Modeling Learning: The Role of Leaders

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What follows is the Portland State University story, a reflection on change as a scholarly act within a learning community using techniques from organizational learning.

Modeling Learning: The Role of Leaders

Judith A. Ramaley, Barbara A. Holland

This chapter explores the role of leadership during a period of transformational change. At Portland State University (PSU), major change has been a constant feature of the institution’s history. “From 1971–1974, there was almost constant discussion of retrenchment, dismissals and budget reductions” (Dodds, 2000, p. 371). Dodds went on to name the period from 1974 to 1996 the “second retrenchment era” (p. 383). The most recent phase of major retrenchment, which began in 1991, led to a major transformation of the institution rather than a further diminution of its prospects. In this chapter, we explore why this was so.

Academic organizations are often resistant to major changes. Yet between 1991 and 1996 (the date of its fiftieth anniversary), PSU leadership, faculty, students, and external stakeholders worked together to absorb serious budget cuts, redesign the undergraduate curriculum, revise the institutional promotion and tenure guidelines, and grow to become the largest university in Oregon. To achieve such sweeping changes, PSU had to develop a capacity to learn as an organization in order to guide and inform change and come up with fresh strategies after the near exhaustion of so many years of retrenchment and budget constraint. This chapter draws on PSU experiences to describe a model for change through a focus on organizational learning and research. At PSU, change became the product of a scholarly approach to institutional challenges.

The argument here is that deep and pervasive change can occur if both the leader and the campus community define intentional change as a scholarly act strongly rooted in a culture of organizational learning. The leader must assist in creating the characteristics and capacities of an organization
that can approach change in a scholarly way, that is, an organization that can learn in a manner legitimated and sanctioned by the academic disciplines from which its leadership and sense of professional identity are drawn. This conception has consequences for the part that individuals in the campus community will play and how they will relate to each other.

As Garvin (1999) has explained, the leader plays two related roles in creating the capacity for an organization to learn. First, to move a group of people into an inquiry mode, the leader must serve as a teacher. “To that end, executives are urged to share their distinctive perspectives about their companies’ strategies, purposes and values. They are told to develop ‘a teachable point of view’ that captivates and enlightens, communicating it to employees through stories and parables” (p. 188). This advice is reminiscent of the way Gardner describes innovative leadership: “The innovative leader takes a story that has been latent in the population, or among the members of his or her chosen domain and brings new attention or a fresh twist to the story” (p. 10). Leaders who tell good stories can give purpose and meaning and ensure cohesiveness in a group.

By itself, however, teaching is not enough. The leader must also lead learning: “New ways of thinking become the desired ends, not facts and frameworks. Discussion and debate replace ex cathedra pronouncements. Questions become as important as answers” (Garvin, 1999, p. 189). At PSU, the role of the president in this process was to teach and foster learning. In describing the characteristics of a learning organization, Senge (1990) identified five disciplines. The PSU story illustrates all five of these disciplines: systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, building a shared vision, and team learning. The first four disciplines are needed to undertake meaningful change. To move beyond the first stage of systemic change, we must invoke the fifth discipline, which is team learning.

The overall goal of the leader in a scholarly change process is to set up the capacity to frame important questions that will affect the trajectory of the organization and foster a scholarly approach to managing these questions. This requires a network of communities of practice and support for their ongoing process of discovery. A campus can learn to identify and use its tacit knowledge as well as the explicit knowledge of each field in an integrative way. Thus, the organization takes an active approach to knowledge management and creates a sustained capacity for learning.

The Portland State Story

In this story we demonstrate some of the barriers and facilitators of organizational learning and the role leaders play in overcoming these barriers.

The Influence of Historic Claims. As we explore the lessons that can be learned from the experience of PSU, imagine for a moment the context in which the story began. In 1990, a new president arrived on campus after the unhappy departure of her predecessor; the institution held competing
views of its mission; the community longed for the symbolism and substance of a major university in the Portland metropolitan area; the resource base available to the institution and to the Oregon state system was about to be radically reduced because of a tax reduction measure; and the institution itself had low expectations of its future and its fortunes after enduring repeated periods of retrenchments and dashed hopes (Dodds, 2000). The arrival of a new president created the possibility of a new way of seeing things, and the prospect of dramatic budget cuts made it mandatory for the institution to rethink its mission, core competencies, and community relationships.

