

Impetus for Opportunity: Reflections on an Organizational Change Process

In higher education, change is a constant. This past year though, the Office of Residence Life at the University of Delaware faced more change than usual. Using the four frames outlined in *Reframing Organizations*: structural, human resources, symbolic, and political (Bolman and Deal, 1997), and a year of hindsight, the authors of this article will examine the change process that occurred here and highlight some keys to success.

The Impetus for Change

In June of 2000, the University's Dean of Students retired after serving in the position for 15 years. The months following this announcement were spent planning for his departure and how to fill the void he would leave on our campus.

The Dean of Students position was modified to include new responsibilities and a new title. This position, "Associate Vice President of Campus Life" was filled by the long standing Director of Residence Life at UD. She was charged with overseeing a new unit, Campus Life, which included both Judicial Affairs and Residence Life. As is common with change, there was a "trickle down" effect. Now Residence Life was without a Director.

The new Associate Vice President worked collaboratively with the Residence Life staff and the Vice President of Student Life to create a new organizational structure. The new

structure divided the residential campus into four areas, each overseen by an Assistant Director. At the helm of the department were two Directors, both former Associate Directors, whose responsibilities were divided along functional lines. Additionally, it was decided that Residence Life would move one of their Complex Coordinator positions to Judicial Affairs to accommodate an increased workload in that office. With the Director's departure and the departure of that Complex Coordinator position, a Residence Life professional staff of sixteen was reduced to fourteen. On July 1 2001, this new structure went into effect.

Only months into the academic year though, one of the co-directors received an opportunity to work in the Vice President's Office and accepted. He left Residence Life on November 1, 2001. In the meantime, a hiring freeze had been implemented for the administrative functions of the University as a result of the economic recession and the resulting state budget cuts. Residence Life was now a department of thirteen and once again needed to restructure.

Quickly, we needed to develop a new structure that would efficiently allow us to do more with less. The result was an organization with one Director and four Assistant Directors. The Assistant Directors moved from supervising an area of campus to managing functional areas for the entire department. Responsibilities were divided into four areas: supervision; training and selection; programming and leadership development; and community development and responsibility.

The Process of Change

Writing new job descriptions and drawing lines and boxes depicting new organizational structures is the easy part of reorganizing a department, especially when you are facing restructuring for a second time in less than a year. Being intentional about each decision and constantly aware of the group dynamics are the more challenging aspects. As a unit, we needed to make sure changes were being made to meet the end goal of creating an organization that could effectively support residence hall student development and learning. The decisions could not be driven by personalities, current skills, fear or avoidance. In other words, we needed to divorce ourselves from the process and become our best objective consultants.

At the same time we realized that our greatest resources were our staff members. Each one needed to have input and sense that his or her voice was valued in the change process. Staff members needed to trust in the motivations and goals of the people making the final decisions about the organization.

Following is an examination of the changes and the process used from the four frames outlined in *Reframing Organizations* (Bolman and Deal, 1997): structural, human resources, political, and symbolic.

Viewing any organization through only one frame is limiting. All four frames provide a more multidimensional understanding of the complete functioning of a complex organization. It is our contention, that because we paid attention to each of the four frames, perhaps unintentionally, we ended up with a good final product. One that not only made functional sense, allowing us to operate more efficiently with fewer people; but also helped create a greater sense of ownership and commitment by those in the organization.

A Structural Frame:

“The structural frame emphasizes goals, specialized role, and formal relationships...commonly depicted by organizational charts” (Bolman and Deal, 1997, p. 13).

The current economic situation combined with other office’s needs resulted in Residence Life being expected to do more with less. So, in order to accomplish the same, we would need to be more efficient. To be more efficient, we quickly determined that we needed to streamline the way decisions were made, eliminate redundancy in positions, and flatten the hierarchy to improve communication. The result was a process driven by function rather than the physical layout of the campus or current personnel. This new structure did in fact eliminate job redundancy, streamlined decision making, and flattened the hierarchy so that communication was improved.

A Human Resource Frame:

The human resources frame “sees an organization as much like an extended family, inhabited by individuals who have needs, feelings, prejudices, skills, and limitations...the key challenge is to tailor organizations to people – to find a way for individuals to get the job done while feeling good about what they are doing” Bolman and Deal, 1997, p. 14).

Ensuring that all members of the organization felt valued during the change process was critical. Input from all staff was solicited. This input was crucial for two main reasons: First, we needed to make sure that all possibilities and perspectives were considered and second, we needed to ensure that staff members were invested in the change process and its outcome. It was important that as much as possible, all involved felt that these were changes “we” were making instead of changes being dictated from above. The Assistant Directors, whose jobs changed the most significantly, had the opportunity to give lots of input into the various areas of responsibility that became functional areas. Complex Coordinators also provided input and were asked to re-write their job description to reflect a flattened hierarchical structure.

In the end, four new Assistant Director jobs were created which were very different from the previous Assistant Director jobs and very distinct from one another. People, who had been hired to do one job, now faced the reality that their job was completely different. The new positions were designed structurally to meet the long-term needs and goals of the department not its current personnel. When you overlay the human resources frame

on top of the structural frame, it becomes apparent that even the most efficient, well thought out organizational structure won't work without committed and passionate employees. So, the next step in the change process was getting people excited about their new positions and acknowledging that not everyone was getting their "dream job." Fortunately, in most cases, personnel at the time had skills matching the newly designed positions.

