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The Limits of Organizational Change: Developing and Embracing Institutional Change and Flexibility in Higher Education Organizations

Author: Roy Y. Chan
E-mail: roy.chan@bc.edu

ED 771: Organizational and Administration in Higher Education
Instructor - Dr. Ted I. K. Youn

Boston College
Lynch Graduate School of Education

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What are the limits to organizational change? Is organizational change necessary for all colleges and universities? In this new century, executing and promoting organizational change is often viewed as a difficult task for many leaders and mangers within the higher education sector. Nowadays, any changes done or proposed are often slow because higher education leaders and presidents are constantly changing and growing. Most colleges and universities have long examples of their inability to change because many senior officials are often resistance to change (Kaufman, 1995). More specifically, stakeholders are usually required to comply with strict regularity and rules, and to overcome many barriers and constraints in order to maintain a sense of stability within an organization. Furthermore, most colleges and universities are required to fix unresolved issues in their own academic structure or unit, such as, non-existence institutional planning, bureaucratic structures, as well as weak leadership between university administrators and senior staff. Moreover, any changes done are often imprisoned by the present because higher education organizations are now seen to be anarchies federations of loosely coupled parts (Weick, 1977) or autonomy-seeking agents (Gouldner, 1954) (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, 156). Despite the fact that most leaders and managers desire to promote some type of change within an institutional structure or unit, numerous past studies have indicated that colleges and universities are often reluctant and resistance to organizational change because any changes done may result in the erosion of their academic freedom and can perhaps weaken the interdependencies between governance, finance, human resources, epistemic norms, and organizational culture.

So the question arises: how do colleges and universities change in the 21st century? And how is it possible for change in higher education organizations to lead to opposite results? Nowadays, educational organizations are often described as homeostatic and are seen as loosely coupled systems. According to Kotter (1995), he outlines three most common reasons why many

colleges and universities fail to change in the 21st century: 1) failure to establish a sense of urgency, 2) fail to form a powerful guiding coalition, and 3) lacking a vision and communicating that vision to other organization (p. 61-63). More specifically, Kaufman (1985) highlights three broad categories that cause higher education organizations to not change: 1) acknowledged collective benefits of stability, 2) calculated opposition to change, and 3) inability to change (p. 8). Generally speaking, most higher education organizations won't change because they are often restrained by several outside social and political forces. These forces may consist of several factors, such as, resources and rigidity, distrust between organizational officers and employees, the institution strategic position and access, and even limitations or obligations of the members in the institution. Kaufman (1985) defines organizational change as "a moving equilibrium in which the continuity of the organization is never in question" (p. 46). He claims that the concept of organizational change can in fact benefit some organizations while at the same time create barriers and losses for other institution (Kaufman, 1995, 48). In other words, the concept of organizational change can often be damped and could result in opposite consequences for an organization. The author emphasizes that most leaders who seek to initiate organizational change are often surprised to find how their new resources have intensified old rigidities instead of loosening or changing fixed patterns (Kaufman, 1995, 70). Typically, the social and political forces that surround organizational change are often opposed by members and leaders of the institution (Cameron & Smart, 1998, 70). The longer an organization has existed, the smaller its ability to change (Cameron & Smart, 1998, 76). Despite the fact that most higher education organizations experience vast challenges when promoting and fostering institutional change, recent study has suggested that institutions still have the capacity to change depending on the adaptiveness of their subunits and the shifts among the populations of their organization.

