

**DISTANCE/FLEXIBLE HIGHER EDUCATION:
VEHICLE FOR CONDUCTIVE ECOLOGY OR CUT-
THROAT BUSINESS?**

PAPER TO BE PRESENTED BY

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**ACTING VP: LEARNER SUPPORT
TECHNIKON SOUTHERN AFRICA**

Strategic decisions taken in higher education on access, retention throughput and transformation are taken at executive level. The cockpit team, in terms of how it harnesses divergent viewpoints can facilitate or jettison institutional initiatives.

The thrust of this paper is that leadership "a la John Maxwell's (the 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership) is sought not management (mechanistic, technician) to transform education to enhance development and to optimise the dwindling financial and human resources.

Glowing institutional successes and enduring values can be created where the team at the summit embraces dissent and celebrates divergent perspectives. Resounding failures on the other hand can result from the team in the cockpit pulling in all directions.

Programmes of transformation and poverty eradication can be effectively driven in a conducive ecology, not in cut-throat business! Higher education requires leadership to deliver on the imperatives of government and the challenges of the rising edifice, of the African Renaissance.

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By R. Cecil Bodibe, Dlitt et Phil (SA).

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1. Introduction

The case study is increasingly being recognised as a legitimate form of epistemological enquiry (Komives and Woodard, 1996). This paper will therefore use the case study as a basis of information and self as filter, after 25 years' experience in tertiary education, to generate ideas and pose questions. The sole aim of all this being a quest to add to the many voices clamouring for excellence in distance/flexible higher education, and higher education fulfilling its mission.

Having flown frequently, because of the wide geographic spread of our campuses, and also internationally in search of best practice and benchmarking, the following words have remained indelibly etched on my mind:

"You have now come to the end of your safest part of the journey. Drive carefully as you hit the road"

"The most important wings in a plane are those on a pilots' uniform".

The aviation industry places a great premium on quality, on paying meticulous attention to detail and on ensuring the best customer care which we, in distance education ought to emulate.

In the rare cases of catastrophes in aviation history, there is also the black-box which captures the last moments, and apportion culpability appropriately. The point is here made that, higher education, especially distance/flexible higher education needs to take its mandate seriously. Dramatic and rapid changes are taking place (Harman, 2000) in education and resources are dwindling. Acrobatic tight-rope straddling is therefore required, between sustainability and the bottom-line, without hegemonisation by the bottom-line (Bodibe, 2002). Goddard (2002) has argued that distance higher education cannot prosper in isolation, it needs to take cues from cutting-edge business practices, without the cut-throat trappings of business profligacy. Higher education can be business-like, without being business. The call here is for moderation, and not going overboard.

2. The Cockpit-Team

Executive Management (The cockpit-team) carries immense responsibility on their shoulders to make it all happen, to use a colloquialism. Livelihoods of men and women, millions of rands in funds from the public purse, and high expectations of delivery from civil society, make it mandatory that the cockpit team to leverage their complimentary strengths, and downplay their sharp differences, if they are to make a success of the enterprise of which they are at the helm.

Bennis (1996) in *Managing People* is like Herding Cats had this to say about his experiences as a university president:

Presiding over faculty was like herding cats, and cats wont allow themselves to be herded. They might however, be coaxed cajoled, persuaded and gently led (pp. 7 - 8).

The crux of the advice of Bennis (1996) is that successful leadership inheres in building trust, mutual respect, and taking care of what Mathabe (2002) calls "psychological contracts".

Harvey-Jones (1994, p. 150) argues compellingly that the major task of the cockpit-team is not to issue " an endless stream of detailed instructions." Harvey-Jones (1994, p. 150) goes on to say: "The feeling of space, responsibility, ownership of the problem, trust and overall clarity about what is expected in terms of achievement, rather than conformity, has to be the aim of business organisation.

The team at the helm does not work in a pristine, sanitised environment. The ugly P's: Personalities, Power, Politics, Policy obsession, Parochialism, Prejudice, Perceptions, Profanity often surface. Storming, Forming, Norming and Performing as natural processes

of group cohesion play themselves out, and indeed must happen if the team has to pull together.

