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VIEWPOINT

Can universities become true learning organizations?

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Abstract

Purpose – Aims to assess whether a university can become a true learning organization.

Design/methodology/approach – Focuses on the need for, and challenges of, transforming universities into true learning organizations.

Findings – Observes that few of the underlying values that serve as the underpinnings of the learning organizations are actually honored in universities.

Originality/value – Offers some possible avenues to help transform universities toward becoming learning organizations.

Keywords Universities, Learning organizations

Paper type Viewpoint

I. Introduction

As university faculty we often experience paradoxes, dilemmas, and conflicts between our ideals of creating learning-oriented organizations and the institutional obstacles inherent in doing so. Should it be surprising that some of the greatest barriers are often found within the ivy-covered walls our own educational institutions? On the one hand we teach our students – undergraduates, graduates, and executives – about learning organizations, as the ideal for work organizations for the twenty-first century. We encourage them to analyze their own organizations to determine how their organizations can become learning organizations. We conscientiously design our courses to include elements of learning organizations, including opportunities for innovation, self-managed work teams, experiential learning, double and triple-loop learning, and learning lesson about how things work discovered through "mistakes." For Senge (1990), a learning organization is "continually expanding its capacity to create its future." Ortenblad (2004) proposes an integrated model of a learning organization that includes organizational learning, learning on-the-job, a climate of learning and an organizational structure that is flexible and organic.

On the other hand, as academics we work in institutions that rarely practice the even the simplest tenets found in the theories of learning organizations. The culture of institutions of higher education is full of examples of competitive ratings and rankings, acceptances and rejections, and authoritarian and hierarchical structures – departmental, school, and university-wide, that shape our lives. Whether we write, do research, or teach, except for collaborative projects and committees, we generally fly

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solo in our work. The problem for institutions of higher learning is that they need to promote the practices of the learning organization as we do with our students in the classroom. It seems that for such organizations to have credibility, they should endeavor to become known as being as models of learning organizations operating in the "knowledge age".

II. Institutional obstacles to creating learning organizations in higher education

It is helpful to clarify the ways in which we expect our institutions, our colleagues, and the culture of academic work environments to exemplify learning organizations. Learning from work experiences can be relevant to multiple levels of organizations, including individuals, teams or work groups, and the organization (Marsick and Watkins, 1994, 1999). Further, in an interdependent world, our networks of influence extend out to our professional colleagues and others outside our institutions, and to even outward to include the concept of global learning (Patterson, 1999).

Conundrums of strategy, structure and culture

In higher education, the institutional expectations set by leaders are often the source of disappointment to veteran university faculty members. In a previous issue of this journal, Patterson (1999) applies the idea of learning organizations to universities, suggesting that as they adapt to increasingly competitive external environments they are becoming learning organizations. He discusses a range of models and modes of integrating post secondary education into university education, concluding that emerging comprehensive universities developed from strategic alliances, particularly in Australia, New Zealand and the UK, illustrate educational institutions that both learn and foster learning.

In contrast, most educators are quick to characterize their institutions as "non-learning" organizations. Institutional theory, both old and new, aptly characterizes why adaptation and innovation are difficult for institutions of higher education (Drugovich *et al.*, 2004). First, educational organizations are notoriously slow to change. Truly inspired leadership is needed to work within the norms of consensual governance to support any amount of innovation and adaptation. Leaders must discover how to employ both traditional governance structures and structures more characteristic of learning organizations, e.g. faculty task forces and other consensus building initiatives, to support curriculum innovation and enhance the institution's financial viability and responses to changing external environments (Drugovich *et al.*, 2004).

Mavin and Cavaleri (2004, p. 287) believe the learning and knowledge-creating roles of professors in most universities are defined by the culture, strategy, and structure of educational institutions. Rather than operating as a community of scholars, most universities operate as bureaucracies where social learning is an espoused ideal rather than actual practice. Faculty consider themselves knowledge creators for their professions and groups or practitioners with whom they identify, but are not usually willing or empowered to learn or create knowledge on behalf of their institutions.

Academic culture clashes

The traditional culture of educational institutions often runs counter to the values of the learning organization. On the one hand, as academics we value academic freedom, intellectual development, exploration and examination, peer review, acquisition of knowledge for its intrinsic worth, and collegiality. In regards to colleagues' intellectual pursuits, most of the time there is a, "live and let live" attitude, acknowledging the legitimacies of the semi-infinite possibilities and directions of intellectual pursuit. Academics are members of a loosely coupled community, working as experts in their self-defined domain of a larger field, collaborating when necessary, and governed increasingly by professional academic administrators. While scholars may consider themselves part of an academic community within their own department, school, college or university, professional associations, and like-minded colleagues across the world, in fact, academic life often fosters autonomy, competition, critical judgment, intellectual skepticism, power distance and self-interest. In practice, a surprising number of values of academic life are antithetical to the values and ethos of a learning organization community. Embedded within the ideal of community is a spirit of cooperation, compassion, acceptance, egalitarianism, common vision, mutual respect, and concern for the group. Values of a learning organization, which would in its ideal have many of the same characteristics as a community, include growth and development, openness, risk-taking, innovation, change, flexibility, collaboration, and interdependence.

