DIFFICULTIES IN SELLING AN INSPIRATIONAL AND ASPIRATIONAL VISION IN AN EDUCATIONAL ORGANISATION

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ABSTRACT

A vision can be considered as aspirational in being a picture of the future and why people should strive for that future. It should also be sufficiently compelling to inspire action and sustain human effort. An organisation vision is always subjected to change as environmental conditions are always dynamic, which makes selling a vision an uphill struggle for many organisational leaders. This struggle is no different for leaders in an educational organisation. As globalisation sets in, changes in the higher educational arena are inevitable. In the local context, constant changes in government policies can also add to the dynamism of the education system and compel changes to be undertaken by institutional leaders. Nevertheless, educational reform is likely to have common themes. Firstly, customer satisfaction will matter more as competition for student increases and choice becomes more prevalent. Next, the shift from a rule-driven to a results-driven system will intensify, resulting in an expansion of leadership roles and creation of a different culture. Leaders need to be strong to elicit significant change or modify their vision. This paper aims to introduce the common difficulties faced by leaders in selling a vision, particularly in an educational organisation.

Keywords: Leadership, vision, change management, communication.

INTRODUCTION

John Kotter (1996) defined vision as aspirational in being a picture of the future and why people should strive for that future. A vision should also be sufficiently compelling to inspire action and sustain human effort (Graetz, 2000).

As an organisation's current conditions and the desired future are almost always different; the study of organisation vision and change is inextricably linked. Consequently, change itself brings along a multitude of difficulties, making selling a vision an uphill struggle for many organisational leaders. This struggle is no different for leaders in an educational organisation. As globalisation sets in, changes in the higher educational arena are inevitable. In the context of Malaysia, the heavy involvement of government agencies also adds to the dynamism of the role of the leader in an institution.

Educational institutions are likely to face common issues as identified by Marsh (1997). Firstly, customer satisfaction will matter more as competition for student enrolment increases and choice becomes more prevalent. Next, the shift from a rule-driven to a results-driven system will intensify, resulting in an expansion of leadership roles and creation of a different culture. Consequently, strong leaders are necessary for significant change or a vision to materialise. Handy (1992) set out five conditions for effective visionary leadership. The vision:

1. has to be different.
2. must make sense to others and be challenging yet attainable.
3. must be understandable and capable of sticking in people's minds.
4. has to be exemplified by leader's behaviour and evident commitment.
5. has to be shared in order to be implemented.

As evidenced by the above, a vision does not involve the leader alone as conditions b, c and e clearly demonstrate the need in "sharing" the vision". Peter Senge (1990) asserted that a shared vision "…changes people's relationship with the organisation…", resulting in people becoming involved in the organisation personally and emotionally. Hence, vision statements should not be given out cold and leaders always have a bit of "selling" to do, including individual selling to key people (Parry, 1996). This selling process however faces numerous difficulties as evidenced by abundant examples of organisations that have failed in effecting change. This paper thus aims to introduce the common difficulties faced by leaders in selling a vision, particularly in an educational organisation.

DIFFICULTIES IN SELLING A VISION

1. Articulating the Vision

As most visions are derived from leaders' own projections of the future, it may be difficult to put this vision into words that will inspire without confusing or isolating employees. Over-enthusiastic leaders may espouse a jargon-laden, MBA-influenced vision that seems perfectly sensible to them but totally irrelevant to others. Kotter (1995) suggested that a vision that cannot be communicated interestingly and clearly in five minutes or less will face problems.

Leaders in an educational organisation especially may find articulating a vision to staff quite a challenge. Teachers are themselves highly knowledgeable, but may come from different academic specialisations. For example, a Management lecturer may find phrases such as "change management" or "transformational leadership" familiar, but not so for a Science lecturer. Alternatively, the Management lecturers may turn out to be more sceptical than the rest when presented with a vision, having read more literature on such topics than the leader!

