UNDERSTANDING BEHAVIORS AT ACADEMIC ORGANIZATIONS

Sabbagh, Haidar,

Prince Mohammad Bin Fahd University, Al Khobar, KSA

ABSTRACT

The way we respond to organization and management issues is determined by the organization culture, structure, environment and context. Most people work in organizations between two extremes: Either given autonomy and trusted to deliver, or continuously monitored through the command and control system with all tasks specified. It is important to have the right model of organization behavior. An emphasis should be placed on connecting with employees. Their ideas and knowledge should be valued. Listening to their needs will repay itself and will drive them towards responsible behavior. We present here insights about higher education organizations in the Middle East, by presenting snapshots from personal experiences and observations as mini-cases to describe the behavioral patterns that arise in this academic and administrative context. We describe the dynamics of the different groups at universities and try to see how universities provide good examples of complex adaptive systems.

Introduction

Academic organizations have not been well studied using traditional theories. Instead of viewing such organizations as mechanistic systems, it would be better to realize that they are one good example of complex adaptive systems (Crabtree et al., 2001; Stake, 1995; Yin, 1994). In the traditional theories, organizations are viewed as machines. If one part is not working properly, it can be replaced and the organization or machine will work smoothly (Morgan, 1986). The one-size-fits-all perspective of the machine model failed to describe organizational dynamics (Stacey, 1996). Instead, the complexity theory offers tools where the system is understood as an integrated whole, by looking at the patterns of relationships and interactions among its agents and attributing them to self-organization (Merry, 1995; Stacey, 1996).

Discussion

When another student came to ask about his evaluation and then left my office, I was still dealing with a pile of exam papers and evaluation forms in front of me. I never wondered before whether it was all worth it. Maybe because in my earlier academic career at previous universities, I was enjoying thinking, discussing and answering good questions. Now, as an assistant professor at this American University, in the remote Kurdistan Region, the hours seemed longer. I started thinking about the life-work balance issues. I realized that I had to pursue a new different step soon. My faculty reviewing process went well and my contract got renewed. If we can talk in terms of Maslow's hierarchy (Maslow, 1943) and the FAB Sweets case (Fab Sweets Case Analysis, 2013), going into a new direction was just a question of self-actualization and not about making a living. My research work was going well, and a new conference paper was submitted for publication at a summer conference in Greece. But still I was confused about decisions. However, somehow I realized that once I would be outside the system, I could see better how I was doing inside the academic system.

Earlier in my career, as researcher at McGill University, and then an adjunct Professor at many universities, it was about acquiring good experience in the first place. Then as Dean of Science at a small growing university in Tripoli in Lebanon, the paycheck was small but I never thought about the money. Again, I was still acquiring experiences at different organizations. So, it was not that any of the universities where I worked did not value what I was doing with my time as highly as I was expecting. It was becoming more like trying to seek a new self-awareness. The size did not matter when it came to the structure of the university and what and how things should be done. As a new Dean of Science, I realized it is my responsibility to re-structure the whole science department. Two years later, the job was done, and I needed a new challenge. When I was driving back to Beirut from Tripoli, I was still in the mood of the pleasant farewell party. But later, I became aware of my mixed feelings of confusion and satisfaction. I just sat on the balcony too exhausted to move after driving all that distance. The view of the city from above on the 21st floor apartment was just what I needed. I could then get a global picture of the situation, and I was able then to reframe and get to the conclusion. Two years were enough experience. Time to move on.

Two years earlier, when I first joined as Dean of Science, I started forming my "formal group" of instructors and professors, by hiring new staff and preparing the course offerings and descriptions. In order to be a good director, during the "storming" stage (Hooks, 2000; Rose, 2000; Newman, 2000; Schermerhorn, 2012), I would rely on strong effective communication both ways and smooth flow of information. Sometimes, conflicts used to arise and some faculty members showed resistance to change (if approached because of some students complaints, for example). I would intervene to encourage, provide support and clarify, and help to resolve any issues. During the "norming" stage, I would make sure all faculty members were working effectively on their individual duties and they were aware of their responsibilities. At the

"performance" stage, we expected the emergence of a well performing and well-functioning organized group. I have had to guide the staff members sometimes when it comes to policies, course content or students complaints. I have had to take over sometimes and resolve issues mainly about grading. We would hold regular individual meetings and regular faculty meetings. Finally, we would conclude with the "adjourning" stage when their work was finished, i.e. when grades were submitted.

