

An institution in search of excellence: Lessons learnt

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Not Me, Not You, but Together WE Will.

This is a report of the strategies adopted by the University of Malaya (UM), Malaysia, to address the issues and complexities involved in its search for excellence in teaching and learning, research and service. The story is told how the university sought accreditation through the International Standards Organisation (ISO) and how by uniting their heartbeats to breathe as one provides a platform for some individuals to rise to the occasion thereby adding strength to the team's struggle. The paper concludes that obtaining ISO certification is only a means to an end and, although the initiative towards change may have come from the top management of the university, any attempt to bring about change, requires that the parties involved have to become the change agents themselves.

Higher education, quality culture, ISO certification, managing change, continuous improvement

“We must become the change we want to see” Mahatma Gandhi

INTRODUCTION

This paper looks at how social development theory helped to explain the approach taken by the University of Malaya (UM) to impact on the movement of its staff from lesser to greater levels of energy, efficiency, quality, productivity and accomplishment. The university's awareness that it possessed a huge reservoir of potential human energy that had been absorbed and held static in its organised foundations, its work ethic, values, beliefs and leadership structures led the management to plan a strategy that caused these energies to be released and expressed in times of transition, crisis and opportunity. The management realised that policies, strategies and programs that tapped this latent energy and channelled it into constructive activities had the potential to stir the entire organisation to action and rapid advancement.

Although all of us in higher education want the services we provide to be of the highest quality, we are much less likely to agree about how to define and measure that quality because of differing perceptions of quality. The decision in choosing what constitutes quality is always based on values, often those shared by a group of stakeholders. Today the stakeholders in higher education consist of students, parents, future employers and the government who have varying interests and different priorities. Quality in higher education also takes on different forms between, as well as within, institutions because of different emphases in certain core activities and fields. As such, the way people see quality is like looking through a kaleidoscope where the pattern changes with any movement, however slight. Similarly, the way quality is interpreted changes with any variation in individuals, activities, or institutions.

Since the word 'management' often suggests centralisation and authoritarianism, it typically elicits resounding displeasure on the university campus. As such, it is necessary to create conditions so that people have greater input in managing their own work environments. That would then give them a greater sense of personal and professional accomplishment which would, in turn, lead to greater levels of commitment. However, most people dislike change. An individual is likely to resist change for three reasons: uncertainty, concern over personal loss, and the belief that the change is not in the organisation's best interest. Quality management requires an extensive commitment to educating and training workers in problem solving, decision-making, and team building. The people dimension of quality management requires a workforce committed to the organisation's objectives of quality and continual improvement. It is against this background that the description of the steps taken by UM to initiate much needed change is presented.

INITIATING THE CHANGE

Tracing the development over the years, it is worth noting that the decades of the 1960s and 1970s witnessed an explosion of intellectual curiosity about work motivation. Theoretical developments emerged in contemporary motivation theories such as goal-setting theories, self-development as well as reinforcement theories. Progress could be seen in both conceptual development and empirical research. The 1980s, on the other hand, witnessed a series of refinements and extensions as well as some new theoretical developments. Interestingly, by the early 1990s, intellectual interest in the development of work motivation theories, at least as measured by journal publications, had waned.

It is observed that in the new economic climate, replete with its dot-coms, e-coms and increased globalisation, a motivated workforce is frequently cited as a hallmark of competitive advantage; teams are redefining the notion of hierarchy as well as traditional power distributions. These changes have had a profound influence on how institutions attempt to motivate their members. Social development theory purports that human energies and activities should be organised at higher levels to achieve greater results. This development increases the utilisation of human potential (Robbins and Coulter, 1999). Deci and Ryan (2000) observe that people are active organisms, with innate tendencies toward psychological growth and development who strive to master ongoing challenges and to integrate their experiences into a coherent sense of self. This natural human tendency does not operate automatically, however, but instead requires ongoing nutriment and support from the social environment in order to function effectively. Field theory says that environmental forces and the ways we have learned to view our situations determine our incentives, goals and intentions. Recent theories (Cotton, 1993) suggest that our notions of what is possible, play a major role in motivation. In addition, studies of successful quality programs consistently demonstrate that these programs require active and strong leadership from the top management (Robbins and Coulter, 1999).

Realising that development required an enormous investment of energy to break existing patterns of behaviour and form new ones, UM embarked on a strategy by creating conditions for explosive energies to be released through a project that called for the involvement of every heartbeat of the university.

The management's initiative for change started with the analysis of feedback from a survey to get input on the perception and needs of academics. This step was followed by several sessions of sensitivity and team building training involving some 800 members of the university including both academic and support staff. The training, resembling the strategies used in the outward bound programs, consisted of sessions and activities that aimed at bridging the gap between the different work hierarchies, that strengthened collegiality and the spirit of collaboration, and that empowered staff to initiate plans of action. Teaching and learning, research, and services were

identified as the core business of the institution, and teams were built around these three main functions to look into several key areas that formed the pillars of their excellence, namely Quality Man, Quality Management, Quality Marketing, Quality Money, and Quality Machine. (These terms need definition and clarification as to their meaning and application in the present context.) What follows is an account of the process of intergroup development in which the five Quality groups met regularly to brainstorm and develop blueprints for the next course of action.

