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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 most of previous studies have pointed out the interpretation and learning by members are crucial for organizational change. This study aims to describe the process of carrying out the 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. Based on our qualitative surveys at two “successful” institutions, the results indicate that organizational learning capabilities determine the level of collective understandings. The results imply that shared vocabularies or learning defined in Carlile (2004) play an essential role to interpret the goals and to create shared meanings among the member. The theoretical implication of this study is that semantic boundary is crucial for knowledge transfer at the organization with ambiguous goals and objectives such as higher education institutions.

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Introduction

Recent reforms in higher education have promoted policies that emphasize the role of leadership and management. 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. Universities are characterized by the fact that most decisions are not carried out 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 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 Leišytė 2016).

The purpose of this study is to examine what kind of interpretation and learning promote the 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 institutions which are renowned for successful institutions in terms of

exerting presidential leadership in the journal for university executives. 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 in Japan with approximately 8,500 students and 160 full-time academics. The criteria for selecting those institutions included the following: (1) the institutions had developed a campus-wide strategic plan that included goals to enhance the number of applicants/enrollments and the quality of teaching, (2) the institutions had covered in the journal for senior executives as the successful institutions. 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 delineate 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 and Discussion

7 concepts for institution A and 5 concepts for institution B were generated from the coding of transcripts, respectively. The generated concepts were completely separated into each institution, which implies two institutions are distinct and working with separate mechanism or dynamics in the organization. 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, the 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 the 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, a 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.

The results imply that shared vocabularies or learning defined in Carlile (2004) play an important role to interpret the goals and to create shared meanings among the member. 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 is that semantic boundary is crucial for knowledge transfer at the collegial organization with ambiguous goals and objectives such as higher education institutions. The implication for managers is that focusing on learning and translating knowledge will contribute to engaging faculty and staff to the institutional strategic plan.

Concluding Remarks

This study examined what kind of learning promote actions for goals 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 stage, and theoretical saturation has not been reached yet. 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 how they work.