2. Creating the Need for Change

Kotter (1995) attributed failures of change processes to the lack of a sense of urgency in organisations. It is extremely difficult for a leader to convince people of a need for change, especially when the organisation is experiencing success and complacency levels are high. Kotter (1996) listed a few sources of complacency:

♦ Visible reminders of past successes.

♦ Low performance standards - measuring against mediocre or outdated standards (possibly using previous successes as yardsticks).
♦ Focus on narrow functional/departmental objectives.
♦ Ignoring feedback from external sources such as customers and suppliers.
♦ Blocking out bad news to avoid "rocking the boat".

In the education industry, complacency may prove to be a significant problem. Firstly, the education industry is comparatively more stable than other businesses and is fairly insulated from changes in the macro-environment. Enrolling in an academic programme is generally a decision made after deliberate consideration and thus customer demand is not as affected as for impulse purchase products, where demand may dip overnight.

In an economic downturn, the recessionary effects in an educational institution are not felt as immediately or drastically as in other industries. Employee redundancy or even cost-cutting exercises that are commonly associated with economic downturns are typically not as evident or at least immediately implemented in educational institutions. Eventually, employee complacency may set in as long as job security is still present.

Next, customer patronage is usually "long-term". A student is committed to the institution for the duration of the course, which is usually for at least one year. The challenge of customer retention may not be as explicit as compared to other service industries. Consequently, the weaknesses in the institution will only gradually seep in and may not be easily evident to the lecturers. Under these circumstances, it will require extra effort from the leader to convince employees or lecturers that something is wrong somewhere and there is an urgent need for change.

A further challenge faced by leaders would be the detachment of lecturers from the business side of the organisation. It is not uncommon to hear of lecturers disagreeing with changes or policies that may make the institution more attractive to customers, but that may compromise on academic quality. Higher level business decisions or strategies that may be necessary in today's competitive education industry may contradict with traditionally held opinions or principles of academics, making communicating change initiatives a challenge for leaders.

As asserted by Kotter (1996), a large part of the problem also lies with having had a history of success. As leaders cannot erase or change history, slighting these achievements, such as past excellent examination performance and awards or high enrolment figures, may come across as unduly pessimistic or even petty. Unless the leader can orchestrate a crisis or raise urgency levels high enough, the vision may be detached from current situations as people simply do not see what the fuss is about (Leicester, 2002).

3. Organising a Team of Leaders

One of the unique features of educational organisations is that they are generally very flat in hierarchy. Unlike a business corporation where there are many layers of supervision and management, educational organisations tend to have many employees (namely lecturers) at the same level. This "level" usually indicates the following:

♦ Type of duties

♦   Responsibility
♦   Authority
♦   Decision making
♦   Grade

In an educational organisation, it can be challenging to reach to individuals, without the help of various team or section leaders. When everyone is of the same "level", it is imperative that the leader is seen to be impartial. Consequently, the leader has to communicate the vision on an individual basis, which can be very time-consuming and ineffective.

Leaders also need to individually sell the vision to key people, including senior lecturers, informal leaders or staff members that other employees look up to. Albeit time and effort consuming, champions of change need the involvement of people with the right resources, knowledge and political clout in order to make things happen (Kanter, 1999).

4. Communicating the Vision

Communication is the key to achieving a "shared" vision as effective communication ensures everyone understands and feels for the vision. A simple yet meaningful vision makes communicating easier, albeit leaders still face the difficulty of getting the message across in the midst of everyday instructions, feedback and general chaos. Poor communication in fact is seen as the key cause of negative feelings among employees, resulting in many who feel that the only way to obtain information is through the rumour mill (Proctor and Doukakis, 2003).

Visionary communication thus faces problems of sufficiency and variety. Most organisations communicate the vision on the cover of their annual report or during the CEO's annual speech, only to be forgotten a week later. The leader has to make sure that every avenue is used to spread the vision consistently. The risk however is that the vision may be perceived as imposed if consistently communicated downwards.

