The Box-Of-Chocolate Phenonema: Using narratives to improve staff morale in large organisations

Carol Ainley, Paul Bason, Carola Boehm, Mo Din, Helen Jones, Rita Lewin, Helen Rowe, Mark Shutt, Bev Stevens

Manchester Metropolitan University

Presented by: Carola Boehm, Manchester Metropolitan University

Research Domain: Management

Abstract

In 2010 a group of senior managers of the Manchester Metropolitan University, one of the largest universities in the United Kingdom with over 4000 members of staff, started a project to explore ways of encouraging a more positive attitude amongst the wider staff community and to begin to change perceptions of the organisation, i.e to change the cultural narrative of their own institution.

The objectives of the project was to use narratives - as a richer set of data - to provide a deeper understanding of how staff develop different identification factors in relation to the institution, locally as well as corporate and to devise and implement a strategy that would allow the institution to create a new and more positive narrative about itself. The investigation resulted in the development of a major institutional-wide initiative, which is in its early stages. (141 words)

Outline

In the recent past, there have been several indications that the current discourse within the HE workforce is structured around unhappiness (real and imagined): "Go around your university or college and ask the first 10 people who you meet how their morale is. The response will always be 'rock-bottom'. Then ask them what they are working on. The responses will be full of life, of optimism and of enthusiasm for the task in hand." (Watson 2009:1) Watson goes on to say that these two sets of responses don't compute; that "the first is somehow unthinking and ideological, and the second unguarded and sincere."

Watson's book on University morale, along with a general review of the literature around this subject area, indicates that the issue of morale within the culture of organisations and the disconnect between the local and the organisational is largely a global phenomenon. This is true not just of Higher Education broadly or the authors' institution specifically, but runs through large institutions in contemporary

society . As Schoch (2006:1) cynically states, "somewhere between Plato and Prozac, happiness stopped being a lofty achievement and became an entitlement". Using the New Economic Foundation's factors of personal and social well-being (NEF 2009), the United Kingdom is ranked 13th out of 22 European nations, with the happiest places being Denmark, Switzerland and Norway. In his "Geography of Bliss", Weiner (2008) maintains that one of the happiest places internationally is Iceland, ad that it is "the glue which holds the whole enterprise together is culture. It makes all the difference" (Weiner, in Watson 2009:14)

In the UK Higher Education, this 'glue' could be said to be in a major state of chemical alteration. The HE sector has continually been undergoing major change since 1992 but increasingly from 2010, this trajectory maps a journey from Higher Education being still seen to be a public good to a more unclear future in which universities are rapidly gearing up to be part of a market providing a service for consumers. Governmental policies have created a need for substantial "institutional transformation". A definition of institutional transformation includes, as Tuchman asserts, the intentional and deep altering of the culture of the institution by "changing select underlying assumptions and institutional behaviours, processes, and products" (Eckel, in Tuchman:4-5). Thus with major changes in institutional culture, it follows (according to Weiner's cultural prerogative) that the morale of this sector's staff could probably have been foreseen to unravel to an all-time low.

From 1992 – 2007 , universities "had been forged into a state 'system' largely paid for by the state and subject to extensive central control."(Graham: 21) "British universities had been changed very significantly, and though the attitude of the universities themselves was largely one of passive compliance, very many (…) objected profoundly to the changes that had come about and believed them to be largely detrimental and possibly irreversible. It was common to hear the complaint that from being the best in the world, the British University was now at most second rate" (Graham:22)

It leaves the possibly satirical but pragmatic human resource question of what is a "quantum of happiness" (Watson:134)? What is the smallest unit of happiness that individuals can experience, below which a situation becomes impossible to bear?

If there are identifiable aspects that have a negative force on institutional morale, are there - on the opposite end of the scale - identifiable positive forces that allow academic identity factors to be maximised? What drives academics to remain in academia, to seemingly live the paradox of continually criticising institutional and sector developments but largely remaining in the same sector - and often in their own institutions for long periods of time? Using Pink's three factors of motivation, 'Autonomy-Mastery-Purpose' (Pink 2009), one might map these to the higher education sector as a whole which: a) still has a relative high amount of autonomy (still) embedded in university structures; b) still is inherently a learning community

supporting mastery; and c) still is one which continues to purposefully contribute to student's own academic development and the learning communities at large.

Do these three factors contribute to the balancing of the negative forces embodied by political initiatives to cope with the global economic pressures? Do they still allow Universities to be experienced as both large (institutional) and local cultures, similar to "turbulent Italian Renaissance Towns"? (Aitken in Watson 2000, 85)

The project group (SMDP2010) was interested to explore whether this disconnect between the local and the institutional could be either shifted to a more holistic perception of institutional self or utilised to develop a pride in diversity and 'local-ness' whilst seeing this as part of the whole.

