

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This dissertation reports the results of a project spanning ten months, investigating the management of change in an university academic (engineering) department. Specifically it focuses on promoting readiness to change, within a particularly unsettling period and changing environment.

The project as initially conceived, sought to use the implementation of a 'significant change' (i.e., requiring staff to adopt new work practise/ relationships with 'clients'), as the vehicle for researching the change process and its management. This change activity, was the introduction of a continuing professional development ethos for 'clients' (students). Though the necessity of this change, was agreed with the authors manager and reflected national developments, significant restructuring requirements (see 1.3: giving rise to serious staff uncertainty), necessitated the development of a basic level, change culture. The project was thus realigned, part way through, with the author's managers requirements. The concept of promoting readiness for change was conceived (subsequently found suggested elsewhere), and investigated. Prior to completing this programme, further significant organisational structural changes were suddenly announced, which threatened the identity of the department and led to changes in the last stage of the project plan. Significant experience has though been gained and is reported. Results show that a climate of readiness for change has been achieved (despite significant external influences leading to uncertainty and job insecurity).

1.2 Background

The School of Electrical and Electronic Engineering is a department within the Faculty of Technology, in the University of Plymouth. As one of the largest Faculties it comprises approximately 131 (139) academic staff, 88 (92) support staff, 2542 (2400) full-time equivalent students, where figures are for 1996, and 1993 in brackets. The department provides a range of courses from foundation to masters level. It also undertakes significant research (six staff are supported fully by research income), research training, consultancy and some short course provision. The department has partially experienced the national trend of declining student numbers for engineering (students provide the majority of its income) and along with the declining unit of resource, has been forced to reduced its staffing by 40% in the last 10 years i.e., departments have had to increase their student numbers to stay solvent. Comparisons with other departments in the Faculty are hard to make, as engineering provision is more costly (i.e., requiring specialist laboratories and equipment, smaller group teaching etc.) than for e.g., computing and mathematics provision. With the falling unit of resource. the University has made attempts to cushion engineering, but trends now lead to an inevitable restructuring for efficiency gains (i.e. a target of a reduction of 16% in payroll has been suggested).

The department has a history of poor internal collaboration (except in research). This may be in part due to a previous manager who operated a 'divide and rule' management

approach. The department also experiences difficulties in change, from Faculty and university level restrictions, which are exacerbated by poor communications. As with many university academics, it is the constant pressure for change from external sources, that limits the space, time and inclination for internally managed change to take place. Specific recent examples of change requirements, have come from:-

- NAGCELL Report: life long learning and development of partnership arrangements
- The Dearing Report on HE
- The Booth Report: professional accreditation for HE teaching
- SARTOR: increasing entry requirements
- Teaching Quality Assessments
- Introduction of student fees,
- Research Assessment Exercise (RAE)
- Information technology developments

The outcome of these influences, is for academic staff to have a high resistance to change. In particular, strong evidence of this has been in the department's attempts to reduce the number of teaching modules and reduce the subject content. Staff have openly resisted this, reporting that they are maintaining their teaching specialism in modules, for job security i.e. their fear is that if specific areas of teaching are 'diluted' or, removed, then their services will not be required.

1.3 The Changing Environment

For approximately three years, staff meetings have been held explaining the crisis with funding, stemming from under recruitment of students. The option of redundancies has been regularly suggested.

In a September 1997, the Dean unexpectedly announced (even to the department's manager) that the department would have to merge with another department due to financial pressure. The solution that was to be imposed, originally with one week's notice for comment. Strong feeling was expressed as to the disadvantages of this plan, and other solutions suggested. An example of this was the author's manager circulating across the whole University, his analysis and plans. A further development from this was the manager proposing a departmental Awayday to discuss change. This gave an opportunity for a research programme.

During the course of this programme, a number of other staff meetings have been held on the topic of restructuring (and the veiled suggestion of redundancies). These have lead to frustration amongst the staff and annoyance at the poor level of communication and lack of participation in the development of these events. Just prior to the conclusion of the research programme, the restructuring was given new impetus by the Vice Chancellor. The present recommendation sees a different structure and new managerial responsibilities, established on the department.

This time of uncertainty was the environment in which this change project operated.

1.4 Aims

The aim of this dissertation is to:

- To assess the readiness for organisational change
- To understand the process of change within an academic department
- To investigate how this knowledge may be used to promote readiness for change
- To document experience gained in promoting change, which may be of use for other managers in HE undertaking change programmes

1.5 Methodology

The following methodology briefly describes the approach that has been adopted to address the above aim:

A preliminary literature review was undertaken. Use was made of Libertas, the www, and CD Rom databases (Inform and at Exmouth the British Education Index), to identify key references. Few case studies of managing change in HE were found (particularly at departmental level). Some 'prescription' material was found for use at University level (see Chapter 2.4).

A project which impacts on the department's culture, was planned and initiated i.e. the development of the Foundation Professional Development Scheme (FPD)(see Chapter 4.2). The aim was to gain understanding i.e., 'learning by doing' within the departments present system, and monitor the response.

With the opportunity presented by the manager proposing a departmental Awayday, the project was realigned to investigate promoting change. An important aspect of this was that the FPD scheme appeared stalled as a reaction from staff to the restructuring uncertainties.

To investigate the department's readiness for change, a questionnaire was designed and run. To start the change process an Awayday was organised with a theme 'Developing a Blueprint for Survival'. The outcome of the Awayday was that a number of working parties were set up to address different areas in the department for change, and then to report back to an Awayday four months later.

The working parties formed an ideal basis for focus groups, from which to gain qualitative data, and to investigate ways of further stimulating change.

Quantitative data analysis in the form of benchmarking the questionnaire results from different stages in the change programme, was envisaged, but the reported problems made the final stage untenable. A comparison with the qualitative data was undertaken.

The surveys validity was strengthened, by an external assessment.