Actually, in general, as individuals develop a group, emergence of division of labor will follow. In addition, development of cohesive groups can influence the effectiveness of organizations (Gilley, 2006; Robbins and Coulter, 2007; Robbins and Judge, 2009; Tuckman and Jensen, 2010). One simple example could be the group of instructors and professors teaching calculus I in multiple sections. The exams should be common ones and all professors contribute to the exam questions. The course coordinator would be in charge of arranging everything, finalizing the exam version, booking the exam hall, and scheduling meetings. The roles of the other professors will vary as needed and as agreed.

Another case of a group dynamics was the case which I have experienced at that American University in the Kurdistan region. As a Math group, we used to have regular meetings and email updates. Our main problem was the lack of a good leadership and efficient communication, especially when we were facing decision making about courses, placement exams and textbooks. Basically, the flow of information was not very efficient.

The dynamics at such academic organizations are complex due to continuous interactions. As director of science at an academic "organization", I realized that when it comes to being in charge of hiring new faculty members and instructors, a lot was involved. There is a tricky process that must be followed, and several people from the HR and the office of the president were involved. This task cannot be simply handled by one person. At many occasions, I had to ignore favoritism and prejudices. Some reforms were needed. And it was one of those early days, just after I started exploring the culture of the "organization". The university president was a previous military officer, but luckily he was easy to deal with. He would not interfere in the hiring process. He would trust my careful selection. One instructor with engineering background used to teach Mathematics courses in the previous years. I took "his two courses" and assigned them to Mathematicians. It turned out he was one of the president relatives, so I got called for a brief meeting just to solve that issue. There was no problem for me to explain my point of view and my decision to send this instructor to the Faculty of Engineering, where my colleague, the Dean of Engineering would give him two courses there. The president saw how confident I was in my decision, and he would not try to interfere anymore after that incident.

Actually, even though the functions at universities involve a lot of coordination and group decisions, the academic side could be predominated by the person culture to some extent. People like professors would prefer this type of culture, but they would find themselves working in more

orthodox organizations (OpenLearn: free learning from The Open University, 2011). Their power is derived from their position. They usually enjoy this power that comes with the profession and they are not easy to manage because they may not allow anyone to be in a position to exercise expert power on them. Relationships with colleagues and group norms would not influence them, and they usually have their own preferences. For them, there is no coercive power but only personal power. In our case, that was the case, maybe because the duties were individually assigned very clearly even for administrative staff, and the university was a small one. However, in academic jobs at larger universities, it is likely to encounter the same typical problems encountered elsewhere (Smith, 1976; Welte and Kunishima, 2004; Worchel et al., 1998; Zajonc, 1965). Also, group work is needed sometimes, such as during common exams for courses with multiple sections. All faculty members get involved, decide, contribute and collaborate. In my experience, there was usually no worries that some instructors would contribute less than others. There was always effort and role distributions, and no social loafing.

To allow for such purposeful collaboration and interaction of faculty members, instructors and all staff in general, good communication and clear norms were needed. Efficient communication and acceptable behavior at the university require thatstaff adapt their register when they relate to different people. In fact, throughout my academic career, I became more restricted in the way I dress up and the way I speak, more restricted in my habits and behavior. There is a unique culture for each institution or university or organization, and we would not be able to describe it easily, but we could tell when we encounter it. Within any university, this culture is formed by the routine behaviors, values, ideas, beliefs, philosophy and culture of employees and students. Actually, education also allows students to develop the skills to solve any problem by learning how to think, communicate and act within some rules and boundaries. That is, it transmits to students the accumulated experience of social living.

During my stay in Kurdistan, there were also some cultural issues to be respected. Being from the Middle East myself, it was easy for me to see those issues, in a reserved and conservative society compared to the cosmopolitan and liberated life in Beirut and at the American University of Beirut, where I came from. Students seemed more reluctant to express their views, provide their arguments, and develop critical thinking. They were always encouraged by all professors to ask questions and analyze in order to acquire some new ideas and understandings of the worldview. It was a good example of a closed conservative society, maybe due to the oppression they have suffered during the days of Saddam, as one local friend told me. On the other hand, I admired their solidarity and strong sense of community. It was a good example of groupthink. At many occasions, we would find all Kurdish students with one and only one opinion about any issue. I have had some students coming to my office and telling me that they had to conform or comply, for instance when they requested postponing an exam or when they wanted to complain about some issue. Such pattern was less obvious among Arab students who had more independent way of thinking. I remember how all Kurd students

protested one day just because the name of the University was changed. They spent a lot of time that day trying to explain how much it means for them to be within their own groups under a relevant name that refers to their own community.