The process of building a scholarly case for action (it’s a warrant) is complex (Mark, Henry, and Julnes 2000). It starts with a claim (that a particular condition exists, that something has value, that a particular action should be taken), builds evidence to test and support the claim, establishes a warrant (a statement justifying the evidence that serves as a basis for a particular claim), and carefully spells out any qualifications for the claim (the specific circumstances under which a claim may be true and the likelihood that it is true). A warrant involves a complex interweaving of evidence, explanation, and clearly articulated values (House and Howe, 1999). At PSU, we began by examining and challenging the historical and constraining claims. Through a combination of intentional strategies and happy accident, we exposed the fallacies of the initial claims of constraint and poverty that had paralyzed institutional spirit and optimism. This initial “unlearning” was critical to creating the capacity for new organizational learning.

We reframed our challenges by basing our case for change on academic values, not administrative ones. Wilson (1989, p. 91) has argued that “every organization has a culture, that is, a persistent, patterned way of thinking about the central tasks of and human relationships within an organization.” Often an organization harbors several different cultures. Within the academy, administrative and faculty cultures are distinctive in their decision-making conventions, time frames, priorities, and constituencies (Martin, Manning, and Ramaley, 2001). Any approach to meaningful change must start from a common set of values that can make the divisions of administrative and academic culture less formidable. Since the core of academic life is scholarship, why not adopt a scholarly mind-set and standards of scholarly excellence as the tests of a good warrant for change?

**Avoiding Decision Traps.** In times of crisis or emergency, it is easy to make some serious mistakes in putting together a warrant. The PSU story is, at its heart, about how we avoided those traps. The experience also sheds some light on the challenge of leadership in a time of change. The basic role of leadership at any time, but especially during periods of abrupt and unanticipated change, is to help the institution avoid the pitfalls of what Russo and Schoemaker (1989) call “decision traps.” Consistent with academic culture, a leader must model a scholarly and principled approach to decision making, guided by a clear and shared vision of the institution (Ramaley,
2000). The purpose of behaving in a scholarly way and according to high standards of scholarship is to create a strong warrant for action, based on the discipline of inquiry with which accomplished scholars are familiar.

First, let us consider the most common decision traps, drawing liberally on Russo and Schoemaker (1989) but adapting their ideas for these purposes. What follows is a list of aspects of decision making where errors are frequently made:

*Framing the question:* Setting out to solve the wrong problem because you have a mental framework for your decision that causes you to overlook the best options or lose sight of the problem you really need to solve.

*Taking time to assess your current situation:* Plunging in without taking time to think about the crux of the issue you are facing or to think through how you would like decisions of institution-shaping magnitude to be made.

*Approaching the challenge from a scholarly perspective:* Being overconfident in your own judgment and knowledge and failing to collect needed information because you are too sure of your own assumptions and opinions. We think we know, in other words, why things are the way they are; however, what we know is often wrong.

*Learning from experience:* Failing to pay attention and keep track of what happens so that you have a record you can study and interpret in order to draw lessons from your experience. This step, which is often neglected, is an important component of the leadership of change. Change can set in motion reactions that ripple out in unpredictable and unanticipated directions. Thoughtful and well-grounded adjustments in strategy are often needed to accommodate these reactions and unintended consequences.

How did we avoid all those pitfalls? The key ideas that set the stage for the transformation of PSU that exists today were simple but powerful. In *framing the question*, we figured out that our challenge in 1990 was not about how to cut the budget. The core question was how to spend wisely the budget we were likely to have, whatever it was going to be, in order to move toward a vision of ourselves as an urban research university. We took *time to assess our current situation* in order to test more carefully the various claims that had been made about our students and their achievement. As we began this exercise, we were well aware of our poor retention and graduation rates, but we assumed this was due to our status as an urban institution with a predominantly part-time, commuting student body, many of whom had begun their postsecondary education elsewhere and most of whom faced serious obstacles on their way to achieving their educational goals. When we looked closely at why we had such low retention and graduation rates, we were surprised. When we exchanged data with institutions with a similar mission and a comparable student body, we learned that most of them had much better retention and graduation rates
than we did. We reasoned that our problems were not caused by our location or our students’ traits. Further reflection and study revealed that our problems stemmed from the fact that we did not have a coherent educational philosophy or a way to create a community of learning for either our students or faculty.

To acquire the capacity to articulate and achieve a distinctive sense of mission and educational philosophy, PSU had to answer two basic questions. First, we had to figure out what we wanted to be. Then we could work on what we wanted to do to handle our budget crisis and create the competencies we would require to take us toward the future we wanted. Most important, we had to do that together. Fortunately, PSU had a tradition of cooperation between faculty and administration, learned through many bouts of painful retrenchment (Dodds, 2000).

