



# THE RESPONSIVE UNIVERSITY

## A Cautionary Tale

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### ***Abstract***

Accelerating change and external criticism are forcing university administrators to actively seek new managerial forms that address the need for innovation in higher education. Unsatisfied with the traditional professional and administrative bureaucracies, institutional leaders are experimenting with ad-hocracy management systems to respond to the needs and concerns of university constituents. This paper discusses three cautions regarding ad-hocracy: the importance of creating internal as well as external organizational fit; the importance of integrating ad-hocracy into the already blended, loosely coupled management systems of the university; and the importance of developing intentional implementation strategies for ad-hocracy systems.

## *Professional Bureaucracies, Administrative Bureaucracies, and Adhocracies*

Universities are reeling under the onslaught of massive change. Existing managerial systems are being taxed to the maximum to respond in innovative ways to external pressures. Green (2003) describes the generalized assault on public institutions and the trends that set the stage for the dynamic, changing external environment of public higher education. Trends include the characterization of institutions as hide-bound bureaucracies out of touch and irrelevant to solving today's social issues; escalating competition for students; accelerating use of part-time faculty; competition from private institutions and vendors; calls for accountability and state level monitoring of budgets and outcomes; the call for privatization and efficiencies; shrinking state dollars; increased regulation of financial aid dollars; and assaults on the tenure process as outdated (Charfauros & Tierney, 1999; Dillon, 2005; Finkin, 2000; Green, 2003; Huisman & Currie, 2004; Plater, 2001; Rotherham, 2011; Williams, 1996). As a result, universities are actively searching for ways of organizing that allow them to respond to the needs and criticisms of their external constituents.

Over generations universities have evolved from monastic academies to multiversities with an uneasy alliance of functions—teaching, research, and service—and of management—faculty and administration (Kerr, 2001; Scott & Awbrey, 1993). As universities grew and took on more functions, faculty had less and less time to attend to the oversight of the institutions in which they practiced and professional administrations arose. As a result, two dominant managerial systems emerged. The professional bureaucracy is one in which “professionally socialized specialists are granted considerable autonomy and self-direction over their work” (Green, 2003, p. 203). The professional bureaucracy of the faculty relies on shared governance, consensus decision making, and collegiality to regulate work. The administrative bureaucracy is characterized by action planning, division of labor, vertical communications, and

regulation through standards and policies (Autier, 2001). During past decades these two managerial systems, professional and administrative, have coexisted through a process of give and take in a less than comfortable partnership that has seen them through a long period of slowly changing, fairly stable external environments. However, research indicates that the post-industrial environment of resource scarcity, increasing competitiveness, and turbulence is having a negative impact on institutional effectiveness (Cameron and Tschirhart, 1992, p.100).

With the acceleration of instability, a third managerial framework has emerged in the hope that it will address the demand for innovation in the face of dynamic change. In the business community the need to address the changing environment in innovative ways led to the emergence of the adhocracy. The rise of adhocracy was foreshadowed by Alvin Tofler in *Future Shock* (1970) and later characterized by Mintzberg (1979). While adhocracy reached its peak in the business world during the 1990s, it has also recently been surfacing in a more direct fashion in institutions of higher education (Green, 2003). Within universities adhocracy takes the form of cross-divisional teams, task forces, project teams, and interdisciplinary centers. Although the professional bureaucracy of the faculty allows for innovations that continuously update disciplinary fields and curricula, adhocracy is targeted at larger scale, “entrepreneurial innovation” involving multiple segments of the institution (Hardy, 1991, p. 369).

Mintzberg described adhocracies as highly organic structures that operate through cross-functional teams, have little formalization, involve high job specialization based on skills, and use liaison devices for mutual adjustment (as cited in Autier, 2001, p. 6). Adhocracy offers a number of benefits for organizations attempting to respond to changing circumstances, such as the ability to act quickly, to anticipate change, and to be agile (Green, 2003). But, if implemented without awareness and planning, adhocracy can have damaging results on an organization and its employees. Mintzberg

notes that adhocracies can be ruthless breeding grounds for all kinds of political forces (as cited in Bailey & Nielsen, 1992, p. 695). Mintzberg acknowledges that adhocracy's lack of structure and clear lines of authority:

Render it susceptible to a high degree of internal politics, with conflict and aggression erupting both within and between project teams. Its greater level of organizational ambiguity can take a psychological toll on workers. And finally, its reliance on the project team approach makes it prone to unbalanced workloads, forcing workers to alternately accommodate periods of overwork and inactivity. (as cited in Green, 2003, p. 205)

This paper suggests three cautions for those attempting to implement adhocracy systems in an existing higher education institution to create a responsive organization.

