Leadership in messy organizational contexts – thinking systemically, acting pragmatically

Theo Andrew, executive dean, faculty of engineering and the built environment, DUT

1 INTRODUCTION

This presentation elucidates on an important aspect of the role of a dean. In addition to the strategic function and the daily decision making and execution a significant amount of resources should be spent on relationship building to create systemic value. In most cases the education, training and experience of a new dean rarely equips her/him to deal with the multiple tensions in building the kind of relationships that necessary for a healthy productive human activity system such as the school/faculty. The extent of the difficulty of the task obviously depends very much on the current nature of the sociology within the school/faculty. In this presentation I share my experience on just one aspect of this journey – making sense of the current reality, and I hope that one would see some of the principles espoused in the simplicity of the exemplar.

Over the last 14+ years as executive dean I had to deal with a range of problem situations from what I thought was the simplest of management problems to the very messy complex situations. By simplest I am referring to those problems that were modeled as a decision system with known I/P and O/P and feedback, and you had a rubric to determine the efficacy of the solution. As an example, the hiring of faculty, or compliance with ABET accreditation. Let's say that these contribute to 80 percent of your work activities. There are a significant number of problem situations where there is no absolute solution. There are too many unknowns, sufficient consensus is hard to come by perhaps because of too many vested interests, lots of diversity, a model representation is insufficient, etc. etc. As an example, the merger of two departments. Here is a picture that summarizes the problem domain.

Table1. Problem contexts according to their complexity and the stakeholder views, adapted from Flood & Jackson (1991)

Complexity of systems / Problem Situation	Divergent views of the stakeholders		
	Unitary	**Pluralist**	**Coercive**
Simple	Simple unitary	Simple pluralist	Simple coercive
Complex	Complex unitary	Complex pluralist	Complex coercive

While excellent scholarship is non-negotiable for the appointment of a dean together with prior academic management experience such as that of a chair/head of department, these attributes and the authority vested in the dean's office is insufficient for the road ahead. You will soon find this out. Perhaps it is not so complex if the mission is to maintain the status quo, but if it to stimulate organizational transformation then we have to lead and manage at the level of complexity of the organization. Now let's say that these contribute 20 percent of your work activities. The issue is that this 20 percent consumes 80 percent of your energy, time and other resources.

Thinking systemically is really about understanding the school or faculty as a system with an environment, and boundaries, and the relationships within this system. This will be elucidated as we move along. So, I shall attempt to briefly discuss one case, due to time constraint, that hopefully will give us a sense of what thinking systemically means. Thereafter I shall attempt to share some ideas on acting pragmatically and then conclude with the idea of leadership by learning.

2 THE INTERVENTION

2.1 CURRENT REALITY PICTURE FROM MY TENURE AT A FORMER UNIVERSITY

I was recruited with a special mandate and part of this had to be achieved within five years. Thereafter renewal depended on performance. So I knew the performance indicators and I had pretty good ideas as to how I should do this. Except this was based on other leaders experience and airport books, and the honest truth was that I had little confidence in the efficacy of the intervention. What I did not have was a deep appreciation for the current realty of the faculty. So this was the first project, a kind of intervention or action research in itself. This meant spending the first three months or so without preconceptions in structured conversations with various stakeholders individually and in departmental settings. By the way it's never too late to do this. Here are some of the issues that I probed without prejudging:-

- individual cultural diversity and the departmental culture, dominant culture
- politics
- history
- surfacing hidden agendas
- level of scholarly practice/behavior

- perceptions about various stakeholders such as students, other colleagues, industry, government
- perceptions of faculty on their role within the organizational system
- Union culture – faculty/school versus management. Expectations of where should the dean stand
- Pressing issues and prevailing tensions

Structured conversations based on soft systems thinking methods and techniques are an effective way of understanding a range of issues (operational, technical and soft) and how these interrelate to each other. The next exercise was to develop the narrative, in fact more than one narrative which I call the current reality narrative/s. This narrative should be open to critique by faculty and management. In this particular case I even drew a Rich Picture of how I perceived the mess – system of interrelated issues.

This action research intervention in itself started the transformation process, in the sense that faculty started to reflect on their own assumptions and thinking on curricular issues, teaching and learning, student centeredness, scholarship, etc. My mental model in essence was to set the vision, compare this to the current reality and explore the interventions necessary to move the current reality to the vision. Note the allusion to conflict resolution in the mental model. I was tempted many times to fiddle with the model by bluffing about either the current reality or the vision and all this did were to move the vision to the current reality! The challenges start to become clear as the faculty explore the leverages needed to move the current reality to the vision and the consequential actions/decisions.

2.2 ACTING PRAGMATICALLY

I am often asked "if the goal of systemic thinking is to understand the phenomena or problem situation as comprehensively as possible then how do you get to action". This is a fair question. While some issues tend to resolve itself in the process of understanding comprehensively, in the main the call to action requires compromises, tradeoffs, and an appetite for risk. In other words boundaries have to be drawn, priority maps debated, resource allocation negotiated, etc. The heuristic nature of managing this should not be new to us engineers! So one might ask then what is the value of thinking systemically because this is usual practice. I argue from experiential evidence that firstly a systemic approach always has the health of the entire system in consideration and there is value in the process of engaging. Secondly, a more appropriate set of decisions are made that leads to sustainability value. And thirdly, individual and

organizational learning is taking place, but for the dean s/he is harnessing the intellectual resources of the entire faculty. And this brings me to my concluding idea…

3 THE SCHOOL/FACULTY AS A LEARNING LABORATORY FOR LEADERSHIP

Complex or messy organizational contexts are wonderful learning laboratories in leadership and executive management. Of course this assumes collegiality, the quest for multiple perspectives, a genuine desire for system improvement, room for mistakes, etc. etc. this approach is a sure way to avoid making the cardinal error of applying solutions that may have worked elsewhere in your current organization. Each organizational system deserves its unique guidance system. Single loop learning of error detection and control in organizations does not lead to deep learning and any transformation. And therefore the quest should always be for what Argyris and Schön, termed double-loop learning where the core values, goals, frameworks and worldviews are questioned.

In summary here are some concepts or ideas that I would like to make explicit from this little narrative:-

- The faculty/school is a human activity system, appreciate multiple perspectives, different world views and diversity, and this means you have to get out of your own comfort zone and learn beyond your engineering science.
- Leadership and relationship building and negotiating boundaries are mutually inclusive
- Remember, the human element always adds complexity to a system.
- Consider the faculty/school as a learning organization. Be brave enough to experiment, allow faculty to have a mistake on you. Always seek to improve the depth of learning as an organization.

4 BIBLIOGRAPHY

Checkland, P. and Scholes, J. (1990). *Soft Systems Methodology in Action.* Wiley, Chichester

Flood, R. L. and Jackson, M. C. (1991). *Creative Problem Solving*. Wiley, Chichester.

Midgley, G. (2000). *Systemic Intervention: Philosophy, Methodology, and Practice,* Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, New York.

Argyris, C., Schön, D.A. (1978). *Organizational Learning: a Theory of Action Perspective*. Addison-Wesley, Reading, Mass.