BUILDING QUALITY CULTURE THROUGH ISO ACCREDITATION

To demonstrate publicly their quality commitment, many organisations have pursued quality certification, such as ISO 9001, that is issued by the International Standards Organisation (ISO). What is ISO Accreditation? It is a series of quality management standards that are embraced by organisations around the world. Gaining ISO 9001 certification provides proof that a quality operations system is in place.

What motivated UM to undertake this Herculean task? The answer lay in the concepts behind the various motivation theories and their integration at UM. The goal-setting theory proposed that specific goals increase performance, and that difficult goals, when accepted, resulted in higher performance than easy goals (Robbins and Coulter, 1999). The specificity of the goal itself acted as an internal stimulus that would outperform operations with no goals or a generalised goal of 'do your best'. Having started the strengthening of the various work groups, UM accepted the government's call for all Malaysian universities to obtain the ISO Certification as very timely, as it served as a major reform initiative to improve quality and strive for excellence. In a dramatic move, the university management decided that instead of going for certification by departments like other academic institutions, thus 'eating the elephant one bite at a time' it would 'swallow the elephant whole' by working towards obtaining certification for the whole university. It was indeed a mammoth task that had to be strategically tackled.

Not Me, Not You, But Together WE Will

The main strategy is to enforce the so-called 'HEARTBEAT' concept. Recognising that the university exists to enhance human capital and development, and that its goal is excellence in human development and humanity, people are seen to be the heartbeat of UM's development. The 'We Culture' was introduced as a result and is based on the principle that together we will persevere. The slogan 'Excellence with UM' has marked the effort to inject a new spirit into university life where the community is needed to unite both hearts and souls. This view stems from the conviction that many academicians are isolationists who do not really interact with others. The culture of 'I am I, and You are You' has long been in existence in an academic institution like UM. In order for the organisation to grow, the emphasis should focus on individuals as well as the institution as a whole. Individual expertise and strength should be shared with others. It is against this backdrop that HEARTBEAT has been conceptualised. The objectives of HEARTBEAT include the establishment of a culture of excellence, an *esprit de corps*, giving priority to the client and striving for excellence in performance based on creativity, innovation and precision. One of the distinguishing features of these programs has been the novel effort to establish a strong sense of belonging and pride in the university. Although these values are not new, their constant reaffirmation is considered to be useful and important. The slogan 'My University, Your University' reflects the realisation of the inter-dependence of the whole university community in its striving for excellence.

'We Are UM, and UM is Us' and the 'We Culture' were born out of the HEARTBEAT concept. Another slogan adopted, 'Certainly Will Be Better' referred to the confidence and the efforts that UM should continue to strive for excellence in a dynamic and continuous manner in terms of human values, humanity and activities based on the principles laid out by religion, the law, and

the environment. In a nutshell, the university management was confident at the beginning of the preparation for the ISO Certification that the job could be handled because the principles of HEARTBEAT stood behind us.

This begs the question: is HEARTBEAT sufficient? Is it strong enough? What about the individuals who hear their own hearts beating louder than the heartbeats of their team members?

As the Events Unfold

Academics are professionals who have a strong and long-term commitment to their field of expertise. Their loyalty and commitment are more often to their profession than to their employer. What motivates academics? Undeniably the chief reward in their job is the work itself and some form of professional recognition.

As such, it is not only important to motivate team members at the onset of a project, but it is equally important to keep them moving through to the completion without losing heart or interest. From Robbins (2000) we are informed that the challenges of creating team players are greatest where (a) the national culture is highly individualistic, and (b) the teams are introduced into an established organisation that has historically valued individual achievement. Unfortunately, both happen to be true in the case of the teams working for ISO certification in UM.

It is also important to note that many contemporary motivation theories recognise that employees are not homogeneous. They have different needs, attitudes, personalities, and other important individual variables. It is as important to recognise that although many positive benefits may accrue from obtaining ISO or any other quality assurance certification, the key benefit to organisations comes from the quality improvement journey itself (Parisher, 1995). In other words, the goal of ISO certification should be to have work processes and an operation system in place that enables employees throughout the organisation to perform their jobs at a consistently high level.

The task of preparing for the ISO certification in UM involved many academic, administrative and support staff. A Steering Committee to coordinate the preparation and production of the documents, comprising academics from various disciplines has been set up. There are 14 committee members, including the authors, and the committee is headed by one chief quality officer. The focus is on the committee's analysis of how the team deals with tensions and issues that develop in the process of preparing the documents for ISO certification. These issues may range from conflicts within the team to motivating and demotivating factors that affect individual members.

