

Possibilities for Change within Technology Management and Organizational Development; A Case Study

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Abstract

With a declining market base, many Japanese educational institutions are having difficulty finding their way and making a profit while attempting to maintain traditional management structures. This paper examines the possibilities for a rural based university in Japan utilizing tools at hand, by managing their technology differently and opening lanes of communication. Improving conditions would require an organizational shift from the current paradigm to a new standard, the university as learning organization. The study includes consideration of Wiki implementation and accountability measures to improve educational standards, increase learner autonomy, and improve communication in and among instructors, students, and administration.

Keywords: Knowledge management, Learning organizations, Organizational development, Change, Japan

Type of Article: Theoretical with example, Case study

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Introduction

Universities in Japan and elsewhere are struggling for market share as the population of traditional students, aged 18-20 years old, is decreasing. The university in this study is no exception, finding itself at a crossroads, searching for change while struggling for survival in an increasingly competitive environment. While management seems to fear relinquishing control in an increasingly uncertain environment, this paper considers the benefits of recasting an educational organization as a learning organization, as discussed in 2000 by Calabrese and Shoho. In addition the implementation of technology could benefit the organization as a whole, by increasing productivity, cutting costs and helping increase worker moral. The following is a discussion with a focus on problems facing the school and methods to overcome these difficulties

Background

The university studied is a small private university located in a rural area in Mie Prefecture, Japan. The school is privately owned but, as all education is in Japan, it is partially financed with government support. The government approves the curriculum before granting funds. Over the last few years, the number of 18 year olds in the population has decreased as a whole, putting strain on the incoming freshman class numbers. The acceptance of non-traditional continuing education students up to this point has not been embraced. As a result and according to management/administration, the schools profit has decreased. This has led to frantic cost cutting and belt-tightening within the university groups. The groups (or factions) tend to fight for their survival as they are asked to produce more with fewer resources. The student population is just under one thousand. There has been discussion from the management that if our student body numbers are over one thousand, the university will realize a profit.

To date the school is open to students who enroll full time with little room for other study options. As the number of retirees in the population is increasing rapidly, one of the seemingly obvious solutions would be to open the school to part-time students (also known as continuing education students), for example on a class-by-class basis. Staff members in the office as well as the faculty have voiced this

option - noting calls from the general public inquiring about enrollment in various classes on a casual basis. To this point, suggestions on the matter have not received official comment from administration.

Top-Down

In traditional Japanese society, one does not question one's elders or superiors. The management at the university studied tends to reflect these values; management style is top-down. It could be said that there is a general feeling that questions and suggestions are not welcome. Reading Mordens' 1997 literature regarding vision statements and leadership, there is no such published or spoken vision at the school in the study. Perhaps the author is too low in rank to be privy to such information. Communication, within the departments studied seems to work fairly well. When communication goes vertically it seems to hit a ceiling.

Dysfunction

The university fits some of the dysfunctional environmental traits as set forth by Argyris in 1990 and noted by Calabrese and Shoho (2000). Unfortunately, the university in question falls more on the dysfunctional side lacking many of the change facilitators that healthy organizations sustain according to Sorohan (1994) and as reported by Calabrese and Shoho (2000). Conversely, in the authors' opinion, to the university's credit, the school provides a sense of security with the tenured full time staff. The school as a whole supports diversity with over 30 percent of the student body and some of the staff, coming from countries other than Japan. However, some of the traits of healthy organizations are missing, including an encouraged balance between work and family life and the use of technology as a tool as noted by Calabrese and Shoho (2000).

Balance

From observation, office staff work late most nights. When the suggestion to hire more office staff is raised, the answer is ultimately lack of financial resources. As well, the university has only one full time, overworked, computer technician. When the question of hiring other technicians is brought forth, lack of funds is again the answer. When the suggestion is brought forth to hire student helpers to staff the open computer rooms and free up the computer technician, security (a.k.a. lack of trust) is the answer as to why it just cannot be done.

