

Institutional Strategy and Knowledge Sharing in Higher Education

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Abstract

Organizational reform is often discussed from the perspective of leadership and management, but it has long been pointed out that the interpretation and learning by members are much more crucial in organizational reform to achieve the effectiveness. This study aims to describe the process of implementing institutional strategies for quality improvement of teaching and research in colleges and universities as a consequence of knowledge sharing and collective understandings of the strategies among the member of staff and faculty. We examine what kind of interpretation and learning can promote actions towards the achievement of goals shown in the strategic plan. To this purpose, this study endeavors to describe the knowledge transfer process, focusing on how each department in the institution interprets the strategy and how they exchanged them with other departments.

Qualitative surveys are performed at two Japanese institutions which are renowned for successful institutions with presidential leadership in the journal for university executives. The results indicate that organizational learning capabilities determine the level of collective understandings. The results imply that shared vocabularies or “learning” in Carlile (2004) play an essential role to interpret the goals and to create shared meanings among the member. Carlile’s model of organizational knowledge flows consist of three conditions as the syntactic, semantic and pragmatic boundary. The theoretical implication of this study suggests that semantic boundary is crucial for knowledge transfer at the collegial organization such as higher education institutions. Therefore, the implication for managers and executives is that focusing on learning and translating knowledge will contribute to engaging faculty and staff to the institutional strategic plan.

Introduction

Recent reforms in higher education have promoted policies that emphasize the role of leadership and management. For example, the role of the president was strengthened through the reform of the Education Act in some East Asian countries (Taiwan, Korea and Japan). It reflects the naive ideas that the reason why university reforms are still behind than expected is attributed to the governance, and strong presidential leadership can improve the performance. The view also reflects the implicit premise that members can perform well and achieve the goals if appropriate decisions have been made. However, in general, decisions made by an organization are not always properly implemented. University organizations, in particular, are characterized by the fact that most decisions are not implemented because the patterns of distribution of attention in the decision-making process are unstable (March and Olsen 1986). Strategic plan or role of management is too much emphasized for the improvement of quality of teaching, there is almost no effect on day-to-day practices on the campus (Taylor et al. 2007).

Organizational reform is often discussed from the perspective of management, but it has long been pointed out that the interpretation and learning of members are much more critical in its realization (Kezar 2005). In particular, the success of the education reform project depends on how its members understand their roles and their meanings (Dee and Leišytš 2017). There are also studies that focus on Boundary-work or Boundary-organization as essential personnel and organizations that play a role in promoting the learning of such members (Lamont and Molnar 2002). However, there are little studies that confirm the factor for promoting collective understandings among the member in the organization.

Organizational learning is one of the essential concepts to understand how institutional reforms in higher education institutions are accelerated or inhibited in universities (Kezar 2005). Organizational features that possessed in universities such as high level of specialization, structural differentiation, and extensive decentralization can disrupt learning and block the flow of knowledge from one unit to another (Dee and Leišytš 2016).

The purpose of this study is to examine what kind of interpretation and learning will promote actions towards the achievement of goals shown in the strategic plan. To this purpose, this study tries to describe the knowledge transfer process, focusing on how each department in the university interprets the strategy and how it is exchanged with other departments. Specifically, qualitative surveys are performed at two Japanese institutions which are renowned for successful institutions with presidential leadership in the journal

for university executives. Those two institutions have published the campus-wide strategic plan for the quality enhancement of teaching and learning in the past 5 years respectively, and they are recognized as successful universities in terms of exerting presidential leadership. Interview data were collected from faculty and staff who are not in charge in a managerial position like dean, department chair or section manager over the past 5 years, and analyzed with grounded theory approach.

Methodologies

The research sites have quite similar institutional profiles including both mid-size private university with approximately 8,500 students and 160 full-time academics in Japan. The criteria for selecting those institutions included the following: (1) the institutions had developed a campus-wide strategic plan that included goals to enhance number of applicants/enrollments and the quality of teaching, (2) the institutions had covered in the journal for senior executives of colleges and universities as the successful institutions in growing the number of applicants in more than 5 consecutive years. In short, both institutions are recognized as successful universities in terms of exerting presidential leadership. Interview data were collected from 8 academics and 8 professional staff from two selected universities who are not in charge in a managerial position like dean, department chair or section manager over the past 5 years. The interview protocol included 3 semi-structured questions, (1) how did you interpret the institutional strategies when the president made it public, (2) how did you share and exchange your ideas on your interpretation of the strategies with your colleagues, (3) how did you being involved in the part of practices that contribute to the goals of the strategies. Those questions allowed the participants to describe their experiences of being involved in the educational reforms to fulfill the criteria described in the institutional strategies. The study used grounded theory approach, which included deductive and inductive coding.