All cultures contain internal contradictions. The ideas of community are strong in academic life, fueled by love of learning, pursuit of excellence in one's subject field, and positive experiences of colleagueship amid sometimes frustrating and negative experiences (Gersick *et al.*, 2000). Pinchot (1998) argues that in higher education the defining principle of community is one of generosity. For example, faculty members "give" papers at academic conferences and their status increases with the value of their academic contributions. Yet, as faculty members, our experience is of a continuous contrast of impulses toward academic community and organizational learning amid seemingly dysfunctional institutional practices (Weathersby and White, 2004). Here are some real-life examples. Some universities give only "lip service" to post-tenure reviews and ignore patterns of poor teaching and intimidation of students by a professor, thereby communicating that tenure provides a privilege of exemption from the requirement of professional and ethical conduct. Or, a university provides a new office in a distant location to a faculty member who has repeatedly harassed a faculty colleague and support staff, essentially only minimally condemning harassment. A public institution is forced to award high academic rank to a newly hired faculty member who is academically qualified only for a lower rank, this is because the candidate aggressively negotiated the highest possible salary. A faculty task force is asked to recommend major curriculum changes, but members are provided with no additional time or support and given a brief time for their work. Faculty members are often physically dispersed and unable to make consensual decisions as no times are set for joint meetings and faculty governance.

As to why such dysfunctional practices are so resilient, institutional theory suggests that universities, like the military and the church, are historically old, large, and universally common institutions. They have historically been rigidly hierarchical,

resistant to change, and structurally stable. They have also usually been led by conventionalists who prefer to wield influence through positional power.

III. Ways forward

According to Wenger (1998) a "community of practice" is a group of people who are informally bound by what they do together in a joint enterprise. Communities of practice are self-organizing systems and socialization processes in work groups that develop around what matters most to people. They have a repertoire of shared vocabulary, sensibilities, and modes of working together. The concept is neutral with respect to ideals. It is a matter of socialization to the workgroup. From continuous renewal and renegotiation, unique and specific capabilities emerge over time. If the organizational culture supports it, a community of practice is a key ingredient of a learning organization.

As educators we have the opportunity of choosing to become members of multiple communities of practice within our own organization and larger profession. We can make this choice by collectively re-socializing ourselves to use our knowledge of learning organizations within our institutions, in our classrooms, and across our profession to more fully develop our academic institutions into true learning organizations. Our institutions of higher education, as learning organizations, need management's traditional competencies including leadership, team development, cultural proficiency, knowledge management, strategic thinking and planning, and ethical decision-making, among others. Additionally, they need to utilize two other competencies – learning how to learn, and community development – in order for there to be organizational change through – transformational leadership at many levels.

Become deliberate learning partners with colleagues

Creating learning-oriented communities of practice among faculty in even small, incremental ways is a challenge that may involve risk-taking. As faculty we may be alone in our commitment to creating our workplace as a learning organization. Like others in hierarchical organizations, faculty, particularly those who are untenured, may defer upwards, to the dean or university executives. A core belief seems to be that the job of faculty is to teach and do research, while the chair and dean are to manage the organization may be code for, "don't rock the boat," or, "keep your nose to the grindstone and you'll stay out of trouble." We believe that in order to be authentic we have an obligation to practice what we preach, to work toward our ideal and take the higher ground.

Regardless of institutional conflicts and constraints, we can be role models for learning organization behaviors. Throughout our daily interpersonal and group interactions, whether informal exchanges or committee meetings, as active and knowledgeable community members we can incrementally move to developing our educational institutions toward being learning organizations. We can do this by listening with care, creating opportunities for dialogue, including under-represented voices, asking difficult questions, and encouraging dissent. We can model balancing advocacy with inquiry and listening with a fresh and open "beginner's mind." Or we can experiment with listening with our hearts and our minds, not just observing but also seeing what is going on under the surface. We might want to volunteer to do

liaison work with other departments, groups, or task forces, or work to create social glue and social magnets, like Friday afternoon "tea time", or a morning bagel break. Perhaps, we could spare some time to mentoring junior faculty and students. We can reaffirm the practice generosity as essential to higher education (Pinchot, 1998) by sharing knowledge, wisdom, strategies, and hospitality. Relational responsibility (Fletcher, 2001; McNamme and Gergen, 1999) would be an important arena to explore as we create our new work environments.