Size of the group

The size of a group definitely affected the group's overall behaviour, but the effect was dependent on the outcomes that were focused on. It has been shown that small groups were generally faster at completing tasks while large groups were better at solving problems. The contribution of individual members tended to decrease as groups got incrementally larger and was known as the 'free rider tendency' phenomenon (Albenese and Van Fleet, 1985). The UM ISO team of 14 was large, and the free-rider phenomenon did take place. Members quickly voiced dissatisfaction over this at the weekly meetings and as a result the chief quality officer started to identify individual roles in the team and recognised individual efforts. This had a positive effect both on the individual and team performance as had been predicted by the expectancy theory. Thus, an employee might exert a high level of effort if he or she perceived that there was a strong relationship between effort and performance, performance and rewards, and rewards and satisfaction of personal goals (Robbins and Coulter, 1999). Linking this to need theories, would

have meant that motivation would be high and the rewards individuals achieved for their performance would satisfy the dominant needs that were consistent with their individual goals.

What happened with the UM team was similar to the situation presented in Robbins's (2000) description of athletes who said they wanted to be part of a cohesive team, but they also wanted their names printed on the back of their jerseys in 6-inch block letters. Thus everyone wanted a share of the cake though contributions came from a minority of the players.

Internal conflict

The team experienced differences that resulted in interference or opposition to policy. Taking the traditional view of conflict, it indicated a malfunctioning or problem within the group and therefore should have been avoided. Within the team, we had one or two members who recognised that conflict was a natural and inevitable outcome in any group. The sensitivity training through HEARTBEAT had activities on conflict resolution where interaction among members of work teams learned how other members thought and worked. Through high levels of interaction, team members learnt to increase trust and openness. As a result, the conflicts were not allowed to cause interference, but were sometimes used as a positive force to contribute to the group's performance, in line with the interactionist view of conflict which proposed not only that conflict might exert a positive force in a group but also that some conflict was necessary for a group to perform effectively.

Reinforcement factors

Reinforcement theory recognises the fact that an organisation's rewards reinforce an individual's performance (Hellreigel et al., 1999). If management has designed a reward system that is seen by employees as a so-called 'pay off' for good performance, the rewards should reinforce and encourage continued good performance. Rewards also play a key part in equity theory because individuals tend to compare the rewards they have received from the efforts they have made with the inputs-outcomes of relevant others. In the context of the UM and typically the Asian culture, employees seldom demand their rights or ask for them directly.

In the case of the UM team, which worked long hours especially in the early part of the ISO project, reinforcement came from the top management who dropped in regularly to provide moral support. Team members were visited often and hence felt that their work was valued. However, when these visits ceased as management got involved with other affairs, motivation was affected. Individuals in the team started meeting in small groups to voice concern over the lack of support resulting in meetings with management to solve existing problems. The meetings were initiated by individuals' concern over the performance of the team.

Two important issues in relation to managing teams are (a) how is it possible to evaluate the team's performance? and, (b) what type of reward system should be used? Individual performance should be evaluated and the factors that indicate how well the individual works in a team context should also be considered. Performance appraisals should include comments from peers as well as from team managers (Robbins and Coulter, 1999; Stewart, 1996). In UM, this system has been enforced as a result of team members empowering themselves to bring up concerns over issues of appraisal.

Rising to the occasion

It was noted that even if leadership had created the vision of change and communicated the purpose for the change, teams had to be trained to 'become the change we want to see'. It was felt that the plus point to the HEARTBEAT project was that hearts were touched and that the impact was deep. HEARTBEAT built relationships that emphasised and supported team goals and

integrated individual skills. It was consistently observed that the team referred to in this paper, more often than not, was able to rise to the occasion. Many problems were faced that could have beaten others but they persisted through self-empowerment and respect for individual differences and a willingness to take calculated risks.

THE JOURNEY CONTINUES

This is not in any way a success story. It is a narrative of sorts and an analysis of how an organisational strategy impacts on individuals. The different characteristics of the individuals in the teams and their coping strategies are seen to be the driving force that moves the effort forward, in addition to the constant support promised by the leadership. In this case development occurs when individual initiatives are imitated, multiplied and actively supported with the strong backing of an established supportive system. Development is taken as an activity of the institution as a whole. In a way, this paper attempts to show that though development can be stimulated, directed or assisted by policies and programs, it cannot be compelled or carried out by administrative and external agencies on behalf of others in the population. A development strategy that has the potential to work should aim to release people's initiative, not substitute for it.

The university obtained the ISO certification after one year of hard work but the quest was far from over. Before long it was realised that being certified was only a means to an end. It was the beginning of the struggle towards achieving excellence. The certification merely created an awareness of the scope and breadth of quality. The positive side of ISO certification was that there was a work system in place that reduced subjectivity and raised accountability. However there were questions that remained to be answered. Could the subjective nature of academic activity ever be structured? What compromises must be made in the process? Would creativity be hampered? Could we continue to produce cutting-edge research? As long as these questions remained, there was the possibility of continuous improvement.

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