

INDIAN RIVER COMMUNITY COLLEGE

# Sustainable Change - It's about the Culture

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## **Introduction**

Like other living systems, organizations and institutions of higher learning, tend to follow a traditional growth curve. This organizational life cycle begins at birth, continues to grow, ultimately developing into a mature organization. Once maturation is realized a conscious decision to either renew or decline must take place resulting in continued relevance or degeneration. This phenomenon wasn't always the rule. With less global competition and a slower-moving business environment, the norm of previous eras was stability and the ruling motto was: "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." Change occurred incrementally and infrequently (Kotter, 1996).

Leadership has also evolved. The evolution of leadership styles was a necessity to keep up with the competitive landscape, changing work ethic, and the transformation of our society through technology. In the early days perhaps one brain did all the thinking for the organization, but in the complex world we live in today successful leaders recognize the importance and benefit of drawing on the talents of everyone within the organization. Nothing in our world is fixed or static--organizations run by leaders who have not evolved will predictably stagnate or face their ultimate demise.

The same is true of educational institutions. The competitive global landscape, 21<sup>st</sup> century students, and learning environments transformed through technology, are just a few of the recent challenges facing educational leaders today. As Bolman and Deal (2003) point out, an organization's Size and Age affect structural shape and character. Over time, as the organization grows, pressures for efficiency and discipline spawn greater formalization and complexity (Greiner, 1972; Quinn & Cameron, 1983). If carried too far, this ultimately leads to the suffocating bureaucratic rigidity often seen in large, mature organizations (Bolman & Deal, 2003).

The findings of these early researchers became evident in the first year of the Indian River Community College *Jumping the Curve*© Cultural Enhancement Initiative. More than 40 years old, IRCC had grown markedly in size during the tenure of the previous administration and the early years of the current President. Increased enrollments, programs, personnel, facilities, land acquisition, and branch campus development, meant an unlimited view of what was possible on the horizon, but at the same time presented the risk of losing touch with employees and external stakeholders.

With that growth came unintended side effects resulting in unwritten rules, rigidity, and bureaucracy that hindered creativity and spontaneity. When the current administration took office in 1988, tough rules and a push for perfection in every area were necessary to “mop-up” some issues that had been the result of the previous era. Those early clean-up years were very successful resulting in perfect financial audits, top CLAST scores in Florida for more than 10 years, completion/graduation rates, placements, and other outstanding conventional performance indicators reflecting excellence through local, state, and national collegiate benchmarks. It was only much later that we realized those successes resulted in yet another batch of unintended side effects—effects that impacted morale, relationships and effective communication.

The early activities of *Jumping the Curve*© brought to light some uncomfortable realities. Several feedback mechanisms were employed to provide people with opportunities to express their thoughts and feelings about the college including a President’s Executive Council (PEC) Retreat, a college-wide Climate Survey, and several Town Hall Meetings with the President to name a few. The uncomfortable attempts at transparency during the Retreat, the unexpected comments and feedback in the Climate Survey, the poignant questions during the Town Hall Meetings, all displayed the dysfunction that existed below

the surface. Many people were not happy. They did not feel free to work, innovate or express themselves in ways that might go against the grain. Several unspoken norms became apparent such as: “only good news travels up, don’t rock the boat, don’t question the status quo because that’s just the way we do things around here.” Behaviors had become entrenched with time and due to size and complexity it was easier and more efficient to keep moving down the same path that had brought such positive conventional results. *Jumping the Curve*© brought an end to the non-questioning acceptance of the status quo, through controlled chaos and tremendous discomfort. People, especially administrators, were fearful and afraid that we would lose the quality of what we had established if we gave up the traditional curve.

#### *Core Process*

As Bolman and Deal (2003) point out, every organization has a central process or core technology (Dornbusch and Scott, 1975). Core technologies vary in predictability, complexity and effectiveness. Because structure must align with an organization’s core process, significant technical change implies structural change (Barley, 1990). At Indian River Community College *Student Success* is the Core Process and purpose for our existence. During the early days of the *Jumping the Curve*© initiative, analysis and review was conducted at every juncture following every activity, especially after those which were the most painful. Deep reflection and discussion enabled us to make sense of what had transpired and in time propelled us towards what was to come. The controlled chaos of these early activities unwrapped and clarified our values, prompting us to make changes, adopting new procedures that were congruent with what mattered most. Students and Student Success emerged repeatedly, sensitizing us to the importance of structuring our efforts around *Students*--our Core Process.

