A Case Study:
Accreditation Process Reviewed Through the Lens of Organizational Change Models and the Five Stages of Grief

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ABSTRACT

Kurt Lewin's work helps us understand organizational change and Elizabeth Kubler-Ross' work gives us insight into personal change. Their work can help us understand the many dimensions of change that occur in our environment. Lewin contends that change can be planned for and Kubler-Ross proposes that change, even unexpected change, can be managed. This article will take a closer look, over a four-year period, at the process within a college unit moving towards national accreditation through the lens of the work of these two well-known researchers.

BACKGROUND

In her 1969 publication, *On Death and Dying*, Elisabeth Kuebler-Ross introduced what has become universally known as T*he Five Stages of Grief*. These stages, processes, or steps, whichever terms we wish to apply to the "set of circumstances" that people experience, are unique to each individual and can be used to provide a perspective for each individuals own loss process. "Grief is a complicated, multi-dimensional, individual process that can never be generalized in five steps" (TLC Group, 2006). This model recognizes that there is no unique pattern for an individuals' emotional response as a consequence to great loss or life-change situations, but that having a description of emotional responses at different levels or stages assists us in communicating and sharing our thoughts and feelings. Chapman (2010) compared Kuebler-Ross' five stages of grief to "a change model" used in helping individuals understand and deal with personal reaction to trauma. To set the stage for discussing how these five stages of grief can be utilized and applied to a college accreditation process, a general discussion of Kuebler-Ross' five stages of grief follows.

The Kuebler-Ross model is divided into five different stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. These stages are fluid and may not be linear in their appearance as individuals follow their own unique path when coming to terms with death or change. Denial, one of the first stages in the grieving process, can be described as "a conscious or unconscious refusal to accept facts, information, reality, etc. relating to the situation concerned" (Chapman, 2010). As individuals are thrust into this stage, feelings can be so overpowering that in order to cope with the shock of reality, denial becomes a natural coping mechanism (Grief Cycle, 2011). Postponing all efforts of dealing with the loss or change becomes uppermost and there is no "normal" timetable for grieving (Smith & Segal, 2012). Not everyone goes through any or all of these stages in order to heal from grief or accept a change; they are merely signposts available for understanding feelings.

Anger, the second stage in the grieving process or change model, is an overwhelming emotion that can be "directed at doctors, nurses, messengers, loved ones" or employers, supervisors and colleagues (DIY , 2012). Explosive outbursts can occur over situations that, at other times, would not cause a ripple. Thoughtless and impulsive choices may be made during this time (Barteck, 2010). Understanding this anger can help others not take affront at words or actions directed toward them by the individual experiencing this stage and assists in holding oneself detached from that anger (Chapman, 2010). Bargaining is the third stage experienced in this cycle. Individuals trying to understand their situation often explore ways of "striking a deal with higher powers" in order to postpone

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the inevitable (Chapman, 2010). In an employment situation, an individual may display higher performance traits in order to avoid the inevitable (Change-Management-Coach, 2012). Depression signals the beginning of the fourth stage in the grieving process whereby individuals begin recognizing the truth of the situation and accepting reality (Chapman, 2010). Employees going through changes at work may become discouraged and unmotivated and absenteeism tends to increase during this stage (Change-Management-Coach, 2012). The last stage in the Kubler-Ross model is acceptance. It is during this stage that people begin to experience objectivity of the situation and gain some detachment or resignation. An individual might not like this new reality but they learn to live with it (DIY Stress Relief, 2012).

There are many other theoretical models that emphasize different aspects of stages of grief: Charles A. Carrs' model highlights individual empowerment and guidelines for caregivers; Debbie Messer Zlatins' model uses "life themes" in the dying process;, John M. Fisher highlights a individuals self-perception, locus of control and past experiences to create that persons anticipation of future events; and William McDougall stressed personal uniqueness as an individual centered approach (Jennings, Gemmill, Bohman & Lamb, Spring).

