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Communicating Change in Organizational Restructuring: A Grounded Theory Case Study

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Abstract

Literature has shown that planned change is accompanied by excitement and hope. People affected by change require quality information. Failure to communicate change may lead to resistance. This paper presents a change involving the amalgamation of two university faculties into one. Within the framework of a case study research design and the used of the Constructivist Grounded Theory for data collection and analysis, the theme of communication during the change process is presented through the experiences and life accounts of faculty members involved and affected by it. The paper ends with useful suggestions for change agents in today's complex organization.

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1. Introduction

The current context of higher education is dynamic with various demands for change (Shin & Harman, 2009). Among catalysts for change are competition, market orientation, globalisation and technology (Blackmore, 2004). Many pointed to the importance of good communication during change process (Battilana & Casciaro, 2012). During change process, change agents communicate decisions, transition processes and procedures, new structures, systems and policies (Self, Armenakis & Schraeder, 2007). Feedbacks to this must be allowed so as to ensure that

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needs and concerns of those affected are met. As such, suffice time for feedbacks and adequate responses can take place (Wilson, 2009).

Nevertheless, communicating change in higher education restructuring is not an easy task. Higher education institutions as an entity are unique unlike business organisations (Pollock & Cornford, 2004). A university has distinctive fundamental characters and practices (Novoa, 2012). As an example, universities consist of diverse semi-autonomous organisational structures such as faculties, Centre of Excellence and departments (Asking & Stensaker, 2002). Another is the presence of the academics and the administrators as the main human resource factor. Both have important roles which are complementary of one another. In this aspect, change agents must ensure that communication that is disseminated during change process are tailored towards the uniqueness of the university structure as well as address the needs of the two important human resource factor (Wilson, 2009). If this is not done, communication will fail. Failure in communication leads to assumptions. Assumptions lead to rumours and cynicism (Brown & Cregan, 2008). This leads to uncertainty. Uncertainties lead to emotional stress and resistance (Starr, 2011).

2. The research

This study was part of a bigger research carried out about the amalgamation of two faculties, a Faculty of Education and a Faculty of Arts, in an Australian University. Both former faculties were established in the mid 1970s and had a reputation as being of the best in Australia in their respective fields. Several prolific academics were part of the core members of these faculties. Both faculties had gone through several amalgamations beginning in the 1980s to the 1990s. The earlier amalgamations were mainly amalgamations with other smaller institutes as part of Australia's nation-wide higher education policy to strengthen higher education position in the global world during the 1970s.

The amalgamation in focus took place in the middle of 2007. It was the result of a top down decision from the Vice Chancellor's office after several discussions at the Senior Executive level of the university. The amalgamation was said to be driven by aims of saving cost as well as to achieve managerial effectiveness. After the announcement by the Vice Chancellor, a restructuring committee was formed to oversee the merger. The committee was led by a representative from the Vice Chancellor's office and consisted of people from the human resource office, and representatives from both the faculties. The committee was given approximately six months to implement the amalgamation. Although there were resistance to the amalgamation, it was push through. By the 1st January 2008, the two faculties had amalgamated forming the Faculty of Arts and Education.

3. Research methods

This research paper applies the qualitative approach through the use of the case study research framework and utilizing the constructivist grounded theory approach for data gathering and analysis. As such, the paper aligns itself to the interpretive research paradigm which is derived from the constructivism philosophy of learning which works on the premise that, by reflecting on our experiences, we construct our own understanding of the world we live in. This paradigm argues that research should be viewed subjectively not objectively. The aim is to develop an understanding of social life as well as discover meaning of a given context/ event through the experiences and perspectives of individuals involved (Neuman, 2006). People are main players in this research context as they provide meanings to their behaviours and actions. Interpretive researchers aims to explore these meanings (Marshall & Rossman, 2010).

The use of qualitative approach empowers the researcher to observe the dynamic complexities occurring both within and across organizational hierarchical levels (Hoepfl, 1997). By employing the qualitative method too, the richness and significance of individual experience in the theory-building research process can be realized (Turnbull, 2002). Qualitative research "permits you to follow leads that emerge" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 14). This is important since data gathered from the participants may yield insights which a researcher might not foresee. Last but not least, a qualitative approach takes into account context as 'a crucial and integral element of in analysis' (Temple, Edwards, & Alexander, 2006). Bryman (1996) reiterates the importance of contextual aspects such as organizational types, historical background and group context.

The use of the case study research framework allows the researcher to retain the holistic characteristics of real-life events and undertake thorough investigation into a phenomenon in its particular context (Yin, 1994). A case

study focuses on an entity in itself and allows in-depth examination (Gibbert & Ruigrok, 2010). Case studies are also studies of multi-perspectival (Tellis, 1997). This implies that the researcher gathers data from various actors and relevant groups of actors for a comprehensive view of the research phenomenon. The use of a case study research design provides the researcher with a systematic way of looking at events, collecting data, analyzing information, and reporting of the research results (Tellis, 1997).