When it comes to management and leadership, my approach as Dean of Science was an open-minded approach, by looking at any situation from different perspectives. In terms of the framing principles as described by Bolman and Deal (Bolman and Deal, 1997), I would be the Human Resources type. I would be approachable by instructors and professors at any times and listen to their problems. I would provide guidance and help to staff and students. Thus, it was interesting for me to see what Bolman and Deal mentioned in their book, that the best approach in management would be the holistic approach and one would have to look at situations from the different frames. They also mentioned that the best management needs a commitment not only to excellence but also to flexibility.

The management approach that we would follow at the university would not usually be similar to Taylor's Scientific Management principles (Taylor, 1996). Social systems such as universities can be unpredictable. Rationality and impersonal relationships do not work well in such complex social organizations. Due to their complexity, complex systems and in particular complex social organizations should be viewed from multiple perspectives as there is no best way to view the system (Bolman and Deal, 1997; Pfeffer, 1996).

We used to have frequent board and faculty meetings. Faculty and administrative employees used to feel engaged as they participated in the decision making by expressing their view without any pressure. It was more like people who knew best were consulted and asked. The university president used to provide a lot of support in a friendly atmosphere. Despite his military background, the president, who had a PhD in education, was flexible and approachable. He would not hesitate to use his sense of humor and listen to what everyone had to say. Information was always shared through memos and emails, and at frequent meetings. Communication was smooth and easy. Administrative staff and faculty members seemed empowered and satisfied with their jobs. That could be seen through their positive attitudes. According to Locke (Locke, 1976), job satisfaction of individuals is expressed by pleasurable positive attitudes.

Still, some employees were having no job satisfaction mainly due to low payment. But, the staff were empowered and given autonomy, and everyone was appreciated and praised. So, we can see that the workers at the university, including myself, were motivated not only by the money, but also it had to do with the feeling of accomplishment and the need for recognition, which is in agreement with Maslow's hierarchy of needs. There was some recognition, and rewards were offered from time to time, for example, by doing birthday parties and farewell or recognition parties for serving the University for a long time. If we would also apply Frederick Herzberg's strategy (Herzberg et al., 1993), then we see that employees were given full control over their work and there was no problem with job enrichment. The autonomy of both the administrative and academic staff

had improved their motivation, performance and sense of achievement. Besides, for the academic staff, the positive interaction with students brings all the satisfaction. This leads to the final stage of self-actualization. For me, it was those good questions and the good lecturing experience that made the days more enjoyable. Also, it is the gratitude of students, the impact we leave, the complete change we could make, and the feeling of being productive and helpful in difficult situations that made me satisfied.

Still, some administrative staff and faculty members expressed their dissatisfaction with the payment scale. The head of the HR herself, told me one day in my office that she decided to leave due to the low payment. The director of Student Affairs also was not happy with the money he was making, and he would teach some courses at another university in the late afternoons. It did not stop here. The Dean of Engineering, told me one day that he decided to return to Australia the following year. So, I came to realize then that other local employees have found their satisfaction either because they were local and their jobs in the same city meant more security, or because of the strong sense of belonging that they have developed for the university. This is in agreement with Elton Mayo Hawthorne's Effect (Mayo, 2001; Mayo, 2007; Mayo, 1947). According to Mayo, people are motivated by more than monetary rewards and conditions. Communication between the managers and the employees is the key and job satisfaction should be attributed to the sense of belonging.

Moreover, the attitude of employees toward work is highly influenced by the group.According to the Hawthorne Effect (Mayo, 2001; Mayo, 2007; Mayo, 1947), people work better together when they socially interact with one another. At universities, there was plenty of chance to socially interact, through picnics, social gatherings, and events. This had a strong positive effect on our communication in office. Also, the relations that workers and supervisors develop and the grouping among the workers would enhance their productivity. Our academic life dynamics was characterized by the formation of those informal groups, as expected at any university or organization. Such groups would come up with norms, as it was the case for example, when people would meet at particular restaurants every weekend night. The establishment of group norms can be understood as those expected procedures or appropriate rules that group members would develop (Leibovich, 2008; Lussier and Achua, 2010; Phelps and Yee, 2011).

On the other hand, normally, it is expected that if employees find out that they work much more than other employees, or receive less monetary rewards for the same job, their enthusiasm and self-esteem would be negatively affected (Little, 1995; Kohn, 1993; Myers and McCutcheon, 1995). I have noticed that some non-American local employees at that American University in Kurdistan were feeling disappointed because they were treated differently compared to foreigners and Americans, in terms of pay and conditions. For example, they were not entitled to get the same international health insurance that we would get as foreigners and Americans, with an American insurance company. But that did not affect

much their performance. They were proud to have a good university in their region and that was a common feeling among them all.

