

## Chapter 6. Conclusions and Recommendations

### 6.1 Background

Change and uncertainty have been endemic in Higher Education(HE) during the last ten years. During the last five years, this has been accentuated in the Faculty of Technology by the constant reference to deficit from falling student numbers. As one member of staff who started here two years ago reported ‘every staff meeting I have attended, has started with doom and gloom and the implication of redundancies’. Against this backdrop and the huge externally driven changes in HE i.e., teaching audits, introduction of quality systems, changing teaching methods, IT developments, research quality assessment, and altering patterns of student attendance, study and preparedness, it is hardly surprising that introducing further change is problematic. The management of change is therefore a critical skill for a manager in HE, if the organisation is to succeed. The promotion of readiness to change must be seen as a necessary precursor or first stage, in the process of managing change.

That it is possible to manage change in an uncertain environment, is demonstrated by this change programme. Central was aligning the programme to the managers objectives, even though the approach taken was considered innovative (and so risky i.e., had not been attempted here before).

Fundamental to this programme has been the development of a survey to track attitudes to ‘the readiness to change’. In the survey three contributory attitudinal factors are identified:

- Personal readiness to change
- Personal motivation (i.e., allowing for change)
- The organisations capacity for change

Confidence as to the validity of the survey has been gained by a number of methods:-

- an external trial and assessment by the manager of another University’s engineering department
- personal assessment
- comparison of results with focus group meeting perceptions

A six stage programme (Chapter 4.3) to promote change has been designed and implemented. The survey results, supported by staff and management comments, show that the programme has been a great success e.g., a direct question asked as to whether the Awayday/ working party process had been a success, resulted in a ‘very strongly agree’ score. The managers comments referring to the first Awayday included ‘the first was a huge success, and probably the best Awayday ever in the school’. With reference to the second Awayday ‘I thought the Awayday went very well (in spite of all the recent distractions)’. As to whether fundamental attitudes have changed, is hard to gauge, as due to circumstances the full survey could not be used at the end of the programme. Evidence does though point to a strong attitude change. Whether this gets translated into a fundamental change (i.e., change from ‘espoused’

to 'theory in practice'), depends on continuing to promote change, so that staff 'learn by experience' and so update their 'frames of reference'.

As part of the programme, education on the concept and practicalities of change, have been explored. Also two models have been adapted to enhance the 'promotion' aspect of readiness for change. The first model has been used to audit and strengthen the programme at a point in time and the second has been used with staff to explore a range of options for change on a particular target area (i.e., opening up staff to more radical change possibilities).

The development and use of a web based questionnaire has shown its great potential for further research. Consideration will now be given for more extensive trialling. A process which includes identifying the benefit of the results to the local manager, would need to be developed.

This programme of work has aimed to share practical experience gained in the area of promoting readiness to change in an academic department and is based on a successful outcome.

## **6.2 Conclusions on Promoting Readiness to Change**

The following conclusions are based on the actual practise/ approach taken in the change programme and are recommended in the light of experience gained. These must be adapted for the culture of the target organisation.

### **Planning**

Change is a cyclic activity, with staff exposed to a cycle of learning. It is therefore important not to go too far at once, but build on successful small steps to increase confidence and commitment to the process. Individual change projects (i.e., introducing fundamental change: e.g., effecting staff working practices) may not succeed, as has been experienced with the FPD scheme (Chapter 4.2). The development of a culture of change, of which the project becomes part, is recommended. Use a systematic approach/ process, with agreed time scale, (communicated to all staff) and to provide a clear change focus, use a theme/ strong message. It is important to agree with staff, agenda and objectives, prior to meeting (change event). This agreement (in principle) provides focus and reduces tension/ dissension at the meeting. The location and duration of meetings is important, as this leads to different levels of thinking, participation and involvement e.g., a committee meeting in the department, is most likely to focus on incremental change, whereas an Awayday may be staged to consider radical change etc.

## **Participation and Communication**

Constant communication is necessary and helps allay fears and concerns. Fears need to be handled directly by acknowledging them and placing them in context, to reduce their impact. Preparation and dissemination of a clear programme also reduces concerns. The use of electronic distribution lists and email, simplifies this communication and ensures that no member of staff can say they were not kept informed. Of importance is allowing staff to participate in the developments. This can be undertaken by ensuring that time is allowed for staff to contribute to e.g., the agenda, of proposed 'activities'. Participation can also be ensured by facilitating structured events which involve all staff to contribute (e.g., breaking into small groups which have to report back). This worked extremely well at the January Awayday (4.5), so much so that tight time control had to be followed. Finally, formal acknowledgement of all participation ensured that staff felt valued.