A core element of the grounded theory is that inquiry is shaped by the motive to understand and discover social and social psychological processes in various fields (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The analytical method employs by the researcher prompts theory discovery and development rather than verification of pre-existing theories. The term 'Theoretical Sampling', thus, is a vital concept (Glaser & Strauss, 2007). Theoretical sampling is a technique whereby the researcher determines, chooses and develops the sampling population and data through his/her theoretical ideas and understanding of the phenomenon with respect to the data already gathered and analysis done (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This sampling technique leads towards the expansion, refinement and elaboration of conceptual categories. Sampling stops as data becomes saturated. This means no new conceptual insights are generated about the phenomenon that may 'advance, modify, qualify, extend or add to the theory developed' (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007, p. 116). Another distinctive feature of the Grounded Theory is that data collection, analysis and sampling occur simultaneously (Glaser & Strauss, 2007). The researcher persistently interacts with the data and remains constantly in touch with the emerging analyses. This analytical process leads the researcher towards other plausible theoretical explanations. As stated by Charmaz (1990, p. 2).

In order to collect data, this study utilises interviews and document analysis. Twenty individuals were interviewed. This includes University Executives, Amalgamation Committee members, academic and administrators. They were chosen through theoretical sampling which assures that these people represented views of important individuals who are well versed with the context and issues related to the study. The transcripts of interviews were provided to the interviewees upon request for validation.

4. Findings

The issue of communication was mentioned by the interviewees numerous times during the whole amalgamation process. Generally, there are two main perspectives that emerge; a) the view from the leaders as well as those close to the decision makers and 2) the views from the general staff, both academics and administrators. The following section presents these opposing views.

4.1. The view from above

The first perspective comes from people who are leaders and those who are close to the top leadership, hence, the source of the amalgamation information. This group of people includes the University Executives and the Amalgamation Committee members. Largely, this group felt that communication during the whole amalgamation process was good. They argued that from the start there was effort by the university leadership to get feedbacks from the staff of the faculties pertaining to the suggestion for an amalgamation of the two faculties. However, the faculty leadership failed to communicate this to the staff to get their feedbacks. This was mentioned by several senior staff (academics and administrators) when they stated that the problems of the faculties had been around for some time and that there had been suggestions for an amalgamation by the university leaders (Interview 5, Interview 11, Interview 17, Interview 19, Interview 24, Interview 26 and Interview 27). Many believed that the faculty leadership knew about this and of the option by the top management to amalgamate the two faculties, the Faculty of Education and the Faculty of Arts. A few Senior Executives and staff mentioned that both of the faculty leaders were reluctant to the idea. They assumed that this was why the information on the suggestion was not relayed to the staff (Interview 6, Interview 9, Interview 13, Interview 21 and Interview 23).

Several interviewees further argued that during the amalgamation process communication was good. Many channels were used to communicate the amalgamation process and to get staff feedbacks. These channels include consultation sessions, emails, letters, newsletters and notices. The analysis of documents proved that this argument is a fact. There were letters from the Unions to the Vice Chancellor, emails from the Vice Chancellor and the Head of the Amalgamation Committee to all staff and there were also feedbacks from the staff to both the Vice Chancellor and the Head of the Committee. Meetings were held to relay information on the amalgamation. An Administrator

stated, “There were certainly meetings that were held for all staff. These were held in the lecture theatre and I certainly went to all those (Interview 2).” A Senior Academic recalled the various meetings held and stated, “And there were many meetings. Many meetings. The whole of faculty meetings. Meetings for small groups. Meetings for general staff. Meetings for academics (Interview 12).” She further recalled the use of newsletters. She stated, “There were regular newsletters that came out. How to communicate the change to the existing staff and if there is to be a change in the job or the organizational units?” (Interview 12).

As can be seen, the leaders and managers mostly felt that communication was good during the amalgamation. Efforts communicating every aspect of the amalgamation process through meetings, newsletters, letters, emails as well as consultation sessions proved that many channels were used to convey relevant information to the staff. This was done at various stages of the process. As stated by a Senior Academic Manager stated, “I think there was as much of a communication as could possibly happened (Interview 12)”.

4.2. The view from the staff

Interestingly, contrary to the above, many staff felt that communication was poor throughout the amalgamation. Despite of agreeing to the various used of information channels, many felt that the quality of information was insufficient and lacks quality. Many recalled the uncertainty during the stages of the amalgamation process (Interview 2, Interview 3, Interview 5, Interview 6, Interview 11, Interview 18, Interview 22, and Interview 24).

4.2.1. Information lacks quality

Throughout the amalgamation, many staff, especially the Administrators from both the faculties felt that although there was information, the information lacks quality. A Senior Academic commented, “I think that maybe there was the lack of information or the lack of persuasive argument about why the rationale for this could have been gone in a lot more detail (Interview 13).” Others felt that information through the consultations were insufficient. A Senior Administrator recalled, “There were certainly information sessions although there were a bit small, very tight period of consultation about how it was and how it was going to take effect (Interview 22).” Another Senior Administrator stated, “I was probably a little frustrated with the management. There wasn’t lot of information to be heard (Interview 5).” Interview 4, a Senior Administrator had her own perception and stated, “I think communication channels were not very good, from above and general staff were not always kept well informed on what was happening (Interview 4).”