Results

Table 1 shows the list of the concepts generated from the coding of transcripts. Concepts that were shown in all research participants are included in the valid concepts in Table 1. 7 concepts for institution A and 5 concepts for institution B were generated, respectively.

Table 1: List of the concepts derived from the transcripts

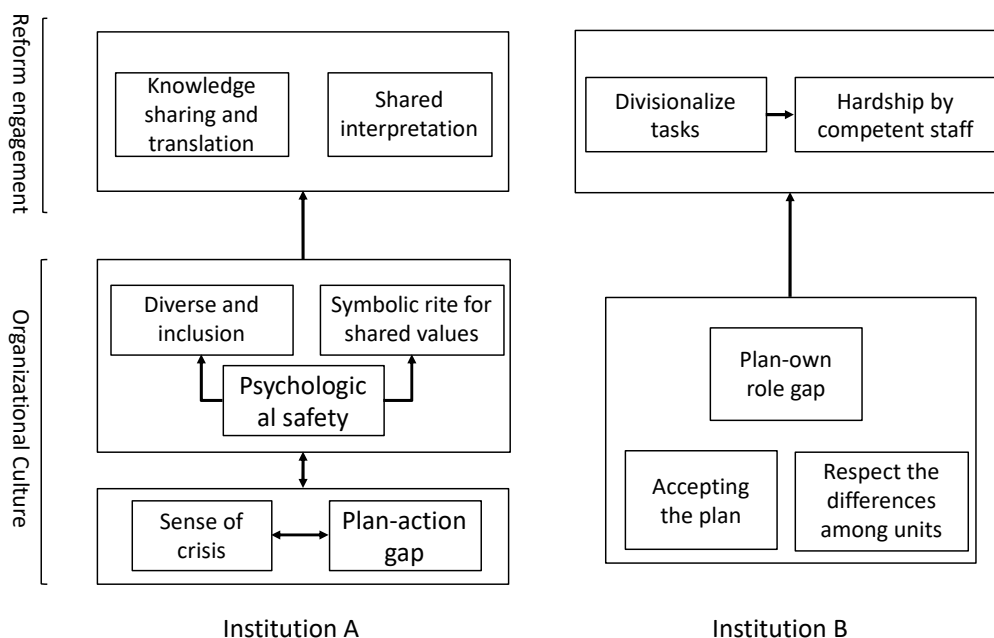
		Category	Concept	Definition
Institution A	Organizational Culture	Top-bottom relationship	Sense of crisis	Accepting the sense of institutional crisis sent by top management team based on their recognition.
			Plan-action gap	Understanding the strategic plan is not effective for the reforms despite knowing it.
		Routines embedded in each unit	Psychological safety	Informal routines for new members preserved to meet and know with people in and out of the unit.
			Symbolic rite for shared values	Formal and informal routines for new members to accept the shared values in the unit.
			Diverse and inclusion	Diverse ideas are respected but the effort for integration is also retained to achieve the goals of the unit.
		Reform engagement	Interpretation of the plan	Shared interpretation
	Knowledge sharing and translation			Translate the plan compatible with the strengthens in the unit, or creating a new meaning of the plan by exchanging and sharing the knowledge by the member.
Institution B	Organizational Culture	Dividing the tasks	Accepting the plan	Understanding the strategic plan and knowing it as a piece of information.
			Plan-own role gap	Understanding the expectation from the top management team but cannot find the relationship with their own roles in the unit.
			Respect the differences among units	Respect the differences of priorities, roles and tasks among units, and preserve no intervention policy from other units.
	Reform engagement	Interpretation of the plan	Divisionalize tasks	Campus-wide plans are divided into small tasks and assigned to specific member or units who are capable to do them.
			Hardship by competent staff	Unit member who are competent in a specific area are engaged in the hardship tasks to achieve the goals related to the campus-wide plan.

