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Leadership of Adult Education and Family Literacy Organizations in an Era of Diminishing Resources

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Abstract: Adult education and family literacy providers must increasingly operate with diminishing resources. This research study explored how program and organization leadership navigated these environmental changes in an effort to continue meeting the needs of adults and families.

In recent years, the leadership of state and federally funded adult education and family literacy organizations in the United States has been impacted by major shifts in the external environment. As evolutions in the global economy have transformed the world of work, the basic literacy and skills necessary for employment that provides family-sustaining wages have increased. As a result, many low-income working families lack the requisite literacy and skills to access and participate in the labor market, thereby becoming further marginalized in the new economy. Organizations charged with providing education and literacy services which facilitate the economic mobility of these families have been challenged with an increasing demand for core services in an era of scarce resources. The strategies leaders of adult education and family literacy organizations utilize to provide solutions to this growing problem are critical to the survival of low-income families, as well as that of the organization.

Purpose of Research

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of adult education and family literacy leaders as they directed their programs and organizations during challenging economic times. The past few years have proven especially difficult, marked most notably by the Great Recession, which lasted between December 2007 and June 2009 (The State of Working America, n.d.). During this period, the financial and housing markets collapsed, resulting in increased unemployment and poverty for working families. In an effort to facilitate economic security during such times, low-income adults and families increasingly seek services from adult education and family literacy providers. Comparatively, reductions in federal and state funding have impacted the ability of organizations to meet low-income, low-literate adults' increasing need for the delivery of services. How do leaders of such organizations manage to meet the growing need for services despite declining organizational resources and increased competition? The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do adult education and family literacy leaders describe their journey to their current leadership positions?
2. From an organizational leadership perspective, how have adult education and family literacy organizations been impacted by changes in the external environment?
3. How do adult education and family literacy leaders leverage resources to sustain organizations in an era of economic downturn?

Theoretical Framework

The underlying theory of this research study is Pfeffer and Salancik's (1978) resource dependence theory (RDT), which concerns the relationship between an organization and its external and social environment. The theorists posit the context within which an organization resides – its ecology – influences the behavior and actions of an organization. As open systems, organizations are subjected to, and affected by, outside conditions (Pfeffer & Salancik). Consequently, the actions, decisions and structure of organizations are informed by the organization-environment relationship. RDT claims that the ultimate survival is based on an organization's ability to: (1) satisfy the varying demands of vested interest groups; and (2) obtain and maintain resources. The more effectively these efforts are accomplished, the more likely the organization will survive the constraints of the environment. However, as changes in the environment occur, organizations' ability to meet demands and acquire resources becomes increasingly challenging. As Pfeffer and Salancik (1978) note, no organization is wholly self-contained or self-sustaining; rather, organizations are dependent upon the external environment for resources in some manner.

Methodology

To thoroughly explore this research agenda, I used the qualitative comparative case study method. This approach allowed me to explore this current issue within the context of actual organizations (Yin, 2009). Three organizations were identified and selected as sites for this study which met the parameter established for inclusion in this study: a Texas-based adult education and family literacy organization in service at least five years or more. All three organizations were non-profit, adult education/family literacy organizations; however, they differed in the way they were operationally structured. The three organizations included in this study were: a) an adult and community education department of an independent school district; b) an independent social and educational services organization; and c) an educational services provider with main offices in a community college.

The executive and program leader(s) (or equivalent job title) for the relevant programs at each site agreed to participate in this study, for a total of eight participants. Relevant programs included adult education, community education, family literacy, and the like. The individual interviews were conducted face-to-face at each person's place of work, with follow-up questions taking place via phone and/or e-mail. The interviews were digitally recorded with the participants' permission, transcribed, and sent to the participants for review and feedback. Supplemental data were also collected from annual reports, program evaluations, marketing materials, researcher notes, and miscellaneous documents to provide a whole picture of the participating cases.

Findings

The Funding Challenge

Federal and state funding were the mainstays of the organizations in each of the three cases. For the ISD department in Case 1, in addition to EL Civics and Even Start funding (before it zeroed out), the organization benefitted from Title I funding as a result of being a component of a socio-economically disadvantaged school district. Accordingly, the department operated as a no-cost center for the school district, supplementing state and federal funds with private donations and tuition-based programs. The director and program coordinators constantly strived to carryout programs with existing resources or sought new sources of revenue to support the delivery of educational services.