4.2.2. Meetings as briefing session

Others felt that meetings were merely briefing sessions and insufficient time was not given for feedbacks and the raising of concerns such as on the future of their jobs. Many administrators expressed frustration and disappointment because that their concerns were sidelined and that the Vice Chancellor and members of the Amalgamation Committee who handled the meetings were more adamant to implement the changes despite of the concerns raised. Many of the administrators felt that they were not being listened to and taken seriously. An Administrator recalled the meeting held by the Head of the Amalgamation Committee for the amalgamation announcement. She stated, “Not very good because I think the representative from the Vice Chancellor, they just came to do a deed and they were going to do it”. To the staff, it was a one way communication. Even though a meeting was held to communicate the decision for the amalgamation, it was viewed negatively. A Senior Administrator summed the general feelings among the Administrators and said, “Nobody knew what was going on (Interview 22)”.

4.2.3. Lack of information leads to uncertainty and disarray

The lack of information during the amalgamation created uncertainty among many administrators. A Senior Administrator recalled, “It was extremely painful because at that time none of us quite knew what was really coming. We knew there was a committee set up which had representation from the two faculties. Not much. It was a small committee that was supposedly advising the Head of Amalgamation Committee” (Interview 5). Another staff recalled the situation and stated, “It was very unsettling because none of us knew whether we had a future with the university or not (Interview 18).” Interview 11 stated a slightly different perspective and stated, “Lots of

conflicting information whether people are going to have a job at the end of the process and things like that (Interview 11)”.

The uncertainty led to feelings of frustration and distress among many staff. Several administrators who were interviewed agreed to this (Interview 3, Interview 5, Interview 11 and Interview 18). The uncertainty that is felt by many staff mostly refers to their job status. Many desperately wanted to know whether they would be able to retain their post or vice versa. An Administrator recalled the situation and stated, “It was stressful on the level of uncertainty (Interview 3).” She further stated on the kind of information which was missing, “Yeah! It was a bit stressful because uncertainties like not knowing you going to have a job. I think everyone felt frustrated. We all felt frustrated at the procedure. Not being clear of the procedure and the time (Interview 3),” A Senior Administrator described the anxiousness during the time, “Often the difficulty is because you are in this environment where no one really knows, and you tried to reassure it but what it is there to say. Because nobody really knows” (Interview 5). The uncertainties were acknowledged by a member of the Amalgamation Committee. She stated that as an amalgamation is a continual process, there were times when it was difficult to provide answers since the amalgamation was on going. She stated, “And I think on occasion when that sort of stuff happens; it was difficult to give people the answers they wanted. And often there would be meetings and you wouldn’t have the answers” (Interview 23).

4.3. Lessons on communicating change: What staff suggest?

Administrators who were interviewed shared their views on what leaders should have done concerning communication during the amalgamation. A Senior Administrator stated:

I think if I want to say... how would you do it properly, I think that talking to people and reassuring, ... no, not reassuring because when you merge you cannot guarantee that they'll still get their job, but having information, I think that's really important. I think if you know what you are dealing with; it actually allows you to have ... you know a better picture of it. Whereas if you are secretive and pretending and all the rest of it ... then at least people will have different view. And I think that's really important. I think having opportunities where people can voice their concerns regardless of how ugly that might be (Interview 4).

Another staff felt that change leaders must be able to provide information in any restructuring process despite of whether the information would be perceived as sufficient or vice versa. The Senior Administrator stated, “Having insufficient information is still better than not knowing” (Interview 6). A former General Manager of the faculty stated that there was a need to engage staff from all levels for discussion on the amalgamation because the process would not only affect their lives but most importantly is because by the end of the day, these staff are the ones who would have to make the amalgamation a success.

In all this aspect, an Academic shared his hypothesis on the problem of communication in a university. He hypothesizes that there are often two worlds in a university, the executives and the reality. The executives have discourse on matters of the university’s direction, mission and policies. However, often these discourses failed to take into consideration the reality on the ground and thus, vital information often fail to reach the staff of the university. As such, change projects and processes are often not understood by the staff and this leads to various problems. The Academic believed that change agents must ensure that communication is disseminated to all staff at various levels to guarantee that every staff knows what is going on. This in turn would contribute to staff’s understanding and ease the change process.

5. General discussion

This study reveals that communication during change is a difficult task. The utilisation of multi-channels to disseminate information is not an assurance that communication is successful. Most importantly, communication must involve and engage the various stakeholders (Lewis, Schmisser, Stephens, & Weir, 2006). This can be done through consultations and the exchange of feedbacks and ample time must be provided for this to take place. In addition, it is also most crucial for change agents to ensure that information that is disseminated is the information that is needed by the staff. If not the information will be viewed as irrelevant and is of poor quality. If not, this will

evoke sense feelings of uncertainty. Although uncertainty during change processes is typical, it should be avoided.

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