2 Towards the learning organization?

Collective commitment
The benefits of achieving this in our universities

The concept of organizational learning, originating in the 1980s, has proved to be ahead of its time. While it may initially have coexisted with humanistic movements in the history of organizational development – and therefore possibly have been dismissed as a passing fad whose days were numbered whenever recession loomed – it is now turning out to be the bedrock of the kind of collaborative and reflective practices that are so necessary to leading in the complex, interconnected twenty-first-century world.

With its sense of networking, of risk-taking cultures that enable learning to arise from failure, and of the importance of those at the margins of organizations acting as boundary spanners and intelligence gatherers, the idea of the classic learning organization (Pedler et al., 1991; Mabey and Iles, 1989; Senge 1990) is only now beginning to come to fruition in higher education. While systems thinking may have turned out not to do justice to navigating the complexities of our current and future environment, it is worth reflecting that it pre-dated the advent of the internet as a mass medium.

The principles of the learning organization have much to offer higher education institutions. Ironically, given that universities' core business is self-evidently learning, it is difficult to find one that embodies all of the practices called for by these principles. However, increasing numbers are able to evidence progress in at least some of them.

According to the early theorists, learning organizations develop through the learning of individuals and groups working within them, and through an interest in resolving organizational problems through inquiry. Such organizations are able to apply their learning so as to adapt to the changing environment in which they operate, and to contribute through their networks to wider learning in a broader context (often involving partners, suppliers and clients). As such, they are likely to focus clearly on continuous improvement and transformation (Pedler et al., 1991). Implicit in all these characteristics is the notion of collaborative practices.

Tourish supports the importance of working collectively in his identification of a fresh approach to designing and evaluating leadership development:

> The approach outlined here challenges HEIs to utilise a full array of leadership development techniques so that participants are more closely focused on solving problems at work. This is more likely to facilitate a shift from thinking solely about the development of individuals to the development of whole groups or teams as well.
>
> (2012: 19)

There is a fascinating implication here that progress could be made towards universities becoming genuine learning organizations through a focus on intra-institutional approaches to developing leaders collectively. This might work in at least two different ways: firstly, through building cadres of leaders at peer level across institutions and enabling them to become communities of practice of leadership (Wenger, 1998); and secondly, through developing as groups whole teams of individuals who need to work together (such as Faculty or Directorate Management Teams). The latter is most likely to contribute most powerfully towards creating learning organizations, in that if successful it would contribute to building working cultures that would impact directly on organizational practices. The community of practice approach is appealing, and provides a credible peer support network; in practice, nevertheless, there is arguably a greater risk that individuals, once back in their daily working space, would encounter resistance from the prevailing local cultures within their organizational units.

The attractiveness in seeking more overtly to build universities as learning organizations lies in the sense of clear alignment between institutions' approaches to conducting their strategic and operational activities as organizations, and their educational purposes and missions. One way in which one might expect such alignment to manifest itself is in the domain of curriculum design, and its potential contribution to institutional distinctiveness, as seen in the following case study.

CASE STUDY 2: UNIVERSITY OF MAASTRICHT – AN INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY WITH A FULLY PROBLEM-BASED CURRICULUM

Overview

The University of Maastricht was founded in 1979 originally to provide an additional medical school and help fill the need for doctors in the local community. Over the past 30 years Maastricht has developed to have over 13,000 students across two campuses:

- the Chemelot Campus
- the Maastricht Life and Science Campus.

The university also has the following divisions for its academic offering:

- Health, Medicine and Life Sciences
- Law
- School of Business and Economics
- Psychology and Neuroscience
- Humanities and Sciences

  o Department of Knowledge Engineering
  o University College Maastricht
  o Maastricht Graduate School of Governance.