A common difficulty in today's organisations is the increasing reliance on non-personal forms of communication. In a typical educational organisation, it is actually quite difficult to assemble lecturers for a duration long enough for meaningful communication. Lecturers are engaged in classes for most parts of the day and when they are not, they are involved in consultation with students. Consequently, leaders use electronic means to communicate. However, without the ability to read facial expression or body language, such messages can easily be misinterpreted. Leaders have to be very conscientious in wording messages in order for the right meaning to get through.

Another difficulty faced by leaders in communicating a vision is obtaining feedback from lecturers. The reliance on non-personal electronic communication, compounded by lack of face-to-face interaction, means that comprehensive feedback is rarely obtained.

5. Exemplifying the Vision

Leaders also need to ensure they "walk the talk". Employees want to see actions from leaders that support the vision. As most employees see their leaders only for brief periods of time, each meeting becomes correspondingly less important to leaders but of significant importance to employees. Leaders have to be wary of conveying inconsistent messages in these meetings or brushing off employees' feedbacks.

To inspire employees, trust is the essential link between them and the leader, and in order to gain trust, leaders must exemplify their commitment to the vision through their behaviour. Evans (1996) wrote that the integrity of the leader is the fundamental consistency between one's values, goals and actions. When leaders do not model the values of the vision that they proclaim, they breed cynicism and resistance. For example, the leader who announces "respect for others" but treat lecturers or students disrespectfully will eventually encounter major obstacles in communicating with their staff.

On the other hand, leaders with strong values will easily translate these into the organisational vision. The leaders' explicit commitment to the vision is crucial to their staff loyalty and dedication because they provide the larger purpose that gives lecturers' work direction and meaning.

6. Getting through Culture

Perhaps the biggest difficulty of selling a vision lies in the existing culture of the organisation. Smircich (1983) described "culture" as the social or normative glue that holds an organisation together. Studies have found that organisations with strong cultures significantly outperformed those without (Kotter & Heskett, 1992). Strong cultures however are double-edged swords as they are also the most resistant to change.

Culture in an educational organisation is even more pervasive as it also impacts on the students. Johnson and Scholes (1997) rightly described organisational culture as a web, as depicted below:
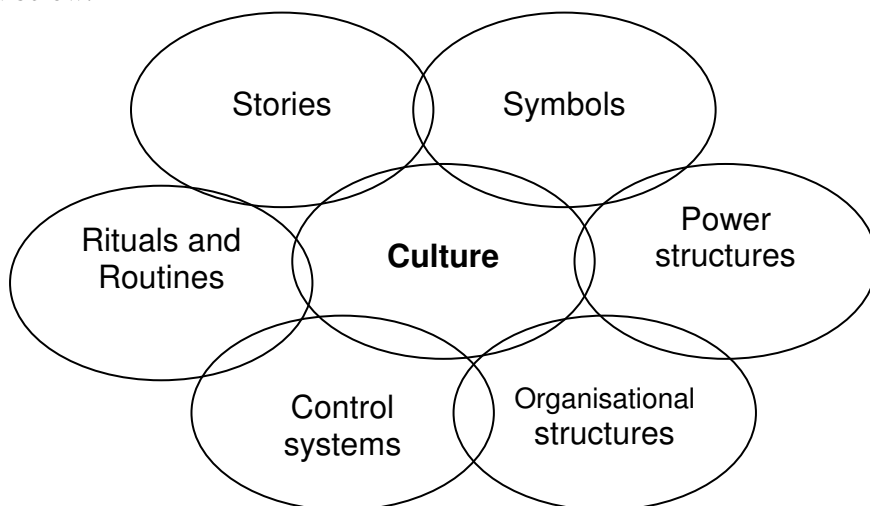

Figure 1. Organisational Culture as depicted by Johnson and Scholes (1997)

As seen from Johnson and Scholes' description, the culture of any organisation is made up of elements from as formal as organisational structures to as informal as stories within the employee grapevine. It is a continuous struggle for leaders to even keep themselves updated on the evolving culture, not to mention having to penetrate it in order to deliver the vision.

