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Putting it in Writing: Examining the Link between Higher Education Institution Performance Rankings, Best Places to Work, and Emphasis on Human Resources in Mission Statements

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Putting it in Writing: Examining the Link between Higher Education Institution Performance Rankings, Best Places to Work, and Emphasis on Human Resources in Mission Statements

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This study examined the content of vision statements, mission statements, and strategic plans for three groups of higher education institutions (HEIs). The focus of this analysis was to determine if an emphasis on the interests and welfare of employees was included in these statements. In addition, the Top 100 Best Colleges from the 2012 U.S. News & World Report rankings were compared to a random selection of HEIs. The results indicate that the externally ranked schools had a higher number of statements highlighting the welfare of their workforce in their strategic documents, thus affirming the importance of employees.

INTRODUCTION

It is evident that improving performance within higher education institutions is a requirement for the future. President Emeritus of Harvard, Derek Bok (2006: 316) stated:

Beyond individual teachers lies a deeper reluctance on the part of academic leaders and their faculties as a whole to undertake a continuous, systematic effort to improve the quality of education. In this respect, universities are badly out of step with the times. Most successful organizations today, regardless of the work they do, are trying hard to become effective “learning organizations” that engage in an ongoing process of improvement by constantly evaluating their performance, identifying problems, trying various remedies, measuring their success, discarding those that do not work, and incorporating those that do. In theory, universities should be leaders in such efforts, since they have pioneered in developing methods for evaluating other institutions in the society. In fact, however, they leave a lot to be desired when it comes to working systematically to improve their own performance.

Van De Ven (2007: 261) observed: “organizations are buzzing, blooming, and confusing. No one person can figure them out. This is hard to see when you are constantly pursuing one point of view. But you won’t know if you only talk to yourself.” Learning organizations must adapt to change, not pursue a linear strategy.

Higher education organizations must then adapt structure and strategy by benchmarking and replicating the practices of private enterprise. Van De Ven (2007: 265) further concluded:

Engaged scholarship is a participative form of research for obtaining the different perspectives of key stakeholders (researchers, users, clients, sponsors, and practitioners) in producing knowledge about complex problems. By exploiting differences in the kinds of knowledge that scholars and other stakeholders from diverse backgrounds can bring forth on a problem, I argued that engaged scholarship can produce knowledge that is more penetrating and insightful than when scholars or practitioners work on the problems alone.

Allen (2003) observed that when higher education institutions attempt to change, it is often with an unquestioning reliance on a specific management style and structure. Unfortunately, this approach can result in reduced employee motivation, resistance to change, a dysfunctional culture, and poor execution. Inflexible strategic protocol is inconsistent with the grounded work of Chandler (1962, 1992) who concluded that changes in structure should follow changes in strategy.

The Importance of People

One promising construct for closing the strategy execution gap in higher education is to put the emphasis on people (Pfeffer, 1998, 2010). Pfeffer (1998: 5) asserts that the organization of today fail to align business practices with strategy:

If you seek success in the wrong places, you are likely to waste a lot of effort, focus on the wrong things, and, in the end, overlook some of the real sources of competitive leverage—the culture and capabilities of your organization that derive from how you manage your people.

Organization successes, as well as failure, are attributed to the alignment of strategy and structure (Chandler, 1962, 1992). Allen (2003) posits a causal relationship between strategy and informal organizational structure, i.e., culture. Bossidy and Charan (2007) link strategy, operations, and people as an execution tripod. A seminal work by Kotter and Heskett (1992) documents the importance of strategy corresponding to the characteristics and complexity of an industry. Pfeffer (1998, 2010) reaches the conclusion that competitive advantage is obtained by putting people first. Barney (1991) integrates the role of people and organizational culture for achieving causal ambiguity, which leads to a competitive advantage.

The metrics selected to measure the magnitude and significance of people in organizations; vision statements, mission statements and strategic plans, have been grounded in the body of knowledge on organizations. Pearce and David (1987) empirically linked mission statement content to performance. In general, a mission statement functions as a foundation to help create a culture that can be integrated to the organization's overall purpose. However, employees were not one of the mission statement content components in the Pearce and David study. Peters and Waterman (1982) identified productivity through people as one of eight characteristics that defined excellent companies. Bain (2004) identified a link between informal organizational structure and employee satisfaction and performance.