Looking back we now realize that those early uncomfortable activities were rolling up to create our Guiding Principles and subsequent *In Dedication to Students*, a declaration which now proudly stands as the preface of every IRCC publication. Our Guiding Principles emerged naturally following the review of these early activities. These Principles continue to resonate with employees and include: the “Will” to be the best; Challenge the Status Quo; Face the Brutal Facts; Surgically Evaluate; and React to the Results.

### *Environment*

Organizations with rapidly changing technologies or markets cope with a much higher degree of uncertainty. More specialized and diversified structures require more elaborate approaches. An uncertain environment demands a high level of flexibility and adaptability (Bolman & Deal, 2003). Traditional managers, steeped in the tradition of the top-down pyramid, struggle to adapt to strange new forms where chains of command are flat rather than multi-layered, and coordination arises mainly from a dense network of horizontal relationships (Chaize, 1992, Serieux, 1993). The value of the existing culture is always depreciating. Equilibrium is a precursor to death, the more stability the more satisfaction with the status quo.

Organizations and institutions of higher learning are living systems that follow nature’s laws of survival—to change, adjust, and grow is to survive, but to resist adaptation to a new world could easily result in peril. Community colleges and universities are faced with increasing competition from private, for-profit colleges as well as an increased number of virtual institutions that are ready to respond to students’ need for anytime, anyplace education and training. Globalization, enrollment growth pressures, changing demographics, and rapid-fire advances in technology are just a few of the challenges facing higher education today. If traditional institutions continue to do business as usual, student demands and expectations for convenience, access, and

responsiveness will dial them right out of the marketplace. Communities, students and the world are now different and the pressure from this ever-changing environment helped IRCC accept the need to look deeper into our culture as the place to begin. In response to the external environment, organizations often pile new projects onto an old culture and then wonder why the attempts at change don't work and aren't long-lasting. Change not anchored in cultural change, at the "bone marrow" level, becomes just another "project." Facing the brutal facts drove our college to the next level, changing the structure from one of "complacency" to one of "creativity and inquiry" as was so aptly described by our own faculty along the way.

#### *Nature of the Workforce*

Bolman and Deal (2003), point out that human resource requirements have changed dramatically in recent decades. Many lower-level jobs now require a high level of skill. A better-educated workforce expects and often demands more discretion in daily work routines. Like changes in technology, changes in the workforce put pressure on traditional hierarchical forms. As a result, dramatically different structural forms are emerging.

The feedback gleaned from the Climate Survey and Town Hall Meetings turned the organization upside down. Responses poured in from the bottom-up and were difficult for administrators to believe. For years "only good news must have been traveling up" because what came out was unexpected. Those early activities made it evident that employees in the trenches needed more opportunities to be heard, have input, and be involved in workgroups and committees that were effecting change in a meaningful way within the institution. The hierarchy remained for structural accountability and ease of operation, but chain of command was replaced with chain of communication. Other new ways of thinking emerged:

FROM:

TO:

Change and new ideas originating at senior levels and recognized

Change and new ideas being rewarded

Directed Environment

Mentoring Environment

Values as Words

Values as Actions

Formalities

Informalities

Institutionalizing

Personalizing

Chain of Command

Chain of Communication

Making changes requires approval

Freedom to make changes

Rather be safe than sorry

Be questioning rather than invisible

Mistakes are avoided in order to conform learning

Mistakes are a normal and part of

Accept what's coming down the pike

Challenge the Status Quo

Everything is forbidden unless it is allowed forbidden

Everything is allowed unless it is

Over the past six years, this opening up of the college has removed barriers resulting in many positive changes college-wide.

### *The People*

Employees are hired to do a job but always bring social and personal needs with them to the workplace. Moreover, they spend much of their time interacting with others, one on one and in groups. Both individual satisfaction and organizational effectiveness depend heavily on the quality of interpersonal relationships (Bolman & Deal, 2003). These authors go on to explain that the Human Resource Frame is built on these core assumptions:

- Organizations exist to serve human needs rather than the reverse

- People and organizations need each other. Organizations need ideas, energy, and talent; people need careers, salaries, and opportunities
- When the fit between individual and system is poor, one or both suffer. Individuals are exploited or exploit the organization—or both become victims
- A good fit benefits both. Individuals find meaningful and satisfying work, and organizations get the talent and energy they need to succeed.