### *Organizational Fit*

The first caution for administrators attempting to create a responsive university is the importance of external *and* internal fit. Universities operate in a field of multiple environmental and organizational contingencies (Zajac, Kraatz, & Bresser, 2000). Organizational fit is commonly held to be alignment of organizational strategies and resources with the external environment and internal process and structure (Miller, 1992). Research has shown that pursuing only external fit can negatively impact internal alignment. On the other hand, single minded pursuit of internal congruence can lead to inflexibility and resistance to change (Miller, 1992, 175–176). Thus, there is a tension between fitting strategy to external contingencies and fitting strategy to the organization's unique internal competencies (Zajac, Kraatz, & Bresser, 2000).

Some researchers have argued that just adapting to the external environment is not enough, suggesting that a dynamic strategic fit is based on matching strategy with both environmental as well as internal organizational contingencies.

Zajac, Kraatz, and Bresser (2000) write, “changing strategy in response to changing environments becomes more uncertain when it moves an organization away from its traditional or ‘distinctive’ competencies” (p. 430). They imply that seeking internal congruence does not necessarily reflect an unconscious resistance to change but can be an intentional way of leveraging the organization’s distinctive competencies and using what it does best to be successful.

Prahalad and Hamel (1990) argue that identifying core competencies can set an organization apart and lead to success not possible through other mechanisms. To identify core competencies an organization needs to identify its strategic intents based on shared values. Strategic intent gives the organization its identity in the context of its environment. According to Prahalad and Hamel (1990), strategic intent cuts across the sub-units of the organization and is the basis of a portfolio of core competencies. They provide the example of NEC’s strategic intent to “exploit the convergence of computing and communications” (Prahalad & Hamel, 1990, p. 1). This intent allowed the firm to apply its core competencies in ways that opened new markets and brought innovation and benefit to its customers. For a university, strategic intent might be to ‘graduate leaders who are citizen scholars’ or ‘to use translational (applied) research to improve the quality of life in the state.’ The institution identifies its core competencies in light of its intents, i.e., what it does best that contributes to these goals. Resources are then infused to support and expand core competencies in new ways.

Through its strategic intents, an institution is not just following the vagaries of the market or becoming all things to all people. Instead, it is intentionally focused on what it wants to become. Based on its values, the institution builds its vision for the future that encompasses environmental change. It is able to capitalize on environmental change to further its strategic intent, not just adapt to external changes. Strategic intent allows an institution to make decisions about which competencies should be enhanced to meet its agreed upon goal.

## *Integrative Management Systems*

The second caution in constructing a responsive institution is a warning against assuming that an adhocracy management system is sufficient to completely supplant the professional and administrative bureaucracies of the university. The literature reveals that adhocracy and bureaucracy are suitable for two different types of functions, both of which are needed in today's organizations (Autier, 2001, Green 2003). Adhocracies are best for creative practices and bureaucracies are best for routine practices. Thus, they are dedicated to two different activities—innovating and stabilizing (Autier, 2001).

The term bureaucracy commonly brings to mind negative images of rigidity, red tape, delays, and conformity (Van Den Eede, Kenis, & Van De Walle, 2004). During the 1980s, business organizations took sweeping, "bureaucracy busting" measures to de-layer organizations which left many companies in weakened states due to the loss of organizational memory, quality standards, staff expertise, and regulatory procedures that maintain organizational stability. As Adler, Klene, Howe, & Root (1999) write:

Reducing the number of layers, procedures, and staff may be necessary in some cases, but most managers recognize at the same time that large-scale, complex organizations need some hierarchical structure, some formalized procedures, and some staff expertise. These are essential tools to avoid chaos and ensure that employees are not continually reinventing the wheel. (p. 37)

Indeed, Autier (2001) argues that instead of being a stand alone management system or the opposite of bureaucracy, adhocracy is actually part of a paradoxical management system made up of adhocracy and a bureaucratic governing system that makes final decisions at the top. Thus, when coupled with traditional bureaucracy, adhocracy, if misapplied, can ask employees to be risk takers who act autonomously, but later ad-

monish them “either you do what you are told to, or you leave,” creating a paradox for employees (Autier, 2001, p. 16 ).

How, then, can the need for flexibility and innovation be reconciled with the need for stability and quality? Adler, Klene, Howe, & Root (1999) suggest that a complete re-conceptualization of bureaucracy is needed. They argue that there are two types of bureaucracy. The familiar, traditional kind of bureaucracy based on coercion and compliance, and a second type of enabling bureaucracy in which “structures and systems function to support the work of the doers” (Adler, Klene, Howe, & Root, 1999, p. 38). Although enabling bureaucracies may require strong leadership, “power is endorsed from below rather than authorized from above” (Adler, Klene, Howe, & Root, 1999, p. 38).