Collins and Porras (1996: 71) posit the significant role of people in adopting and sharing an organization's ideology and vision:

How do we get people to share our core ideology? You don't. You can't. Instead, find people who are predisposed to share your core values and purpose; attract and retain those people; and let those who do not share your core values go elsewhere.

Pfeffer (1998, 2010) emphatically advocates the need for organizations to recognize and empower employees, with particular insistence on the need for organizations to clearly exhibit employment security as a strategic planning outcome. Fawcett, Rhoads, and Burnah (2004) integrate employee empowerment with strategic benchmarking as a means of achieving competitiveness. Schermerhorn, Hunt, Osborn and Uhl-Bien (2009) researched high performance organizations, (HPOs) and found that employee participation, organizational learning, and support of employee intellectual capital to be critical strategic directives for differentiating HPOs from traditional organizations.

This present study begins with a review of the relevant strategy frameworks for higher education institutions (HEIs). We then examine the relationship between an institution's ranking and its emphasis

on employees in its mission, vision, and strategy statements. The paper concludes with implications and a further research agenda.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The theoretical frameworks for strategy are relatively recent. Porter (1980) introduced what evolved into the industry-based view of strategy. This framework for strategy prevailed throughout the 1980s. The 1990s were greeted with the resource-based view (Barney, 1991, 2001). The resource-based view (RBV) was followed by a renewed appreciation for the institution-based view of strategy (North, 1990) during the first decade of the twenty-first century.

The practical application of strategy theory has been challenged by contextual dynamics. Peng, Sun, Pinkham, and Chen (2009: 63) offer this statement: “the long-standing criticisms of the industry-based and resource-based views’ lack of attention to contexts.” Therefore, it can be reasonably argued that the most attractive strategy framework must be consistent with the complexity and dynamics of a given industry. A mechanistic industry necessitates a strategy framework different from an organic industry (Burns & Stalker, 1961; Mintzberg, 1979). Mintzberg (1987:75) states: “In more complex organizations, this may mean building flexible structures, hiring creative people, defining broad umbrella strategies, and watching for patterns that emerge.”

The evolution of institutions in higher education has resulted in more complex organizations (Becher & Kogan, 1992), as well as the need to integrate formal and informal structures with strategy. Allen (2003: 61) argues: “a more sophisticated approach to strategic planning and change should be utilized reflecting the need to view the HEI (higher education institution) as a symbiotic community.” A symbiotic community requires mutual dependence, support, and benefit.

The symbiotic community can be evasive to institutions that fail to properly integrate the theoretical foundations of strategy with resources and industry complexity. Hamal and Prahalad (1989: 131) offer this poignant comment on strategic fit:

Both models recognize the problem of competing in a hostile environment with limited resources. But while the emphasis in the first is on trimming ambitions to match available resources, the emphasis on the second is on leveraging resources to reach seemingly unattainable goals.

This study argues that for any organization, and expressly higher education, attainment of lofty goals by mutual dependence, support, and “strategic fit” can only be achieved with a consummate fixation on people as a core competency (Pfeffer 1998, 2010).

Theoretical Frameworks

The theoretical frameworks for strategy include the industry-based view (Porter 1980, 1996, 2008). Porter’s seminal work includes mainstream strategy mechanisms including concepts such as generic strategy, the five forces model, and the Diamond. The industry-based view is competition focused. The objectives are to strategically position your organization where competitive forces are weakest, or where your organization is the least vulnerable. The industry-based view has been criticized because it generalizes strategy and fails to take organizational context into consideration (Peng et al., 2009).

The institution-based view (North, 1990) has received renewed interest, in large part as a result of the contextual criticism of the industry-based view. This view incorporates inputs from the institutional environment to formulate strategy. Peng and Khoury (2009: 261) observed: “when formal constraints are absent or incomplete, informal constraints intervene to mitigate uncertainty and provide a guide to

managers.” The institutional-based view addresses the contextual criticism of the industry-based view by incorporating environmental inputs.