## **Running Change Events**

Difficult staff have to be handled and an effective technique was developed (see Chapter 4.5). The opportunity for comment and agreement in principle, is advised on recommendations developed at meetings (NB. staff appear happy to leave the final prioritisation, decision and implementation of recommendations, to management). It is important not to rush the concluding session; it is better to leave more time and leave early, if the time is not utilised. Also openly record (using a flip chart) comments etc., which should then be circulated later (unabridged).

## **Assessment and Feedback**

The development of the survey would have been enhanced by undertaking a few focus groups in the development phase of the questionnaire to identify significant local factors. Attaching the questionnaire to the meeting outcomes, was felt to focus academic's thoughts to the meeting and lead to more considered replies. This material should be circulated within a few days of the event to maintain confidence and involvement. The communication of the result of questionnaires is important as there is an expectation created by running a survey. Difficulties were encountered here (4.4.1) and in the light of experience the following recommendation made:- Carefully consideration must be given to reporting the results of actual questions. Reporting trends; which may be in the form of percentage change from previous results (not absolute values), may prove less controversial and focus attention to areas that the manager wishes to emphasis.

## **Support**

Education on change is necessary e.g., ones reactions to it and how these reactions are normal etc. Concern was felt in undertaking this, but utilising practical examples was found to stimulate much interest. The area of risk and the positive side of learning from failure (i.e., being prepared to support failure) was felt an essential part of change to be discussed. An emphasis on 'its the trying that is important' was given and supported by providing information from other organisations i.e., their experiences etc., to place the local situation in context.

## 6.3 Recommendations for the Organisation

The results from the survey and focus groups suggest a number of changes that should be addressed, to further enhance the change readiness and to successfully continue the change effort. Central to these are issues that can be progressed internally (cf. pay and Faculty issues) i.e., regarding: communication, team working/ collaboration, recognition (reward), vision, objectives and goals.

### Enabling structures

- Vision: the underlying vision (and associated objectives/ implementation plans), need urgently addressing. At present with no shared picture of the future, staff feel as though they are working in a vacuum and find it difficult to make decisions and prioritise etc.
- Job insecurity, fear and stress: the Faculty has been paralysed by fears of redundancy and change. Three years of suggesting redundancies are around the corner and pressures for radical job changes (implementing quality systems, being a 'learning facilitator' rather than a lecturer, IT developments etc.) has led to serious uncertainty/ stress. The latest 'innovation' where 20% of all modules should be delivered telematically, only further accentuates the pace of change for which staff development is not keeping pace. These changes and pressures need to be put into perspective e.g., job definition, time scales, likely impact, what staff can do about it etc. Job counselling (Appendix A20) is recommended (as used by other industries experiencing rapid change), perhaps through a formalised mentoring system for all staff. This should be kept separate from the appraisal process, which must be more closely aligned to staff development.
- Set appraisal objectives linked to change

### Participation

- Communication: the attitudes to communication (i.e., includes feeling part of department etc.) have increased positively and dramatically by staff who have attended both Awaydays. It is recommended that a process where by a weekly email is distributed (with contributions from all staff) is adopted. Management support should be by example and praise of contributors
- Deep concern is felt for the few staff who have not been invited to participate (attend Awaydays). At present an included and excluded culture is developing, to the detriment of the department. Future events must acknowledge that all staff are invited but that some fair mechanism will be found to rotate attendance for staff who have to man facilities.

### Reward

- Team building and reward: an annual Faculty award is recommended for the most outstanding team (teaching, research or other area e.g., course promotion). Consideration should be given to adoption by the University (e.g., forming part of one of the Board of Governors dinners)
- Department management structure needs to be strengthened; limitations are now evident with the implementation stage of the recommendations
- Development of management group needed, to be able to handle radical change cf. incremental change and have a more strategic view

### **Development**

- Change Programme: Build on the achievements to produce an ‘I/we can do’ and ‘I’m part of this’ etc. culture.
- Individual recognition: this needs to be strengthened by a number of means, but includes the recognition being widely disseminated
- Information: provision of information on changes happening elsewhere, is necessary to keep a perspective, and to open staff eyes as to what is possible
- Survey results: staff should discuss the survey results with the intention of seeing what can be improved/ changed.
- The change process/ programme needs to be nurtured with future events advertised (this includes a review of how the implementation of the recommendations has worked out in practise).