Maastricht University (2010)

The university's mission/strategy is:

> Based in Europe, focused on the world. Maastricht University is a stimulating environment. Where research and teaching are complementary. Where innovation is our focus. Where talent can flourish. A truly student-oriented research university.
>
> (www.maastrichtuniversity.nl/web/Main/ AboutUM/MissionStrategy.htm)

Achievements

In the Times Higher Education World Rankings of 2009, Maastricht University scored 100/100 in the international category, which helped to place it at 116th in the ranking of 40,000 world universities. This achievement, the university believes, is due to:

- developing a vision in the context of what is needed internationally
- ensuring the institution (and indeed Maastricht itself) is foreigner friendly
- educating its students for life and not just a qualification
- deciding that all provision is delivered in English
- its problem-based learning curriculum.

Problem-based learning

> The Problem-Based Learning system at Maastricht University guarantees a high quality education. Students get more out of their studies, take less time to complete their studies and are overall more satisfied.
>
> (www.maastrichtuniversity.nl/web/Main/ProspectiveStudents/ Bachelors/OurEducation/CompletionRatesRankings.htm)

Over the 32 years of its existence Maastricht has ensured that all of its provision is in a problem-based learning (PBL) format. It believes it is the

only university to do so and that it is this approach to its educational programmes that has enabled it to be effective and efficient. To emphasize this, the institution points out that universities ranked in a similar position to itself have greater funding per student or per academic staff member.

PBL at Maastricht University supports the notion that students are personally responsible for their own academic education and is based on tutorial groups consisting of 14–16 students. The tutor plays a limited part in the discussion during these tutorials but monitors the discussions, provides feedback and where required helps the students to identify relevant problems.

These problems are then researched, debated and discussed by the students to try to derive a solution. It is recognized that in many situations there is not just one answer. By bringing together different views and perspectives, students can derive a common way forward. In working in this way the students realize that no one person, book or technique has all the answers, and learn how to learn effectively together.

'As PBL courses are intensive, students can take only two or three courses at a time depending on the number of credit hours per course' (http:// en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maastricht_University). The PBL philosophy links with the international agenda of the university as the students learn at their own pace and incorporate their own values, beliefs and cultures. The university's Language Centre offers an introduction to Maastricht's PBL approach for international students.

Questions

1   How efficient and effective is your method of curriculum delivery?
2   Do you view international English-speaking universities as serious competition?
3   How complementary are research and teaching at your institution?

Case study developed by Professor Dawn Forman.

Enablers and barriers
The conditions for organizational learning

One of the macro-environmental factors supporting organizational learning is that of the societal drive towards sharing behaviours. Botsman and Rogers (2011) are leading advocates of collaborative consumption, characterized by patterns of behaviour within a so-called 'sharing economy' that uses technology to disrupt conventional models of doing business. Applied to higher education, Botsman and Rogers's vision implies huge changes to curriculum development, research management, and teaching and learning relationships, *inter alia*.

More immediately, the drivers of research funding point increasingly towards a collaborative approach, particularly in view of the need to work collectively

(at departmental and faculty levels) to demonstrate broad impacts of research outputs.

Furthermore, initiatives such as Future Learn, the UK Open University's challenge to United States-dominated propositions such as Coursera, are bringing about greater intra- and inter-institutional collaboration around the need to develop Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) – and at an unprecedented pace.

Set in the context of such drivers of change, it is worth considering the critique of thinking about organizational learning by Wang and Ahmed in which they argue that the literature has failed to attend to the importance of 'quantum leap innovation and creativity' (2002: 12) and how these might be enabled in organizations. They outline the enabling attitudes and behaviours that are required in environments characterized by 'hyper-dynamics, uncertainty and chaos' as 'flexibility, proactiveness, innovativeness and energetics' (2002: 13).

There are also numerous behaviours that serve to inhibit the development of learning organizations. Many of these overlap with what has been identified as 'toxic leadership' (Lipman-Blumen, 2005), in which the interests of personal politics dominate institutional discourse. If people communicate guardedly, for fear of humiliation or reprisal, they are unlikely to take risks in bringing new ideas to public fora.