To clarify, most higher education organizations are now required to change because people in American society deliberately change in values, politics, and public policies (Kaufman, 1995, 44). Colleges and universities are often changing by acquiring additional resources from outside institutions as their strategic approach to avoid being "swept" away (Cameron & Smart, 1998, 67). Normally, organizational change can be either voluntary or involuntary. Kaufman (1995) outlines that reorganization makes change in higher education more difficult than it was before (p. 76). Surprisingly, past research have claimed that university administrators are considered one the most important players when formulating and implementing any kind of change in higher education performance (Whetten & Cameron, 1985, 36). To enumerate, university administrators' primary goal is to maintain or build the organization reputation and size (Coleman, 1973, 363). More specifically, effective administrators are typically concerned about the process of implementing a decision (Whetten & Cameron, 1985, 37). The process of their decision-making can consist of many factors, including but not limited to, emphasis on process and outcomes, support strategic constituencies, succumbing to the power of interest groups, respecting the power of organizational culture, and even exploiting sources of opportunity at an institution. Furthermore, effective university administrators are capable to work around contradiction in faculty attitudes about governance, and are sensitive to members' strong allegiance to core cultural values and norms (Whetten & Cameron, 1985, 44). Professor James G. March once portrayed from the film *Passion and Discipline: Don Quixote's Lessons for Leadership* that the three primary characteristics of which defines an outstanding leader are imagination/vision, commitment and joy. Through these personal qualities, March claims that effective leaders and managers are those individuals capable to manage post-decision disappointment, recognize when to draw a fine line between taking responsive action and acting

responsibly (Whetten & Cameron, 1985, 40), and understand when to think politically and act politically when a conflict arises (Heifetz & Grashow, 2009). Although most higher education administrators and leaders often describe their organizations in coalitional terms, a large number of institutions still encounter numerous challenges when assessing and executing organizational change for long-term self-institutional improvement (Whetten & Cameron, 1985, 38).

Aside from effective university administrators, higher education institutions can also promote organizational change by being more flexible with old and new ideas while talking among themselves to help clarify their own misunderstandings (Weick, 1977, 195). To clarify, organizational flexibility is defined as "the ability of organizations to change their structure or behavior" (Cameron & Smart, 1998, 71). It normally occurs when colleges and universities seek to create and establish a more favorable atmosphere or environment through subtle use of language, symbols, ceremonies, and settings. Past studies have claimed that organizational flexibility works best at large institutions because they are more capable to support larger research experiments afforded by the discoveries of new ideas (Kaufman, 1995, 103). In other words, older higher education organizations tend to be more inflexible than younger higher education organizations (Cameron & Smart, 1998, 78). Although larger academic organizations are typically more flexible than smaller ones, past studies have revealed that maximizing organizational flexibility is not always unequivocally beneficial and can sometimes create risks to the survival of many established behavioral and structural patterns (Kaufman, 1995, xi).

Consequently, past studies have suggested that organizational flexibility can, quite surprisingly, weaken organizational unity and create problems for followers. More specifically, the environmental conditions of an organization may sometimes favor more rigid organization because they are unburdened by the costs associated to flexibility (Kaufman, 1991, xvi).

Normally, there are two kinds of costs associated to organizational flexibility: 1) resource costs and 2) disunity costs (Cameron & Smart, 1998, 74). Leaders who make changes frequently can exceed the tolerances of their followers because organizational resources tend to dwindle and disappear at a fearful rate (Whetten & Cameron, 1985, 36). Implementing effective strategies to promote organizational flexibility is highly critical to ensure that organizations become sustainable and would not possibly fall or die out as a result from organizational disunity.

In essence, organizational change does occur in spite of the barriers impeding it (Kaufman, 1995, 41). Most transformation in higher education often goes through a series of phases that requires considerable length and time (Kotter, 1995, 59). Kaufman (1995) clearly emphasized that promoting organizational change is neither good nor bad, or beneficial nor injurious (p. 8); rather, he claims that organizational change is necessary for organizational survival. The role of university leadership between university administrators and presidents must be emphasized to achieve greater organizational change. Leaders and managers must think politically and act politically by expanding informal authority, developing allies, staying connected with the opposition, manage authority figures, take responsibility for causalities, and protect the voice of dissent (Heifetz & Grashow, 2009). Institutions are no longer just organizations but rather set of values, norms, and habits that influence thought and behavior (Youn & Price, 2009, 210). Stakeholders in higher education must develop a clear articulated vision that can inspire and encourage leaders and presidents to formulate a solid direction in which an organization can move forward and achieve organizational change. Without a clear articulated vision, promoting institutional change and developing effective administrators and leaders can easily dissolve (Kotter, 1995, 61). Weick (1977) once concluded in his article that the "prescriptions for effectiveness favor quantitative rather than qualitative change" (p. 225).

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