Technology

An example of underutilization of technology as a tool: at the university, paper is still the main means of communication. Many routine forms could be distributed electronically, saving stationary and printing costs as well as allowing use of technology tools such as online translators to encourage the staff to help themselves with language issues. (The section on Wiki Installment describes this in depth.) The computer rooms have been the center of advertisement for the university, the rooms are often used for advertising opportunities, but when requests for software are rejected and the fact that the LAN is undersized, and slow from overwork, one tends to question commitment. One begins to wonder if the multimedia room was just a political or marketing move to attract new students.

Overworked Management

At this point management seems to be working hard to make all the decisions. An example is the professors' monthly meeting. Delivery of information for the professors to decide upon is not available until the time of the meeting. The management seems to apply the Just-in-Time (JIT) strategy to information by treating information as a commodity. Without proper time to consider and discuss the issues, the faculty in turn may feel they are simply a rubberstamp for the issues presented at the meeting. One major problem of the JIT system in manufacturing (where it began) is that it leaves parts suppliers open to supply shocks. Within the university, the shock is lack of information, leading to feelings of apathy within the uninformed, or anger if the information directly affects the person or group affected.

The information would be better served at an earlier opportunity for all to consider and discuss before decisions are necessitous.

A more horizontal (verses the current vertical) chain of command would promote openness thus encouraging the foundations of trust. The current top down management style allows no room for movement or negotiation. Top management does not have a name in Japanese style organizations. To question the management is to go against the group as a whole. There is no one to discuss proposed issues with other than a select few whom may have a relationship with the leaders.

Trust

Denton in 1996 noted the four rules for leading change in management situations. Listed as follows:

Rule 1. What are you trying to do?

Rule 2. Creating trust and buy-in

Rule 3. Create disciples/followers

Rule 4. Measure and monitor "it"

Although easier said than accomplished trust, as noted in Rule 2 (Denton 1996), is a common theme in much of the literature concerning organizational growth and change (Denton 1996, Mordon 1997, Scheid 2003). Control needs relinquishment to allow trust to build so the learning organization may grow. In 1999, Nader discusses this issue (page 138); giving the means and control to the group makes it a team. This in turn, encourages trust and makes the team responsible for outcomes. This would require large amounts of trust on the part of management. If that trust could be achieved then management's role could switch from regulating, to that of Denton's (1996) fourth rule: measuring and monitoring (the change).

Delegating Responsibility

According to Calabrese & Shoho (2000), if management is to allow growth it must relinquish its grip on control in support of change. University members must then work as a whole to find commonality of reality in regards to the goals to be achieved. Dialogue and trust are prominent as essential for sustaining growth and consideration of ones “assumption of responsibility” (Calabrese & Shoho, 2000) to maintain organizational change.

From the author’s observations of the conditions at the university, the models of change that may have the most relevance are first, the Principle Centered Leadership (PLC) paradigm, which is the examination of the organization as a reflection of nature, as presented in 2000 by Covey; and second, Calabrese and Shohos' (2000) article on recasting administration as a learning organization. As a learning organization, the management, as well as the whole school, reaps the benefits of growth. As Calabrese and Shoho suggest in 2000, the administration and the university should act as a learning organization, operating mutually and facilitating long-term change. Leitch, Harrison, Burgoyne, & Blanter (1996) support the notion of learning as central to the survival and growth of organizations. This learning could partially be achieved through the introduction of technology tools to improve communication, namely a Wiki, or its enhanced cousin, the Moodle. Both would fulfill the task but we will examine the Wiki.

Technology utilized

What is a Wiki? Defined by Cunningham (2002), “Wiki is a piece of server software that allows users to freely create and edit Web page content using any Web browser. Wiki supports hyperlinks and has a simple text syntax for creating new pages and crosslinks between internal pages on the fly.”

The development of a Wiki for class information and other documents would allow online access quickly to achieve two goals. One, it would open the classes to a more student centered proactive

type of class structure by making the students produce work to be published, thus allowing the work to be viewed and possibly edited (amended) by other students. Second, the administration could monitor the class activities through the Wiki, creating an element of transparency, which consequently encourages accountability. This move would require most everyone to become more literate with the computer and Wiki software. A couple of years should be allowed for adjustment and it could be phased in over a period of years.

