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# Get on the Train or Get Out of the Way: A Passing Glance at Transformational Leadership

Lauck Parke & Joy Pehlke<sup>1</sup>

*This paper explores the challenges of galvanizing substantive change within the academy. By focusing on the arrival of a new president and his strategic desire to institute an interdisciplinary honors college amidst a traditionally fractionalized campus, the authors explore the dynamics of change within the organizational structure of The University of Vermont. Through this exploration the authors offer a forward-looking perspective on the critical importance of leadership and followership among university subcultures in affecting transformational change in higher education.*

## The (Un)Changing Academy

For many observers of higher education, especially within the context of the modern-day research institution, organizational change at the institutional level frequently appears to be a virtual impossibility. At times, even the very concept of innovation within the structure of the academy seems to be viewed as an anathema. As various disciplines of academic research become more specialized and the need to collaborate outside one's academic department becomes not only less necessary but possibly less desirable, decentralized, politically-oriented subcultures begin to emerge and strengthen within the centralized bureaucratic framework.

Within such a context, institutional change becomes even more difficult to implement since such change requires those bound together in loosely-coupled systems or "functional silos" to come together and agree (American College Personnel Association, 1994). In Jay's (1987) words, this has all the makings for a first class baronial war, for while the central administrative structure of the institution functions largely as a bureaucratic hierarchy, faculty, who comprise the essence of the university's "life of the mind," function as a far more fractionalized collegial system. The result is a dualistic system of decision-making where, on the one hand, the administration depends on clearly delineated lines of authority and demands for measurable outcomes. On the other hand, faculty expect, even demand, an autonomous "first among equals," decentralized decision-making structure (Birnbaum, 1988). In addition, formal governance structures such as faculty senates and union contracts are often thrown into the mix, creating not merely dualistic management structures but frequently a *trio* of influential forces. In such a context, one is not surprised at Hutchins' (as cited in Kerr, 2001) description of a modern university as:

... a series of separate schools and departments held together by a central heating system.

In an area where heating is less important and the automobile more, I have sometimes thought of this as a series of individual entrepreneurs held together by a common grievance over parking. (p. 15)

Given this fractionalization and the apparent increasing trend toward further decentralization, it is no surprise that attempts at centrally-managed, large-scale, systematic change are often seen as ill advised, if not doomed. Thus while the modern day academy, at the very forefront of intellectual curiosity and scholarship, continues to flirt with the very essence of innovation and the *potential* for change, it may well be *structured* in a manner that makes it nearly impossible to embrace vital transformational changes. Tichy and Devanna (1990) press this very issue:

It is important to come to grips with the paradox that many organizations facing environmental pressures do not change and thus collude with their own demise.... This leads us to believe that there is something in the nature of organizations and people that makes it difficult for them to change in a fundamental way. (p. 72)

This paradox presents academic administrators with a dicey challenge: How do they institute transformational changes, perhaps ones that are essential to the viability of the institution, while at the same time come to grips with the uniqueness of their administrative leadership roles? Such roles often require them to adapt to notions of authority that are systematically diminished by the decentralized

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decision-making culture inherent in modern-day institutions of higher education.

### **Research Challenge**

The recent creation of an honors college at The University of Vermont (UVM) provides a useful context from which to explore the paradox of institutional change. The richness and complexity of this unfolding, real-world case study allows for not only reflection, but a systematic discussion of the organizational dynamics of change and the resulting implications for leadership in institutions of higher education. Thus, our central purpose in writing this paper is to describe, using an ethnographic analysis of our own experiences, the process of system-wide, transformational change. Further, we seek to comprehend the complexities of the organizational dynamics involved in such change and to understand how the academy is profoundly affected by leadership, evolving situational conditions, and organizational life cycle considerations.

The primary questions underlying our exploration are: (a) Why did UVM's campus community debate the issue of an honors college for almost twenty years and then subsequently have one within eight months of the arrival of a new president?; (b) What was it about this new president's leadership style that helped yield this transformation?; and (c) What might other higher education administrators learn about organizational change from this particular case study?

