

Education Policy Reform in South Africa: A Case Study on Leading Change

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Abstract

Despite the wide array of studies investigating issues pertaining to leading change, the juggernaut of organisational change continues to be pervasive within the literature. This paper presents empirical evidence of change leadership within the context of education policy reforms in a developing country such as South Africa. The conceptual framework employed to present this evidence and assess the effectiveness of implementing change is the Five-P model. Recent national reforms in South Africa have been accompanied by a re-evaluation of the parity of educational institutions, particularly policies centred on redress and equity of past practices. The results indicate that change leaders are far from transforming their organisations in the ways they intend and that the implementation of change strategies is multifaceted and complex. The paper concludes by emphasising the importance of change leaders developing broader strategies which encompass components of organisational culture and discourse.

Introduction

As part of their continuing quest towards redressing past inequities, the South African Ministry of Education developed policies aimed at reforming the Further Education and Training (FET) sector. FET was identified as key to the human resources future of the country (RSA, DoE, 2001). Specifically, the transformation process entailed the merger of previously advantaged technical colleges with previously disadvantaged institutions (RSA, DoE, 2001). The policy change was driven by the need for institutional strength via the development of human resources, building economies of scale and the redistribution of resources between previously advantaged and disadvantaged institutions (RSA, DoE, 1997, 2001). This action was also a significant endeavour undertaken to transform the South African Education sector.

Various studies have highlighted mergers within public sector organisations; however, the merger of educational institutions in South Africa is a more recent phenomenon (Harman & Meek, 1988; Skodvin, 1999; Harman & Harman, 2003).

Moreover, South African history is unique as it involves a legacy of apartheid which has engendered major inequities between educational institutions (RSA, DoE, 1997, 2001; Reddy, 1998; Harman & Harman, 2003).

Leading change theorists have argued that developing a compelling vision, communicating this vision and empowering employees to act on the vision are crucial elements for leading major change (Senge *et al.*, 1999; Kotter, 2007). Other studies note the importance of utilising the symbolic lens to address important features of the change process (Bellou, 2007; Brownell, 2008). It is argued that the success of a symbolic perspective depends, to a large extent, on a leader's ability to listen and understand how organisational members construct their perception of the changes taking place. Ford, Heisler and McCreary (2008), in their influential model of leading change, propose five Ps—purpose, priorities, people, process, proof—as a framework for implementing change.

This study explores the concept of change leadership by analysing employee perceptions of vision, strategic direction, communication and empowerment during the merger of three further education and training institutions in South Africa. It subsequently employs Ford *et al.*'s (2008) model as an assessment tool for discussing avenues for further development.

This paper is comprised of seven sections. Following this introduction is a review of the policy reforms driving the merger of FET institutions. The next section provides a brief overview of the literature on leading change, followed by an outline of the 5-P conceptual model. The last four sections include focus on the methodology employed in the study, findings from the statistical data, a discussion of the findings and a conclusion.

Policy Reforms

The National Committee on FET (RSA, DoE, 2001) was appointed as the body to investigate and propose changes aimed at achieving the national objectives of *equity* and *redress*. They proposed: revitalising human resource management practices; developing strategies to address issues of equity; the sharing of resources; and joint planning among providers of further education and training. These recommendations led to the development of a strategy which outlined the merger of FET colleges. The merger process entailed an integration of previously advantaged and disadvantaged academic institutions. Challenges such as the prevailing legacy of past authority, which promoted authoritarianism based on racial, gender and cultural domination, were highlighted. The staff profile in current institutions failed to reflect the reality of South African demographics, particularly with regard to issues surrounding governance, career development, adequate personnel for counselling and equity support. In addition, the National Committee on FET argued that the legislative provision for state-controlled institutions had created a culture of dependency which undermined employees' capacity for sustainable self-management. Other issues, such as building

participatory governance, creating a culture of teamwork and developing strategies aimed at seeking gender equity, were noted.

A wide range of literature supports these recommendations and contends that there is a positive correlation between human resource development and the quality of public sector management (Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2003; Willems, Janvier & Henderickx, 2004; Bellou, 2007). A key outcome of the National Committee's proposal was the restructuring of the FET landscape via the mergers of institutions. Across all nine provinces within the country, technical colleges were merged to form the *new* FET institutions. Within the KwaZulu-Natal Province, 24 institutions were merged to create nine FET colleges (RSA, DoE, 2001). Against the backdrop of institutional restructuring, the effectiveness of change leadership was explored in a wide-ranging study into the merger of three particular FET institutions.