Problems arise when the existing culture does not fit into the new vision that the leader is now selling. Many aspects of culture such as rituals, routines, values, behaviours and their underlying assumptions require significant time to change, leading Kotter (1996) to assert that cultural change should come last, and not first. However, as culture "gets in the way" of change initiatives so easily, many leaders perceived that it may be more expedient to change culture first so that other changes would be easier. This perception proved to be wrong as culture is in fact a residue of change.

On the other hand, the notion to "change culture last" may be difficult for leaders to pursue as some important determinants of culture such as organisational structure, formal communication systems and power structures would have to be modified right from the beginning to pave the way for the new vision. This may lead to awkward situations where leaders are suddenly faced with culturally-changed empowered lecturers who are now expected to comment and criticise, but who themselves are used to working individually and independently. Confusion and conflicts may also happen as the vision espoused by the leader is not only new, but infiltrates into the day-to-day routine and norms that they are so used to.

7. Individual Resistance

Most resistance to change begins at the individual level. Proctor and Doukakis (2003) attributed individual resistance to a few sources, namely, fear of the unknown, lack of information, threats to status, fear of failure and lack of perceived benefits. Kotter and Schlesinger (1979) also listed the following reasons:

    a. Self-interest.
    b. Misunderstanding and lack of trust.
    c. Differential assessment of change - different views and levels of urgency.
    d. Individual differences in adaptive skill and tolerance for change.

Out of the four, only the second reason may be overcome by effective communication. The rest are results of individual perceptions, education, upbringing and societal culture and are more difficult to change. One can imagine the magnitude of resistance in an organisation staffed by thousands of different individuals. Leaders face the difficulty of uncovering reasons behind resistance, and will eventually realise that it is not possible to please everybody. In an educational organisation, lecturers may have different areas of concerns, as their resistance to change may also emanate from their assumptions of how students may react.

8. Maintaining Motivation

Over time, employees have difficulty sustaining optimism as complex issues and frustration set in, causing disappointment and even disillusionment. New policies that support the institutional vision may result in a temporary drop in enrolment or increased staff workload. These will lead to lecturers feeling de-motivated as they feel that the vision has now become a burden. In addition, most staff enter the teaching profession with a certain set of ideals and if the institution's vision is somewhat contradictory to these ideals, lecturers will find themselves in a personal dilemma; causing further frustration.

Carnall (1995) suggested maintaining momentum through ensuring and rewarding early success, involving people through clear tasks and paying attention to training. Symbolic and substantive actions of rewarding and recognising improved behaviour associated with the vision are important to maintaining the motivation of lecturers, even after the initial communication process has slowed down (Graetz, 2000).

9. The Leader

Leaders themselves have to guard against perils of leadership that come with success and acclaim. Overconfidence can lead leaders into believing the vision is without fault, rushing head-on without pausing to assess changing circumstances, which may demand new strategies. Powerful leaders can unknowingly act against the best interests of their organisations if power is left unchecked (Thompson, 1997).

Educational institutions are highly interactive organisations, where staff and students interact constantly with each other. In such organisations, leaders may find themselves isolated if the new vision does not immediately receive the expected positive response from the staff and students. Leaders must be prepared to faces changes in relationships and attitude of staff and students towards them at a personal level. In fact, leadership difficulties may extend to a more personal level as they experience loss of family time, loneliness at the top and fatigue.

CONCLUSION

After spending considerable time and effort selling the vision, leaders ironically face the final difficulty in ensuring changes are continued after the end of their tenure. Kotter (1995) warned that a decade of hard work can become undone with one bad succession decision at the top. Consequently, in the midst of selling the vision to employees, leaders also have to plan for the future continuation of their hard work via their chosen successor.

An aspirational and inspirational vision would be the panacea for ailing organisations and catalyst for success for others. However, it needs a strong leader and the leader needs his army behind him. Clifford and Cavanagh (1985) sum it up nicely:

> *"Life can be lonely and frustrating for a visionary with a cause in a crowd of the dispassionate and uninterested. What distinguishes the best leaders is how*

they transform their personal commitment and obsession into institutional obsession and energy".

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