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BUILDING LEARNING ORGANIZATIONS: EMULATING BUSINESS ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES IN ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENTS



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Academic Environments**

Administering academic institutions by adhering to common business principles and organizational structures can provide a template for effective leadership and management practices. Applying these corporate ideologies in academic environments offers a roadmap for effectual learning outcomes and positive pedagogical institutional paradigms.

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Abstract: This paper will explore the underlying concepts and foundations upon which to build effective learning organizations, principally through emulation of corporate organizational structures. Business modeling applied to learning organizations can yield effective academic and administrative reporting structures, curriculum design and classroom teaching paradigms. By examining corporate industry structures in terms of academic learning, a case analysis uncovers learning disabilities through system archetypes. Consequently, recommendations for a corrective action plan can initiate academic solvency and positive learning outcomes. This specific educative stratagem will apply Peter Senge's five "Disciplines" as curative remediation. A final review applies a personal mastery plan to the organization that will employ a declaration of purpose, mission statement and sustaining vision for enduring and maintainable success.

Keywords: Building Learning Organizations, Personal Mastery Plan, Peter Senge, Academic Structuring

Introduction

Academic institutions and business organizations alike can stifle growth and inhibit positive change. By succumbing to common disabilities that invasively plague inert companies, academic institutions may also passively allow internal infirmities to riddle and ultimately incapacitate their organization from thriving. Identifying and addressing debilitating inefficiencies are only initial steps in rectifying an academic institutions' deficiencies and forging a counteractive blueprint for achievement. Explicit recommendations and thorough planning are integral to gauge accomplishments and attain scholastic success. Therefore, unremitting sustainability for any business organization is only possible with a clear and unobstructed statement of purpose and persisting vision for the company's future. Likewise, any learning organization's mission statement should focus on measurable goals and institutional growth. Whereas a corporation should be client-centric, an academic institution must also craft their own mission around their student constituency. A vision statement is similarly integral to maintaining a concentrated trajectory that affirms dedication to student learning while also advancing its pedagogical reach. Senge (2006) maintains that the "art of systems thinking lies in seeing through the detail complexity of the underlying structures generating change" (p.124). This systematic thinking is an attribute of successful business leadership whereby upper management and institutional leaders chart a course for the company by identifying business trends, institutional patterns and industry development. For an academic institution to successfully engage shifting student populations, they must, as Senge (2006) affirms, "...make the shift from seeing the world primarily from a linear perspective to seeing and acting systematically" (p. 125). Instituting systematic thinking into curriculum building fuses student engagement with academic organization. Forecasting for this evolution involves primarily identifying the limitations and "disabilities" that stifle an academic institution and cause it to disengage with its primary "client," the student. Thus, identifying these limitations and obstacles must be the initial first steps in curative remediation. These institutional confines are analogous in both business and academia. This study will assess organizational confines inclusive of both paradigms and then recognize a path to rectify these impediments to organizational success and institutional development.

Analysis

Learning disabilities evident in academic institutions are often reflexive of weak leadership. Consequently, weak leadership causes ineffective administrative management and yields dogmatic institutional policies which bear archaic teaching models. This in turn results in disaffected faculty and ultimately, reveals a disengaged student body. "A reinforcing (amplifying) process," as Senge (2006) states, "is set in motion to produce a desired result. It creates a spiral of success but also creates inadvertent secondary effects (manifested in a balancing process) which eventually slow down the success (p. 94). Successful leadership promotes effective management. Effective management achieves measurable benchmarks through staff participation. Staff participation facilitates best practices for positive faculty instruction. Positive faculty instruction engages student active participation. Active student participation promotes receptive learning.

Meadows (2008) states, “To be a highly functional system, hierarchy must balance the welfare, freedoms, and responsibilities of the subsystems and total system - there must be enough central control to achieve coordination toward the large-system goal, and enough autonomy to keep all subsystems flourishing, functioning, and self-organizing” (p. 85). She goes on to say, “Resilience, self-organization, and hierarchy are three of the reasons dynamic systems can work so well. Promoting or managing for these properties of a system can improve its ability to function well over the long term—to be sustainable” (Meadows, 2008. p. 85). Academic institutions must be aware when crafting their own internal structural systems that leadership teams and managers are inclusive of existing subsystems and hierarchical structures within the organization.

In corporations when there is a lack of new product development or profits languish, participant constituencies can, as Senge (2006) asserts, “shift the burden” (103). Senge (2006) goes on to explain, that “The underlying problem grows worse...and the system loses whatever abilities it had to solve the underlying problem” (103). In this way, companies are stymied with an apathetic work force and “eroding goals” (Senge, 2006. P. 107). Senge (2006) warns, “Whenever there is a gap between our goals and our current situation there are two sets of pressures: to improve the situation and to lower our goals” (p. 107). This model plays out in academia as well. “Improving the situation” and “lowering goals” can be diametrically opposing objectives. Thus, a lack of real purpose and a muddled vision couples with inefficiencies in both time and purpose.