### **Contextual Background**

The University of Vermont, now a doctoral research-intensive institution and the state's flagship university, is somewhat unique in both its structure and intense dependence upon tuition revenues from out-of-state undergraduate students. Founded in 1791, it remained a relatively small liberal arts institution with modest ties to the professions of agriculture, medicine, and engineering until it was deemed an "instrumentality" of the state by an act of the legislature in 1956. From that point forth, it grew steadily in size, student population, and scope of its academic offerings. Today it boasts roughly 132 academic buildings, 9,100 students (7,600 undergraduates) (*About UVM*, n.d.), and 92 masters and doctoral programs (Fogel, 2003). The stature and reputation of the institution expanded accordingly through the 1970s and 80s, culminating in the prestigious honor of being crowned a "public ivy" in Richard Moll's 1985 book on college rankings. From 1976 through 1989 the growth and development of the University was overseen by President Lattie F. Coor, now generally regarded as an able and popular administrator (Pendergrast, 2003). Upon his departure, however, the University experienced a virtual revolving door of top-level executives, six presidents, and a like number of provosts.

As the institution went through this series of interim and short-term presidents, it experienced more than a decade of increasing uncertainty and turmoil. Applications, enrollments, and tuition revenues all fell, while cost cutting, strained town-gown relations, and declining staff and faculty morale became the order of the day. All of this ultimately culminated in successful union drives for some staff groupings as well as all full-time faculty. Not surprisingly, as the various administrations came and went, not only did the rancor between faculty and administration rise, but as the unmet expectations of the president of the day multiplied dramatically, the relative power of the decentralized deans and chairs rose to fill the resulting power vacuum. It was within this organizational and political context that Daniel Mark Fogel was appointed as UVM's 25th President.

### **Case Study: The Honors College**

A self-described "impatient executive," Daniel Mark Fogel arrived on campus early in July 2002 espousing a bold vision for the University, and within two weeks of his official arrival on campus he held his first Vice President's staff meeting. During this session, he quickly and unequivocally made clear that the creation of a University-wide honors college would be one of his administration's top priorities for the coming academic year.

It was immediately clear to many present that, while the new President was the type of executive who expected decisive action, perhaps he did not comprehend nor appreciate the fact that this campus had been discussing the issue of an honors college for years and the idea had never come to fruition. Following the meeting some questioned why he thought he was any different than the seven other recent presidents who preceded him.

The desires of this newly appointed President to oversee the implementation of an honors college posed a complex and challenging dilemma. How could a top-down initiative from the central administration be imposed on a faculty accustomed to decentralized, college-based,

decision making and a rapid turnover of presidents? How was this new leader going to persuade seven disparate, sometimes fractious deans, representing widely diverse programmatic orientations, to agree on an interdisciplinary core curricular structure for “his” honors college?

Despite such concerns and unanswered questions within the upper administration the president’s challenge had mobilized a platoon of soldiers, and there was consensus: retreat was not an option. Thus the Provost, Vice President for Undergraduate Education, Special Assistant to the Provost, and Higher Education and Student Affairs graduate assistant to the Vice President closed ranks and charged ahead. They were set on course to fulfill the now publicly announced presidential desire to initiate an honors college by the fall semester of 2003, a mere year after his appointment!

At this point, it seemed that UVM had reached a critical moment, a time ripe for change. We perceived the challenge of developing an honors college as a powerful and exciting opportunity to challenge the status quo and create an innovative new curricular possibility for the campus. Amidst a flurry of background research into the nature of honors colleges, conference attendance, and intensive drafting and redrafting, the President’s desired initiative began to take shape. Building upon a previous administration’s earlier efforts, the administration’s design team crafted a proposal that not only captured what they believed to be current best practices, but also represented a high probability of local institutional acceptability. At the same time, the politically astute Provost created the Honors Council, a diverse and inclusive faculty charged with oversight responsibilities for creating the substance of the new Honors College.

Carefully comprised of the curricular affairs representative from each school and college, existing honors programs directors, the Vice President for Undergraduate Education, the Director of Admissions, the Dean of Students, the Director of African, Latino/a, Asian, and Native American Studies (ALANA), and an honors student from each previously established honors program, the Honors Council immediately represented an intentional, functioning, integrative decision-making coalition from across the campus. It was to be a coalition that would add flesh to the bones of the President’s vague notion of an honors college. For the first time in many years, in one fell swoop, the Provost’s intentional creation of the Honors Council served to recognize and legitimize the disparate interest of almost all of the decentralized, politicized coalitions from across the campus by bringing their legitimate and respected representatives into the same room to debate and craft organization-wide decisions about substantive, institutional change.