What we wanted to be focused on next was our educational approach and the design of our curriculum. Our aspirations as an urban research university meant that we had to address the core of our historic purpose: access to learning and knowledge generation focused on the urban experience. We created a new motto: Let Knowledge Serve the City (Doctrina Urbi Serviat). From the beginning, we approached our challenge from a scholarly perspective. We set out to learn what we needed to know to develop a curriculum and an institutional mission and identity based on a clear vision of what it would mean to be an educated person in the twenty-first century. For PSU, change became a scholarly act. This required some basic administrative changes, but the dominant force was a set of well-warranted educational ideas based on a careful study of the research then available on the undergraduate experience and its applicability to our institution and students. Those ideas had power and led us to a vision of what we wanted to do: become an urban research university with an innovative curriculum designed primarily for nontraditional students that integrated teaching and research into new forms of engaged scholarship and engaged learning. Administrators and faculty used a scholarly approach to collaborate in decision making on critical issues. What follows is a model for large-scale change that emerged from that experience.

The value of thinking about change as a scholarly approach to developing a warrant led us to build in the opportunity to learn from experience. A scholarly approach requires continuous gathering of data, interpretation of the results of various changes at the institution, and an infrastructure to allow faculty and staff to develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to work together in a scholarly mode about the institution and the curriculum. The infrastructure need was addressed by the formation of the Center for Academic Excellence, a faculty-led support model that invests in design and evaluation of educational experiences and faculty development opportunities. The center proved invaluable in creating capacity for creative change and the sustainability of innovations.
Large-Scale Change as a Scholarly Act

Transformational change must be deep, pervasive, and continuous (Eckel, Green, and Hill, 2001). The experience of change of this kind gradually alters the shared expectations, culture, habits of mind, and ways of doing things (Ramaley, 2002).

There are many ways to think about large-scale change and to model its stages and underlying structure (for example, Heifetz, 1993). In describing the experience of PSU, we elected to combine several of these models into a single five-element framework (Ramaley, 1996): (1) building a compelling case for change, (2) creating clarity of purpose, (3) working in a scholarly mode at a significant scale, (4) developing a conducive campus environment, and (5) understanding change.

Building a Compelling Case for Change. A core challenge was to get past the historic assumption of inescapable impoverishment and demonstrate that it was possible to make changes without the infusion of major new financial resources. The need for deeper and more pervasive change can be triggered by external mandates, fiscal crises, internal problems like our poor retention rates in those days, or a desire to prepare for the future. At PSU in 1990, all of these forces were active at once. Depending on the energy and imagination of a campus community, reactions to these forces can be in three basic forms: restructuring (downsizing and cost reduction), reengineering (redesign of programs), and regenerating strategies (development of new competencies) (from Hamel and Prahalad, 1994). Of the three options, redesign and regeneration are by far the most attractive in terms of building organizational capacity. It is important to avoid the mind-set and perils of downsizing. If you must cut your budget, avoid doing less with less or more with less. Redesign or regeneration requires attention to the experiences, values, and current context of the organization as well as history. The authors emphasize that the future is not what will happen; it is what is happening now (Hamel and Prahalad, 1994). Most institutions have experience to draw on if they can identify and validate it.

Creating Clarity of Purpose. Before setting out on a journey, it is always wise to have a destination in mind as well as some idea about how to get there. That means you need both a vision and a sense of direction. It is not always easy to figure out who you are, who you want to be, and how you want to get there. The PSU experience revealed key questions that a campus community needs to ask itself (adapted from Hamel and Prahalad, 1994). These are truly scholarly questions and require different research methodologies to answer. Generally it is the role of the leader to ask these questions and insist on thoughtful, well-documented answers to key questions about our mission, our organizational values, the educational model we wanted to build, the resources we had to invest in our future, and the alliances we wanted to form.
Working in a Scholarly Mode at a Significant Scale. Intentional and significant change must be approached in a scholarly manner with the same demanding standards of excellence and the expectation that action will be guided by a warranted foundation. In other words, transformation must be guided by a well-documented and well-researched case. The approach to building such a case resembles the expectations that the scholarly community has for quality research in any field. The role of the academic leader in this model is identical to the principal investigator in any research project. The academic leader should be guided by the same standards that the scholarly community applies to the assessment of scholarly work. The only difference, and admittedly it is an important one, is that the result is not a scholarly communication but a transformed institution.