We are not so naïve to ignore obstacles and barriers to enacting our ideals. Our academic institutions present persistent obstacles to creating our own learning communities. Practically, these include high need for autonomy, separate ways of knowing, expert status and posturing, competition, high percentage of part-time faculty, evening teaching schedules, and frequent preference for electronic, faceless modes of communication. The accelerated programs many of us teach make it difficult to develop meaningful relationships with students as well. When viewed, more broadly its possible to conclude that many universities barely resemble learning organizations at all. Moreover, in transitioning to learning organizations, we are likely to need to unlearn some habitual skepticism and critical attitudes. It is frequently the norm for faculty to complain about their institution without taking responsibility to challenge limiting norms or champion alternatives. We must be persistent in our commitment to positive action.

Become partners with students in creating learning communities in our classrooms. Engage in action inquiry

Creating a learning community in our classrooms requires us to step down from our position as "sage on the stage" and instead see ourselves as partners learning with our students. We can experiment with changing our own mindset and seeing students as teachers, teaching themselves, each other, and ourselves. We can help students develop leadership skills in our classrooms, even if they are not studying leadership, by having them lead part of a discussion, design a group exercise, or facilitate a role play for a case. At the very least, we can arrange the chairs in the classroom so that students are sitting in a semi-circle or horseshoe design, facing each other, so communication is between students, not just between student and teacher. These are "low-stakes" attempts at community building in the classroom. Palmer (1998) calls for "high stakes" acts of courage to reform higher education, by collectively speaking and seeking truth in our classrooms and outside them, thus developing "communities of congruence" as an essential element of our communities of practice.

Becoming change agents

It is possible to find examples of educational institutions that have used learning organization methodologies to support culture change. Bowman (2002) describes the rekindling of a spirit of organizational community at a mid-western university in the USA in a strategic initiative that involved cross-university dialogue, learning conversations, and self-managed faculty groups working as project teams across institutional boundaries. Essential in this change effort were alterations in the meaning or mental models of the university's mission and organizational structure to foster synergies of effort. In this example, the faculty were enabled to create an academic

culture of shared best practices, collaboration and partnership that allowed institutional changes and also sustained momentum for future initiatives.

Many in academic life long for a sense of "lost" community. To develop community, universities, and the individuals within them, need to commit themselves to increasing collaboration and decreasing competition, at the individual, group, and organizational levels. This involves minimizing status differences, dissolving intra-disciplinary and cliques that are created from fear and arrogance, and eliminating the competitive organizational structures and incentives that traditionally create and maintain turf battles. At the level of the individual, these goals involve changing one's sense of oneself to be part of a larger collective unit, and at the group and organizational levels requires understanding the systemic results of competition and individualism versus collaboration and interdependence.

Understanding the excellence of learning organizations as deviance

One of the challenges to developing our educational institutions into intentional communities of learning is that the quality of excellence that learning organizations represent is often viewed by traditionalists as being a deviant organizational strategy. That is, learning organizations are rare, not common, and require that we develop patience and compassion for the process, ourselves, and our colleagues. We all learn how to work in learning organizations through experiencing "pieces" of them. Consonant with research and theory, learning organizations in any field of endeavor require radical departures from common organizational culture and exceptional leadership (Argyris and Schon, in Senge, 2003). In that sense, we have to constantly develop and reinvent both ourselves and organizations into something novel.

IV. Accepting the challenge

We anticipate that some of our colleagues will respond to our call for communities of practice with, "If it's not broken, why fix it?" Universities as learning communities require a big tent, inclusive of colleagues who may be so idealistic as to underestimate the necessity for political savvy and strategy in order to be "successful" within our highly political institutions. Some of our colleagues may call for transparency, cooperation, and egalitarianism instead of secrecy, competition, and elitism. We need these voices if we are to develop vibrant, progressive, learning communities.

Our individual intentions are crucial. Can each of us commit ourselves to each other as members of an extended professional community, moderating our drive towards competitive individual achievement, and alternatively developing our collective achievement as we learn how to support learning organizations in our institutions and our classrooms? Individually and collectively, we can use our knowledge of learning organization research and theory to good advantage as we put into practice what we already know about facilitating learning and creating learning organizations. This voluntary expansion of our role and responsibilities is demanding but we have the tools and skills. We need the strength and support of collective communities of practice. We need knowledge of shared practices. Might we make a commitment to a colleague to together take some small steps?

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