Results and Discussion

Senge’s (2006) “Five Disciplines” establish a substantive foundation upon which to formulate an actionable method for academic “systems thinking.” “Systems thinking,” according to Senge (2006), “...is a discipline for seeing wholes. It is a framework for seeing interrelationships rather than things, for seeing patterns of change rather than static ‘snapshots’” (p. 68). This shift of thinking is of primary importance if there is any desire to rectify a downward trajectory in teaching effectiveness. Because there is in its genesis a pattern of behaviors and not just individual exclusive events, an academic organization is best served to conceptualize the “mezzanine view” of its state of affairs, both leading up to its current state as well as where this trajectory will likely end up. In this sense, “Systems Thinking” is the “conceptual cornerstone that underlies all of the five learning disciplines,” and thus pertinent to address first and foremost (Senge, 2006. p. 69). Senge (2006) goes on to say, “Without systems thinking, there is neither the incentive nor the means to integrate the learning disciplines once they have come into practice” (p. 69).

Remaining cognizant of changing patterns and emerging trends, whether positive or detrimental, is central to preparing for change and tracking effectiveness of corrective measures. This self-awareness of over-arching principles, policies and practices is the essences of “seeing wholes” as a means to “learn how to foster health” (Senge, 2006. p. 69). Senge (2006) calls this awareness “seeing circles of causality” (p. 73). “If we want to see systemwide interrelationships, we need a language of interrelationships, a language made up of circles” (Senge, 2006. p. 73). In practice, an academic institution as an entity must simply be aware of the parts as well as the sum of those parts, both in administrative dealings as well as in operational acuity. Specifically, it is not solely the business outcomes or transactions, but also the mental causality precipitating those behaviors, decisions and actions.

“Personal Mastery,” as Senge (2006) avows, “means approaching one’s life as creative work, living life from a creative as opposed to reactive viewpoint” (p. 131). In this sense, academic institutions must become the creative talent it professes to be by creatively thinking outside of restrictive and outmoded teaching models. In this regard, that means providing new, novel and emerging learning paradigms within the scope of its pedagogy. By refusing to be constricted, passé modes in the creation of instructional learning academic institutions must provide a unique product and experience for both its clients and its students, which the institution should perceive as one in the same. To reiterate, in today’s landscape of higher learning, the student is also the client. The value, and in fact the monetary value in this case, is the message, how this message is taught and delivered, and also how it is received and perceived. In practice, this delivery mechanism is the creative transmission of erudition.

“Mental Models” come into play then, to discredit preexisting notions and resulting stereotyped, deeply held views that serve to limit growth and change. Senge (2006) concludes, it’s “why the best ideas fail” (p. 163). Conversely, he observes, “if mental models can *impede* learning—why can’t they also help *accelerate* learning” (Senge, 2006. p. 167). Here, what Senge (2006) suggests is, “...the impetus for the discipline of bringing mental models to the surface and challenging them so they can be improved” (p. 167). To accomplish this task, Senge (2006) provides “tools” and “skills,” specifically employing “skills of reflection and skills of inquiry” as a means to liberate the leader and engage the instructor in shifted, improved mental models (p. 175). In academia, outmoded attitudes in organizational teaching models must be abandoned from the starting point of academic administration and replaced with policy that integrates progressive inquiry methods and emerging trends in instructional teaching methods. Care must be taken to avoid new fads in classroom theatrics or instructional hyperbole, but instead seek out and embrace the creative realms of learning receptivity. Receptivity in this example is the crux of message delivery. In essence, the new message is always look for the *new* way to deliver a *new* message.

Logically, the next step is to recruit Senge's (2006) discipline of "building a shared vision" (p. 192). Senge (2006) asserts, "When people truly share a vision they are connected, bound together by a common aspiration" (192). He contends, "Shared vision is vital for the learning organization because it provides the focus and energy for learning" (Senge, 2006, p. 192). In reality, this shared vision is problematic because at this stage of the "five disciplines" a leader must recruit the subordinate support structure where the rest of the organization buys into the message. In academic institutions, this often comes across as vapid proselyting and unidirectional lecturing. Instead, administration must take the example from business models and empower organizational leaders to be "classroom" leaders to create and deliver a bold and identifiable message to their constituencies that is both accepted and consumed across a multitude of academic and classroom teaching models. In common parlance and in accord with the institution's prescription for change, the academic institution must adapt to *creatively* conceive and *creatively* deliver that message that is also *creatively* understood.