A particularly good source for insights on the standards that scholarship must meet is Scholarship Assessed (Glassick, Huber, and Maeroff, 1997). Using the Glassick model as a guide, the case for institutional change must have clear goals and must be firmly grounded in knowledge about the institution and the context in which it operates (adequate preparation). The warrant for change must be built on a solid body of evidence gathered and interpreted in a disciplined and principled way (appropriate methods) and shown to be significantly related to the challenges at hand (significant results). The case must be presented effectively (effective presentation) and studied reflectively (reflective critique), with a clear and compelling sense of responsibility for the effects of the ideas and proposed actions on the community that will be affected, both inside and outside the institution (ethical and social responsibility) (qualities in italics reflect Glassick, Huber, and Maeroff, 1997).

This list of standards leads to a more finely grained set of expectations for how an institution and its leadership can most effectively approach change at a transformational level. Change must be intentional and must affect a significant part of the institutional mission, for example, general education, undergraduate majors, research, and outreach. Change must be supported by a culture of evidence that documents the consequences of the steps undertaken and allows a community to learn from its experiences. When approaching institutional change, the nature of this community and the extent to which the process draws on the talents and expertise of individuals outside the academy as well as within the campus depend on the mission, history, and aspirations of the campus. Attention to the challenge of appropriate consultation can strengthen shared governance. Change, when approached as a scholarly act, must emerge from a consultative and scholarly process similar to the workings of a deliberative democracy. The development of a case for change and the choice of ways to create an academic community represent a form of public scholarship and will, for most institutions, include engagement with the broader community beyond the campus as well as an open and reflective process within the campus community (Brown, 2004).
Developing a Conducive Campus Environment. Leaders play a decisive role in helping campus employees to shift their mental models in order to engage in the change process. This section reviews some specific strategies used.

Starting Out Well. It is important to take care to pick the right first project and to be sure that it is both symbolic and substantive. Our goal was to debunk one of the major impediments to change: that an unidentified “they” would not allow us to do “it,” whatever “it” was. Our choice of a project was illuminating, so to speak, for we chose to find out how many PSU employees it took to change a light bulb.

The campus lighting project met all of the conditions for a good first project. It would require us to study and learn the techniques of Total Quality Management in order to map out the steps in changing a light bulb from the time a bulb was reported to be out to the time that it was replaced so that we could learn where in the chain the process was broken or too complex and error prone. Success in the form of a well-lit campus would help us provide an existence proof to dispute the usual PSU explanation for why things could not change on campus (“THEY won’t let us do that”). During periods of rapid change, a leader must surface the underlying mental models that can support resistance to change and hold them up to thoughtful scrutiny. This was a good project to start that process.

Making Connections and Sustaining Change. To be effective, the scope of change as it unfolds should include the major spheres central to the identity and purposes of the institution. For PSU, the four interlocking spheres were curricular reform, the definition of scholarship, collaboration with the community, and campus operations and management. So what did PSU do in order to bring these elements together? The list was daunting. During the first wave of reform, we redesigned our general education curriculum. We linked faculty roles to our institutional mission and purpose by redesigning our approach to promotion and tenure and by providing faculty-led support for professional development that would allow our faculty to interpret and introduce elements of engaged scholarship into their own research and their approach to the curriculum. We rethought how work is done at PSU and how to incorporate our own educational philosophy into the way we approached problem solving. We began to understand how important our students were in both contributing to our distinctive campus mission and connecting us to the surrounding community. They were members of that community themselves. We began to realign departmental priorities and values to reflect shared responsibilities and set up a meaningful link between the budget resource cycle and campus and unit priorities.

Fully aware that attention is paid to those things that are measured, we began to develop effective assessments of the educational experience of students and the impact of PSU on the community that reflected what we valued and wished to reward. The process of data gathering and interpretation allowed us to adopt a habit of reflective practice throughout the organization.
Only later did we discover that the name for this was a learning organization (the many definitions of a learning organization are outlined in Garvin, 1999). We also sought collaboration with other institutions within the Portland region and across the country. Through redesign of our curriculum and campus operations and through investments from private foundations, we began to identify and release sufficient resources to invest in change.

Rebalancing the Institution. By the time of our fiftieth anniversary in 1996, we were already partway through the second wave of change, and some of the elements of the next set of challenges beyond that were already fairly easy to see. The second wave of innovation and adaptation represented an impressive list of things that would need to be done to sustain change at such a grand scale. According to people at PSU (personal communication), some of these steps have been taken; others have yet to be realized. The list was a long one, each element of which was a natural consequence of what we did in the first wave of innovation. We began to think about how to expand our undergraduate curricular innovation to additional partner sites. We sought to connect the philosophy of our general education curriculum to the major and our overall concepts of liberal learning. We began to redesign our basic processes of budgeting, institutional studies, and assessment and planning to support informed decisions and further adjustments as we learned more.

