

Facilitating the development of a shared purpose in a university department: the first stage towards developing a culture of shared governance

Abstract

Background and context

The structure of higher education departments tend to be hierarchical and we were no exception. However, changes in the way nursing education was provided, internal growth and development followed by a period of austerity, presented our school with an unprecedented opportunity. We found ourselves in a position where we had an opportunity to change.

Aims

The aim of the paper is to share our reflections on the process and outcomes from a culture change project in a university department so far. The purpose of this part of the project was to enable creative and collegial opportunities to work together.

Conclusions

An inclusive culture can make a difference to peoples' lives and reflect the underpinning principles of person centred practice. This project has enabled us to define our shared purpose, clarify our values, make commitments and set standards. Overall, though it has allowed us to see each other as people emerged from behind a faceless organisational structure.

Implications for practice

The values of Inclusiveness, Integrity and Professionalism are important for a shared understanding and effective collaborative functioning within university departments. Staff teams can be structured around professional and personal development needs. Managerial support, staff participation and an experienced facilitator is vital for successful cultural change. Despite being UK based, we believe these experiences to be transferable across jurisdictions and of interest to international readers.

Six Keywords/Phrases

Culture change, nursing, higher education, shared decision-making, values, shared governance.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we share our experience of the process and outcomes to date of a culture change programme in a university department. The paper uses a modified version of the model of reflection proposed by Rolfe, Freshwater and Jasper, (2010). We have framed our experiences in terms of 'what', 'so what' and 'now what', in relation to a journey that aspired to co-design our practice architecture, (Kemmis, 2009), from a traditional hierarchical school, towards one based on shared values and driven by shared governance similar to that outlined by Bamford-Wade and Spence, (2011). We were drawn to this because shared governance is an approach that devolves decision-making and accountability out to constituent members as opposed to a command and control structure thus empowering individuals, (Marquis and Huston 2006).

WHAT?

Organisational context:

With a history of providing graduate nursing programmes since the 1970's, Nursing in Ulster is characterised by pioneering, academic excellence, practice development and research, with a strong focus on person-centeredness, McCormack and McCance (2006, 2010) and creativity, (McCormack and McGowan et al. 2014). As a department, it provides undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in adult and mental health nursing. It has approximately 70 staff, and four research centres.

In 2000, the Department of Health contract for the provision of undergraduate/preregistration nursing in Northern Ireland was renegotiated and 50% of the provision was awarded to Ulster. This triggered a series of fundamental changes in the School such as a recruitment drive that explosively expanded the number of staff and provided "new" courses on two campuses. Following rapid expansion and growth, the university entered a period of austerity that profoundly affected how the school delivered its programmes. Thus, at the start of the culture change programme the organisational context in the school was one of flux with a new curriculum and associated developments in research and teaching.

The overt organisational structure at this point was bureaucratic, hierarchical and centralised in keeping with the description provided by Giddens (2006); but it was designed to be flexible. The design was to accommodate the post 2000 changes however, the hierarchical structure was at odds with the notion of flexibility and created a dissonance that undermined effectiveness. Subsequently there was a feeling among colleagues that it was no longer fit for purpose. The evidence for this was feedback from exercises conducted at a School Away Day and from the School Executive Committee who used the stakeholder evaluation tool, *Claims, concerns and issues* (Guba and Lincoln 1989). From the data generated, we decided to address not only our organisational structure but also recognised that this was an opportunity to embrace culture change.

The process

The decision to proceed was endorsed by school management. Endorsement was important, because according to McCormack et al. (1999) organisational change is next to impossible to achieve if it is not supported from the top. With that support in place and in keeping with Titchen and Binnie (1993), we resolved that this would be a bottom up approach to facilitate change. Our goal was to reimagine School structures whilst maintaining and improving the standards already enjoyed. A shared governance model was proposed as a viable way to achieve our goals and live our values, informed by the idea that 'form follows function' (Manley et al. 2014). Thus, the purpose of the project was to establish an effective workplace culture by enabling and nurturing the creative and collegial aspects of working together (Manley et al. 2011).