Kurt Lewin's change theory involves a three-step model for managing change in the 21st century workplace: unfreeze, transition or change, freeze or refreeze. Although this model was developed in the 1940's, it is still relevant today (Connelly, 2013). Lewin's three-step change management model provides a relatively easy and for some, too simplistic, theory for producing changes (Connelly, 2013). The change process has been compared by Lewin to that of changing the shape of a block of ice in order to obtain a cone of ice: "First, you must melt the ice to make it amenable to change (unfreeze). Then you must mold the iced water into the shape you want (change) and finally, you must solidify the new shape (refreeze)" (MindTools.com, 2013). The first stage or phase is the unfreeze stage. In this stage, the preparation for change (or reassessment of current practices) begins, not only in the individual, but also for the organization that expects the change. In order to prepare for a change, an incentive or motivation for that change needs to be identified and communicated to everyone involved. Arguments for and arguments against the change should also be identified so that the reasons for the overwhelming need to change become the driving force (Force Field Analysis) of the change. Force field analysis can be accomplished by enhancing the driving forces that guide conduct away from the existing situation; reducing the restraining forces that negatively affect the movement from the existing situa-

tion; and then, finding a combination of the two (CurrentNursing.com, 2011).

The transition, change, implementation or movement stage is the second phase of Lewin's change theory. In this stage, the process or reactions of individuals toward the new change can be seen and felt. During this stage, individuals are often fearful of the unknown and need to have time to understand and work with the changes. Communication and support is essential during this phase in order for individuals to be able to provide solutions for some mistakes that might be made in the change process. Using role models, training, and coaching all become reliable forms of providing support (Connelly, 2013). People may need to take on new duties or responsibilities during this stage in order for the effective transition to occur.

The last stage in the change model is freezing; some authors use the word refreezing to also describe this third phase. This third phase is as important as the first stage because unless the change is allowed to "settle in and become routine" there is always the fear of backsliding into old ways of doing things. So this stage is about creating stability once the changes have been made, reinforcing those changes and maintaining the changes into the future (Morrison, 2010).

The next section will discuss the psychology of change in a case study of an institution where the behavior of the faculty going through the process of national accreditation can be viewed and described using Elizabeth Kubler-Ross' Stages of Grief and Kurt Lewin's Change Management Model.

CASE STUDY

The literature tells us that organizational change has several dimensions; one such facet is not always planned for by leadership during organizational change projects. That dimension is the change that needs to occur in the minds of the persons affected by the reorganization. Because it is invisible, this cognitive and affective change is often not attended to and the resulting behaviors can slow the process considerably and possibly cause the change to fail.

The subject of this case study is a university college that began its organizational change towards national accreditation four years ago. The first year was essentially a period of denial for the faculty or as Kubler-Ross would describe a period of conscious or unconscious denial of the facts or reality. The college had just welcomed a new Dean who came from an essentially larger university with ideas of raising the stature of the college unit within the university and the external community. He quickly

pushed for an organizational name change from School to College and followed that by an announcement to his administrative team that the college unit would be seeking national accreditation. The seventy two plus faculty were informed of this intent. An accreditation coordinator and a small select number of faculty began their work in becoming familiar with the national accrediting body and its processes. Most of the work was being done by the accreditation coordinator with little or no communication occurring among the team members and little or no communication being shared with the faculty at large. For most of the first year, there were no observable significant changes in the faculty ranks so they experienced no compelling or motivating reason to change or unfreeze their sense of identity as Lewin would describe in stage one of his model.

By the second year of the project, a change was made by the Dean in the leadership of the project coordination and momentum towards the ultimate goal of accreditation began to change. With the establishment and inclusion of larger number of faculty on several committees with specific tasks, outcomes, and a fixed timeline came a cry of anger from the faculty, stage two in Kubler-Ross's Stages of Grief. The sense of security faculty felt in the environment was being threatened by program self-studies, curriculum changes, adherence to national standards, issues of accountability, collection of assessment data, measurement of dispositions, working from a conceptual framework and many more changes loomed before them. Faculty were not ready for that much change and many remained frozen as described in Lewin's stage one.

An interesting phenomena occurred within their denial or frozen state. Some faculty began to identify themselves as exceptions to the accreditation process. Some claimed that their particular discipline was different from the others in the college therefore they were exempt from the process. For example, they were doctoral faculty not undergraduate faculty, or they were clinical faculty not classroom faculty, or they were involved in numerous grant projects, or they were planning to retire within the next one or two years. These behaviors seeking exceptions can best be described in Kubler-Ross' third stage of bargaining, seeking to negotiate their way out.

