Frameworks for Interaction and Disbandments: A Case Study

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Frameworks for interaction provide a basic context for communication within organizations. This case study examines the utility of this concept for examining the circumstances surrounding the proposed disbandment of a department at a university. The issue of downsizing to address organizational decline is an increasingly important one. This study suggests that frameworks for interaction shape the dialogue between interested parties in these often trying organizational events.

Les cadres d'interaction fournissent une contexte de base pour la communication au sein des organisations. Cette étude de cas étudie l'utilité de ce concept afin d'examiner les circonstances qui entourent le démantelement d'un département universitaire. La problématique de la compression structurelle en vue de contrer le déclin organisationnel est de plus en plus importante. Cette étude suggère que les cadres d'interaction orientent les formes de dialogue entre les partis impliqués dans ces événements organisationnels souvent douloureux.

In recent years interest in organizational decline and death has increased in the organizational behavior literature (e.g., Tushman & Romanelli, 1990). Still, we do not know very much about how the internal organizational dialogue relating to issues like downsizing is conducted. Universities throughout the world are not immune to these processes and they provide rich grounds for examining the variety of communication that can occur relating to these issues because of their complexity and tradition of faculty governance. This essay examines the various frames within which debates, discussions, and dialogues occurred recently within a major midwestern university concerning the disbandment of one of its departments.

Perhaps the most difficult of our social issues is the one of sacrifice, partly because of the forces of Lockean individualism (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidley, Tipton, 1991). But there are many situations where the sacrifice of one individual can stave off disaster for the collective. For

One thing that characterized the early stages of the Religious Studies case was a lack of concern for true consultation and established formal university processes. Almost a year after the department was informed that it would be disbanded, the Office of the Provost discovered a document from 1976 that specified procedures and criteria for disbandments. This 1976 document provided a firm basis for making such decisions and was quite comprehensive. Yet nobody could determine if it had ever been made official by a vote of the Academic Council. So, although it had been distributed to units by the Provost's Office in the early 1980s, and it was referred to on a form for curricular changes as a guide, and some units had used it as a basis for subsequent disbandments, the Provost, at times, questioned whether it was a binding document. Needless to say, all of this hopelessly clouded the issues.

To the Provost and the Dean the facts were clear – the unit should be disbanded and at several times they emphatically questioned whether it was in the interest of the university, the college, and the department to have the issue unconscionably delayed, while the greater good was at risk. For a long time the members of my committee had been concerned about the lack of true consultation in these matters. We had come to view ourselves as something of a vestigial appendix – we were often consulted very late in the process and many units were "all but dead" as they no longer had any faculty left by time consultation took place. In other words, trust, such a critical element of any democratic process (Bellah et al., 1991) had been seriously undermined by patterns of formal action.

Often interaction, which is initially based on one of the preceding frames, produces collective sentiments which emerge from the interaction. Thus friendship and other more emotional bases for relationships often mediate interactions within organizations. Traditionally this has been cast as one of the primary bases for informal communication structures within an organizational context. The shared understandings characteristic of these relationships are often dependent on the depth of emotional involvement. The degree of affiliation felt between the interactants determines the temporal stability of this relationship and the degree to which parties' sentiments may override other bases for relationships, such as exchange. Thus, exchange relationships may be essentially the same for friends as for strangers, except for the greater trust and likelihood of being involved in the first instance. However, exchange relationships between individuals with deep emotional ties may be characterized by bad trades.

In the Religious Studies' case sentimental ties between the department faculty and members of academic governance also played a role. Many members of academic governance, including two Religious Studies' faculty

members, were involved in governance because of experiences with their units in past disbandment decisions. Furthermore, the lead faculty member from Religious Studies in pleading their cause to academic governance was especially sympathetic. It was the retirement of this particular faculty member that later provided the Provost's Office with a convenient target of opportunity by reducing the size of the faculty to a level where it could not support itself. The faculty member, perhaps optimistically, had thought his retirement would help the department by paving the way for new blood which would help to revitalize it.

Increasingly over the last decade cultural factors have assumed a central place in our theories of organizations. Culture and communication also are increasingly intertwined concepts. Thus culture is seen as providing an interpretive framework within which communication is possible. The more elaborate and refined the framework, the more effective the communication. Thus, an advantage of strong cultures is their enhancement of shared understanding between actors. Interaction is also provided with a normative base that expresses the underlying cultural values of an organization.