A number of studies into mergers have discussed and debated the relevant issues, yet most conclude that too few leaders have been able to successfully transform their organisations according to stated goals (Schmöker, 1999; Brownell, 2008). Other studies (Harman & Meek, 1998; Crain, 2000) suggest that the success of a merger is dependent on specific key issues. These include: commitment by participating institutions and their employees; strong leadership; shared vision of the future potential benefits from a merger; wide consultation and involvement of employees in the planning and integration processes; and transparent decision making. To achieve strategic change, however, the leader has to predict the future, maintain flexibility and empower followers to achieve the change objectives (Daft, 2008). This study extends on those findings by exploring the concepts of leading change, vision, communication and empowerment within the context of mergers in a developing country seeking reforms of equity and redress.

Literature Review

Whilst vision, strategy and culture are the foremost responsibilities of leaders in steering the change process, leaders also need to provide resources and commitment, and be prepared to champion the results to both the organisation and its stakeholders (Ralston & Wilson, 2006). Leaders may have to critically challenge various change scenarios and be able to effectively learn from past experiences. Dotlich and Cairo (2002) concur that effective leaders are individuals who refuse to be prisoners of experience. Instead, they create a culture that embraces change and they critically view situations. It is noted that while the organisational culture may provide the context within which strategies are created and implemented (Ireland & Hitt, 2005), leaders have the capacity to shape the organisational culture and the way that strategies are implemented (George, Sleeth & Siders, 1999). Wheatley (1999) proposes that leaders need to provide a clear image of the destination and motivate followers to attain the desired state.

Practices such as clear articulation of the organisation's mission and vision become essential elements of a change initiative and are also associated with leveraging a competitive advantage (Calder, 2006). A vision becomes meaningful when it is frequently communicated within and outside the institution and attached to notions of inspiration and motivation. Whilst goals may provide a concrete sense of progress toward the organisation's vision (Schmöker, 1999), incorporating the vision into an organisation's culture and then using tools such as scenario planning to provide the long-term perspective becomes especially crucial (Ralston & Wilson, 2006). These elements are essential to developing strategies that enhance employees' understanding of their common purpose (Garman, 2006). Moreover, throughout the change process, communication becomes a key aspect in preparing employees to respond and engage in attaining their goals. This may include reinforcing key components of the desired culture, issues surrounding structural changes (George *et al.*, 1999), performance measures and mechanisms of control subject to organisational goals. It is also noted that the core of communication is the perceived level of support leaders offer as role-models and that mentorship roles help shape the organisation's culture and prepare employees for change (George *et al.*, 1999).

Unfortunately, in any long-term reform effort, it is possible for people to lose sight of their organisation's vision and the goals they had set to reach it (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996; Duke, 2004). Therefore, change agents need to be prepared for the possibility of these implementation dips and other forces that might limit their reform efforts (Senge *et al.*, 1999). Inclusive leadership styles that involve employees in developing a shared vision and the goals for reaching the vision provide greater meaning, challenge and motivation as well as a common purpose to everyone in the organisation (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Schmöker, 1999; Askren Edgehouse *et al.*, 2007). Hersey Blanchard and Johnson (2001) advocate practicing democratic leadership, team leadership and servant-leadership (leading from behind) as behaviours which enable followers to work towards achieving intended outcomes. In addition, Rinke (2004) notes that establishing an environment that is high in trust is fundamental to having a successful and vibrant organisation. Greater support is attached to creating an open environment that promotes dialogue, particularly between employees and leaders (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Dotlich & Cairo, 2002). However, a major challenge in creating a climate that promotes employee empowerment is the manner in which power is used. For instance, it is noted that a leader's ego is the most common impediment to creating an environment that encourages meaningful dialogue. Yet leaders that are receptive to differing views and opinions excel during times of change (Dotlich & Cairo, 2002; Rinke, 2004).

Five-P Model of Leading Change

Ford *et al.*'s (2008) Five-P model represents the five key aspects of leading a successful change: purpose, priorities, people, process and proof. They contend that, for successful change, change leaders need to consider and effectively address each of

these five components and that the model includes all of the change components in a way that guides the entire change process.

Purpose is noted to be a key function of change and is associated with vision, goals and identification of the gap between the current state of affairs and what is desired. Setting priorities for change involves identifying the targets of change and establishing a sequence or schedule for addressing each target. Priorities was adopted from Pascale and Anthony's (1981) framework of incorporating interdependent organisational components such as strategy, structure, staff and shared values. Once the purpose and priorities for change have been established, people who will be affected by the change and who will implement the change need to be identified. Process focuses on the implementation strategy that will be used to bring about the desired changes, while proof relates to evaluation and measurement of the change efforts.

Method

Sample

Respondents for this study were full-time members of the administrative and academic staff from the three FET institutions (A, B and C). A sample size comprising 148 (63%) participants (>50%) from the target population of 234 participated in the survey. The questionnaires were distributed to the CEO of the merger group, senior managers of each college, departmental managers and all other academic and administrative staff. General and casual staff did not form part of the study group due to varying work hours and because some were employed on a contractual basis.

