

HUMANE

Heads of University Management & Administration Network in Europe

SEMINAR

Human Resources Management

Venice, 9-10 October 1998

ABSTRACTS AND SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION

**University Autonomy and the Reform of Public Administration: Reflections on
Personnel Management**

Francesco Costanzi, Università degli Studi di Venezia (IT)

There was no preliminary abstract for this presentation, which Dr Costanzi shared with his colleague Professor Bergamin from the Management Studies Department. They both stressed the functional changes which had affected Italian university administration as a result of new laws introduced in the 1990s. In particular, legislation passed in 1993 had aimed to transform the Civil Service. Until then civil servants and universities in general had merely obeyed laws irrespective of results - administrators had been rather like parts in an assembly line; since 1993, however, there had been much more emphasis on results. Such changes corresponded not only to political decentralisation in Italy but also to profound social, economic and political changes in Europe.

Professor Bergamin emphasised the move away from a compliance culture towards one in which the practice of management was constantly improved. Since 1993 managerial choices had become possible, although there were still structural and cultural obstacles, notably national bargaining on employment conditions, differing reward mechanisms for managers and lower-level staff, and old

traditions such as competitive examinations for entry to academic and non-academic careers. Although training was now in hand it would no doubt take some time to overcome cultural habits.

Discussion

In response to questions the speakers stressed again how personal accountability was being increased as a result of individuals' being associated with results, although there was very little scope for concrete rewards. Dr Costanzi noted that academic and administrative career paths were seen as totally different. Other Italian colleagues felt that current legislation made it difficult for training to take place, and identified what they saw as the lack of a strategy for staff development.

It was also explained that performance and efficiency were judged in terms of formulae usually based on student factors (for example, numbers, or the time taken to complete a degree). The system suffered from the great range of institutions. The main speakers agreed with the view that most of the problems under review centred on the management of change rather than the individual issues which so often caused controversy.

Organizing Change by Bottom-Up HRM Tools

Raf Vandebussche - Vrije Universiteit Brussels (BE)

Abstract

1. Context

Before focusing this introduction on concrete practice at the V.U.B., it is necessary to give a brief view of the context :

- a. the specific situation of the legal context concerning university financing in Flanders, which deals not only with funding but even more with very detailed rules in engaging, remunerating and career possibilities of both academic and administrative staff;
- b. the roots of the V.U.B, founded in 1970 as an autonomous Flemish University which left its mother university, the U.L.B., as the result of a political decision, but also as the outcome of the 1968 democratic movement;
- c. my own personal context. I moved in at the V.U.B. in 1995 after long experience as HR-manager in the private sector.

2. Making Choices.

HRM is not trying to achieve the same goals in every company. All literature on HRM will tell the importance of the "mission statement" as a starting point. That is also the case for a university. The challenge is how to handle this without stepping in trendy ways of nice "beliefs" and expensive "words", but on the contrary how to give an own definition.

The V.U.B. in its founding mission stands for a democratic, social, excellent university in close relation to society development and humanistic tradition. In this context, the ideas of flexibility and rapid changes can't have the same context as in a commercial company, but that doesn't mean we don't want to be flexible and change-minded. In the context of the V.U.B. we choose critical and loyal teamplayers who are conscient of their input and the effect on the outcomes of the university. Therefore we decided to work out HRM tools that start with the decision of each member of our "Human Capital" in order to be a real member of the V.U.B.

3. Bottom-up Tools.

In the early nineties, the V.U.B., in several reports, tried to define a huge changing process in the administration. But none of these reports had a real mobilisation force. There was no real action plan or real goals, and so after a few months each one disappeared. When I arrived in 1995, being focused on the necessity to cut costs, especially the total cost of staff, I was able to convince the academic board not to work out a "global plan for change" again, but to act on small projects, step by step, and "self-directed" by the administrative and technical staff (A.T.P.). From this point of view, we worked on four concrete domains, in combination with a plan of intensive communication and training. The four main areas are:

- €€ function descriptions;
- €€ a process of setting goals and evaluation;
- €€ active job rotation : the V.U.B. "excellent team";
- €€ A.P.A. (in Flemish: Active Problem Solving).

4. Results and Further Questions.

We are just at the beginning and it is too early to evaluate, but the enthusiasm of the A.T.P. is very good. A lot of questions still need to be addressed:

- €€ What is the effect of this way of working on the global process of change ?
- €€ Is the process more important than the outcome ?
- €€ Why working only with the A.T.P. and not with the academic staff ?