By introducing the Wiki the transparency could help achieve a more open communication chain between teachers and students, students and students, and the classrooms to those whom may not usually get to view the classes - the administration. The new candidness would help open chains of communication, referred to as “*wirearchy*” (Husband, 1999) (as opposed to a hierarchy). The Wiki helps create an informal communication line outside the traditional top down style now in place. According to Husband in 1999, who coined the term, the working definition of a wirearchy is “a dynamic two-way flow of power and authority, based on knowledge, trust, credibility and a focus on results, enabled by interconnected people and technology”. (Husband, 1999, ¶ 3)

ACCOUNTABILITY

Face-to-face education is difficult to audit and this difficulty may lead to a lack of information within the organization. From personal experience as an educator, instructors seem to be interested in what is happening in other classes. Class information viewed from the Wiki board has the added benefit of making the classes auditable. By adding this visible element, a more open auditable approach would help information flow and probably deflect rumor by allowing visibility and accountability.

Accountability for better results will lead to a higher quality of education if this accountability comes from a standpoint of pride as opposed to fear, as is noted by the State Higher Education Executive Officers in 2005. An example of accountability in action in the education market, that could be implemented, is the [Australian Qualifications Framework \(AQF\) Register](#). Universities, and other

academic institutions, are listed on the register. The benefits include openness allowing crosschecks to assure quality and help promote the school to prospective students. If there was such a program in Japan, it might indeed encourage quality by opening the classrooms to view, opposed to the current situation. The only persons who see the programs in action now are enrolled students, and their opinions generally spread via word of mouth.

Wiki installment

While the implementation should be quick as suggested by Werner (2000) and Bhatti (2001), the use of the Wiki, as with most change, should be phased in over a period to allow comfort and ubiquity. To achieve seamless integration of the Wiki, papers that are now printed and distributed in text form (at high cost to the institution) could be placed on the board available for online reading or printout via PDF format. This would create a natural progression away from the copy machine to paperless format. Responsibility for class materials (once placed online) shifts from the instructor to the student increasing autonomy.

Documents that could be easily prepared in .DOC format and placed online immediately include, but not limited to:

- Teacher profiles
- Class profiles
- Class syllabi
- The Student Handbook
- Overseas Study Program information
- Often used office forms

As comfort with the medium rises, use may be increased. The more technically savvy of the staff would take the lead voluntarily adding blog boards for their students, links to readings, homework assignments, etc. Others would follow owing to educator's competitive nature and a drive to improve their teaching. An integral part of the Wiki board is communication via blog and messaging. Within the Wiki

communication naturally flows in any direction creating the wirearchy discussed earlier thus bypassing the typical communication difficulties, albeit information flow would favor the more technically proficient.

Establishment of a guide system would facilitate proficiency in the Wiki environment among students and staff. Students would indirectly benefit by becoming more computer literate with use of the system.

The long-term commitment from the university's standpoint would be in the form of hardware and upgraded LAN, hardwire or wireless. As well, it would be necessary to buy computers for the students to use, or require students to purchase their own.

Conclusion

To maintain quality and attract students the university studied is searching for change. By casting itself as a Learning Organization (Calabrese and Shoho, 2000) it would gain multiple benefits. These benefits include (1) improved use of existing technology, leading to, (2) development of a wirearchy that would enhance communication, leading to, (3) improved standards from the openness of the classroom derived from Wiki implementation. In order for change to occur, management would need to relinquish control and trust its members to a greater degree. Implementation suggestions include a new definition of student (creating part-time students), upgraded computer hardware, and LAN network to allow freedom of information flow via the creation of a Wiki. The Wiki could be set up to allow viewing, producing a virtual window into classes. This window, in turn, would open the realm of the class to audit. Cost savings could be realized from reduced printing costs by posting forms, syllabi and other information that are now in printed form on the Wiki.

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