In a toxic, non-learning environment, dialogue is organized so that articulation of innovative proposals can only occur through a set of stilted conventions for communicating and decision-making. This means that people spend inordinate proportions of their working lives in meetings which, while ostensibly driven by rationale and by the deployment of reasoned arguments, are in reality controlled through highly political agendas that allow the chairperson and allies to reach the outcomes they desire. When nearly everyone appears to be complicit in reinforcing the behaviours that characterize this toxic environment, it can be difficult to recognize it for what it is – people effectively become conditioned to behave in set patterns. The toxicity of such an environment derives from the lack of trust that prevails, and the extent to which people feel they have to resort to covert or subversive practices in order to circumvent the system and get things done – assuming, of course, that they have not given up trying to achieve anything within a culture that is so inimical to engagement.

Further barriers to organizational learning include relationships and behaviours that are essentially deferential in nature (see Chapter 4), working within tightly defined organizational boundaries which lead to a 'silo' mentality, and being driven by short-term operational targets. As the architects of organizational culture, leaders are potentially well positioned to redesign in areas where they have influence, and rising to the challenges this poses will be the focus of the rest of this book.

At the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education, we have sometimes found that assumptions made about the impact that can be achieved from commissioning leadership development programmes have actually constrained effective organizational learning. If institutions expect a 'magic bullet' effect from a commissioned programme, they may not be acknowledging their

own responsibility for supporting programme participants to maximize their learning. Tourish is clear about the opportunities which come from institutions embracing organizational learning more holistically:

> Formal programmes do make a positive difference. They provide information, challenge outmoded habits, offer fresh perspectives and facilitate networking. But when supplemented by mentoring, coaching, job assignments, job rotation and other interventions designed to sustain deep reflection and ongoing learning in the real world of work, a greater long-term impact can be achieved.
>
> There is significant evidence that the best forms of leadership development create opportunities for people to learn from their experiences, and then apply what they have learned to solving real and pressing problems in their own organisations. Leadership development activities should therefore focus people's attention on problems they face at work which are likely to impede the achievement of key organisational goals, draw out appropriate lessons and equip them to make a real difference on their return.
>
> Formal programmes can be supplemented by mentoring, coaching and other interventions designed to sustain deep reflection and ongoing learning in the real world of work. This puts action at the heart of the learning process.
>
> (2012: 18)

CASE STUDY 3: EMORY UNIVERSITY, ATLANTA, GEORGIA, USA – DEVELOPING A LEARNING ORGANIZATION THROUGH TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES

Background

Emory University has for the past three years been nominated for an elite award of the Chief Learning Officers' magazine for its development of a learning organization. This award is given to any organization that establishes a learning culture. Emory University is the only academic institution to be shortlisted for such an award, and it has achieved this in each of the three years that it has been available.

This has been achieved through the integrated nature of its Leadership Development Programmes which are championed by the executive vice-presidents within the university. This support has enabled over 900 staff within the organization to have experienced a leadership programme, and such is the commitment to this development that, even at a time of reduced funding, funding has been made available to ensure that these programmes can be maintained.

The Executive Leadership Programmes

Emory University supports three Executive Leadership Programmes. These are:

- the Woodruff Leadership Academy, which is for the health service provision of the university
- the Academic Leadership Programme, which is primarily for faculty staff
- the Excellence through Leadership Programme, which is for administrative staff

Each of these programmes has been developed specifically for the participants it attracts. The programmes are available for staff to apply for, and there is a long waiting list for each programme. Sponsorship by their line manager must accompany each application, and a selection process is conducted to ensure that the appropriate mix of individuals is on each programme and that the individual will gain from the leadership provision. Themes that underpin each of the programmes are:

- a strong emphasis on the individual understanding the strategic priorities and the context in which the university is working
- networking across the university and understanding how each department and faculty contributes to the strategic goals of the university – it should be noted that Emory is a very diverse university and therefore this aspect is critically important in the development
- the culture and values of the organization are endorsed and owned by the individuals
- the programmes aid retention of key staff within the organization.