How to Gear Staff towards Change: The Approach of the Universiteit van Amsterdam

Ruud Bleijerveld, Universiteit van Amsterdam (NL)

Abstract

Since 1987 the Universiteit van Amsterdam (UvA) has been pursuing decentralization of responsibilities and areas of competence wherever possible. The university's imminent loss of control (marked by budget deficits, poor decision-making practices and declining enrolment) and the challenges of the 1990s (increasing domestic and international competition, declining government funding, a greater say in internal organizational structuring) necessitated such changes. However, no organizational change will get underway unless there is a corresponding cultural change. The 'old' culture, which abounded with unclear responsibilities, tendencies to pass the buck, compartmentalization and procedural entrenchment, had to make way for one oriented toward content and results in which staff assumed responsibility for their work and were accountable, while optimizing the opportunities to apply their creativity and knowledge.

Alternating between faculties and at the university's Central Administration, initiatives for change have been launched. In 1992 a decision was taken to 'tilt' the Central Administration. From a collection of disciplinary, hierarchically structured departments an organization of independent units, responsible for delivering results with the understanding that serving the clients (the Board and the faculties) was the main objective, was to be built.

The process of change officially ended on 1 January 1997. The new Central Administration has been operational for over eighteen months, which makes this a good time for a retrospective view. I will emphasize cultural change over structural transformation: "How do you involve the current staff in implementing change in an organization to bring about a different working environment and to improve the quality of the products delivered and the well-being of the employees?" The topics covered include the analysis of the UvA culture, the process of involving the staff and the consequent achievement of change. The account relates both the successful and the less successful interventions. It considers the roles of the different players, including my own. Without providing a blueprint for overhauling management, the story highlights a few explicit *dos* and *don'ts*.

Discussion

The discussion session consisted of questions to both speakers. It was noted that in UvA the academic staff seemed happy with "Operation Tilt" because of the much more direct relationship between academics and central administration. Meanwhile in Brussels the major bonus was that staff made up their own functional groups, with distinctions between junior and senior levels becoming less rigid and thereby less inhibiting. It was acknowledged that a more decentralised system often led to an overall increase in staffing levels, but since this tended always to happen at the "local" level rather than at the centre it was usually a good thing from the customer's point of view. In response to a question about the role of external consultants Ruud Bleijerveld noted that although it had been useful to gain an external view it was also vital for an institution to have a clear view of its own quality standards, and to promote its own cultural values.

Total Quality Management as a Tool to Increase Staff Motivation and Participation in University Decision

Rafael Zorrilla-Torras, Universidad Carlos III de Madrid (ES)

Abstract

The different TQM tools and self-appraisal models can be a new and powerful way to achieve staff participation. The University Carlos III Services began in 1990 to use some of these tools and to connect one to another so that University Governing bodies and staff could share a common view of their goals.

The consolidation of a “Heads of Administration Team” has been one of the first steps in this direction. This has sometimes been criticized as a “managerial style”, not in keeping with university traditions, but it has shown its powerful effect, not only as a communication structure but also as a way to improve leadership.

MBO can be a way to connect Academic Management, Services and Clients. Communication problems can be worse in university than in other institutions because of its non “hierarchical” structure. MBO allows the different interests that are present to participate in the development of University Services.

Quality Teams have been a great success at the University Carlos III since they began in 1994, not only because of the process improvements they achieved but also as a powerful learning method. A new culture is slowly emerging in some units and it could change the whole organization culture. We moved from a very sceptical position about them to a very positive one.

The Communication Survey launched first in 1994 is one of the tools used to measure staff satisfaction at work. The comparison of the results in the different years allows us to see some important change in staff opinion. Quality tools are based on the use of performance indicators. Some of them rely on the way processes are done (time, errors, costs, etc). Others look at the way in which clients perceive the service. The presentation will show how some of these tools have been used, and the way in which they can evolve in the future.

Discussion

Participants from several countries expressed enthusiasm for the sorts of model and analysis proposed by RZ, and there were several requests for specific examples of the results. There was some concern

that such analyses might lead to benchmarking and competition, but RZ pointed out that it was an internal exercise, and that the results were of no value in a competitive sense. He acknowledged that there had been resistance from a conservative culture in the institution, and that work always needed to be done on maintaining interest in the future. One speaker underlined the thrust of the talk by recalling the results of an American survey which showed that, in a large group of dissatisfied customers, 15% left the company because of cost, 15% because of service/speed, and 70% because they did not like the people they were dealing with.

Changing the Status of Staff - From Civil Servants to University Employees.