The resource-based view (Barney 1991, 2001) theorizes that heterogeneous and imperfectly mobile resources can be strategically deployed to obtain either a competitive advantage or a sustainable competitive advantage. Barney (1991: 102) defines a sustainable competitive advantage as: “not simultaneously being implemented by any current or potential competitor and when these other firms are unable to duplicate the benefits of this strategy.” The resource-based view (RBV) incorporates four resource characteristics into the VRIO Model (Barney, 1991). These model components are value, rareness, inimitability, and organizations.

Higher education institutions require the intellectual capital of faculty as well as staff to remain competitive. Intellectual capital has been identified as the foundation for high performance organizations (Schermerhorn, et al., 2009). Intellectual capital can become a competitive advantage for higher education institutions, and even a sustainable competitive advantage via the RBV tenant of causal ambiguity, which makes intangible characteristics of an organization such as employee satisfaction, motivation and organizational culture difficult to identify and replicate by outsiders.

The last component of Barney’s VRIO Model, organization, asks this question: Does an organization have the conditions in place to capitalize on a resource? Putting these conditions in place requires an appreciation and adoption of the institution-base view of strategy. The institution-based view of strategy encourages and accepts inputs from the institution. Additionally, when there are formal constraints to an institution’s execution, informal constraints manifest themselves to dominance.

Practically then, this paper positions a combination of the RBV and the institution-based view as most strategic for higher education’s resource base. The former capitalizes on intellectual capital and the latter puts conditions in place to avoid any formal constraint to strategy execution. A multi-process strategic framework consisting of the resource-based view and the institution-based view is grounded within the literature (Peng, et al., 2009; Oliver, 1997; Hart & Banbury, 1994).

People First

“Successful organizations understand the importance of implementation, not just strategy, and, moreover, recognize the crucial role of their people in the process,” (Pfeffer, 1998: 16).

Bossidy and Charan (1997: 141) add:

After all, it’s the people of an organization who make judgments about how markets are changing, create strategies based upon these judgments, and translate the strategies into operational realities. To put it simply and starkly: If you don’t get the people process right, you will never fulfill the potential of your business.

Bosse, Phillips, and Jeffrey (2009) studied employee fairness and concluded that treating employees fairly resulted in enhanced performance. Barney (1991) identified causal ambiguity, achieved through people, as a source of sustainable competitive advantage. de Wall (2008) completed a meta-analysis of 280 publications on high performance organizations and found that people evidence contributed to superior performance metrics for HPOs.

Higher Education Strategy

The industry-based view of strategy (Porter, 1980, 1996, 2008) appears as the most frequent theoretical framework supporting higher education strategy. The generic strategy emphasis is through

differentiation, primarily by concentrating on curricula. This approach though has resulted in costly “me-too” academic programs. Higher education institutions have largely failed in obtaining strategic niches.

Additionally, the culture at higher education institutions plays a significant role in strategy execution. Tierney (1988) identified employees in general and faculty as essential components of a higher education culture. Sporn (1996) observed a lack of clarity in HEI cultures and concluded that symbolic approaches along with artifacts that promulgate values and the roles of people are constructive in achieving greater clarity. Finally, Gioia, Thomas, Clark, and Chittipeddi (1994) concluded that strategic change was directly related to achieving a level of cognitive understanding and acceptance from employees.

The Strategy Formulation/Implementation Gap

A disconnection or gap between the theoretical schema of strategy and core organizational resources results in negative undesirable outcomes, including employee dissatisfaction, low morale, employee turnover, and poor financial performance. These outcomes are symptomatic of the lack of a learning organization (Senge, 1990).

According to institution-based theory, such disconnect will create formal constraints to execution. When formal constraints, such as a non-adaptive structure and lack of motivation in the workforce exist, informal constraints, such as a dysfunctional organizational culture and a decline in values, manifest themselves (Sporn, 1996).

Bossidy and Charan (2007: 195) stated: “An astonishing number of strategies fail because leaders don’t make a realistic assessment of whether the organization can execute the plan.” Bossidy and Charan’s trilogy for execution; strategy, operations and people advocates a robust interest in people as the means to fulfill the execution gap. More recently, Crandall and Crandall (2013) point out that a tri-pod base is needed to implement organizational change, infrastructure, technology, and culture, the last of which is people based.

