Distance Education Leadership, Technology, and Culture:
Strategies for Organizational Change

Dr. Don Olcott, Jr.
Executive Director, Division of Extended Programs
Western Oregon University

Dr. Donald E Hanna
Professor of Communications
University of Wisconsin Extension

Dr. Michael Johnson
Associate Professor of Educational Leadership
University of Alaska Anchorage

Introduction

During the past decade, numerous scholarly studies have been published on leadership, technology-distance learning, and organizational culture within higher education institutions. Each of these areas has been examined in unprecedented detail as a separate and distinct topic for books, articles, and special monographs. Most recently, the proliferation of new communications technologies in concert with new challenges for managing increasingly complex university organizations has precipitated the need for a more integrated approach to understanding organizational change. These dynamics are particularly important elements of the environment for outreach and distance learning programs, managers, and leaders. In sum, managers need a new integrative framework for understanding how leadership, technology, and academic culture collectively influence the dynamics and probabilities for success of designing and implementing organization change that is flexible, adaptive, and sustainable over time in the knowledge era.

Leadership, Technology, and Academic Culture

The need for this integrative framework (leadership-technology-academic culture) has been accentuated by a dramatic trend in distance and distributed university programs in the last two years to blur the traditional distinctions between distance learning and traditional campus instruction with increased competition from new competitors via the Internet and other electronic resources. From a functional view, this has involved re-examining instructional-pedagogical practices; academic and student support services; academic and administrative policies; learning resources, and student and program assessment in the context of an integrative-convergence framework where distance learning and campus instruction are simply viewed within the broader teaching-learning continuum of the institution. This shift focuses on teaching and learning first regardless of how, where, when, at what pace, and with what technologies are used for content delivery.

The practical implication of this integrative-convergence shift for distance learning and outreach leaders is that they must interact more “intimately” with all key administrative, academic, and support units within the university to influence the evolution of their organizations. The past politics of defending and advancing distance learning on the “separate but different” premise (that actually accentuated differences in organizational, academic, administrative, and support services between campus and distance education) are being dramatically altered by this shift. And
adherence to premises of the past and status quo management practice for campus and distance learning managers will not allow organizations to thrive in this new organizational environment.

Conversely, campus-based organizational counterparts are also being challenged to work more collaboratively with the institution’s outreach organizations. Organizational managers (such as registrars, information technology directors, student services administrators and others) who may have been comfortable with managing only their areas of responsibility with minimal change impinging upon their domains, must now assume new leadership roles to manage technology and culture to bring about organizational change within the mainstream institution.

The insular nature of the modern university tends to create competent, bureaucratic managers. Most deans, chair persons, and administrative leaders have risen up through the academic ranks from faculty members or mid-level administrative managers to assume positions such as vice president, dean, department chairperson and so on. The result of this has been the creation of a managerial pool that inherently has been conditioned to promote the status quo and defend the traditional ways of doing things. The collective result is good managers- struggling leaders in an era where universities need many more leaders than managers.

The leadership-technology-academic culture framework focuses on giving current academic managers new issues to look at and new ways to look at them. What is certain, however, is that training academic managers on the characteristics of effective leadership will not make them better leaders in a dynamically changing environment where new technologies, more demanding student-consumers, and greater competition are redefining the new higher education landscape. What is needed is a sound framework that integrates leadership, technology and academic culture into a practical framework for leading organizational change.

**Transforming Academic Culture: From Collegium–Bureaucratic to Collaborative**

The university academic culture, and its diverse subcultures, has been traditionally defined from a collegium perspective with rigid cultural norms that have tended to protect the status quo across the institutions and its units. This culture has further infused major bureaucratic norms into the primary functions of the university and its units.

Perhaps the most important practical result of this reliance on collegium has been a decision-making paradigm of deliberation- consensus-incrementalism. This change process is usually very slow, responsive primarily to internal status quo values, and very resistant to external forces for change. Table 1 provides transitional framework for moving academic culture from this collegium-bureaucratic mode to a more collaborative mode.

Table 1. The Changing Cultures of Higher Education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Orientation to change*</th>
<th>Collegium</th>
<th>Bureaucracy</th>
<th>Collaborative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Stewardship</td>
<td>Preservation</td>
<td>Visionary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values</td>
<td>Faculty/program</td>
<td>Administrative efficiency</td>
<td>Client-oriented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision-making</td>
<td>Restricted/shared internal</td>
<td>Vertical/Top-down</td>
<td>Horizontal/shared with stakeholders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support structures</td>
<td>Program-driven</td>
<td>Rule-focused</td>
<td>Learner-focused</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key messages</td>
<td>Quality</td>
<td>Efficiency</td>
<td>Market-driven</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication strategies</td>
<td>Internal</td>
<td>Vertical/formal</td>
<td>External/internal horizontal informal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Systems and resources</td>
<td>Duplicated according to need</td>
<td>Stable, efficient, and pre-organized</td>
<td>Evolving 'as needed'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key messages</td>
<td>Stick together</td>
<td>Don't rock the boat</td>
<td>Seize the day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alliances</td>
<td>Value not easily recognized</td>
<td>Unnecessary</td>
<td>Sought out and implemented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational features</td>
<td>Specialized</td>
<td>Segmented and vertical</td>
<td>Integrated and cross-functional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Budgets</td>
<td>Stable/priority programs</td>
<td>Tightly controlled</td>
<td>Fluid/opportunity seeking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actions</td>
<td>Evolutionary</td>
<td>Targeted</td>
<td>Revolutionary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Programs</td>
<td>Complement existing programs</td>
<td>Fit existing structures</td>
<td>Make new markets/force new structures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition</td>
<td>Avoid competition</td>
<td>Minimize competition through regulation</td>
<td>Exploit competitive advantage</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