Of course, there is an irony in all this – the very intellectual foundation of the modern university rests largely on Cardinal Newman's 19th century work, which centrally argues for a place for religious studies within the university (Newman, 1982). Religious studies would appear to be at the heart of the modern university's concern with diversity, a concern expressed in this university's Institutional Diversity: Excellence in Action (IDEA) program. This seems to suggest that there is a central underlying value structure that would support the maintenance of a Department of Religious Studies. But, as the Provost stated during a meeting of the Executive Committee of Academic Council, while all students might benefit from having a capstone course in religious studies, this is not something we can afford to do at this university.

The normative situation at the university was further complicated by the existence of three strong cultures which had special ad hoc committees appointed to further their goals: one culture was committed to undergraduate instructions (CRUE, 1988), the second was committed to the goals of an Association of American Universities (AAU) research university (CORRAGE, 1991), and a third was committed to the goals of a land grant university and outreach. As such, the problem at the university was a problem of finding consensus among these conflicting subcultures. Developing underlying cultural criteria for disbandment in the university's pluralistic environment was very difficult.

The normative and formal frameworks are provided for the individual within the larger organizational context. Still, it is possible for an individual to act with others within their unique mix of the foregoing frames, to negotiate among themselves what frame (or combination of frames) will govern their interactions. It is also possible for two interactants to decide mutually on idiosyncratic bases for interaction (Nathan & Mitroff, 1991). This possibility creates the underlying conditions for change (Strauss, 1978). Indeed, the absence of a dominating frame, or the lack of rigid specification when one or another applies, creates the possibility of flexibility within an organization. This is reinforced by the loose coupling of university units which allows them the autonomy to operate within considerably different frames (Weick, 1976).

Relationships formed on the bases of the unique characteristics of actors, in opposition to existing organizational forms, require substantial negotiation among interactants especially conerning forms and desired outcomes. Two parties must communicate with each other in order to arrange the nature of their future interaction by mutual agreement. This negotiation is designed to establish a stable ordering of the relationship governing interactions within it, to move to a state where the underlying bases for the interaction is established. At times this negotiation might be explicit, verging on contractual terms, at other times it might grow out of ongoing interactions. But in the end, the negotiation results in a frame which will apply to subsequent interactions.

Notions underlying negotiated order are also revealed in Giddens' arguments concerning the production and reproduction of institutions (e.g., Poole & McPhee, 1983). In other words, the way roles are performed can change the nature of our institutions. Implicitly, in the early stages of the Religious Studies case, the administration was attempting to get academic governance to accept what was in their view a less deliberative, less cumbersome, and more expeditious process for handling disbandments. In essence, the academic governance was to assent was that a disbandment needed to occur.

Discussion

> So it follows that we believe serious institutional reform in the absence of change in central values is not likely to succeed. (Bellah et al., 1991, p. 288)

> All of these subjects share a common characteristic of academic administration: they never go away; they are rarely solved. (Rosovsky, 1990, p. 39)

> We see policy positions as resting on underlying structures of belief, perception, and appreciation, which we call "frames" ... the frames that shape policy positions and underlie controversy are usually tacit, which means they are exempt from conscious attention and reasoning. (Schön & Rein, 1994, p. 23)

One of the key factors in understanding the Religious Studies' case as it unfolded was the differential ability of the interactants to operate within a variety of frames. Only a few individuals appeared to have the facility for dealing in more than one frame at once. These individuals appeared to have some recurring experience with a variety of differing frames either because of long experience in academic governance, administration, or because of professional experience. This was particularly true of the administration, which appeared to be able to shift their focus on various frames at will to achieve their objectives. Since they also had greater experience with a variety of frames and were more powerful, they were better positioned to negotiate idiosyncratic approaches. In general, leaders appear to have a deep appreciation for framing issues at an intuitive level. They use their understanding of frames to implement organizational change processes, develop visions of the organization (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996), and to manipulate policy debates (Schön & Rein, 1994).

This facility with the various frameworks is somewhat akin to the classic communication concept of rhetorical sensitivity (Hart & Burks, 1972; Hart, Carlson, & Eadie, 1980). Organizations and subcultures have been found to foster certain communication predispositions towards rhetorical sensitivity in their members (Hart, Carlson, & Eadie, 1980). Rhetorical sensitivity is an instrumental concept, stressing that effective persuaders must be able to communicate within the framework of others to achieve their goals. Seeming inconsistency in approach to particular audiences may be perfectly consistent with the accomplishment of the persuader's ultimate goals. The rhetor must have the conceptual flexibility necessary to manage complex interactions such as those found in the Religious Studies' Case. The, perhaps optimistic, assumption being that a rhetorically sensitive approach promises to achieve human understanding and to effect social cohesion. Although it can be used in other ways as well.