Around a third of the programmes are common but the emphasis is different in each of the three executive programmes. It is felt helpful to emphasize the differences that each of the programmes provides.

Following successful completion of the programmes, alumni programmes exist to ensure that cross-fertilization provision is made available between the academic support and the health service staff. Included within the programmes are different teaching and learning methodologies, including taught provision, action learning projects, coaching provision from external coaches for each of the individuals, a 360 review and use of the Birkman Method to establish the individual's style. Each individual will develop a personal development plan. They will be involved in a team project which will be presented to the university council; four hours' coaching is provided to ensure that the team is ready for the presentation and for the question and answer session at the end of their presentation.

Key outcomes which have been achieved in the organization

1   One project that was developed as a result of a team working on an executive project was a business process review to establish leadership programmes at all levels of the organization. This resulted in a framework for management development programmes being implemented across the university and the establishment of a director for learning and organizational development to ensure this provision could be developed and maintained. A suite of programmes therefore exists for all staff at all levels across the organization and this has been seen as key in enabling the organization to achieve its reputation as a learning organization.

2   Sustainability: Another project that was developed as part of the executive leadership programme looked at sustainability and led to many awards being achieved within the university for environmental sustainability approaches within the organization. The office of sustainability has been established as a direct result of the project outcomes of the executive leadership programme.

3   Parking and transportation: A further project that was reviewed by an executive leadership programme was that of parking and transportation. This has resulted in changes within the bus system to facilitate access to the university, cycle lanes being provided throughout the campus and to and from the campus, a bike hire programme, and a zip car programme so that cars are available on campus to ensure that should a member of staff need a car during the day they can acquire one, but they do not need a car to actually come into the university.

Conclusion

The Chief Learning Officers' magazine, *Learning Elite Awards*, reviews each organization against five criteria to establish whether they are a learning organization. Emory University has been selected from over 300 applicants in each of the past three years when the award has been made available. It is the only university in the USA to have been nominated for such an award.

Emory University is fully committed to its leadership development provision and has ensured that funding is ring-fenced even in a difficult economic climate so that these leadership development programmes can still take place.

Questions

1   To what extent would you consider your institution to be a learning organization?

2   How does your institution ensure the priorities of its leaders match the strategic goals of the organization?

Case study developed by Wanda J. Hayes, PhD, Director of Learning and Organizational Development, Emory University, Atlanta, and Professor Dawn Forman.

CASE STUDY 4: UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS, USA – TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE THROUGH CLEAR LEADERSHIP

In 2012, the *Times* of London ranked the University of Massachusetts system 56 in the top 200 universities internationally. UMass Lowell is ranked among the top 100 public universities in the United States, with over 16,000 students and more than 120 undergraduate, 36 master's and 23 doctoral programmes, and a faculty-student ratio of 14:1. The University has an entrepreneurial approach to all aspects of management of the institution. UMass Lowell's annual fundraising is 88 % more than it was four years ago. Over the same period, research expenditures increased 66% to $60 million.

(*A Campus on the Move*, 2012)

Background

The University of Massachusetts Lowell appointed a new Chancellor, Marty Meehan, in 2007. At the time of Chancellor Meehan's appointment, the university had had a period of consolidation and almost stagnation; student enrolment was on the decline, the institution had a $5m structural deficit, and, as a consequence, its rating in comparison to other universities in the US was not high. Since the appointment of the new Chancellor, enrolment has increased by 40% and the average SAT score increased by 56 points. The university was ranked for the first time as a top-tier university three years ago and increased its status in the national US News & World Report rankings by 13 points over the past two years to no. 170. There was a turnaround in the financial profile of the university and during the 2012–13 academic year, six new buildings were completed on the campus. This transformation in a six-year period and against a poor economic climate seems astounding, and therefore it is worth considering the key aspects of change that have been brought about to ensure the university is in a position to capitalize on its current developments and look forward to the future.