- Is enthusiastic, positive and passionate: a good cheerleader. They are positive about faculty/staff members' power to envision and create their future" which is not defined by their past and present.
- Facilitates the development of a vision for the department or college that is Big Enough—Faculty may not develop the commitment or willingness to endure the travails of significant change unless they are inspired by the vision of making a real difference.
- Is willing to be seen as colleague in meetings, letting go of some of the "trappings of power.”
- Makes a habit of reflection and systematically reviews personal and unit performance.
- Actively seeks evaluation information on college's/department's performance.
- Pays attention to the department/college culture and watches for changes and retrenchments, including analyzing unit culture.
- Establishes social functions and traditions; such as, retreats, informal gatherings, lunches, banquets, and other social symbols that provide social cohesion and common unit experiences and ties and even a sense of fun.

Copyright 2005 The Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System. Duplication or redistribution prohibited without written permission of the author(s) and The Annual Conference on Distance Teaching and Learning http://www.uwex.edu/disted/conference/
• **Focuses organizational attention** on areas where collective agreement exists
• Is **persistent**: Doesn’t give up
• Appreciates, values, and has faith in the collaboration process -- trusts that the group (faculty, staff and other groups) will find a solution that works for everyone.
• Demonstrates **patience**—waits for group process to coalesce knowing that group processes take time and often come together and get things done at the last minute
• Does not take her/himself too seriously.
• Knows their personal strengths, weaknesses, tendencies, and perspectives.
• **Is receptive to views** that counter to his/her own? Aggressively seeks out individuals with perspectives and strengths that counter her/his own.

**Summary**

Distance education is at a crossroads. The future of the field will not be dependent upon more sophisticated technologies or new “bells and whistles.” On the contrary, distance education will retain its essential role in the university mission with effective and creative leadership and the unit level. Leaders will have to manage technology and culture, fuse their individual leadership characteristics into the change process of the entire institution, and continually renew their commitment to teaching and learning and to the people who make this happen . . . faculty, students, and staff. The visionary leader will recognize that even in an era of revolutionary technological advances, it is the human element that will increasingly become more, not less, important in the educative process of distant learners.

**Note.** This paper is an abbreviated summary of key sections of the following book:


The book is available from Atwood Publishing, P. O. Box 3185, Madison, WI 53704; 608.242.2101 or 888.242.7101; [http://www.atwoodpublishing.com/](http://www.atwoodpublishing.com/) or contact Linda Babler at lindab@atwoodpublishing.com
Biographical Sketches

Dr. Don Olcott, Jr. is the Executive Director, Division of Extended Programs, at Western Oregon University. Dr. Olcott is also President of Harmony James Associates, specializing in higher education and distance learning planning, development, and evaluation consulting. Don was the 2000 University Continuing Education Association’s (UCEA) Gayle B. Childs award recipient for exemplary long-term leadership, scholarship, and applied contributions to the field of continuing and distance learning. Dr. Olcott received the 1998 Charles Wedemeyer Outstanding Distance Learning Practitioner in North America award from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and The American Center for the Study of Distance Education.

Address: Division of Extended Programs
Western Oregon University
Monmouth, OR  97361
E-mail: olcottd@wou.edu
Phone:  593.838.8483
Fax:   503.838.8473

Dr. Donald E. Hanna is Professor of Educational Communications, University of Wisconsin-Extension. He has been an administrator and a faculty member at four U.S. land-grant universities. Dr. Hanna served as Chancellor of the University of Wisconsin-Extension (1993-1997) and previously was Director of Continuing Education and Public Service (1983-87) and Associate Vice-Provost for Extended University Services (1987-1993) at Washington State University and Professor of Adult and Continuing Education. An author of numerous articles, Hanna received, with co-author and editor Colin Latchem, the 2001 UCEA Wedemeyer Award for the best book in the field of distance learning for Leadership for 21st Century Learning.

Address: University of Wisconsin-Extension
432 Lake Street, Room 213
Madison, WI  53706
E-mail: dehanna@facstaff.wisc.edu
Phone:  608.265.5119

Dr. Mike Johnson has 25 years experience in Education as a teacher, principal, school superintendent, university professor and department chair, state level lobbyist, school board association executive, national technology consultant, foundation evaluator, researcher, and author. In the past two years he has served as on faculty of Pepperdine University in Los Angeles and the University of Alaska where he has been developing online mediated advanced degree programs and conducting research. Prior to returning to higher education, he served as Director of Strategic Initiatives, Western Region Higher Education, for Apple Computer in the 14 Western states for 4 years.

Address: University of Alaska Anchorage
3211 Providence Dr.
Anchorage, AK 99508
E-mail: mjohnson@uaa.alaska.edu or mjohnson@ravensfire.net
Phone:  907.230.6562

Copyright 2005 The Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System.
Duplication or redistribution prohibited without written permission of the author(s)
and The Annual Conference on Distance Teaching and Learning
http://www.uwex.edu/disted/conference/