

TEAM BASED LEADERSHIP AND LEARNING

by

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A Leadership Abstract

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Interpersonal and teamwork skills are now considered essential for individual and organizational learning, and learning, as Peter Senge points out, is the only sustainable source of an organization's competitive advantage. As social animals, we humans learn best through interaction, dialogue, practice, and communal reflection. In recognition of this fact, many North American colleges have embraced "collaborative learning" as part of becoming more learning-centered.

Team-based curriculum development and delivery, for example, employs an interdisciplinary approach and often enhances the quality of student learning. But equally important, and perhaps even a precondition, is the need to reconfigure post-secondary institutions themselves as learning organizations characterized by a team-based approach to leadership and staff learning. A flat organizational structure, collaboration and dialogue among staff, and responsive decision-making modes are hallmarks of a "learning college". Senge identifies other essential disciplines of a learning organization, but this paper focuses on the fourth discipline, team learning.

How can we expect college students to become good team-players if college staff lack those skills themselves? How can we expect faculty to promote collaborative learning activities if they are treated in an authoritarian, top-down manner by "management"? How can a college respond quickly to student needs if decisions are slowed by layers of bureaucracy? Dr. Terry O'Banion, President of the League for Innovation in the Community College, argues that the very architecture of a college needs to be overhauled if it is to model best learning practices for its students - if it is to practice what it preaches.

To become a learning-centred institution, a college must view **itself** as a learning organism and act as a 'learning college'. Sir Sanford Fleming College in Ontario, Canada, offers some insights into this process of transformation into a learning college by adopting a relatively flat organizational structure based on teams with consensual decision-making as its *modus operandi*. This paper will assess the outcomes to date and particularly the impact on student learning.

NEW STRUCTURE MOVES DECISION-MAKING CLOSER TO THE FRONT-LINE

A 20% reduction in government funding in 1995 spurred Sir Sanford Fleming College to redesign its organization from top to bottom. An entire level of middle management was eliminated from both service and academic areas in order to preserve front-line services and programs whenever possible. Deans and Chairs were replaced by Academic Team Leaders drawn primarily from faculty ranks and selected freely by faculty members, with agreement from the faculty bargaining unit. A comprehensive *Memorandum of Understanding* was developed with the faculty union which calls for:

- cross-functional and interdisciplinary collaboration
- decision-making devolved closer to the learner through empowered staff and teams
- shared responsibility and accountability for results among peers and colleagues
- dialogue within and between teams to promote continuous learning

The new Academic Team Leaders, together with their team members, are fully responsible for the daily operation of academic centres of specialization including such responsibilities as:

- staff recruitment and hiring
- formative evaluation of faculty
- budget development and monitoring
- program development, modification, and suspension
- professional development of team members
- evaluation of team performance and leadership

The Academic Team Leaders serve a three year term with the option for renewal of a second term if the team so decides. Each leader is expected to spend a minimum of 10% of his/her time in direct student involvement and receives modest compensation for assuming this role.

The Academic Team Leaders report directly to the Vice-President, Academic (VPA). The VPA is involved in performance issues that entail summative evaluation only. At this time, there are no outstanding faculty grievances, and the Union/College Committee meets regularly to resolve any potential disputes. A college-wide Academic Leaders Team sets major academic policies allocates academic resources, and is responsible for all aspects of academic delivery.

The new structure depends totally on commitment to a team-based organization. Nine characteristics of high-performing teams have been identified and learning outcomes specified with recommended staff development activities. Each team sets its own norms and decision-making principles, but consensus is the predominant decision-making mode (defined as the ability to “live with a decision”).

How do we know whether this team-based approach to leadership is working? Based on an annual 360 degree performance evaluation system, more than 90% of staff evaluated their leaders as good to excellent last year; 94% of students rated their faculty as good to excellent; and 93% of college graduates were satisfied with the quality of their education experience (April 1998 cohort). (Sir Sandford Fleming has a history of collegial relations among its employee groups which is a key cultural factor behind the success of the new model.)

TEAM-BASED STRUCTURE ENHANCES STUDENT LEARNING

The new structure has fostered greater dialogue, conversation, and reflection among staff, and grass-roots innovation is the result. The emphasis on teams, for example, is having a noticeable effect on curriculum. The Applied Computing and Engineering Sciences Centre is in the process of introducing an entirely project-based sixth semester in January 2000. No formal courses will be offered and faculty “services” will be negotiated for as required by teams of students, with a focus on interdisciplinary collaboration and applied research. The “gen ed” faculty and the “techies” work together in surprising harmony.

The concept of a self-directed “learning commons” is migrating beyond Sir Sandford Fleming’s

new \$6.2 million Learning Resource Centres (LRC). The main campus has an extremely popular open area within its LRC with 250% networked Pentiums for self-directed and team-based student learning. An engineering commons, a health sciences commons, and a natural resources commons are in development in order to model collaborative learning principles, and less time-bound modes of learning.

A host of other exciting academic initiatives have been launched during the past three years as staff are empowered and decisions are pushed down the ladder, including the development of:

- 23 new full and part-time academic programs (in addition to seven program suspensions)
- 48 distance education courses (more than ten on-line)
- an annual \$100,000 incentive fund for distributed learning initiatives
- the Bell Institute for Learning Design (a technology-enhanced professional development facility staffed with curriculum specialists, learning designers, media production support, etc.)
- a new curriculum development framework and manual
- an intergenerational Institute for Healthy Aging, including the planned construction of a long-term care “teaching” facility on campus in partnership with the community
- the BCE Innovation Centre @ Fleming, an applied research and technology applications partnership with Nortel Networks, Bell Canada and local employers

Sir Sandford Fleming continues to operate with a balanced budget and its performance is healthy as measured against the province’s newly introduced Key Performance Indicators (86% graduate employment rate, 78% employer satisfaction with quality of graduates). Current student and alumni satisfaction with the quality of their educational experience at Sir Sandford Fleming is one of the highest in the Ontario college system.

NEW CHALLENGES EMERGE

The overall impact of Sir Sandford Fleming’s team-based approach to leadership and staff learning is positive, but it poses many challenges. A lean administrative structure puts more pressure on faculty team leaders, co-ordinators, and front-line staff. Many staff report feeling “overwhelmed” and “overworked”. Time for reflection and professional development - so crucial to good learning - can be sacrificed as operational needs and tight resources cut into “learning time”. Consensual decision-making promotes team learning and empowerment; however, it can slow decision-making.

The numerous grassroots academic initiatives have unleashed staff creativity, but can diffuse energy and generate too many conflicting corporate priorities. It is easy to add something, far harder to delete. The acid test of a team-based structure is an open, principled budget allocation process. Sir Sandford Fleming’s College Leaders Team (25 members) goes through a lengthy and sometimes painful process each year of balancing the needs of the whole vs. the parts. Conflict is inevitable but the commitment to working as a team most often prevails.

The College is currently engaged in a total-rethinking of its vision, mission and values in order to

become more fully a learning-centered college (for both students and staff). The “vision team” has begun the process with some bold new projections about possible “multiple futures” by the year 2010, using scenario-learning as its tool. Dialogue and debate within each department and across the college will ensure that the decisions made reflect Sir Sandford Fleming’s ongoing commitment to team-based leadership and learning. As an embryonic “learning college”, Sir Sandford Fleming still has far to go on its transformation journey.

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