The University of Massachusetts Lowell regards itself as a 'Public Entrepreneurial University'. Its strap line is that it provides learning with a purpose to ensure that students are 'work-ready, life-ready and world-ready'. Key changes have been made over the past six years, starting within a month of Marty Meehan taking up his post, in that the whole of the executive team changed within that first month. Key to the appointment of new staff, from within the university and from the local community as well as nationally and internationally, was to select leaders who shared the drive and the passion necessary to ensure that the institution would develop along the lines of the Chancellor's vision.

The institution recruited 'thought leaders' and those who had high expectations both of themselves and of the institution. The Chancellor sought out people who were entrepreneurs, team players, had no egos, had a drive for excellence and were prepared to take risks. One of those individuals is a co-author of this case study, Jacqueline Moloney, who had worked for the institution for 25 years and developed an online provision of $38m. Jacqueline now serves as Executive Vice-Chancellor and is the most senior executive, second only to the Chancellor of the university.

Marty (as he is affectionately called by students, faculty and staff) exhibits the characteristics that he looks for in others, and this is demonstrated in every aspect of his working life – within an office environment, speaking publicly, walking around the campus or participating in keep-fit activities in the university's gym. Marty is described as a considered risk-taker, someone who listens very carefully, makes decisions in a collective and collaborative manner with his team and owns any decision that is taken.

Key mechanisms to ensure continuous improvement and success

The university initiated a comprehensive strategic planning process in 2008 after the Chancellor had been in his post for a year and the majority of senior leaders who make up his executive team were in place. The strategic planning process within the organization is owned by everyone, including students, faculty, staff and other key stakeholders.

More than 200 people actively participated in the development of the current strategic plan – UMass Lowell 2020. Committees were convened to develop plans for what were identified as the university's most urgent challenges and strategic opportunities. The committees were made up of employees and stakeholders from all levels and corners of the university. Considerable benchmarking, research and data development were undertaken to ensure that the priorities of the university and the strategic plan itself were built on firm foundations. As a result, all strategic planning priorities are owned by all faculty, staff and students within the university and are monitored on a regular basis, using a report card mechanism. There is a comprehensive articulation of the institution's key performance

indicators (KPIs), and each KPI has a clear individual or group responsible to ensure the targets are reached. While ongoing monitoring occurs, twice-yearly reports on the strategic planning KPIs are reviewed and reported. All information is transparent and shared broadly. Key faculty and staff are made accountable and hold themselves as owners to this accountability.

Overall, through the strategic planning process, and this period of significant change – in fact transformation – the university has managed to gain the trust of all staff with regard to its decision-making process. Interestingly, while the institution has been entrepreneurial in its vision and has taken considerable risks, each decision has been carefully considered and determined to align with the overall vision that the university is trying to achieve. As a result, the university has been successful in its endeavours and has managed to avoid errors in its high-stakes decision-making.

How has this transformation been afforded?

From the outset, the university adopted a set of guiding principles to inform the strategic plan that included striving for excellence, staying focused on the core mission, creating efficiencies and high performance in all aspects of the university, and creating a culture of engagement, innovation and entrepreneurship. During the past six years the United States, like many other countries, experienced economic challenges which meant that financing has been more difficult to acquire. Key to the success of the institution, therefore, was early bold administrative actions that the new Chancellor drove on his arrival and that included the elimination all non-essential activities in both operations and staff. This resulted in savings of $6.5m on staff costs and $3m in operational efficiency savings. These savings were immediately reinvested in identified strategic initiatives aimed at increasing new streams of revenue.