However, these should not jettison the team spirit (Together Each Achieves More: TEAM).

This is where the CEO (University President) has to exercise leadership and harness the best in each member of the team at the summit. The summit is high and often reached after prodigious effort. Falling is so easy for those precariously perched at the summit. The rest of the organisation take their cues from the cockpit team, and it is therefore a sine qua non that this team shares a common vision, and a common purpose.

Cockpit jargon these days is replete with the following:

No piecemeal approach	Across The Board (ATB)	Risk analysis
Time Consuming	Structural Anomalies	Corporate governance
Tax Efficient	Economies of Scale	Realignment
Strategic Thrust	Quality Assurance	Retrenchment
Cost Reduction	Sanctioning	Reskilling
Cost Benefit Analysis	"Whose Monkey is it?"	Retooling
Cost Containment	"Who will do the donkey work?"	Labour Relations Act
Clearing House	Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs)	Corporate Governance
Synergy/Integration		Audit Trail

The point made is that learner, student, access, retention, throughput and the Students' Learning Imperative (SLI) receive scant mention. Ironically so, at the institutions of higher learning. Are we missing the boat? Have we lost the space to contemplate the universe like professors in aeons past?

Blanchard (2000) makes the point that none of us, is as smart as all of us. A point that tellingly bespeaks of the powers of collective wisdom and the might of the corporate brain.

Moss-Kanter (2000) also asserts that: Management is about doing things right - Leadership is about doing the right things. Handy (2000) adds a voice to this understanding that there is no one way of managing or leading. Like the Greek gods Apollo and Zeus for example, the cockpit team needs diverse skills and different styles.

To move from demagoguery to leadership requires keeping up with cutting edge (not bleeding-edge) knowledge of Leadership. It is important to note however, that tertiary campuses in South Africa have been cauldrons of dissent and crucibles of discontent, and many a leader has had to resort to intuition and ingenuity to stay afloat. Giving credence to Maxwell (1999) that there are, indeed, 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership. These laws are as powerful as the Law of Gravity.

Insight into the Peromnes System indicates that the cockpit-team functions at very high and complex levels of the following job content factors:

1. Problem solving
2. Consequence of Decisions/Judgements
3. Work Pressure (Conflicting/Competing demands)
4. Knowledge
5. Job impact or influence (Internal and External)
6. Degree/Level of Comprehension

7. Formal Qualifications
8. Training and Experience.

The team at the summit has been comprehensively covered. The thrust of my thinking being that this is the team that sets the tone of the organisation. Critical values like integrity, accountability, respect, appreciation for good work and acknowledging and affirming staff are best modelled by example than by precept. Psychological plugging in, and de-stressing and disengagement are reached, by a cockpit-team that has created a conducive ecology for itself, rather than a cut-throat boardroom. It is a team that has moved from the political sovereignty of the flag, to the cultural sovereignty of the soul (Mazrui, 1974) which can set the correct institutional agenda.

3. Utilisation of Resources

Literature on successful organisations (Blanchard, 2000; Handy, 2000, Moss-Kanter, 2000, Juechter, 2001) suggest that the life-blood of any organisation is its people (its staff) - indeed its human capital. It is heart-rending to see at the helm of some organisations, Human Resource directors who are narcissistic and ruggedly individualistic. The challenge of creating an enabling environment, a conducive ecology, lies very centrally at the heart of Human Resource practice. Performance Appraisal, Remuneration Strategies, Staff Development Practices, should all speak to an insatiable quest to ensure that workers (lecturers, administrators, clerks, secretaries, the whole lot) are affirmed and are positively inspired. When they are provided with an enabling environment, they will appreciate the need to do the very best for the student. A debilitating environment will only spawn shoddy commitment and a poor work ethic.

They (staff) will always want to add to the credit side, of the human capital sheet. Sound corporate governance, reduction of risk exposure, prudent use of financial resources cannot be left solely to policies and legislation. They need engraving in the hearts of women and men, who comprise the workforce.