Throughout the fall semester, the President and Provost engaged the relevant constituencies, including the Student Government Association, Faculty Senate, and Board of Trustees. Each of these political entities, at various times, appeared simultaneously challenged, threatened, and exhilarated. But, in general, neither faculty, nor the general student population were knocking on the administration’s doors with new exciting thoughts and ideas about what an honors college might constitute on this campus. In fact, the Faculty and Student Senates often balked at the speed at which the president seemed to be initiating this particular transformation.

While resistance emerged on many levels and the inertia of the status quo threatened to derail the active creation of the Honors College, at the very least, the President’s bold initiative and rhetoric had served to engage the campus community in a spirited discussion and debate. Almost spontaneously, dialogues emerged in both professional and casual conversations across the campus as themes of “competitive metabolism” and “curricular cohesiveness” (Fogel, 2002) filled the air. “Competitive metabolism” referred to the energy that the President expected to instill and maintain on campus as we all sought to advance the scholarly reputation of the University, and “curricular cohesiveness” referred to his desire to reintegrate the campus culture around common curricular themes. These phrases and related buzzwords, uttered early and often by the new President, spread quickly into the campus lexicon and, as a result, intellectual energies were stirred and various campus constituencies were nudged into, at least, considering multiple intellectual viewpoints. Students, staff, faculty, and administrators, whether suspicious, supportive, confident, or indifferent about the new President and his “force-fed idea” of an honors college, seemed of lesser importance in his grand scheme of organizational transformation than the intense reality of an engaged, invigorated campus debate on the issue.

Almost regardless of the results generated by the seemingly endless meetings and debates on the honors college proposal by the Honors Council, Faculty Senate, Student Government Association, or the Board of Trustees, the President had already accomplished something remarkable and long absent from the campus. The various subcultures of the University were coming together, whether it was for or against him. Either way, they were being forced or cajoled into collaborating and working together. In due course, both the Faculty Senate and the Board of Trustees voted to approve the creation of an honors college at The University of Vermont; it would begin admitting students into the College for the fall of

2004.

At this point in time the authors began to reflect upon not only the outcome of this change initiative, but also upon the process and organizational dynamics that had led to the positive results. The question lingered: why had this effort to implement change occurred so swiftly and with such apparent success, when so many other change efforts in higher education often do not?

### Analysis

What we have begun to understand as a result of observing this unfolding cultural phenomenon at UVM is that there were a multitude of forces and circumstances at play during this complex system-wide change initiative. Without question, at first blush, one could easily point to the President's forceful, strident personality, and leadership style as, perhaps, the singular, most compelling reason to explain the outcome. However, to do so would prematurely dismiss several other research threads in the organizational literature on the dynamics of transformative change. In this regard, we wish to consider two additional theoretical components of situational leadership—attributes of followers and attributes of context. Our initial efforts to examine the successful creation of the Honors College at UVM were framed within the context of research done on contingency models of leadership including Hersey and Blanchard's situational model, Feidler's contingency model, as well as the Path Goal model advanced by House (Hellriegel, Slocum & Woodman, 1992). All of these theories concentrate to varying degrees on three crucial variables—characteristics of the leader, characteristics of the followers, and characteristics of the organizational situation—as well as upon the critical interplay between them. The proverbial “bottom line” for all of these theories is that higher or more effective levels of organizational performance are more likely when there is a good “fit” between the leader, followers, and the nature of the situation. In essence, successful organizational change is contingent upon the right blend, mix, or “chemistry” of leader, follower, and situation!

Turning our attention first to characteristics of the leader, few would dispute the fact that the new President is a dynamic, decisive leader, one who is indeed impatient and prone to action. For us, then, it was not surprising to hear whispers of the “get on the train, or get out of the way” analogy as he proclaimed his plan for an honors college about the campus. To many, the train symbolized his dramatic and at times autocratic style of forcefully imposing his language, plans, ideas, and decisions upon a heretofore much more languid, democratically oriented academic culture.