Early on we recognized that the change process was not over when the new structure went into place. It would have been foolish to assume we would "get it right" the first time. We acknowledged from the beginning that we would need to make adjustments as we all settled into our new roles. To facilitate this, we spent two days in January reflecting on the change and planning for how we would continue. The title of our January retreat was "Who are we and where are we headed?"

A Symbolic Frame:

The symbolic frame "treats organizations as tribes, theaters, or carnivals...propelled more by rituals, ceremonies, stories, heroes, and myths than by rules, policies, and managerial authority" (Bolman and Deal, 1997, p. 14).

As a result of the January retreat, we realized that not only did we need to know who we were and where we were headed; we needed all of our staff to be able to quickly articulate answers to those questions. This was especially important during a time of

change and potential confusion for our student staff. Why had we changed - again? What was our end goal? Could Resident Assistants and Hall Directors answer this for their students? So, we embarked on creating a new statement that would articulate clearly and effectively to our many constituencies who we are and what we hope to accomplish. We held lengthy conversations discussing our purpose and our goals. We already had a mission statement, diversity vision, and a strategic plan. As a group we were committed to these documents, but wanted something that would be easier than our 22 page strategic plan to communicate to staff, students, faculty, or parents. As a professional staff we came to quick consensus on who we are and what we want to accomplish. The challenge was coming to consensus on the best way to articulate that vision. After discussing with professionals, Hall Directors, and Resident Assistants, we eventually arrived at a statement that all levels of the organization felt reflected what they hoped to be and do.

Encourage, Empower, Educate: Each student discovering his or her potential through personal relationships, diverse experiences, and inclusive communities.

This statement provides a symbolic way for us to communicate who we are as an organization and what we hope all staff will be striving to accomplish. Regardless of how we are structured and who is responsible for various functions, this is what we aspire to be. It symbolically and literally focuses our efforts.

Not only was this statement a symbolic shift, but the process of creating such a statement was also the first real example of how the hierarchy had been flattened, a major cultural change for Residence Life. At one point during the discussion a staff member turned to the new Director and acquiesced, “You’re the Director, you decide.” She refused. This was not the Director’s statement; it was *our* statement.

A Political Frame:

The political frame “sees organizations as arenas, contests, or jungles. Different interests compete for power or scarce resources...conflict is rampant...bargaining, negotiating, coercion, and compromise are part of everyday life” (Bolman and Deal, 1997, p. 14).

Our department functions within a greater campus-wide political environment. The higher levels of the administration have also seen great change during this time with a new Provost and the Vice President of Student Life’s retirement. With changing leadership of the institution and a poor economic climate, resources on campus continue to be scarce. Scrutiny of units at all levels has significantly increased. It is increasingly important for units to justify themselves as essential and not supplemental.

In order to better articulate our values and who we are to these new leaders and to the University President who is currently directly supervising the Division of Student Life, an annual report was prepared to articulate our accomplishments in the past and our

immediate goals as well as the obstacles that stand in our way. To best meet the needs of our students, we need to be our own advocates and foster allies from among the campus community. This requires proactive marketing of the department's services and accomplishments.

We are working as a department to pay attention to how our changes are affecting others external to Residence Life. It is important that we recognize that while our new structure makes sense to us it is not so intuitive to others. Job responsibilities have been shared with those we interact with frequently. Assessment continues as we strive to ensure that services we provide to other units have not diminished. We are now a smaller department but hopefully one that can maintain its outstanding campus reputation.

Conclusion

The impetus for the change process was our need to continue to succeed with a smaller professional staff. Since and despite this change we have had several noteworthy accomplishments. We managed to provide students with the same quantity and quality educational and social programs in a year that saw a record setting number of policy violations addressed by Residence Life staff members. One of the Assistant Director positions was upgraded to an Associate Director level, an unexpected accomplishment in a time of a continued hiring freeze and shortfalls in state allocations. In the spring following the second reorganization, UD Residence Life received four national awards.

Change is not easy. Although we had noteworthy accomplishments we also faced many challenges. Under the newly flattened hierarchy some staff members still struggle to believe that they do indeed have new decision making power and accept the associated responsibility. Old habits die hard. Ensuring that espoused and enacted values are consistent is essential to any organization's success. As expected, the change process did result in some dissatisfaction. One of the Assistant Directors resigned shortly after the second reorganization took effect. However, putting the goals of the organization ahead of individual preferences was necessary for the long-term success of the department.

We are still changing and refining our roles as we progress through another academic year: Our first opening, Homecoming, mid-terms, finals, etc. Yet, because we paid attention to our human resources; illustrated our goals and changes symbolically; designed an efficient structure supportive of our goals; and paid attention to the political frame within which we function, we have come through the past year healthy and strong. We did not let change define us. We used the change as an opportunity to define ourselves.

Reference

Bolman, L. G. and Deal T. E. (1997). Reframing organizations: Artistry, choice, and leadership. (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.

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