Site

College A was established in 1963 with a 100 percent white student and staff composition. College B was established in 1975 with a 100 percent black student composition and a 50 percent white and 50 percent black staffing ratio. College C was established in 1963 and had a 100 percent black student enrolment with a 100 percent white staff composition. These three colleges were merged to form a new FET institution that continued to operate at the original three sites. The newly merged FET College consisted of 184 full-time academic staff members and 50 administrative staff members. Colleges A and B were classified as advantaged institutions in terms of infrastructure and institutional capacity whilst College C was classified as a previously disadvantaged institution.

Procedure and Measure

This paper employs data from two sources. The first source was published state government policy documents relating specifically to further education and training and more generally to issues closely related to this policy area (transformation and historical development). The second source of data was reliant on a climate survey

questionnaire. The survey instrument was distributed to a representative sample of the workforce in terms of occupational classification, gender and race. A total of 148 questionnaires were made available for distribution to the three campuses using stratified random sampling. A total of 102 completed questionnaires were received. The researcher conducted a climate audit using questionnaires as a means of data collection for quantitative analysis of the research study. The instrument used for this survey consisted of a pre-coded questionnaire drawn from the Hay and McBer Organisational Climate Survey II. The questionnaire was carefully constructed to facilitate maximum response and at the same time obtain more detailed information. The questionnaire employed a 5-point Likert scale to elicit the degree of agreement or disagreement with provision for respondents to supply demographic and perceptual data. The survey instrument provided responses for measuring respondents' perceptions that leadership had a vision and strategy for the change process, that there was adequate communication and that leadership empowered employees to undertake the change.

Analyses

Contrasts of mean scores by Anova of Variance (ANOVA) were undertaken for the four variables: vision, communication, empowerment and strategy. Items that measured vision included sharing a common vision of what change should accomplish, vision for the future, direction and goal attainment. Issues associated with consultation, effective communication, being aware of changes and being informed measured the variable communication. Items related to empowerment included the perceptions of the change process, trust, leaders inspiring followers, human resource development and being encouraged to employ new ideas. The variable strategy included components of structure, operationalising the vision and plans, developing practices and procedures, and decision making. The mean scores were contrasted for difference at the $p < 0.05$ level. The reliability of the study was estimated with Cronbach's alpha.

Findings

Table 1 presents the means as well as the standard deviations of the assessed four variables of vision, communication, empowerment and strategy.

The means contrast results confirm that College C is significantly different from Colleges A and B. For instance, the four variables have the lowest means in College C, which indicates a positive set of perceptions that leadership has both a vision and strategy aimed at bringing about transformation and that employees are empowered to drive the change process. Furthermore, College C was classified as a previously disadvantaged institution and would benefit from integration with other well-resourced organisations. However, the variables of strategy and empowerment reveal a significantly higher mean score for College B (which compares with College A), but contrasts with the scores of College C. This finding suggests that whilst both

respondents from Colleges A and B demonstrate lower confidence levels in leadership, developing a change strategy and empowering employees, College B experiences a greater negative disposition towards leaders enabling the merger process and achieving its objectives.

Table 1: Means, Standard Deviations and Comparisons across the Institutions

Variables	Institutions			ANOVA		Scheffe' Means Contrasts P<0.05
	A n=34	B n=33	C n=35	F	P<	
	1	2	3			
Vision	2.78 (.853)	2.75 (.586)	2.02 (.766)	6.770	.00	1, 2 > 3
Communication	2.45 (.97)	2.71 (1.04)	2.31 (.423)	1.475	.23	ns
Empowerment	2.93 (.391)	3.022 (.485)	2.06 (.730)	11.146	.00	1, 2 > 3 2>1
Strategy	1.86 (.586)	1.93 (.620)	1.42 (.468)	8.295	.00	1, 2 > 3 2>1

Source: Original table.

Note: Values in parentheses are the standard deviations of the means.

Furthermore, for the variable vision, College C had the lowest mean score while College A had a significantly greater score, which suggests College A had the least favourable belief that leadership provided a clear direction for the future. Although the means score for the variable of communication was lower for Colleges A and C, the mean contrasts produced results which were not significant. The standard deviation greater than one indicates a spread of response rates; that the respondents were ambivalent about communication during the merger. Conversely, the overall results indicate that College C displays a greater degree of confidence in leadership successfully driving the change program, as well as a more favourable disposition to change than the respondents of the other two institutions.