Again, we see the pattern where unconsidered implementation of an adhocracy within a traditional institution can create unintended negative consequences—in this case a paradoxical situation that pits innovation against quality and stability. The alternative is to intentionally acknowledge the role that bureaucracy plays in regulating core operations. Intentionally moving from a coercive to enabling bureaucracy can allow adhocracy and bureaucracy to function together. When coupled with adhocracy, enabling professional and administrative bureaucracies can create what has been termed a “durable co-existence” (Autier, 2001, 7). Van Den Eede, Kenis, and Van De Walle (2004) note “cross-fertilization of bureaucracy and adhocracy leads to a learning organization (p. 5).”

### *Implementing Adhocracy*

A third caution for building a responsive institution is the importance of intentionally implementing cross-functional or matrix teamwork in ways that preserve the best characteristics of an adhocracy while limiting negative impacts.

Autier (2001) argues that one of the major blind spots of the adhocracy model is the role of decision making and regu-

lation. In adhocracy there is often the belief that people will agree on a solution because they have a common goal. So, mutual adjustment will happen automatically or “as if by magic” within a cross-functional team (Autier, 2001, p. 15). However, different segments of the institution can have very different “implicit models” of the institution, leading to conflict over how problems are viewed and what solutions are best (Tichy’s work as cited in Peterson & White, 1992, p. 177).

Quinn and St. Clair (1997) used a competing values model (flexibility/control and internal/external focus) to identify four values quadrants and the positive characteristics of a responsive organization associated with them. In addition they identified the potentially negative impacts a poorly implemented adhocracy can have on the organization, its work, and its people. Quinn and St.Clair (1997) and Buenger, Daft, Conlon, and Austin (1996) argue that adhocracy characteristics co-evolve in different, sometimes competing, quadrants and developing and maintaining a responsive organization requires balancing the practices underlying all quadrants. Based on the advantages and limitations of adhocracies identified by Quinn and St. Clair, the discussion below suggests some best practices that can be taken to help divert negative outcomes.

## **PEOPLE**

In an ideal adhocracy cross-functional team members are self-reliant and feel empowered. They are active participants and use their emotional intelligence to navigate potential conflicts. In an ineffective adhocracy people feel a loss of authority over the areas for which they have responsibility. The cross-functional initiative is not integrated into the fabric of the institution. Some team members display a sense of ‘self-authorization’ taking on authority for decisions they are not charged with making (Quinn & St. Clair, 1997, pp. 32–33 ).

In an effectively implemented adhocracy model that lessens negative impacts, teams will be appointed by institu-



tional administrators or department heads responsible for the area of the initiative and not by “bystanders.” Teams will be given a specific charge that makes objectives and boundaries clear. There will not be “free floating” teams looking for “problems to solve.” Department or office supervisors will recommend members to represent them on the cross-functional team. Major focus will be on making recommendations that solve a problem and/or on the creation of new opportunities. Ad hoc or cross-divisional teams will be time limited, not ongoing in a way that challenges existing structure and causes conflict. Measures will be taken to lessen the blame game both in team discussion and behind the scenes. Team recommendations will be fully discussed with the offices/departments/and governance structures involved. Owners of the process under consideration will be fully consulted on the final decision regarding a recommendation.

## **CHANGE**

In an ideal adhocracy there is commitment to positive improvement. Cross-functional teams are used to make breakthroughs not possible within individual units or organizational silos. There is a commitment to serving the needs of constituents and a creative, positive orientation. In an ineffective adhocracy people feel overwhelmed by too many initiatives. There is a sense of chaos and change overload leading to a loss of productive focus (Quinn & St. Clair, 1997, pp. 32–33).

To maximize the positive impact of the adhocracy model there will be a clear vision for how the cross-functional initiatives fit into the larger strategic plan of the institution with clear reasons for why initiatives are important to the institution. This big picture will be communicated to all members of the community. Priorities will be set at the administrative level for initiatives that involve overlapping offices so that individuals don't feel overwhelmed by the number of projects they are trying to juggle. There will be timelines developed so that priority

initiatives get first attention with others following as time permits. Individual units and departments will also set priorities to insure important institutional initiatives are fit into their ongoing objectives and planning.

## **GROUPS**

In an ideal adhocracy there are temporary, diverse cross-functional teams that are self-managing. The team is coached and facilitated by its leader. There is an ongoing, continuous challenge of ideas and open discussion. In an ineffective adhocracy there is unresolved conflict within the team and between the team and other segments of the organization. There is unproductive discussion, collusion, and low expectations (Quinn & St. Clair, 1997, pp. 32–33 ).