In order for the externally facilitated process to move forward, volunteers from all departments established a coordinating group. Membership of this group was varied and had administrative, academic and research staff as well as an external facilitator with experience in the culture change process. This was built on an insider-outsider approach and as Adelman, (1993) pointed out, the strengths and perspectives of the members complemented each other thus distilling a, "new common sense".

The first priority was to draft the vision, purpose and values from the data that staff had already generated collaboratively. It is widely recognised that defining purpose is the first stage of a culture change programme, (Manley et al. 2014 and Martin and McCormack et al. 2011). The data, (both positive and negative), were captured in Wordles and processes to

facilitate the project continued with a series of interactive meetings guided by the external facilitator. As many staff as possible were involved to ensure that colleagues were confident that the programme's output was theirs. This was helped by feedback and verification by peers to clarify ownership. In addition, we wanted to avoid contributing to resistance to change as identified by Klonek et al (2014), (who found that resistance to change increased, when recipients believed that change was being enforced), by maintaining dialogue. After many meetings and discussions with colleagues, the vision for the School was agreed. This is presented in Box 1.

Box 1: The School vision

Having a clear vision to build on enabled us to clarify our purposes and these emerged as:

- **Developing a flourishing person centred culture**
- **Flourishing students and staff**
- **Have a positive impact on Ulster University and the wider society**

Continuing our dialogue with peers through workshops allowed us to work out our values.

The core values agreed were **professionalism, inclusiveness** and **integrity**.

Reflecting on how we would live our values led us to consider the commitments we were making to each other and to ourselves. The process was again facilitated externally and the commitments are illustrated in the diagram below. It should be noted that the hand drawn illustrations are artefacts arising from the staff workshops.

Figure 1: The Commitments

In order to clarify what the commitments would mean in real terms, we drew up a series of standards. The standards benchmarked our behaviour and attitudes and allowed us to see what the values and commitments would "look like". All of the standards arose from the group work and this enabled ownership and reflexivity.

Box 2: The standards:

SO WHAT?

This element of the reflective framework described by Rolfe et al (2010) enabled us to make sense of and consider the impact of the events described above. Despite being written in an academic, critical and somewhat dispassionate manner, we did not want to lose our voice in convention (Murray 2013). Therefore, it should be noted that the culture change project has been an emotionally charged undertaking with a significant amount of emotional labour for all involved. With hindsight this is perhaps not surprising as Smollan and Sayers, (2009, p. 435), point out that culture change does provoke intense emotional reactions. Also, there were times when we did want to “fix” as opposed to facilitate as highlighted by Scott, (2013), however, expert support through facilitation ameliorated the worst of the negative effects and prepared us for ‘demechanisation’ a process described by Boal, (2002) as an opportunity to unlearn old habits in order to relearn.

From the outset, it was apparent that the project represented opportunities for collaboration, participation and shared decision-making. As a part of this process, scepticism needed to be addressed and dealt with. From time to time those facilitating the groups felt vulnerable; resilience however, was nurtured through high mutual support, high challenge and living the values. It could be that we were illuminating Waddington’s (2016) compassion gap in university in so far as were we illuminating a disconnect between our values as caring professionals and the neoliberal agenda that drives commodification of students in higher education? Emotional venting notwithstanding, a variety of ideas and opinions were shared, recorded and discussed and this enabled people to feel listened to and come to understand that their input was important. Examples of this are the development of a dashboard that provides evidence of staff ‘flourishing’ through pre-existing indices of achievement. The School Board was appraised of progress and provided ratification of the proposals for a new decision-making structure to run in shadow form for one year.

We are at a place where we have shared purposes, values, commitments and standards. However, enabling the values to become ‘lived’ was more testing. We needed to consider how the values could be translated into the foundations of an embryonic structure that would enable us to embed them in our everyday work. Following this, we need to consider what the new value driven practice would look like as opposed to our previous “regular” practice. Van Manen, (1990 p.30) suggests that perhaps it will emerge in our idiomatic phrasing. This is an idea that is supported by Waddington, (2016), who suggested that conversation patterns shift and may indicate the presence of values.

