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The Politics and Power in Curriculum Introduction: An Information Management Case Study

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ABSTRACT

There can be resistance to a new curriculum. Generally, resistance is a tricky subject and so are its explanations. Building on work about organizational effectiveness and resistance, this paper examines two theories of resistance in order to understand and explain resistance. It deals with potential difficulties in curriculum design process posed by political and organizational structural forces within a university. Conclusion and insights obtained from this study, we hope, will contribute, on one hand, to the body of organizational theory regarding innovation, change, conflict and resistance. On the other hand, this work will add to the explanations of resistance in general, and to new IM curriculum in particular. (Keyword: IS Education: Curriculum, IM Education; Research Methodology: Case study; Organizational Environment: Dynamics--Change, Power, Innovation.)

This paper deals with the organizational difficulties in launching a graduate program in Information Management. The problem deserves attention specifically because there exist fields of studies and academic departments (which could be viewed as separate cost centers) that are more precisely defined and established--such as Management, Sociology, Psychology, Organizational Behavior, Management Science, Computer Science, etc., to name a few--across which the IM field spans taxonomically. Existence of such departments in- or out- side the college of business, we observe, can make launching a new program in IM very vulnerable to criticism of duplicating efforts and wasting university's scarce resources in times of economic downturns. In contrast to our initial thought that once we know what we want to teach we will be able to offer the program, we found that there are organizational difficulties--such as the one mentioned above. Because of its inter-disciplinary nature, an IM program (launch) puts different demands on the organizational structure of a university than any other one-discipline program would. We suspect most universities are not organized for inter-disciplinary program

offerings. Of course, there are exceptions, but most universities are generally organized by strict academic disciplines, and, at the best, can offer "inter-disciplinary" programs that simply require students take a mix of course offerings that are serviced by separate departments.

The study focuses on the resistance posed by organization structure, the nature of product, the politics of power and resource redistribution. We examine resistance theories that attempt to explain the reasons of resistance. We report the results of a study that has been conducted in the context of existing theories of resistance and conflict (Markus, 1983) and organizational politics and power (Kling, 1978). In addition, in the realm of organizational change and innovation, we draw upon the congruence hypothesis of Nadler and Tushman (1980), discussed in the next section. We propose and test two theories in order to understand and explain resistance and conflict in general, and, in particular, to new IM curriculum in a university setting.

The subject university, the Our Pride University (OPU), is a 2A medium-sized state-school that is primarily a teaching institution, with significant master's programs, and which mirrors numerous other US state schools in tradition, rigid departmental structure, resource scarcity, bureaucratic slow decision making process, and academic protectionism. The subject college is the College of Business which is accredited by AACSB for both MBA and Undergraduate Business programs.

The OPU is a hierarchically organized, public university. As of Fall, 1992, when the proposal of a new graduate program in IM first started, and since, at least, the last decade and a half, the OPU was composed of six academic colleges administered by their respective deans: Applied Sciences, Arts & Sciences, Business, Education, Fine Arts, and Health, Physical Education, and Recreation. The five departments of the college of business are functionally organized around the following disciplines: accountancy, economics, marketing and finance, management, and information management. In addition to the above undergraduate degree programs, the College of Business also offers graduate degree programs in business administration, economics, and accountancy.

From this point on, our presentation is as follows. The product proposal and its rationale are briefly described, the data for resistance presented and then the assumptions are tested. The predictions from the theories are then derived for the case and contrasted with the real data from the case to accept or refute the theories.

The New Product: Master's in Information Management

In December, 1992, one of the departments in the college of business that offers an undergraduate degree program in Information Management, forwarded a proposal to the Provost's office for a new graduate program in Information Management. The proposal contained a five-page, single-spaced description outlining the rationale and objectives for the above graduate program. The rationale included factual information from the Occupational Outlook Handbook, published by U.S. Department of Labor, and other sources to emphasize the growing need of IM professionals and the lack of any master's

program in IM within the region. Earlier, this new product idea had received a strong joint endorsement by the Dean of the College of Business and the Dean of Graduate Studies. In order to determine the feasibility of this new master's program, receive broad acceptance from the constituent groups, and finally the approval from all the necessary places within the university governance, the Provost called a meeting of the three deans: Business, Arts & Science, and Applied Sciences; three chairs of the departments offering programs in: Mathematics (from now on department MNO), Computer Science (XYZ), and Information Management (ABC). At this meeting, the chair of ABC department was directed to develop a program description and course offerings in consultation with the information management faculty and then call a meeting of the above group again. It may be noted that the departments of MNO and XYZ independently contained master's programs in mathematics and computer science respectively. In March, 1993, the chair of ABC department circulated the proposed curriculum among the above participants.

The Resistance

After inviting comments from the XYZ faculty, the XYZ chair wrote the following to ABC chair:

"As you can see, my faculty has definite concerns over the content and depth of your program. There appears to be a considerable overlap with ours. Secondly, and more importantly, Computer Science is FAR MORE than programming and hardware. Most of what we do is DESIGN, ANALYSIS, DECISIONS, WORKING WITH PEOPLE and COMMUNICATING.

"I have given more thought to the list of courses you presented and have attached comments regarding those that are clearly Computer Science. Several of these were already offered!