One goal of this study is to extend the body of evidence on the significance that vision statements and mission statements have upon organizational outcomes (Pearce & David, 1987; Collins & Porras, 1996) to higher education strategy formulation and implementation. The second goal is to identify a gap in the theoretical framework supporting higher education strategy, and the execution of that strategy (Bossidy & Charan, 2002) as mediated by the degree of employee emphasis (Pfeffer, 1998, 2010).

It is hoped the results of this study will illuminate the causal relationship between people and outcomes that are unequivocally desired by organizations in all industries, but disengaged from strategy formulation and execution in higher education. Hart and Banbury (1994: 251) observed: “Strategy-making is typically portrayed in ‘either/or’ terms-either rational or incremental, or separated into formulation and implementation activities.”

Research Question

Given the extensive body of knowledge on strategy formulation and implementation, and the achievement of desired organizational outcomes by integrating people, the following research question is proposed:

Do HEIs that are highly ranked emphasize employees in their mission statements, vision statements, and strategic plans?

Given the extensive body of knowledge on strategy formulation and implementation, and the emphasis on people as an antecedent to several positive organizational outcomes, including employee satisfaction, performance, and organizational commitment, the following hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 1 – HEIs that are identified as best performing universities will emphasize the value of employees in their vision statements, mission statements, or strategic plans to a greater degree than lower ranking HEIs.

Hypothesis 2 - HEIs that are identified as best places to work will emphasize the value of employees in their vision statements, mission statements, or strategic plans to a greater degree than lower ranking HEIs.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

This study was based upon the performance rankings of higher education institutions published by *U.S. News & World Report* (2012), and a ranking of higher education institutions that was compiled by *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (2012). A random sample of 100 U.S. HEIs was compared to the top 100 schools from each of the two above rankings.

The random sample was selected from *The University of Texas* (2013), U. S. Universities by State data base, www.utexas.edu/world/univ/state, which contains a listing of over 2000 colleges and universities. A random sample of 100 of these institutions was obtained by utilizing www.random.org.

Data Collection

Each of the three groups of HEIs were subjected to a content analysis to determine if the institution acknowledged employees as a valuable resource. The analysis reviewed the vision statement, mission statement and strategic plan on the institution's website. For example, some institutions mentioned the enrichment and development of their faculty and staff as a strategic goal. Such a statement would be considered an acknowledgement of the value of employees.

Two researchers completed the examination of the available statements. Each team member consulted with and verified the work of the other member. Observations were coded with a 1 if a reference to employees as a valuable resource was acknowledged. Since there were three sources of information to analyze (vision statements, mission statements and strategic plans), a potential score of 3 for each institution was possible. Negative observations, and unavailable statements, were coded with a 0.

Hypothesis Testing

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to determine the differences in means of the three study groups. Table 1 depicts the hypothesis testing rationale.

RESULTS

Table 2 shows the results of the initial one-way ANOVA analysis for the three study groups. The resulting F value of 3.482 was significant at $p = .032$, indicating that a difference in means was detected among the three groups.

TABLE 1: HYPOTHESIS RATIONALE DESIGN

Hypothesis	Top 100 National Universities	100 Random HEIs	Top 100 Best Places to Work	Results
Hypothesis 1 –HEIs that are identified as best performing universities will emphasize the value of employees in their vision statements, mission statements, or strategic plans to a greater degree than lower ranking HEIs.	Mean score	Mean score		A significant difference in means will support hypothesis 1.
Hypothesis 2 - HEIs that are identified as best places to work will emphasize the value of employees in their vision statements, mission statements, or strategic plans to a greater degree than lower ranking HEIs.		Mean score	Mean score	A significant difference in means will support hypothesis 2.

TABLE 2: RESULTS OF THE ONE-WAY ANOVA

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	5.180	2	2.590	3.482	.032
Within Groups	220.900	297	.744		
Total	226.080	299			

A Scheffe follow-up test was run to determine which groups displayed differences among each other. The results are shown in Table 3 along with the two research hypotheses.

TABLE 3: HYPOTHESES TESTING*

Hypothesis #	Top 100 National Universities	100 Random HEIs	Top 100 Best Places to Work	Sig.
Hypothesis 1	1.26 (.92791)	.95 (.86894)		.041
Hypothesis 2		.95 (.86894)	1.03 (.78438)	.807

*One-way ANOVA with Scheffe follow-up test; mean and (standard deviation).