Rhetorically sensitive individuals can be best contrasted with noble selves whose primary goal in interaction is expressive and who are unwilling or unable to adapt to different frames for interaction. Most professors were able to operate within the normative framework provided by their profession and within the formal due process frameworks of academic governance, while most lower, mid-level administrators could clearly understand exchange frameworks. However, one of the reasons that many of the parties had only a partial understanding of the Religious Studies' case was that they could not appreciate the other frames within which dialogue was occurring.

Even today, I doubt that more than 50 of the 2300 faculty members at this midwestern university have even a partial understanding of the various twists and turns of the Religious Studies case or the issues involved. Fewer, perhaps only a handful, have a complete understanding of the case. I still run across faculty members who have no idea that the university has been disbanding programs – they think this is something that is being contemplated, not something that is in process.

Furthermore, most of the people who did know, did not necessarily want to know. They had the information thrust upon them because of their positions within academic governance or administration. In fact, there had developed over the last few years an increasingly explicit compact between busy faculty members and administrators – that this sort of thing was what administrators were paid to do and as long as they did not go outside certain boundaries, they could literally do anything they wanted. In a telling incident, at the height of the Religious Studies' Case, and in the midst of gathering financial storm clouds, the Provost gave a detailed presentation to the Academic Senate (which contains all the tenure stream faculty) concerning life after R^3. In other words, he was trying to lay out in detail the future financial planning process and the strategy for dealing with impending budget crises. Roughly 20 people showed up at the presentation, approximately one percent of the faculty. While nonattendance could be attributable to a variety of factors (e.g., the press of work), it reflects a more general societal trend of noninvolvement attributable to a growing alienation of individuals from institutional arrangements in which they feel powerless (Greider, 1992).

If faculty were more involved, to watch and listen, it is doubtful that the lack of concern for formal process, which characterized the early stages of the Religious Studies case, would have occurred. However, in part, what this case reveals is a compact between the parties to avoid direct discussion of the issues that can be traceable to historical events. For example, during the last budget crisis in the early 1980s a special Blue

Ribbon select committee determined a strategy for wide-spread disbandments. But, after considerable internal debate, with resulting bitterness that lasts to this day, the Board of Trustees did not have the political will to follow through with the final plan. With one or two exceptions, most of the units that were targeted in this plan are still weak and would probably be the prime targets of any new plan. A year after the Religious Studies' case peaked, the Board was again asked to decide if it had the political will to eliminate colleges within the university. The answer was no.

Avoiding direct discussion was a conscious strategy on the part of the administrators, the most sophisticated communicators in the issue. A year after these events occurred the then ex-Provost stated in a colloquium that the Provost's Office had believed in communicating subtly, using complex and fuzzy language, thereby avoiding direct confrontation of issues. This last fall, in a meeting of university administrators, the current Provost noted that various university acronyms and code words would often be appropriated by other groups within the university community and come to have a meaning that distorted her office's original intent. She noted that periodically her office needed to change acronyms to ensure that they embodied her message and not the consensual, common understanding of various groups, so critical to effective communication.

Schön and Rein (1994) have provided a thoughtful analysis of how different frames impede the resolution of policy problems, especially in university settings. Most importantly, a lack of recognition of the underlying frames for dialogue of the differing parties leads to a lack of recognition that facts and arguments rest on tacit assumptions of our own frames and may have little significance or value for those operating in different frames. Without a recognition of these differing frames it is not possible to resolve policy disputes. This of course, may not be a problem to powerful actors who can ignore others and impose solutions.

While Schön and Rein (1994) recognize that reliable communication may at times deepen disputes when parties truly understand the disparity of their positions, it is still a critical condition for further inquiry that may be the only hope of adjustments and of pragmatic resolution of controversies. Too often university administrators do not listen to "back talk," assuming that individuals are willfully denying their arguments ("they just don't understand our frame"). Thus, a failure to engage in dialogue may ultimately be a denial of the pluralistic intellectual aspirations of universities. There has also been a growing recognition that organization's are splintered into different functional groupings and that

"occupational communities" form subcultures within organizations (Johnson, 1993).

Social designing relies on recognizing problems, feedback, reinvention, and recognizing the intentions of the goals of the other party, all of which require at least a minimal level of communication. In the end there must be a convergence of meaning concerning what is to be done (Donnelon, Gray, & Bougon, 1986) even if there are different interpretations of the reasons for action. Schön and Rein (1994) suggest there are four main ways of dealing with policy disputes: marketing and persuasion, negotiation, co-design, or continuation with possible escalation.