Admissions and gaining student satisfaction

One of the first changes made was within the admission process, which was rebuilt in the first year, ensuring that a clear journey was articulated from the initial enquiry through to enrolment, induction and retention in the university's programmes. A very strong student-centred focus operates within the university, with monthly meetings being held with student representatives and university leaders. Initially students were intimidated by the interest the Chancellor was showing in their ideas and activities. Now, however, the students are very open, honest and direct with regard to how they report what they feel is right and what needs improvement within the university. The students therefore actively own the decisions that are taken within the university and support changes taking place. One example of this is the students' support for the university's Division I hockey team.

The success of the team is owned not only by the players but by the supporters. In past years, attendance at hockey games was low, averaging around 500 per game. The number of people attending these games today has increased to around 6,000–7,000 on a regular basis, with new records set in 2013.

Buying a hotel to aid student accommodation

The university has also supported the students by upgrading their accommodations. The university is expanding the number and variety of residential options for students. More than 1,000 residence hall accommodations have been added recently and the university acquired a hotel in the city centre, which emphasizes its role as part of the city in terms of its profile. An example of the speed with which the institution is able to make decisions, owing to its thoroughness in researching the enterprise before it undertakes it, is that the hotel was acquired and renovated within a 30-day period. Approximately 500 students reside at the hotel, and the remaining hotel facilities operate as an inn and conference centre, generating revenues for the university. This acquisition and residential housing plan were seen by many as a bold initiative, as the hotel was failing as a business prior to the university taking it over.

Review of all aspects of the university processes and establishing the culture

All aspects of the university's work have been reviewed, including all employment policies and practices, service level agreements, and all aspects of research, teaching and learning. This has been achieved through the commitment of key executive leaders and the faculty and staff within the institution.

As one walks round the institution as a visitor, one is struck by the energy level and smiling exchanges with which one is greeted. Such is the culture and community spirit that have been gained. This culture is key to ensuring that the development of the university over the past six years is sustainable for the future.

Division I aspiration

Another example of the university's development is its aspiration to become a Division I participant for sport. Elevating to Division I in sport was identified as an important initiative in the strategic planning process, but the university did not pursue Division I immediately. It recognized the importance of developing other foundational academic and administrative programmes and services first. Faculty-generated new undergraduate,

master's and doctoral-level programmes were established, and the research profile was increased. Up to 50 members of faculty and staff were involved in the decision-making process. Student experience was seen as key to the development. Considerable research and reviews were undertaken to ensure this aspiration would be achievable. The institution's aim to be a Division I player in the sports arena was realized when it accepted the invitation in February 2013 to join a Division I conference, America East. Like UMass Lowell, America East values academic achievement highly and the conference has the third-highest average GPA among all Division I conferences in the country.

Concluding remarks

The University of Massachusetts Lowell regards itself as having an entrepreneurial spirit, which is evident in the commitment of the faculty and staff to this leadership approach. It believes this spirit will be evident in all graduates who complete programmes at the institution in the future. To help ensure that it graduates entrepreneurial-spirited students, the university has launched a $25,000 Difference Maker innovation competition, in which 45 teams of four to five students are already set to participate. It will be interesting to review the University of Massachusetts Lowell's development in another six years.

Questions

1   In your view, how distinctive is the concept of the 'public entrepreneurial university'?
2   How effective were the mechanisms deployed by the university to ensure continuous improvement and success?
3   In what circumstances do you think it is appropriate for a university to diversify into running additional businesses such as hotels?

Case study developed by Jacqueline Moloney, Executive Vice Chancellor, University of Massachusetts Lowell; Lauren Turner, Associate Vice Chancellor for Human Resources and Equal Opportunities and Outreach, University of Massachusetts Lowell; and Professor Dawn Forman.

These case studies provide rich examples of the approaches to organizational learning being taken in different institutions, and demonstrate the impact that leading strategically can make. In the rest of this book, we shall identify specific practices that can be deployed by leaders at all levels in universities in order to bring about change effectively, and to engender organizational learning.