The Open University staff in Hong Kong is small in number (comparatively) speaking to Unisa and Technikon Southern Africa). However, because of an enabling ecology created, they seem to be doing much more (by way of turn around time for example, in so far as assignments returned to students are concerned). Their staff seem to exude with energy all the time!

3. Support Systems

The point to make under this rubric is that the distance higher education enterprise is highly integrated and synergistic. There is no room for SILOS. A clerk who does not capture data correctly on an application form, a clerk not properly supervised by a Regional Director, can feed corrupt data into the Management Information System (MIS). The consequence of all this may be wrong information fed to the Department of Education, and subsidy loss amounting to millions of rands. Loss of millions of rands may point eventually to retrenchments.

The mistake of one person may spell doom and gloom for hundreds in the form of job losses. There is no core business (academics) and peripheral business (learner support, administration, planning and development). At the core of distance flexible higher education is the student/learner.

The *raison d'être* is the student, and this understanding must permeate the whole organisation. When everyone else realises that at the core it is the student/learner, unnecessary contestations are eliminated, and a better climate for learning created.

The individuals, teams, divisions, departments, and other sub-groups in the organisations must be exhorted to work synergistically and not at cross purposes. Their attitudes, habits and behaviours (Juechter, 2001, p.1) are contributory to organisational success.

5. The student as point of focus

The confluence, indeed the vortex of what we do in distance higher education is the student. All our energies need to be focused on the student, to create for them a memorable learning experience. A wide range of matters call for attention: Financial aid, financial access, holistic development, HIV/AIDS challenges, race and other diversity challenges face all of us in distance education. Students form the Human Resource Pool of the future and the ethos of excellence need inculcation in all of them, if they are to be competitive in the job market. Civil society also expects distance education to play a prominent role in the agenda of redress, re-skilling, re-engineering and retooling.

6. Challenges of flexible learning

Access for success, multiple exit points, pre-registration assessment and tutorial support and study groups, are some of the ways in which Technikon Southern Africa (TSA) takes challenges of distance higher education. A model of collaborating with contact campuses, to offer teaching to distance learning students (e.g. the so called College Model) has seen students succeed more at what they do. Quality assurance, benchmarking and striving for Just In Time (JIT) delivery of study material are some of the ways of doing business in this complex, yet deceptively simple mode of education delivery. The proliferation of pretenders to the crown of effective distance learning is amazing. Everyone thinks it can be easily done. Like deep-water swimming, however, it is appreciated by those who have done it - those who have had firsthand experience at it.

The umbilical connectivity, not dependence can benefit our students if we stay with them for academic succourance.

7. Argument of a conducive ecology

Ingenuity and creative thinking thrives in a conducive ecology. Cut-throat practices and ruthless retrenchments show temporary gains! General Eletrica after Jack Welsh can attest to this claim. Distance Education practitioners are therefore urged to create a conducive ecology, for one another, in order to best serve the students.

Juechter (2001, p.1)) has good advice for all of us: "A systematic approach goes to the heart of an organisation - the attitudes, beliefs, habits and expectations of all individuals from the top to the front lines".

The student who is at the core of our business, expects no less than the very best from all of us. This is an imperative of distance education we cannot eschew! History will judge us harshly if we do!

8. Conclusion

The case made throughout the whole presentation is the following:

The cockpit team has the ineluctable responsibility to ensure that the student gets the best possible learning experience. However, this team at the helm can get results by focussing on the leadership rather than management. Most importantly, this team should not have prima donnas with fragile and fractious EGOs (Edging God out) as Ken Blanchard (2000) would say.

It must be a team where each is committed to bring out the best out of the other.

Hermeneuticists, tell us that God (in Judaeo - Christian religion) has both a perfect will (everything is pre-ordained) and a permissive will (there is room for negotiation with Him). The team at the helm should realise their answerability to Him, in the final analysis, and do the best whilst still allowed to breathe, before being wiped out like flies in the hands of wanton boys.

NB: Distance/Flexible higher education has be used synonymously with ODL (Open and Distance Learning).

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