However, looking back and reflecting upon the characteristics of the followers in this case (i.e., the faculty) it seems clear that while the President was forceful and direct in virtually demanding an honors college, what he *did not do* was seek to control or unduly influence the process or the specific content of the College. Rather, once he had clearly articulated a direction he took pains to invite and encourage the broader academic community into the *cocreation* of “our” Honors College. While he at first appeared as a commanding leader, possessing the characteristics of one intent on forcing his model or plan upon the entire University, the effect of merely laying down a skeletal concept without the details was an act that encouraged a decentralized campus community to come together and collaborate. Though it was at times difficult for many faculty members, and some trustees, to get past the implied sense of coercion, there was little question that the President respected and honored their various governance and decision-making processes.

The President's transformational challenge had not been to single-handedly create an honors college, but rather to encourage a fractionated campus culture to embrace the possibility of an interdisciplinary and curricularly cohesive future. In essence, the President set out on the task of getting his followers to engage in important intellectual discussions across previously decentralized, rarely crossed boundaries. At the same time, the President knew the limits of his control and relinquished the creativity piece of the Honors College construction to the Honors Council, which was essentially the combined voices of the distinct faculty and student coalitions that make up The University of Vermont campus community. This very concept relates directly to Birnbaum's idea of “flexible rigidity as a willingness to compromise on means but an unwillingness to compromise on ends” (p. 46). This appears to be precisely the method of organizational redesign that President Fogel endorsed during the honeymoon period of his presidency.

Finally, in regard to situational characteristics, in times of chaos and institutional instability organizational theorists have long recognized the importance of institutional *receptivity* to change (Hersey & Blanchard, 2001). Greiner (1998) too alludes to this very issue as he emphasizes the importance of the relationship between organizational structure and the balance between creativity and control.

There is an element of leadership that requires one to recognize the times and it is imperative for a leader to know the

environment, assess its readiness for change, and be intentional about vision but unintentional about the way to reach that vision.

One must know where you are in the developmental sequence for every organization and its component parts are at different stages of development. The task of top management is to be aware of the stages; otherwise, it may not recognize when the time for change has come, or it may act to impose the wrong solution. (Greiner, p. 61)

We contend that the President's plan to introduce an honors college was an example of an intentional and effective recognition of the situational "ripeness" at the University, in other words a crucial window of opportunity. For his part, the President took advantage of the organization's ripeness for change by closely assessing the history and culture of the University he sought, along with the help of tentatively ready followers, to achieve what was possible: the successful implementation of a University-wide honors college.

### **Conclusion**

Clearly there are important administrative lessons to take from this particular example of change in the academy. On this campus, the "battle" for the Honors College and the resulting campus-wide approval of the initiative has sparked a new energy and set the stage for other ideas and initiatives to come to fruition. We also perceive the Honors College differently in retrospect. Perhaps in reality it was not such a fundamentally new idea or radical innovation, but rather merely a return to, or regrounding in, a core value of the University—the pursuit of intellectual advancement and excellence. The Honors College is no more, in fact, than a reinvention of a core value of higher education. It exemplifies a commitment to academic and curricular advancement, and sets the stage for interdisciplinary collaboration and scholarship.

The battle and the resulting realization of the core significance of the Honors College initiative has served to kindle a new receptivity for other, perhaps more innovative ventures. Greiner (2002) asserts "I also doubt that managers can or should act to avoid revolutions. Rather, these periods of tension provide the pressure, ideas, and awareness that afford a platform for change and the introduction of new practices." (p. 61) And while Clark Kerr (2001) has observed that "universities have the unique capacity for riding off in all directions and still staying in the same place"(p. 13), Birnbaum (1988) makes an equally compelling observation early on in his seminal work on change in institutions of higher education:

The important thing about colleges and universities is not the choices that administrators are presumed to make but the agreement people make about the nature of reality. People create organizations as they come over time to agree that certain aspects of the environment are more important and that some kinds of interaction are more sensible than others. These agreements coalesce in institutional cultures that exert profound influence on what people see, the interpretations they make, and how they behave. (p. 2)

In this regard, we are left only to ponder the remaining question: does the implementation of the Honors College at The University of Vermont represent a true cultural transformation or merely a temporary organizational shift that will eventually drift back to status quo equilibrium? Time will tell.

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