

Inciting Grassroots Change

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INTRODUCTION

Achieving meaningful and lasting change within an educational organization requires that diverse constituent groups engage and buy into the transformation. Often, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) implement policies with the intention of influencing how learning and teaching will occur. Such policies are generally not as effective as their authors intend. Affecting the values and behaviors of teaching staff presents a challenge, and leaders must generally provide vision, policies, resources, and moral support to achieve change. As the results of this case study suggest, however, projecting too strong a sense of ownership from the top may actually deter individuals at ‘the bottom’ of the institutional hierarchy from participating—at least in a decentralized institution like the one under analysis. Sparking enthusiasm of grassroots champions and equipping them to help inspire and motivate their colleagues is crucial. Grassroots initiative that is matched by top-down support offers the best chances for successful transformation; having a clear and identifiable champion at the top may not be as important as having clear and identifiable champions at the bottom of the power pyramid.

The empirical study that provides a foundation for this chapter investigated the transformation of one academic program. In the transformation, teachers sought to implement student-centered teaching and assessment practices. The empirical study investigated “organizational culture,” which Birnbaum (1988) described as “a powerful way of looking at how people in institutions create social reality through their interactions and interpretations” (p. 72). The study was conducted in an engineering college in one post-secondary institution in Ireland. It illustrates that crystallizing a sense of ownership at the ground level is crucial to successful change. There, grassroots change by a small group of individuals working together provided inspiration for transformation at the program and college levels. Seeing and talking with other people who were implementing change was a crucial aspect of deciding to change themselves. Leaders in the college apparently sensed this and helped shine the spotlight on their progress. The grassroots change process involved researching, creating, debating, testing, and sharing new pedagogies and then institutionalizing them into the program curriculum. Today, changes this small group pioneered help form the basis for a new common core for all engineering majors at the institution.

Members of this small group perceived the shift in course and program design as something of their own making. They saw themselves as part of a larger group of colleagues working together to improve the learning environment for their students. They were encouraged to address specific apprehensions and barriers to change by receiving constant messages of support from one particular member of the group—who they say “evangelized” for the use of innovative methods. Participants in this study got engaged because they wanted students to work in groups. They want to provide fair assessment and timely, relevant feedback to students. They enjoyed each other’s company and determined to work together to address specific doubts that were keeping them from implementing the ‘best practices’ they had studied and discussed.

In the process, a skilled mentor who had implemented similar changes (in a different subject area but within the same institution) guided them. However, because there was no visible proponent of the cause at the top of the organizational chart, they saw this change as their own. This perception may hold a key for other leaders who hope to foster similar change, particularly in institutions with weak hierarchy and a strong sense of collegiality (Birnbaum, 1988). Rather than focus on projecting a strong sense of ownership from the top, academic leaders may be well advised to share the spotlight—carefully creating a grassroots culture of change around issues and values they aim to spread.

Although the faculty members saw the transformation as grassroots, the growth of knowledge and skills that enabled it resulted from policies, affirmative messages, and support mechanisms provided over a decade by the administration. Support included professional development workshops and seminars, teaching fellowships and awards, newsletters and publications, speeches, and new degree programs in “learning and teaching.” For the case study, interviews were conducted with eight key players who implemented change at the program level. These individuals said they would have liked more support and a clearer vision. Yet a number of them were motivated to participate because they felt the change was their own.

Analyzing and understanding this case can benefit the fields of educational leadership and planning. This chapter reviews classical literature on change management, describes the context of change at the case study institution, identifies important policies and programs, discusses outcomes in relation to existing theory, and highlights where and how organizational learning occurred.

Review of Theories on Change

The literature on change management emphasizes:

- Overcoming resistance to change is a primary challenge for educational leaders (Fullan, 2001).
- Educational planning is difficult to track and control (Presley & Leslie, 1999; Wilson, 1997).
- Learning from experience is critical to the long-term success of any organization (Birnbaum, 1988; Kolb, 1984; Llamasa-Villalba et al., 2014) but HEIs usually fail to learn successes and failures of themselves and others (Holcomb, 2001; Rowley, Lujan, & Dolence, 1998).
- Individuals within an educational system who champion specific causes can be highly effective in prompting change (Black & Gregersen, 2013; Sergiovanni, 2012).
- Literature on industrial and organizational psychology provides helpful guidance for educators wanting to promote change and support student learning (Borrego, et al., 2013).
- Teachers working together can change their conceptualizations and facilitate change (Barrie, 2007; Biggs & Tang, 2015; Hofmeyer et al., 2015).

Organizational Learning Models

Institutions that learn from their own past experience and use it to improve future performance reflect organizational learning as defined by Huber (1991), who synthesized 40 years of writing and determined “an organizational entity learns if, through its processing of information, the range of its potential behaviors is changed” and that additional learning occurs if any of the organization’s units “acquires knowledge that it recognizes as potentially useful to the organization” (p. 126). Argyris and Schön (1996) say organizational learning involves detecting and correcting error. Most organizations demonstrate what these authors call single-loop learning, where individuals identify major aspects of a given problem and try to

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