

Chapter 13

Integrating Cultural Perspectives Into Organizational Learning: An Anecdotal Study in Higher Education

Ruth Gotian
Weill Cornell Medicine, USA

ABSTRACT

Higher education has a distinct culture. Subsets of this unique culture are found in specific professional schools, including medical, dental, law, and business schools. Just as every person is different, every institution is also distinctive. Regardless of similarities, successful initiatives at one institution may not translate to another institution. To succeed, a culture of learning, open dialogue, and unbiased, active listening must reverberate through every person and level of hierarchy within the organization. This chapter will delve into the hallmarks of a learning organization and provide useful tools to create successful learning organizations at the program, departmental, and organizational levels while simultaneously being open to transformative learning opportunities for its faculty and staff.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education has its own culture. Successful programs in the corporate world may not translate to the academic environment. As a subset of higher education, professional schools have vastly different cultures. Institutions within the empire of higher education have distinct cultures and rhythms. Professional schools, especially Ivy League institutions, are rooted in centuries-old traditions. These include: medical, dental, and law schools. Leadership at these institutions resembles a revolving door as new leaders introduce their own ideas and visions. Success or failure of leadership can be summed up by whether they took the time to understand the culture of their new institution. Armed with examples ranging from admissions to retreat planning, this chapter will focus on real life examples within higher education experienced by an educational administrator with over a quarter century career in higher

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education. The outcomes varied based on the leader's cultural understanding and appreciation of the institution. This chapter serves as a guide for such leaders, articulating the importance of bridging the dichotomy between the cultural organization and the learning organization and to understand the role cultural influencers have within the organization and the context of learning.

Background

This chapter highlights some of the experiences of a higher education administrator who has been educated and served as a leader in both state and Ivy League institutions. The administrator's learning experiences include active participation in online and in-person communities of practice. By participating in both instructional forms as a leader and student, the administrator's experience and research indicates that cultural dichotomies exist between state, private, and Ivy League institutions as well as in the administration and communities of online and in-person courses.

Prior to implementing or suggesting changes, it is important to understand the learning culture of an institution. Doing so takes time and a willingness to listen through dynamic engagement with the institutional faculty, staff and students. The administrator observed first-hand leaders at every level attempting to match their new environment with their old institutional practices. The experience shows that a leader's ability to be the active listener with bespoke ideas that an institution needs succumbs to a predisposition of comfort and ease. The proof of principle here came through three deans who tried to mirror prior workspaces, organizational structures, programs and technological solutions, while incorporating guilds and informal groups for vertical mentoring. While each initiative was promising, they were predestined to fail, as the leadership did not account for the current institution's campus and resources. Unlike the institution that they were trying to emulate, the affiliated hospital, students and faculty came from various geographical locations. This made it difficult to schedule meetings due to the transient nature of the current campus, versus the homogenous nature of the previous campus where each leader previously worked.

Another example from the administrator's experience comes from yet another leadership change brought by a dean who was hired as part of a change in leadership at a professional school. Once fully on board, the dean decided to change the department's culture by expecting higher production from the staff in terms of having an immediate handle on the tracking of all students and alumni, a process that was never previously underscored or undertaken in that office. He also expected an exponential increase in the number of students and faculty who applied for and were awarded federal grants for their research. What the dean failed to grasp was that the staff lacked the skill sets to increase production. Furthermore, they were not motivated to complete additional tasks. Rather than seeing the staff as a valuable resource, he saw them as a liability, a recipe that Peter Drucker identified as a disaster (Drucker et al., 2008). Most of the staff did not have a college degree and they viewed their job as a "paycheck." In addition, they did not show ambitions to climb the hierarchical ladder. As Drucker identified, management should have prepared them to perform and given them the opportunity to do so. Rather than send the employees to training programs, the dean assigned impractical goals. Morale hit an all-time low. Most of the department's staff were fired or quit with little notice. Instead of feeling supported and motivated to achieve higher goals, the staff felt like failures. The quality of their work, therefore, disintegrated.

Contrasting the above, there was a senior member of the institutional leadership who felt that he was aware and understood the problems within his department. He made a point to speak with every student in the program, both in one-on-one sessions and in groups, to ask their thoughts on program strengths

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