Pedro Meireles, Technical University of Lisbon (PT)

Abstract

As far as I see, one of the main objectives of the HUMANE seminars is to allow a time of reflection about problems and situations common to professionals like ourselves - a time of reflection about very specific technical issues or, as in this presentation, about general and comprehensive questions.

Due to the nature of the topic, no conclusions or solutions are to be expected, but rather an open discussion, where people already involved in similar processes can share their personal experience and opinions. The debate might represent a starting point of future compared studies on this issue carried out by the network, and also of consistent research on this theme. I'll try to induce a debate on the following 10 main questions:

1. Is the legal status of the academic and non-academic staff (i.e., civil servants or university employees) linked to the efficiency of institutions?
2. If so, is it necessary to change this legal status in the present environment of State universities?
3. For State universities (and assuming that it's legally possible) what are the possible advantages and disadvantages to the institution and to the people involved, if staff, at present civil servants, become (totally or partially, by compulsion or by choice) university employees?
4. What would be the advantages and disadvantages of mixed models, where part (but which part?) of the staff remained as civil servants while the rest were university employees?
5. What difficulties could one expect in the (various) processes of this change of legal status?
6. Can this be an internal process, or is some (and how much?) government intervention needed?
7. Again for State universities, what would be the likely consequences of this change of legal status for staff in terms of the institution's process of decision making? Can collegiality survive?
8. And what about organisational culture? Can academic freedom survive?
9. And the structural and the management model? Can decentralisation and elections survive?
10. And the system of public funding? Can the autonomy of the institutions survive?

Discussion

The presentation emphasised the precise situation of administrators and academic staff in Portugal - but this in fact had several strong resemblances to the situation and culture described by the Italian hosts in the opening session. Moreover, the comments and questions following this session came from a particularly wide range of nationalities.

Pedro placed the debate firmly in the context of how to cut costs (and perhaps jobs). He also stressed the wider social changes whereby HEIs were no longer the main source of specialised or expert opinion, and the social demands for greater efficiency as a result of market forces. He insisted that teachers had to be aware of the needs of the labour market as well as theoretical research.

In discussion, several speakers queried the alleged correlation between legal status and the level of staff performance, pointing (for example) to the differential effects of institutional culture even in countries where no “civil service” mentality existed. There was a very lively debate on several key concepts such as “collegiality”, and the autonomy often expressed as “academic freedom”. The notion of loyalty to an academic discipline as opposed to the institution was also developed and debated.

Developing and Implementing a Comprehensive Staffing Strategy: the Glasgow Experience.

Dugald Mackie, University of Glasgow (UK)

Abstract

This presentation will look at the development, adoption and implementation of a formal Staffing Strategy by the University of Glasgow. It will examine the issues and difficulties which led to the development of the Strategy including external legislation and the need for change brought about by financial pressures. It will also deal with the reasons why the Strategy applies to all categories of staff within what is a large University in a UK context.

Aspects of the implementation of the Strategy will also be explored including reaction of staff, time and resources and the development of operational plans in areas of action including performance appraisal, staff development and training, flexible working arrangements and reward strategies.

The presentation will explore what the University hopes to achieve by adopting a formal strategy which it believes to be forward-looking and of assistance in positioning it for the 21st Century. Difficulties in the development and implementation of particular parts of the Strategy will also be examined and some of the lessons learned identified. It is hoped that exploration of these issues and lessons will allow colleagues to share experiences from other institutions across the EU.

Discussion

Dugald illustrated the perceived weaknesses and lack of staff morale which had characterised the system when he had taken up his post at Glasgow. There had been under-performance in terms of several key features, and it had been necessary to bring in changes of culture (for example, increasing the prominence of Equal Opportunities) while reducing staff costs by a significant amount (around 8%). Change had been managed by an explicit recognition of both the cost and the value of staff. Much more emphasis had been placed on better procedures, better reward structures (essentially based on a recognition of teamwork, but also including grants for personal development activities) and less bureaucracy.

He agreed with observations that secretarial and technical staff were often under-valued, and noted that each category of staff had a separate section in the strategic plan. Similarly, appraisal systems were deliberately forward-looking, based on self-appraisal analyses which were then checked by managers. Finally, he had to acknowledge that Glasgow had not produced the inventive acronyms quoted by Raf Vandebussche or the innovative “tilting” vocabulary of Ruud Bleijerveld, but noted that - in this as in other aspects - the seminar had given him a number of ideas!

(Summary prepared by Trevor Field)