To increase the potential for effective teamwork discussion will occur at the beginning of the team about perspectives and assumptions regarding the initiative. All segments of the institution that are impacted by the outcome of the recommendations will be included on the team. The involvement of “political” people, those with known ulterior motives related to a recommendation, will be limited. Teams that devolve into cliques will be disbanded.

## **GROWTH**

In the ideal adhocracy there is long term growth planning and the institution grows through its partnerships. In an ineffective adhocracy there is fragmentation and conflict at all levels of the institution (Quinn & St. Clair, 1997, pp. 32–33).

To insure positive growth using the adhocracy model administrators will ensure that campus teams and off-campus teams are aware of each other and there is communication flow. There will be clarity about who is the final decision maker with regard to on- and off-campus recommendations. To avoid conflict, differences of opinion will be openly discussed within

the team and with departments at relevant locations. Teams making recommendations that impact more than one site will have representation from all of the areas impacted. Creative team assignments will be used to encourage personal development and critical thinking among employees about the services they provide, not just to address problems.

## **PERFORMANCE**

In the ideal adhocracy people are rewarded based on their performance, they take on stretch goals that help them grow, they take decisive actions based on what is best for their constituents and those that add value to the organization. In an ineffective adhocracy employees are seen as commodities, they are overworked to the point of ignoring their life balance, are suspicious of fellow employees, and lose the ability to work effectively in teams (Quinn & St. Clair, 1997, pp. 32–33).

To increase the potential for positive outcomes administrators will set priorities among responsibilities and make it clear how the cross-functional initiative fits into overall goals. Participation will be included as part of the employee's responsibilities with release time from regular duties to attend meetings and participate. Team meetings will be held during regularly scheduled working hours. Because cross-functional work can detract from ongoing departmental or office teams, there will be support and recognition of the importance of ongoing work within the employee's academic or non-academic unit so that internal performance doesn't suffer from people being "pulled away."

## **DIRECTION**

In the ideal adhocracy there is dynamic leadership that puts forth a compelling vision for the organization. The management "walks the talk" and adheres to what is professed to be its priorities. In an ineffective adhocracy there is groupthink and

death of dialogue. Minority views become un-discussable (Quinn & St. Clair, 1997, pp. 32–33).

To enhance the effectiveness of using cross-functional teamwork creative discussion is encouraged. Leaders do not prejudge solutions or indicate to the team the result they expect. Experts from outside of the team will be invited in to provide advice and criticism of the process and ideas. The cross-functional team will start with the owner of the initiative (person responsible for its implementation) as leader of the team.

## **PROCESS**

In the ideal adhocracy process leads to improved speed and less work. Adequate human resources are provided and processes are streamlined to be both efficient and effective. In an ineffective adhocracy there is the feeling of impending crisis with the high anxiety and stress that it engenders. There is continuous reengineering and management according to fads (Quinn & St. Clair, 1997, pp. 32–33).

To maximize potential, process redesign doesn't wait until the problem is a crisis. Discussion about the change process and what causes anxiety or stress is encouraged, not dismissed. When the team completes its work and a recommendation is made, completion is celebrated. Teams are not continued after a recommendation or change is made. To do so would challenge the legitimate structure of the organization. Recommendations are supported or explanations of why they are not taken are given to team members who deserve closure.

## **STRUCTURE AND DESIGN**

In the ideal adhocracy the organization is integrated instead of operating in silos. The organization also works in tandem with its external partners. There are cross-functional communications with a flat organization structure. An ineffective adhoc-

racy spawns intense internal politics and conflict. Employees are confused by multiple reporting structures, unclear expectations, and ambiguous roles (Quinn & St. Clair, 1997, pp. 32–33).

To maximize success using an adhocracy design, the team does not take over the roles of other groups or offices. Teams making recommendations work in collaboration with the legitimate structure of the organization and do not usurp decisions. There is participation of those served—both internal and external. An employee’s accountability remains in the team member’s home unit. Measures are taken to insure communication flow between the team and the member’s unit. All relevant groups are represented on the team. If the team becomes too large, subcommittees or core groups are used to keep the process moving. Measures are taken to insure that cross-functional teams don’t have overlapping charges. Relevant administrators, department heads and managers are regularly updated on the discussion of the team.

### *Conclusion*

Universities have been defined as loosely coupled systems (Orton & Weick, 1990; Weick, 1976). Over time two management systems, professional and administrative bureaucracies, have emerged to govern higher education institutions. Traditional bureaucratic methods have not proved to be flexible in meeting the needs of changing environments. This paper argues that adhocracy should not be seen as an alternative to the existing management systems of the institution, but that existing systems need to become enabling bureaucracies that can work with adhocracy to create responsive universities and learning organizations. These universities can be responsive not only to the external environment, but also to maintaining internal congruence in a way that engages the best characteristics of the institution to serve its constituents.

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