Douglas McGregor (1960) argued that most managers harbor “Theory X” assumptions, believing that subordinates are passive and lazy, have little ambition, prefer to be led, and resist change. In his view most conventional management practices, have been built on either hard or soft versions of Theory X. The hard version emphasizes coercion, tight controls, threats, and punishments resulting in low productivity, antagonism, militant unions, and subtle sabotage (Boleman & Deal, 2003). The soft version is to try and avoid conflict and satisfy everyone’s needs, resulting in superficial harmony with undercurrents of apathy and indifference. Both versions are self-fulfilling in that if you treat people as if they’re lazy and in need of direction they will conform to your expectations. McGregor (1960) also advocated another view, which he called “Theory Y.” This theory purported that the more managers align organizational requirements with employee self-interest the more self-directed employees will be.

People are the single most important resource within an organization. Above all else, *Jumping the Curve*© is about enhancing the relationships between people—employee to employee, employee to student, employee to community and all variations in between. When people are appreciated for their strengths, talents, input and feedback they in turn become more empowered, productive,

and valuable to the organization. This creates a win-win for the employee and for the organization.

At Indian River Community College many employees spend their entire professional lives working here, from their early 20's through retirement. This demonstrates employee satisfaction with pay, benefits, security, and perhaps most of all, working conditions. At the same time we discovered that long-term employment creates two problems: written and unwritten rules become habits and perceptions become realities; and secondly we work so long together that if we have a problem and solved it successfully 10 years ago, chances are we'll approach that same problem in today's society the same way--but this time it will most likely fail. Working together for a long period of time and experiencing success together by doing things a certain way doesn't guarantee the same results today. Society and students have changed and what worked years ago may no longer be relevant.

McGregor's Theory X and Theory Y also resonates based on our experiences. The soft version of Theory X was discovered to be true through the early activities of *Jumping the Curve*®. A population of employees worked hard to overtly avoid conflict, act happy, and satisfy everyone's needs, when in reality there existed undercurrents of apathy, indifference, and unhappiness resulting in superficial harmony. When given the opportunity to express genuine feelings, with an outside source, in a safe, confidential environment, without fear of reprimand, the phony "all is well" gave way to deep-rooted frustrations and conflict, unknown to and in some cases created by the powers-at-be. Closer inspection revealed these side-effects had been created during the early years when tight controls were necessary to move the organization onto a healthier track. Theory Y also proved to be true. When the cultural changes were well underway formal opportunities to vent and question resulted in little response. Ongoing, informal, open communication was

obviously eliminating some of the pent-up frustrations and conflict that had previously existed. Issues were being dealt with as they emerged, and this meant new behaviors were beginning to take root and impact the culture of the college.

Boleman and Deal (2003) question: “Why do so many organizations fail to implement the noble human resource practices they espouse?” One problem, they point out is managerial reluctance and ambivalence. Another is the fact that they change the relationships between superiors and subordinates, which many people in roles of authority find disquieting, and yet another barrier is that implementation requires skill and understanding often in short supply. In every organization people are busy with their daily routines. Adding a cultural enhancement initiative to a busy schedule is not something one would expect from a CEO who had been at the helm more than 14 years, when we started this (now more than 19). Reluctance would be natural given the fact that in Florida, feedback from Climate Surveys are on record as being the cause, of at least two community college presidents being removed from their positions. Even with the risk involved, the desire to take an institution from “Good to Great” drove the President to become immersed in a new arena, where feelings began to take precedent over facts, figures, results, and the bottom line. Committed to learning this new language and understanding employees in a deeper way, this initiative was very difficult, trying and at times down right painful—but failure was not an option. The President was clear--we would prevail and *Jump the Curve*©

At the same time this cultural enhancement initiative was taking root, IRCC was implementing a brand new Employee Development Program (EDP). A program that would be in place to provide resources, training and development to assist all employees become the best they can be. This program evolved to include targeted offerings for all employee groups and today

includes development opportunities that address the dynamic relationship between superiors and subordinates, and the skill and understanding needed to be effective leaders.

In summary, after six years of staying the course we've learned that sustainable change is about the culture. While it took at least four years for this cultural enhancement initiative to begin to take root it is now evident--both internally and also through the incredible third-party validation that has been realized these past two years-- that the pain and effort has been worth it. We have *Jumped the Curve* and we are now ascending a new curve!

While this summary has attempted to provide an overview of the Cultural Enhancement Initiative underway at Indian River Community College, we are confident that those who attend our session at the 2007 Chair Academy will better understand in what context all of this has occurred. We hope attendees will walk away thinking deeply about the culture which exists within their own organizations and go back inspired to take it to the next level.

## References

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