From a practical perspective though, we needed to think about how everyone could contribute to a shared governance model. This drew us closer to understanding the expectations and burden of responsibility that comes with shared governance processes, (Gill 2011). Shared governance is described by Porter-O'Grady and Malloch, (2016 p.16) as,

“A structure and process that embodies the principles of equity, partnership, accountability, and ownership, which are necessary for autonomy to flourish”.

Whilst colleagues supported the direction being taken with the project, the proposed shared governance structure produced some doubt. This is in keeping with Shaw's, (2012) assertion that practice development is not that straightforward. Perhaps the doubt indicated uncertainty because shared governance would remove perceived security through anonymity whilst making responsibility explicit.

So, a number of possible structures were identified to reflect collaborative ways of working and decision-making. Because of this, we established staff teams on the basis that supporting individuals first, would facilitate consequent development. The teams were designed to mix business support, research and academic staff at varying career stages. Membership of teams was through self-nomination and this was achieved at an away day in December 2014. The coordinating group nominated a facilitator and co-facilitator to start with and their role was to lead the staff team meetings regarding areas of personal/professional development. In this regard, the agenda has been left very much as an open forum. The staff teams are not campus specific and are intended to be supportive, developmental and participative.

A number of factors from our perspectives enabled development and without ranking them, we felt that expert facilitation, managerial support, motivation and enthusiasm for changing 'the way we do things around here' all played a key role (Drennan 1992). Barriers were encountered along the way, but this is similar for many organisations undertaking change (Buchanan and Huczinski 2010). It was when objections were being voiced and threatened to dominate the agenda that the value of experienced facilitation became apparent. Because of our new structures and processes, we looked forward to a changed workplace culture. This was imagined as being different ways of doing the things. We felt that having worked towards changing our context and the mechanisms by which we did things; outcome change would follow as suggested by Pawson and Tilley, (1997). Perhaps most importantly the project would enable shared responsibility by adopting the principles of

shared governance that would be manifest in working together to realise a bottom-up decision-making approach. On occasion though, (and paradoxically if not ironically), this idea also posed a problem for some as the realisation dawned that shared governance implied active participation as opposed to passive observation. There would be an enhanced focus on individuals (their interests, skills and career development) and thus enhanced team working (harnessing knowledge and skills and talents more effectively; supporting one another to exemplify the agreed values etc.). We forecast that this would result in improved satisfaction, outputs and recognition (local, national, international). We also recognised that increased scrutiny in the University would occur because of the new approach.

Operationally, the members of the coordinating group experienced dissonance between expectations of group membership and the priorities of the School. This was apparent from a lack of (promised), relief from workload that often had to take precedence over the project. The pace, scale and volume of work and the time demands created by practice learning support have made carving out time to change difficult. We continue to be reminded of the professional implications of our course and the fact that changes cannot be made if there is risk of compromise.

NOW WHAT?

Continuing along the framework provided by Rolfe et al, (2010) brings us to a decisive point in the development of the project that enables us to suggest how things may be improved. To facilitate this, the project passed to the stewardship of colleagues with a significant record of accomplishment in facilitating large-scale practice developments. New decision-making bodies were proposed but in the first instance, the decision was taken to concentrate on the development of new ways of collegial working through the development of staff teams.

On reflection, we find ourselves asking the question, “what have we learned from this exercise?” Overall, the journey, (so far), has been challenging from a variety of perspectives. It has even been distressing at times but this has been balanced by learning, a sense of moving forward and moments of excitement as we began to realise what was possible and became aware of the empowering effect this would have on our working lives. Having the opportunity to reflect on our experiences in the project thus far has enabled us

to consider what Burman, (2006 p.327), referred to as the “political economy of production”. We have been empowered to challenge the bureaucratic controlling organisational structure with a view to improving outcomes for our students and our own working lives. However, we have also gained insight into the value that such a structure offers and that perhaps shared governance may not be the panacea it was sold as? We can see the impact that leadership has on a project such as this, (Manley 2014). Opportunities now arise for us to refocus and refine our approach. This we believe can only serve to push the project forward.

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