There was an opportunity for this project to probe the findings of an institutional survey a little deeper by interrogating contradictions and exploring some of the reasons for the responses evident in the survey. Through a literature review, series of focus groups and video reportage, the SMDP sought to understand the issues around identity formation within universities generally and specifically at MMU to identify potential strategies towards shifting to a more positive organisational identity.

Furthermore, the group devised and embarked on the design of a university initiative, aimed at allowing an institutional narrative to be created that would maintain connection between the big and small narratives, the institutional and the local ones, an initiative which set out to utilising Watson's last but most significant recommendation, "creating a sense of corporate commitment that taps into both balance between al altruism and self-interest." (Watson 2009:140)

The paper will describe the results of the project, which collected evidences from a institutional-wide staff survey, from structured focus groups, from a talking-heads video that gave individuals the opportunity to have their thoughts to be recorded and a literature review, as well as outline the new initiative, developed from the finding of this project. (973 words)

References

Watson, D (2009) *The Question of Morale: Searching for Happiness in University Life.* Open University Press.

Schoch, R (2006) The *secret of Happiness: 3000 years of searching for the good life.* London:profile Books.

NEF New Economic Foundation (2009) *National Accounts of Well-being: Bringing Real Wealth Onto the Balance Sheet*. London: NEF.

Weiner, E. (2008) *Geography of Bliss*. London: Black Swan.

Tuchman, G. (2009) *Wannabe U: Inside the Corporate University*, University of Chicago Press.

Pink, D. (2010) RSA Animate – Drive: The surprising truth about what motivates us. http://www.cognitivemedia.co.uk/wp/?p=289 Last accessed June 2011.

Oswald, A. (2007) These are good days to be in academia, *Independent Education,* 15 March:3.

Graham, G. (2008), *Universities, the Recovery of an Idea*, Imprint Academic

Bibliography

Association of American Colleges and Universities. Diversity Web, an interactive resource hub for higher education, http://www.diversityweb.org/ Last accessed June 2011.

Auty, C. (2008) Managing Stress in the HE workplace, AUA *Newslink,* 59(1).

Brabazon, T. (2007) *The University of Google*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Cooperrider, D. L. Resources for Getting Appreciative Inquiry Started: An Example OD Proposal. *OD Practitioner 28, no.102* (1996): 23.

Cuthbert, R. (ed.) (1996) *Working in Higher Education.* Buckingham: SRHE and OUP.

Denning, S. (2005) *The Leader's guide to Storytelling: Mastering the Arts and Discipline of Business Narrative.* San-Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Delanty, G. (2008) Academic identities and Institutional Change, in R. Barnett and R. Di Napoli (eds) *Changing Identities in Higher Education: Voicing Perspectives,* (124-33). London: Routledge.

Florida, R. (2003) *The Rise of the Creative Class.* Basic Books.

Frand, J. (2000) The information age mindset: changes in students and implications for higher education, *Educause Review* 35(5):14-24.

Graham, G. (2008), *Universities, the Recovery of an Idea*, Imprint Academic

Hamel, G. (2007) *The future of Management.* Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.

Kreber, C. (ed, 2009) *The University and its Disciplines. Teaching and learning within and beyond disciplinary Boundaries.* New York: Routledge.

McCaffery, P. (2004) *The Higher Education Manager's Handbook. Effective leadership and management in universities and colleges*. New York: Routledge.

McMahon, D. (2006) *The Pursuit of Happiness: A history from the Greeks to the Present.* London: Penguin.

NEF New Economic Foundation (2009) *National Accounts of Well-being: Bringing Real Wealth Onto the Balance Sheet*. London: NEF.

Oswald, A. (2007) These are good days to be in academia, *Independent Education,* 15 March:3.

Pink, D. (2010) RSA Animate – Drive: The surprising truth about what motivates us. http://www.cognitivemedia.co.uk/wp/?p=289 Last accessed June 2011.

Reissner, S. (2005) Learning and innovation: a narrative analysis, *Journal for Organizational Change Management*, 1.(5): 482-495.

Robinson, K. (2010) RSA Animate - Changing Education Paradigms, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zDZFcDGpL4U Last accessed June 2011.

Shattock, M. (2003) *Managing successful Universities.* Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill.

Society for Research into Higher Education. http://www.srhe.ac.uk/ Last accessed June 2011.

Tuchman, G. (2009) *Wannabe U: Inside the Corporate University*, University of Chicago Press.

Warner, D. and Palfreyman, D. (2003) *Managing Crisis.* Maidenhead: OUP.

Watson, D. (2000) *Managing Strategy*. Buckingham: OUP.

Watson, D (2008) Universities behaving badly? *Higher Education Review,* 40(3):3-14.

Watson, D (2009) *The Question of Morale: Searching for Happiness in University Life.* Open University Press.

Weiner, E. (2008) *Geography of Bliss*. London: Black Swan.

Whitchurch, C. and Gordon, G. (eds., 2010) *Academic and Professional Identities in Higher Education*. London: Routledge.