Once these disciplines are understood and the vision is shared by all, the academic leadership team must be molded to sustain the direction and viability of the enduring mission and that new vision. Concepts must be learned and repeatable, and not so stringently constricted. Instead, these notions must be adopted fully by the organization and continually adaptable to the changing needs of the marketplace. Senge (2006) writes, "Team learning is the process of aligning and developing the capacity of a team to create the results its members truly desire. It builds on the discipline of developing shared vision" (p. 218).

John Moorecraft (2007) notes, "The idea of rehearsing alternative futures is fundamental to contemporary strategic modelling and scenario development. The purpose of models and simulations is to prepare organizations and individuals for alternative futures by bringing these futures to life so they are imagined more vividly than would otherwise be possible" (p. 6). This notion assumes that modeling standards are necessary prerequisites functioning in academic modeling and business organizational structuring.

Relatedly, "team learning has three critical dimensions. First, there is the need to think insightfully about complex issues. Second, there is the need for innovative, coordinated action. Third, there is the role of team members on the other teams" (Senge, 2006, p. 219). In practice, this translates as the academic organization to explore new, but related avenues for innovative learning opportunities, to work collaboratively within a creative *workspace*, and finally, to work across cross-functional groups and amongst external departments with colleagues as well as the student/client both within and outside the organization.

Senge (2006) refers to these thinking paradigms as "metanoia" or a "shift in mind" (p. 219). "To grasp the meaning of 'metanoia' is to grasp the deeper meaning of learning, for learning also involves a fundamental shift or movement of mind" (Senge, 2006, p. 13). As Senge (2006) concludes, "This then, is the basic meaning of a 'learning organization' – an organization that is continually expanding its capacity to create its future" (p. 14). Extrapolating these concepts necessitates that academic organizations require a revived "shift of mind" and recommitment to embracing and incorporating change as a core tenant of doing business in the field of education.

Pragmatically, these disciplines espouse a plan of action that outlines feasible specific tactics that are easily implementable. Monthly reports by academic leadership should be instituted surveying how each department group interacts and integrates with the organization and across cross-functional teams. Additionally, upper administration must develop and regularly adhere to a primary and consistent purpose of business that provides a vision for continued success. At the same time, the organization should discard outdated mental models and instead embrace new mental models that allow adaptability of the unit to thrive in a changing academic landscape. Finally, care should be given to enlist the help of other members of this "new" organization to enact change and share this renewed vision for the company. In this case, the leadership team must sell the idea of creative change in the creative realm. Most importantly, however, academic leaders must provide personalized mentorship throughout the organization by measuring successes and quickly enacting corrective measures as a means of affecting institutionalizing effective learning practices and ingratiating new learning practices into the culture of the organization across all constituencies.

Conclusion

To most effectively adhere to these principles is to review personal mastery in the context of leadership organization and development. Developing a plan for personal mastery is contingent upon a clear understanding of that concept.

Bearing in mind, aspects of the "personal mastery" notion must be clearly understood by all individuals across all levels of the organization. In this definition, "Personal mastery is the discipline of continually clarifying and deepening our personal vision, of focusing our energies, of developing patience, and of seeing reality objectively" (Senge, 2006, p. 7). As Sweeney and Meadows (1995) state, "Words are sometimes ill-equipped to convey the power, strength and dynamism of a clearly visualized goal or objective," (34). Precisely for this reason, it is

imperative that all members of the organization, and especially the leader, clearly understand how each member of the organization is crucial to implementing and furthering the institution's message in accordance with the mission statement and in harmony with the outlined vision for the future.

To enact this fundamental alteration, an elemental approach to transformation must be embraced by the institution. In a sense, the company becomes an individual entity defined by values, purpose, vision and ultimately practice. A statement of purpose, therefore, is the most basic and primary foundation of which to build any organization, whether that be a business unit or academic institution. In the case of the academic model, the business at hand must exist outside of and exclusive of any one department head, and instead shared amongst administrative leaders as well as with faculty, staff and student constituencies. Consequently, the mission statement in its most rudimentary form should be to provide personalized, innovative and creative messaging that promotes erudition and inspired reception by the desired recipients, primarily the students in this scenario. Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross, and Smith (1994) assert that this should be collaborative in an organization by "co-creating places [for] every member in a creative orientation. Every step involves choice. Individuals begin by drawing forth aspect of their personal vision" (p. 322). Therefore, an enduring vision can follow to subsist as a sustaining and positive creative force for learning effectiveness. Fundamentally, it is therefore the duty of an academic institution and its leadership to ratify and enthusiastically maintain positive change incorporating the values and disciplines outlined, in all future iterations and successive generations to continually adapt and reassess teaching practices for primary efficacy on an ongoing basis and in perpetuity.

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