"With respect to the budget page, since two of four of the background courses, six of eight of the required courses, and three of eight of the elective courses are Computer Science, shouldn't we say that one of the two requested faculty and at least half of all other items should be assigned to the Computer Science Department?" (emphasis as per original).

There were several other comments offered by the XYZ faculty in the same letter and spirit as the one quoted above (Samaddar and Kaul, 1994). There were other comments that voiced similar perceptions of potential erosion of their own product's future and the perceived threat of losing the XYZ Department's share of organizational resources. The intentions of ABC department were questioned: "Is it the intention of ABC department to compete with the XYZ department?"

Commenting on Drucker's article: 'Be Data Literate--Know What to Know,' where Drucker was referring to 'executives have become computer-literate...but not many executives are information-literate' -- a quote contained in the original IM proposal for the master's program, another member of XYZ faculty wrote:

"In fact, their discussions about executive's predictions seem far too biased. In Drucker's comment, the error is to assume that an executive would really understand computer science. This proposal seems to carry forth the standard bias of those who don't really understand what real computer science is all about, and tends to blame CS for the evils of Information Systems and Data Processing."

However, the same faculty member, while commenting on how the proposal might be more palatable, wanted to have a share of new resources and courses. During the same period, it may be noted that the MNO department did neither lend support nor any resistance to the IM proposal.

Testing Assumptions

From the previous description, there seems to be sufficient evidence to believe that resistance exists. The data also suggests that the theories of resistance are applicable. For example, according to product-determined theory assumption, we need to answer the following question: Are the products that invite resistance different from the products that do not? The data seem to imply that another variant of the product could be more acceptable. While the original product is an inter-disciplinary product, in this case, however, changing the product from seemingly conflicting to an independent one would elevate some resistance.

According to the *interaction theory* (both formal and informal variants), resistance can be explained by the interaction between organization arrangements and the product. Sufficient data exist in this case to provide a basis for the plausibility of this theory. For the formal variant, the interaction is with the formal organization. The formal organizational context in this case study started when the Provost's office, sensing the multi-functional nature of the product, invited the three deans and the three chairs to a joint meeting. It is also evident that there are questions about the intention of the proponent. There is also concern about the nature of potential redistribution of organizational resources. Formal variant of the interaction theory assumes that goals are influenced by formal interaction. In formal meetings, discussions, and writings, there is enough evidence that all key participants seemed to agree on the general goals of the university and scarce nature of the resources. Everybody seemed to agree on the university goal that its clientele be best served, that it attract increased enrollments and that it does this in a resource efficient manner. However, there is evidence to believe that the goals of the departments were to protect, preserve and enhance their respective market, resource and stability. Apparently, then, there exists sufficient evidence for the plausibility of the informal variant of the interaction theory.

Predictions Derived from the Two Theories and Tests:

For the sake of space we could not put this section here in. Please refer to the complete version of this paper.

Concluding Remarks

This case study makes contributions to theory by validating it. First, for the theory of organizational effectiveness, it extends the congruence model of Nadler and Tushman (1980) to that of a new product and organizational fit. More importantly, it has provided an empirical testing for the same. Second, it supplies additional corroboration to political Interactionist theory of Markus (1983) and Kling (1978). To this end, it has tested two variants of the interaction theory compared to Markus's test for one variant. Of course, several other variants of interaction theory are possible and remain to be tested.

By implication, the work presented here makes contribution to organizational practice. First, managers in academic institutions, in particular, and in industry in general, can use the assumptions and predictions of the theories tested here to shape their strategies for dealing with resistance. For example, if a manager has reasons to believe that product-determined theory might hold true in his or her setting, his or her strategy would be to differentiate the product to make it free from the organizational context to avoid resistance. If someone believes in the interaction theory, he or she might first attempt to solve organizational contextual problems to preempt resistance. Another strategy for them is to improve congruence. The rendition of the case presented here, hopefully, will help proponents of new products or managers in general to understand the reasons of resistance and the formal and, more importantly, informal organizational dynamics in their own setting. In this vein, from our observations, we make a conjecture. Recall that we have shown earlier that the formal variant of the interaction theory predicts weak influence on resistance intensity than that of informal variant. The course of events and the process dynamics in this case study, especially after informal interaction started showing its impact on resistance, make us conclude, without proof, that for all practical purposes there is a recursive relationship between both variants of interaction. This should influence the way they are used. The formal interaction does set the stage for informal interaction. We suggest, however, that both should be used recursively to forge a resistance-free commitment. Results are as generalizable as a detailed single case study can offer, and should be informative to the colleagues in similar settings or universities. Results of this study are interesting in the sense that some of the myths are fleshed out and a few reality checks are hit--such as, it is one thing to propose a marriage between technical and management skills and theoretically design the course contents, it is another to have two or more academic departments--one with technological orientation and the other with information management--agree on participating in such offerings. It is one thing to design an interdisciplinary program that, according to literature, is much needed for educating work force for the future; it may be very different, if not difficult, to forge organizational approval and support--both horizontally (i.e., other allied departments) and vertically (i.e., top administration). Universities organized with strict departments are natural home for islands of education rather than true inter-disciplinary education. The experience with this case study, undoubtedly, corroborates the editorial opinion regarding the relationship between the fields of Computer Science and MIS expressed by John King in Information Systems Research (King, 1993, p.294).

A full version of this paper is available.