While remaining frozen during this period, faculty were moving from the anger stage to the bargaining stage and vice versa. Kubler-Ross' research tells us that often individuals move back and forth from the five stages or get stuck in one stage for some length of time. Lewin describes this as a period of transition or one of a journey or process through change.

During the third year, a group of faculty were selected for a faculty accreditation retreat in which the facilitator started by saying "Let's address the elephant in the room". Faculty were asked to make a list about everything they disliked about the accreditation project. Results were almost unanimous with respect to expressing anger over the change, additional work, concern about workload, interference with their research time, and not having had a say in the decision. This exercise was followed by a request to list the benefits of the accreditation. That list included a number of positive items that seemed to resonate with the whole group. A theme that cut across the first list was one of the faculty thinking only of themselves while the theme in the second list was that of thinking of the greater good for all. This faculty retreat activity could be described as a Force Field Analysis in Lewin's model. Lewin contends that there are many different factors to consider in making a change. When one outweighs the other, there is more, or less, motivation to continue the change process.

Towards the end of the third year and the start of the fourth year, the majority of the faculty seemed to be in Kubler-Ross' stage five, acceptance. A small number had moved from stage three, bargaining to stage four, depression but the majority of the faculty was now in stage five, acceptance. More objectivity about the process without emotional attachment was being exhibited as the faculty tackled the many curriculum and other infrastructure changes. New faculty hires during this period entered a college culture that was deep in accreditation mode and wanting to quickly fit in began to request inclusion in the many committee assignments of the college.

Also during this period, a sense of community was beginning to be experienced across departments in the college unit. Upon receiving positive feedback from the accrediting agency on the completion of significant milestones, the project leadership arranged for the faculty to take time to pause and celebrate each accomplishment. These events helped to create a unity among the faculty and solidify the vision towards the identified target of national accreditation. The start of each semester's convocation for the college unit now included full discussions of the project timeline, accomplishments and recognition of faculty. Kubler-Ross' final stage of acceptance appears to permeate the faculty.

As the college and its faculty now move in its final year towards their accreditation site visit, the many committees are becoming standing committees of the college in order to insure the continuous improvement process required by national accreditation. Such committees represent assessment, data collection, curriculum review,

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establishment of core curriculum to name a few. Levin's third stage is one of freezing or re-freezing. The literature tells us that Lewin believed that the change has to be maintained otherwise individuals will slip back to the way things were before the change. The momentum in the college now is one of completing a task, accreditation, and one of not losing what has been started.

The authors have now encountered the beginning of a new change process even before the completion of the existing accreditation change with this university and this particular college unit. Legislation is now being considered to create a new university by the merging of two existing universities. The merging of college units within the new university is a real possibility. Receiving national accreditation could allow the college in this case study to remain autonomous and not be merged with its counterpart which does not have the same national accreditation in the new university. This latest development appears to reinforce the first stages in both Lewin and Kubler-Ross's respective stages of change and the support for addressing the invisible dimension of change which occurs in the mind of the employee.

LESSONS LEARNED

This case study provides several lessons to consider as an organization goes through major changes. First, time must be taken at the beginning of the change process to create awareness and a need for the change. Informing and involving as many individuals at the start of the process is important as it will minimize the resistance that occurs once individuals realize that change is a reality and denial of its effect on them dismissed. Cognitive and emotional change is many times invisible and should be anticipated and addressed A Force Field Analysis or something similar should be considered early in the process so that employees can realize the benefits of the change and employee morale is not affected seriously.

Secondly, open communication is necessary throughout the change process and accomplishment of milestones should be celebrated. It is important that as information becomes available, it be disseminated to everyone within the college unit so that everyone is involved in the discussion and identification of roadblocks. Thirdly, flexibility in creating infrastructure as the process evolves is important, this was evidenced by the change in leadership in the second year in order to provide movement toward the goals. Lastly, timelines towards interim and long term goals need to be established and communicated throughout the process so that target goals can be achieved and the process moved along its timeline.

SUMMARY

Kurt Lewin's work helps us understand organizational change and Elizabeth Kubler-Ross' work gives us insight into personal change. Their work can help us understand the many dimensions of change that occur in our environment. Lewin contends that change can be planned for and Kubler-Ross proposes that change, even unexpected change, can be managed. This case study attempted to take a closer look over a four year period at the process within a college unit moving towards national accreditation through the lens of the work of these two well-known researchers.

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