To understand all those behaviors at such organizations, universities could actually be described as loosely coupled systems, requiring chaordic leadership (University Foundation, 2013). This is due to the differences of academic and administrative structures. The administrative side has a more hierarchical structure which requires more tightness. The academic side, on the other hand, has a chaordic structure. In fact, complexity theory suggests that a university is best understood as a system and that system is best understood as nested within a larger network of systems (Watts, 2003). The same is true for components or people within a higher education organization. There is likely to be a fractal (Liebovitch, 1998) or self similar set of relationships between phenomena at different levels of the organization, going from the relationship with the local students, to the relationships with the local society, and then looking at the relationship of all foreigners with the locals, and then with the whole population on a larger scale. The small community at the university included all ages and both Iraqis and Kurds, and it was a good representation of the population. The same happens when we go down to the classroom scale. We still notice the friendly attitude of students, their solidarity, the formation of groups, the cohesion, the same stereotypes and the same mentalities that we would encounter at the higher level. This represents a fractal in complex systems. This self-similarity means that the patterns at all levels are similar and this is characteristic of complex systems.

The loosely organized academic systems are often described as complex adaptive systems. The university itself is such a good example of complex systems (Supply Chain Complexity, 2010). It has many parts or agents (students, professors, administrators, faculties, departments, research groups, and so on). The interconnections include: rules, communicating knowledge to students, etc...The interactions among faculties, parts and interconnections give rise to the whole that is a university. According to complexity theory, the key to understand the system is in the patterns of interactions and relations among the agents (Capra, 1996; Lee, 1997). A university is not just a collection of faculties, but rather emerges from the interactions of its components. Each agent of the university (in particular each faculty), is also a complex system by itself.

So, to describe such nonlinear systems, we try to detect nonlinearities. We would look for instances where small events have led to large outcomes and instances where large events have led to small outcomes. For example, one of my colleagues gave a metaphor or hypothetical question to his students during the lecture, just to try to explain and communicate the idea, but apparently, he did the unforgivable when he said:" if I ask you to sleep with me, in order to give you an A…". His students misunderstood, and a campaign was initiated against him by the Kurdish students. Eventually, the American professor got suspended, and he had to leave, just because people from a different culture got offended and misunderstood him.

Also, we must ask ourselves what outcomes we would be missing because we were only looking for expected events. According to Heisenberg's

Uncertainty Principle in Quantum Physics, in experiments when we try to measure one aspect of matter, other aspects become less observable. This suggests that deeper understanding of the organization can be achieved by searching for actions that deviated from what we had predicted and planned. People at successful organizations look at events that deviate from daily routines, i.e. when some new and different behavior is needed (Eisenhardt and Tabrizi, 1995). But, people deal with that unexpected event by normalizing it (McDaniel et al., 2003). So, we should be careful. We should not accept any explanation that normalizes some unexpected event. For example, at the universities, this has happened when the university admitted that there was some dangerous situation, after one American instructor got shot in class by a local student at a local school. There was no additional precautions taken or any warning email, as we used to get usually. It was assumed as an irrelevant segregated normal incident that could happen anywhere any day.

Conclusion

In general, organizations are complex dynamical systems. They are not easy to describe except by referring to particular snapshots of the reality at some points in time. The context, culture, size and sector of the organization are usually the factors that determine the behavior of employees and managers.

The concept of a university as a complex system can be described by exploring its nonlinear dynamics, by experiencing it all and knowing in detail all about the workings of the university, with its administrative and academic sides. It is possible then develop a well-rounded view about this "whole" thing called university. We would still have to see how things would change in a non-academic setting and compare the different types of organizations.

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Author Biography

Haidar Sabbagh is a currently a professor in Physics whose research is on spiral waves, their nonlinear dynamics and spatiotemporal chaos, as an example of complex systems. He did his PhD at the University of Leeds in the UK, then did postdoctoral fellowships at Leeds and at McGill University in Montreal. In addition to teaching physics and publishing research work in physics journals, like Phys. Lett. A, Physica A, Chaos Solitons and Fractals, and after teaching finance courses at the Holy Spirit University in Lebanon, he developed interest in business and finance. He pursued an MBA and a certificate in quantitative finance (the CQF, Paul Wilmott, London) and taught business finance courses in Paris. One of his current research interests is how to model an organization as a complex adaptive system.