also includes the size or scale of change. Stewardship (Donaldson & Davies, 1991; Davies et al., 1997) refers to facilitating the implementation of change, its leadership and an assessment of its progress and effects.

Context

It was no real surprise to find that, driven by business context pressures the universities researched had changed emphasis over the years and had adopted a more entrepreneurial outlook and business culture. From the late 1980's when the polytechnics were no longer confined to local authority control and were eventually designated university status – and in the words of the former head of the HEFC Sir Bill Stubbs, now had the "freedom to go bust" – the control and subsequent reporting methodology to the HEFC prompted senior management teams to examine the vision and purpose of the university and in general make them more reactive to external pressures.

From the research the universities recognised that they needed to respond to demands of government, industry and societal groups, whilst at the same time maintaining and refining their traditional role of teaching, research and student learning as this was becoming more complicated due to the rapid changes occurring within the environment. It meant that in order to survive, despite old traditions or individual characters which had coloured their past, they would need to adopt a more flexible and adaptable position.

It was noted that higher education is in a complex change environment:

> "Educational change is complex more so than business change and requires a greater number of managerial skills than possibly in business due to the diversity of the organisation and the variety and power of stakeholders."
> **University C Interview 1**

Higher education, it would appear, is influenced just like any other business by the market supply and demand mechanisms.

Problems were revealed in the data that may contribute to staff morale issues and low support for some changes. An example might be under-recruitment. It could lead to budgetary constraints, which would mean less money to spend on recruitment and retention during the following year. From the author's view this is a classical 'death spiral' concept that is directly related to business practices.

> "… better value for money … so what you have over the years is student numbers going up but actual 'cash' going down."
> **University A Interview 1**

Although senior managers do recognise the necessity to operate in a more business like manner there is the recognition that faculty do have an important role to play in the organisation:

> "I make a real distinction of what the university must be like business wise in that it must be well managed and have real value for money. On the other hand I do not try and teach academics how they should run their programmes."
> **University A Interview 1**

Substance

The external influences impacting on a complex institution such as a university do mean that senior managers have to make some key decisions in order to enact change. As such, a university may be considered to be interacting in an open systems organisational model in which the external environmental events, issues and forces cannot be viewed independently but as interrelated elements in the complex entity. This links back to the literature review and the research of Davies & Ellison (1997) who suggest that the external environment does have an important impact on the change process.

Across the institutions researched there were arguments that the external environment did form an essential ingredient in guiding change:

> "I am concerned about the constant incessant [government] policy making concerning the sector."
> **University E Interview 1**

> "… our funding is dependent on the effective implementation of a [market force] policy directed by external stakeholders."
> **University D Interview 2**

Stewardship

It was relatively clear from the response that senior managers felt there had been a 'flatter and leaner' structure created, but on closer examination they were still hierarchical and, in some instances, significant power, especially financial was retained at the centre. What became apparent was that certain decision-making authority had been devolved but was still closely monitored in order to ensure compliance with the strategic objectives:

> "… the [organisational] structure is flatter than it used to be but there is still a hierarchy that is needed to ensure operational effectiveness."
> **University A Interview 1**

> "Schools are allowed to spend budget as they see fit within the limitations of the strategic plan. No need to get permission to spend or sign off contracts or grants."
> **University C Interview 1**

Those recently created, 2005, new universities viewed that structural change provided the means to improve efficiency and effectiveness even though there is little evidence to suggest that their original structures were any less effective than the implemented new ones:

> "… the structural changes involved the formation of the seven schools, headed by deans, but also cross university functions …"
> **University D Interview 1**

"A major effect was restructuring the organisation to meet the needs of the demands placed upon it …"
University E Interview 1

"The way we've tackled the changes in the organisational structure and processes … is being driven by the senior management team and by the vice-chancellor and me in particular."
University D Interview 2

"What we've done in the last couple of years, and put into place just over a year ago, and kind of 'tweaked it' this year, is we've increased the number of schools, reduced their size and created groupings of cognate subjects."
University D Interview 2

Summary Table 1

Context	Substance	Stewardship
Market need and segmentation	Reputation	Senior management
Customer	Massification	Management Practice
Recruitment		Communication
Competition		Academic perspective
Cultural Change		
Change Process		
Management and staff		
Strategic planning		

Although the main finding emerge when the artificial separation of themes into the three categories above are merged as in Figure 1.

What can be seen is a common overlap where external pressures of Growth, marketingisation are set in tension with organisational change. It is the management of this interlocking sector where the success of the change within universities is most critical and it is here that the literature indicates that leadership is the critical factor for success.

Insert Figure 1.

Discussion for a paper on the overlap

In conclusion the themes that emerged centred on the business environment, which is a relatively new phenomenon for those institutions in the UK. The external environment is significant with regard to how the individual stakeholders perceive higher education and how its services may be utilised by them. Stewardship of the institution as expressed by Donaldson and Davies (1991), and Davies et al., (1997) is focused on leadership and making sure that all managers fully engage with staff. To support this action research is a methodology, resulting in action learning activities, that is employed in the UK to determine the underlying concepts that require addressing. .

Recommendations

By employing action research techniques, leaders and change agents instigate action learning sets as a development tool, and in the UK this has been a considerable learning experience, which requires anything up to five years to implement. Nevertheless it is considered an essential aspect of inculcating change within the organisation. This has been supported through leadership development programmes and the further use of action learning sets in order to improve leadership skills. Through this programme the concepts of open communications, transparency and the 'management by walking about' have emerged

Management Practice
Leadership
Communication
Role Modelling
Implementation

STEWARDSHIP

Status

Reputation

Strategic Plan

Senior Managers
as Change
Agents

Massification
Recruitment and
Growth
Competition
Customers
Cultural Change
Change Process
Tensions

Organisational
Structure

CONTEXT

SUBSTANCE

Market
Segmentation