

In Search of Abundance: Strategic Tools for the New Normal

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As community colleges have taken their place in the national spotlight during this most recent recession, a “new normal” context has emerged for this sector of higher education. Challenged by unprecedented funding constraints and enrollment challenges at both ends of the spectrum, the “new normal” is exacerbated by accelerating technological changes and increasing calls for accountability from a wide variety of constituents. This changing context requires new approaches to leadership – which can only come from a new set of tools that include strategic thinking, design thinking, and most importantly, a fundamental change in organizational mindset from scarcity to abundance.

The “New Normal”

The economic recession combined with rising healthcare costs and increasing retirement obligations has created enormous funding constraints for community colleges in nearly every state. Enrollment increases associated with the recession sustained some community college budgets in recent years, but enrollment shifts continue to increase the intensity of resource challenges. However, the peak of the recession created an enrollment bubble that cannot be sustained in many states – creating even more financial challenges for community colleges.

As the “new normal” takes shape, technology continues to be a major force in changing programs and services. From mobile devices on campus to massive open online courses (MOOCs), our colleges are quickly taking forms that were thought to be decades away just a few short years ago. And just as our world has become more complex and nuanced, calls for

accountability have dramatically increased. The completion agenda has made its way to Washington D.C. and raised new questions about financial aid default rates, seamless university transfer, secondary curriculum alignment and student preparation along with a bright spotlight on the effectiveness of developmental education.

The New Workplace

The “new normal” evident in the external context for community colleges also has a mosaic of issues surfacing within the internal context of our campuses. More than ever, we have the dynamics of four generations in the workplace. With multiple staff who have worked at colleges longer than many of their employees have been alive coupled with senior employees delaying retirement due to the economy, a cultural mandate to facilitate respect and civility for the generational divide inherently surfaces in various forms.

The stress of life in the 21st century is carried into the workplace on a daily basis. Older staff living life as the sandwich generation – taking care of their parents; adult children; or sometimes their grandchildren adds a burden to be carried while at work. Faculty and staff with young children managing logistical miracles on a daily basis to navigate overscheduled after-school activities for their children demand more flexibility in their workday while they send periodic texts so no child is left behind.

All of these stressors and more are reshaping the workplace in every industry and equally so on community college campuses. While the economic recession has increased the focus on salary and benefits for many employees, the need for a better work/life balance, different forms of recognition, and a positive supporting workplace. John Zogby (2008) supports these notions through his polling research and concluded that a fundamental societal shift is underway. The

economic changes of the last twenty years have changed the mindset of many Americans from being valued for what they have in material things to being valued for who they are as individuals and living life with a greater purpose in mind. The greater purpose of community colleges provides a meaningful foundation upon which to build these modern workplaces to serve our communities and thrive in the “new normal.”

New Leadership

The linkage between organizational success and effective leadership has been noted in the literature (Baker, 1992). Over the last two decades, the case for emotionally intelligent leaders is increasingly relevant. Daniel Goleman posits that a new yardstick is being used for effective leaders. “The new measure takes for granted having enough intellectual ability and technical know-how to do our jobs; it focuses instead on personal qualities, such as initiative and empathy, adaptability and persuasiveness” (p.1, 1991). Leaders who do not authentically engage with others may “...be respected or feared, but they will not be willingly followed. Yet this attribute, too, requires its opposite, a capacity for aloneness, because leaders have to be out in front. It is not always possible to share one’s worries with anyone else. Few will thank the leader when things go right, but many will blame the leader if things go wrong. Great leaders have to walk alone from time to time. They also have to live vicariously, deriving their satisfaction from the successes of others and giving those others the recognition that they themselves are often denied.” “Great leaders are bred from great causes, but leaders, at their best, also breed great causes.” (Handy, p. 9)

Leadership in the “new normal” must be more strategic, focused, and intentional – adhering to the primary characteristics that others are seeking in their leaders. As research by

Kouzes and Posner (1995) identified, the four most important characteristics people want their leaders to possess are honesty, a forward-thinking mindset, competence, and inspiration. These core characteristics, along with the dimensions of 5th level leaders (Collins, 2001), including humility and a driving sense of vision, must be combined with emotional intelligence and some new tools that allow for new thinking in the “new normal.”

From Scarcity to Abundance

Perhaps most importantly, leaders of the “new normal,” and their followers, will benefit from an important paradigm shift away from “scarcity” thinking and toward “abundance” thinking.

What does this mean?

The rapid rate of change in the “new normal,” coupled with diminishing resources and demands to do “more with less” can lead to ways of thinking, behaving, and leading that are rooted in negativity, selfishness, and hopelessness. Looking around and seeing only problems and problematic people; hoarding information, data, and resources; competing; operating in a transactional, give-me-mine-and-I’ll-give-you-yours way; and taking all the credit and distributing all the blame are all examples of “scarcity” thinking.

This kind of thinking leads to behaviors, decisions, and organizational cultures that focus on short-term survival, and lurching from one problem to the next without a larger, shared vision for what lies ahead.

Looking around and seeing possibilities and the strengths in people; sharing resources, information, and data; collaborating; operating in a transformational, how-can-I-help-you-grow-and-our-organization-thrive way; sharing all of the credit and seeking to learn from mistakes and do better next time are examples of “abundance” thinking.

This kind of thinking leads to behaviors, decisions, and organizational cultures that create shared vision for the future *first*, using processes like strategic thinking and appreciative inquiry; then work toward that future *together*, with tools like design thinking and process management.

Thriving in the New Normal

While an abundance mindset is imperative to embrace these processes and tools, it also surfaces opportunities that present challenges with regard to setting priorities and keeping your team focused. Leveraging new tools and processes will provide new levels of return on effort and unexpected use of resources that will help colleges thrive in the “new normal.”

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