In the subject example, when the issues were directly discussed, the Office of the Provost would shift the grounds whenever they were engaged with debate within one frame. So, the first rounds of discussions on the case were couched purely in terms of exchange, which was unacceptable to academic governance, as a sole ground for deciding the case. As a result, almost immediately, a formal frame was applied to the case. With the increasing intrusion of the courts into United States university life, concern for due process in decision making is increasingly important and with it a heightened awareness of the formal frame. If our aim is to protect and to preserve individual units, then this frame can extend the life of a unit. In fact, if lawyers had become involved in the Religious Studies case, they would have been kept busy for years, given the early lack of concern for process in the case. But as Bellah et al. (1991) point out, this is not a very satisfactory solution to the fundamental problem – someone has to sacrifice for the good of the collective. It also seduces us away from the substantive issues, the merits of the case.

Ignoring due process also increases the emotional level of an already distressing issue, increasing the collective sentiments of faculty and further reducing the probability that there will be real commitment to any solution, since it is likely to be perceived as being arbitrarily imposed by a higher power. The easiest way for an administrator to make a situation much worse is not to follow the established process because it violates both frames. In many ways administrators should act like prosecuting attorneys, realizing that even the guiltiest of criminals is entitled to a fair trial and should not be summarily executed. In other words, administrators have an obligation to make a case. Especially on already sentimentally charged issues, like disbandments, every effort should be made to follow established practice and precedent. This may be one of the few occasions in which otherwise distracted faculty demand that administrators explain themselves and their prior actions (Kanter, 1983).

Of course, another alternative is to create a strong institutional culture that can guide decision making and override concerns with individual interests (Bellah et al., 1991). This normative frame, then, would determine the substance of the debate – the criteria that should be applied to disbandments. After the bitter experience with the Religious Studies case, the Provost's Office decided that a vision of the university and a reorientation of its goals (Tushman & Romanelli, 1990) needed to be created before proceeding with more systematic, widespread disbandments. There was an explicit recognition that a widespread consensus about values was needed and once this consensus emerged individual self-interest could be overridden by overarching institutional concerns. As Bellah et al., (1991) point out this may be the only grounds on which to build an approach to systematically dealing with fundamental problems. The real question is, in a pluralistic culture, or one like this university that has at least three strong and at times contradictory cultures, Is a unifying vision possible? In postmodern organizations the increasing complexity of frames can make for a feeling of powerlessness, a sense that we are lost in a sea of tempting but ultimately unsatisfying possibilities (Eisenberg & Goodall, 1993). Even more to the point, when the crisis is upon us, it may be too late to simultaneously build the most powerful consensual framework for dealing with it.

But, for the moment, assuming there is a strong culture within an institution, can it override self-interest, exchange frameworks? Most of us have ties to other institutions/cultures that also bind us, and universities, especially large research universities, are especially vulnerable in this regard. Most of our rewards, our exchange relationships, are determined by our profession. The profession determines journal publications, grants, and other things that the university uses to determine merit and tenure decisions. This reward structure may distract us from examining the institutions of which we are members (Bellah et al., 1991).

However in many ways for the modern university researcher, especially in the hard sciences, the university is the distraction. If we are socialized into any culture, if we have any loyalty, it is usually first to our profession, as Bellah and colleagues (1991) concede. When the university makes a judgment about a department, it also making a judgment about one of our most fundamental bases for identity – our profession. So the question is, Can any institutionally normatively based framework overcome this fundamental professional tie that rests on both exchange and normative frameworks?

In the end, there is also a real question of divided loyalties with no agreement about what the common interest is that must be protected. In

this situation the only hope of constructive resolution lies in an understanding of the various frames at play, which is in turn a precondition for what has been termed revaluation, or the creation of a synthetic frame encompassing the interests of all of the parties (Putnam & Holmer, 1992). Unfortunately, the most likely outcome is for faculty to operate in limited frames, and university administrators, partly in reaction, to use their power and manipulative skills to do what they feel is necessary to protect their institutions.

Postscript

In the summer following the events described, both the President and Provost resigned, in part because of the difficulty of getting the Board to address the issues described. In the ensuing year neither academic governance nor the administration dealt with the underlying structural problems revealed here. In February of that same year, in response to a question posed in an open student forum, the new Provost (the previous Associate Provost) stated that there was no longer a moratoria on admission to the Department of Religious studies, which had yet to receive any replacement lines. Three years later, across the board budget cuts continue as well as the odd consolidation of units, a process which the administration has discovered meets with less resistance than formal disbandments.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I would like to thank Dr. Sally Johnson for her comments on an earlier version of this manuscript.

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