The community-based organization in Case 2 received their base funding in the form of EL Civics and Even Start funding (until it was zeroed out in 2010). Despite additional streams of revenue from private donations and various grants, this organization could not sustain its various programs without these federal and state monies. Similar to the previous two organizations, Case 3 also received a large portion of funding from state and federal funds. However, a significant ratio of their operational budget was in the form of private donations and endowments. As the organization experienced a decrease in government funding, the organization was able to draw on its other streams of revenue to counteract the effect.

Organizational Impact

The organizations in Cases 1 and 2 experienced organizational shifts as a result of the downward trend in state and federal funding for their programs, specifically the zeroing out of Even Start. For the ISD department in Case 1, when Even Start funding ended, they lost a total of \$150,000 a year in funding. To save costs and continue to deliver seamless services to their student population, program costs were shifted to Title I funding. Furthermore, the family literacy team agreed to shorten their work year from 220 to 202 days per year. While the students were not affected by the budget cuts, the employees absorbed the costs in the form of less salaries and benefits.

In comparison, the organization in Case 2 terminated one staff person, and the remaining employees' hours were reduced from 40 hours to 32 hours per week. Family literacy programming was reduced to focus solely on English as a Second Language in an effort to streamline costs. In addition, the organization became more dependent upon donations and volunteers to fill the funding and personnel losses. The overall budget constraints limited the number of students served, the number of children served in the child development center, and the salaries paid to employees.

Case 3, on the other hand, did not receive Even Start funding, and therefore was not impacted by its zeroing out. Though the organization did experience a loss in government funding, it did not have to make cuts to staff (outside of attrition) or reduce the level of delivered services to adults and families.

Organizational Strategies

In an effort to address these funding issues and resource constraints, the organizations have taken, or are considering, the following approaches.

Focus on performance measures. The ISD department in Case 1 is focused on performance measures. Their goal is to surpass, not meet, expectations. In doing so, the organization can remain a competitive force. This idea was expanded from existing performance improvement plans and financial improvement plans as guides for staying on course throughout the year.

Funding opportunities. To address resource constraints, the organizations in Case 1 and 2 adopted a strategy of pursuing every available funding opportunity. As the director in Case 2 expressed, this strategy has been marginally effective in that education services have been delivered without interruption for the last twenty years.

Partnerships. The ISD department in Case 1 embraced the partnership model as an alternative method of raising funds for the organization. This department is situated in close proximity to their Partnerships department. They work closely together to review existing and potential partnerships to explore funding possibilities. The community-based organization in

Case 2 would like to start working with new and existing private partnerships to pursue donations. Doing so would capitalize on the resources within these relationships as a more realistic method of ensuring the survival of the organization, especially given the questionable nature of federal funding availability. The organization in Case 3 also relied on partnerships to pursue funding opportunities, as well as to tie the organization's brand to the community.

Implications for Research and Practice

This study contributed to this issue from a research and practice standpoint. From a research perspective, by examining this topic through the resource dependence framework, this study provided a scholarly contribution to the issues surrounding external influences on adult education and family literacy organizations. Leaders must constantly scan the environment to acquire and manage resources, as well as be aware of competitors, all of which affect organization survival (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). This in turn informs practice. As resources continue to become scarce, leaders of other adult education and family literacy organizations will be able to draw from the findings of this study. While qualitative research is not generalizable, the practices shared by the participants of this study will encourage other organizational leaders to implement new strategies in an effort to meet the needs of their clients.

Conclusion

Torraco (2007) expressed, HRD “has advanced the understanding that new ideas, innovation, and resourcefulness—all products of learning and employee development—are inseparable from organizational success and sustainability.” However, he continued marginalized workers, such as low-income, low-literate adults, have not benefitted from these improvements in the workplace. Without the requisite education and skills, these adults continue to be denied access to family-sustaining employment opportunities. As a result, leaders of adult education and family literacy organizations are increasingly contending with growing demands for core services in an era of diminishing resources. This research serves to address a contemporary issue within the field of adult education and family literacy. The ultimate goal of this research study is to make a significant contribution in both scholarship and practice to adult education and family literacy.

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