Beyond that daunting set of recalibrations of PSU’s basic internal structure and program design and its working relationships beyond its campus borders, additional questions were taking shape that would form the basis for yet a third wave of change. The elements of the third wave were not yet clear in 1996 but were still in the form of large, challenging questions. How were we going to pay for the start-up costs of our ambitious agenda? How would we assess the quality of the educational experiences we offered and find out what our students were actually learning? How might we draw the clear educational philosophy that underlies the general education curriculum into the rest of the curriculum? What does it really mean to be the hub of an educational network? Where would the support and the money come from to realize our vision for a university district surrounding and extending our campus that would be shared with the city and developed as a mixed-use environment?

None of these challenging questions had ready answers. All required further study, a habit of thoughtful inquiry, and a willingness to learn from the experience of the earlier stages of institutional transformation. To negotiate these difficult next-wave questions, PSU had to become a true learning community. As in the case of any other kind of education, institutional learning is never done.

Understanding Change Itself. The final step is to understand change itself and how to work effectively in an environment that has been unsettled by either external or internal uncertainties, or both, and that is not likely to settle down any time soon, if ever.
In retrospect, the PSU story is clear on this point even though it was not always so clear at the time. There are a few very important things that an institution must attend to if it wishes to move into a change mode and continue to identify and address the rippling outward of the consequences of transformational change. From the PSU experience, we can draw a few lessons, the PSU Principles, which may have general value for other institutions and other times.

First, it is important to have a clear mission and an action-oriented strategic plan that comes from the work of the campus community itself and its experiences. The plan must be built on a shared set of core organizational values and a sense of collective purpose. Second, it is rare for an institution to undertake a completely new direction. Generally there are already elements of that future present in the fabric of the institution and in the interests and activities of the campus community. It is important to identify aspects of the institution already aligned with promising future directions and develop a vocabulary to define and recognize these efforts.

Third, it is always helpful to call attention to work that supports and exemplifies the goals of the institution. This can be done by creating incentives, recognition, and rewards consistent with mission and goals and by ensuring early successes. In the complexity of daily life, many people fail to catch the significance of these early, often small successes. It is important for campus leadership to interpret them and celebrate them.

Fourth, it is important to link budget decisions and performance. Maria Montessori built an educational philosophy for children on the basis of guided choice and logical consequences. Campuses that wish to undertake significant and intentional change need to do the same. The most powerful way to do this is to maintain a scholarly discipline of gathering and interpreting the results of change and linking budget decisions to performance and strategic goals. In the process, it is important to give resistance respect; there is much to be learned from the objections of responsible critics. In the process of gathering information and responses from a broad constituency, campus leaders can demonstrate flexibility and invent as they go. Teaching people to accept and embrace the risk of not knowing how things will turn out is not easy. The actions of leadership must not send mixed signals about the importance of experimentation by declaring innovation to be a high value and then punishing anyone who tries something risky and fails at the attempt.

Finally, it is important for leadership to pay attention to how people are interpreting what is going on and to help promote organizational learning by explaining what the change means. Good leaders leave the essential work of change in the hands of faculty, staff, and students. They do not micromanage, but they do notice and repeat good stories that help everyone learn their role in the campus mission. At PSU, we often spoke of how faculty and staff would learn how to “map themselves” into the new institutional landscape (Ramaley, 2002). Leaders can help a campus move process along by encouraging
informal networks and a sense of community and by trusting people to be intelligent, care about the organization, and do their best. Most of all, the leader can express pride in what the institution is learning and achieving.

**Linking Educational Philosophy to Organizational Behavior**

Armed with a compelling educational vision that draws on their own institutional history, mission, and conditions, leaders can evaluate institutional interventions or responses to conflicting external mandates or budget crises or societal pressures or social criticisms or demands from the governing board without losing their sense of purpose and direction. Strong attention to educational purposes can guide any institution, whatever its mission, through troubling times. Do these demands make educational sense? Will these changes help the institution achieve its educational goals? With an educational compass in hand, the institution and its leadership will be less likely to become distracted or drift off course. By using the lens of educational purpose and philosophy, a college or university can approach change in a scholarly way by defining and then following the dictates and expectations of a shared vision of what it means to exercise scholarly responsibility.

**References**


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