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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 (Askling & 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

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