The analysis indicated a significant difference between the Top 100 National Universities and the 100 randomly selected schools, thus supporting hypothesis 1. No significant difference in means was found between the Top 100 Best Schools to Work for and the randomly selected schools. Hypothesis 2 was not supported.

DISCUSSION – PUTTING IT IN WRITING

In support of hypothesis 1, this study found a significant differentiation between the *U.S. News & World Report* Best Colleges (National University classification) and a random sample of U.S. HEIs. The finding supports our position that the higher-ranking schools emphasize employees to a greater degree than a random selection of schools. What is interesting is that the ranked schools “put it in writing.” In other words, statements pertaining to the welfare of employees are not just slogans that appear on the school’s website (e.g., our employees are our greatest asset), but such statements are written into documents that pertain to the strategic direction of the school.

Accreditation agencies put a great amount of scrutiny on what is contained in strategic related documents, as these dictate how the institution should look in the future. Such statements must be measurable, and hence, verifiable. The top administrators at a HEI know that what is written in a vision statement, mission statement, or strategic plan will be evaluated by stakeholders based on whether the items in the plan were carried out or not. Interested stakeholders include accreditation agencies, governing boards, parents, students, and even their faculty members.

More than just becoming more capable in these areas because of the external evaluation or greater scrutiny, the operating systems and the culture of the best performing universities must have been reshaped to emphasize the value of employees. There is general acknowledgement that reaching these objectives within HEIs is a complex process that has to be first modeled and also carefully led. The interaction between employees and leadership within an aligned, efficient, and supportive operating context and culture produces benefits.

Interestingly enough, hypothesis 2 was not supported. This finding is indeed perplexing, given that this hypothesis looked specifically at HEIs that were best places to work. The key to understanding this finding most likely lies in determining what differences there are between the two groups of schools, high ranking vs. best places to work.

More than “put it in writing” as part of their vision statements, mission statements, or strategic plans; there is a broad range of cultural and functional factors that are prerequisites for employees to truly engage towards the goals of an HEI. Developing and implementing these desired conditions are not done through individual events. They are complex endeavors that involve new learning, as well as an unlearning process for everyone. This is a change process that does not simply happen by itself, but through comprehensive programs that feature carefully focused learning processes, as well as implementation that involves skillful leadership.

Study Limitations

One limitation is that the two samples did not differentiate between private and publically funded HEIs. It is thus not possible to conclude that this study is representative of HEIs in the United States. A second limitation is the subjectivity of the content analysis for the vision statements, mission statements, and strategic plan that was conducted on each of the HEIs examined.

Recommendations for Future Research

This work provides the field of strategy research with additional knowledge gained, but also highlights the existence of significant gaps that need to be pursued. Addressing the limitations delineated herein is an important first step. The sample can be examined to see what differences exist, if any, among public and private institutions in the United States. In addition, the study can be expanded to incorporate higher education institutions globally. There are known disincentives for HEI staff and faculty, such as inadequate salaries and the status of research relative to teaching, as well as unclear career pathways, methods and measurement of recognition, and what counts for promotion. Future research should look at other dependent variables such as employee turnover and tenure, as well as other factors that measure the participation and engagement of employees, as well as the degree to which they contribute to the operations of the HEIs and to their vision statements, mission statements, or strategic plans.

CONCLUSION

All organizations depend on people to get things done. Numerous studies document that efforts to engage employees typically provides positive results. The performance levels of employees can significantly affect the execution and attainment of the mission of organizations. Institutions of higher learning are under increasing demands and pressures, which are testing the abilities of these organizations, as well as their employees and leaders. This study has examined the relationships between published performance rankings of HEIs, the “best places to work” designation, and the institution’s emphasis on human resources within their mission statements or strategic goals. Although broader societal change forces have generated new expectations for higher education, this study identified that responding to changes has enabled some to respond and implement effective approaches.

Placing emphasis on employees as an integral part the vision, mission statements, or strategic plans can help organizations achieve institutional improvements. The insight from this study is significant because it implies that HEIs that emphasize and engage their employees have efficient and supportive environments that foster change and they achieve recognition for their efforts.

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