Source: the author

The most important results shown in Table 1 are that the generated concepts were completely separated into each institution, which implies two institutions are distinct and working with separate mechanism or dynamics in the organizations. Informal network

and shared knowledge play the crucial roles to support the translation process of the campus-wide strategic plan in Institution A. This function is embedded in the informal process in each unit that is separated from formal routines or interactions. Therefore, unit member can interpret the strategic plan on their own view and start to exchange their interpretation with peers, which enable to generate collective understandings of strategic plan with the sense of link to their strengths. So, the plans are translated into different forms of the goals coinciding with the strengths and carried out by each unit collectively. In contrast, specific person or unit take the important roles to achieve the goals described in the strategic plan in Institution B. The activities are separated from other member or unit, competent person or unit are designated by the top management team directly and engaged in the projects. If the designated members are not capable to achieve the goals, some of the plans are failed to be accomplished.

Figure 1: Storyline and relationship among the concepts



Source: the author

Discussion

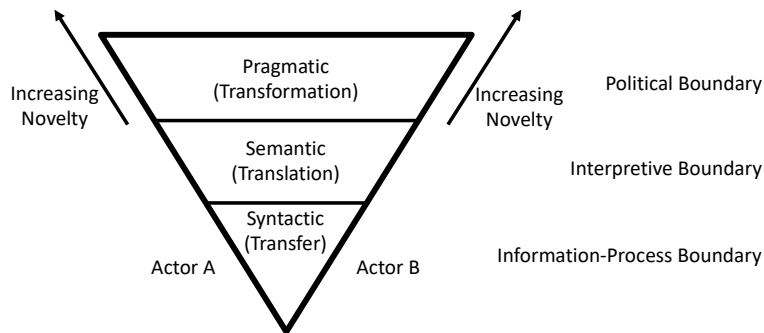
Different approaches were taken between the institutions in terms of faculty and staff engagement for the practices to enhance the quality of teaching. Institution A has an

informal communication network established in some academic departments and the administrative divisions before the strategies are formulated, and the network has been maintained by the routines and shared values embedded in the team. The group of faculty or staff preserve a function that creates shared vocabularies or meanings through learning and communication about their day to day practices on teaching and research. The function contributes to accumulating collective understandings as well as the flow of knowledge across the school, department or divisions. When the member faces the new plan shown by the senior executives, they usually start the new conversation outside the formal duties or practices about the abstract meanings written in the strategies. The shared vocabularies make the knowledge transfer smoother between the boundaries, which contribute to accumulating collective understanding in the institution. Therefore, the member acquires the ability to understand the strategies, to adapt to it, to discover which practices correspond to the strategies, and to suggest a more effective way to shape the strategies.

On the other hand, campus-wide strategic plan tends to be carried out by leading individuals who are competent in each topic shown in the strategies at institution B. Executive member sometimes request faculty and staff individuals directly to participate in the designated projects as a project leader or a member. So the success or failure of the projects depends on the personal traits of members. In this case, the expert knowledge of the leader is hardly transferred to other colleagues, and organizational knowledge is seldom updated. The executive team of institution B tends to recruit talented faculty or staff from outside when there is no candidate to take the role of project leader.

Figure 1 summarizes the difference in the implementation process of strategies between two institutions. The results imply that shared vocabularies or “learning” in Carlile (2004) play an important role to interpret the goals and to create shared meanings among the member (Figure 2). If there are no collective understandings in institution A, the member of faculty and staff cannot find their role and it is difficult to be involved in the organizational change process. Carlile’s model of organizational knowledge flows consist of three conditions as the syntactic, semantic and pragmatic boundary. The theoretical implication of this study suggests that semantic boundary is crucial for knowledge transfer at the collegial organization such as higher education institutions. So the implication for managers is that focusing on learning and translating knowledge will contribute to engaging faculty and staff to the institutional strategic plan.

Figure 2: Three types of knowledge across boundaries



Source: adapted from Carlile (2004) p.558

Concluding Remarks

In this study, we tried to clarify what kind of learning would promote actions for its achievement when the organization member was shown the campus-wide strategic plans. Results are summarized as follows: (1) knowledge transfer between members is promoted in creating common vocabularies, (2) knowledge transfer between departments is promoted in creating commonly interpretable understandings. However, this study is at the preliminary research stage, and it may not be possible to say that theoretical saturation has been reached. Particularly, if the managers foster appropriate conditions which make the group of boundary workers performs easier (Gieryn 1986), boundary workers work as a catalyst to flow the knowledge across the department or sections, but this study is still trying to specify who is the boundary workers and its function, additional qualitative survey is underway.

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