Discussion

Employing Ford *et al.*'s (2008) functional model as a toolkit to assess the change trajectory undertaken in this case study, it is noted that for the component purpose, which relates to the variable vision (Table 1), there were mixed responses with some participants demonstrating a positive response towards the presence of purpose. This signified the outcome of equity across educational institutions and redressed past

imbalances. Other participants, particularly from College C, demonstrated hope ('I believe this merger will be beneficial for all') that the future would be worth the 'pain of change'. Yet others, particularly from Colleges A and B, indicated a negative response towards the change process having a purpose, thereby contesting the belief that the change process possesses beneficial outcomes or that change leaders have a valid rationale for organisational change. This suggests that sub-cultural groupings based around the pre-existing colleges continue to exist. Among other things, the subcultures can be differentiated between based on the varying expectations that employees have towards what they may lose or gain from the merger process. Whilst College C may benefit from shared resources, improved infrastructure and enhanced human resource development, College A, which was classified as a previously advantaged institution both in terms of staffing opportunities and resources, did not share the same level of hope for the future.

The results are consistent with other studies which reveal that employees differ in their attitudes, beliefs and values, and that there may be other attributes influencing their construction and interpretation of the change initiative. Kotter (2007) proposes several broad approaches to implementing organisational changes that may improve employees' understanding of the change initiative and its intended outcomes. These include listening, communication, participation and involvement, assistance and support, negotiation and agreement, and control and voting. Any attempts to utilise these approaches should be underpinned by a thorough analysis of the change context which identifies and addresses the variables that will most likely contribute to resistance behaviours (Argyris, 1994; Trader-Leigh, 2002).

Ford *et al.* (2008) note that the second P, priorities, concerns itself with the notion of change being initiated and controlled by leaders. It is also suggested that there will be a state of returning to normality (Ford *et al.*, 2008). A wide range of literature contradicts the idea of returning to normality, calling instead for discontinuous change that assumes change never ends and is intercepted by further changes along the transformation process (Calabrese, 2002; Graetz *et al.*, 2006). The fourth P, process, focuses on the implementation strategy that will be used to bring about the desired changes. The variable strategy (Table 1) included items measuring the perception of procedures and structural changes, including how it will personally impact on individuals, which are associated with priorities. The variable strategy also included items such as operationalising the vision and being part of the decision making process. The findings reveal a positive response for College C as compared to the other two colleges, with College B demonstrating the lowest belief in the design or strategy itself. The desired outcome of the change process is one of redress and equity, thereby seeking a redistribution of resources and restructuring of the staffing profile that is more reflective of South African demographics. The results suggest that employees (Colleges B and A) are concerned with issues relating to job security and personal loss. The results are also consistent with Brownell's (2008) suggestion of heeding to questions of individual interpretations of meanings. As a result of the

involuntary or forced nature of the mergers (national policy directives), a notion of employee compliance is acknowledged. The perception of organisational leadership retaining final decision making authority is noted. This could be a contributory factor to the differences in perceptions of employees. The third P, people, is related to the variable empowerment (Table 1) which includes items of trust, inspiration, development and encouragement. The results are similar to the previous findings, with College C demonstrating greater levels of trust in the merger process and its outcomes. Finally, the fifth P, proof, is related to the measurement and evaluation of the change process.

Conclusion

The research findings demonstrate that whilst employees value the importance of change, there are strong indications that past institutional practices and employee attitudes impinge on current and future transformation initiatives. The Five-P model was purposeful in providing a framework against which the various components of a change process could be assessed. Despite this model advocating a need for critical ingredients such as the five Ps in a change process, these findings suggest that culture can be an overriding factor during transformation.

Results revealing differences in perceptions between the various stakeholders towards leadership and change do not imply inaccuracy in ratings by one of these groups. Instead, the results suggest that different stakeholders hold diverse perceptions depending on issues such as benefits, power, uncertainty and loss. Furthermore they are consistent with Brownell's (2008) commentary on leading change using the Five-P model which suggests that the variables of organisational role, culture and other individual differences impact on the success of a change program.

Brownell proposes that in the pursuit of a shared organisational vision, constant alignment and realignment is needed. It is also noted that individuals and group interpretations and the way they construct realities may form the basis for employees' subsequent behaviour. Other studies (Reissner, 2005) suggest sensemaking as a way of constructing a meaningful and shared understanding of the new environment. Sensemaking supports the role of stories in enabling organisational members to focus on meanings, symbols and rituals in comprehending their emerging new world. It thus becomes incumbent on leaders tasked with the transformation process to manage change with considerable respect for, and understanding of, future directions, the creation of employment equity, and a review of the organisational culture towards concepts in favour of empowerment and democratic participation. Policy makers and change agents need to be aware that whilst measures such as vision and strategy are necessary elements of a successful change process, a broader and more holistic approach is essential. This case study reflects the need for a greater understanding of organisational culture, discourse and dialogue.

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