Conducting a College through COVID-19: The Evolving Leadership Challenge.

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Introduction

Thank you for the invitation to address the HELMeTO 2020 conference virtually. We would much rather be gathered in Italy for the meeting – but that will be for another day.

The authors are, respectively, President and Chancellor of the Acsenda School of Management (ASM), Vancouver. ASM is a privately-owned higher education business school in Vancouver, Canada with some 1,200 students from 40 countries (Acsenda, 2020). Our topic is inspired by the events of this unprecedented academic year and our title is: *Conducting a College through COVID-19: The Evolving Leadership Challenge.*

We shall draw on our experience of the challenge of change at ASM in this paper because, like higher education institutions (HEIs) around the world, it has been through three distinct phases during the 2020 calendar year. ASM began the year 'normally', that is to say teaching all its programmes on its downtown Vancouver campus. In mid-March, after the COVID-19 pandemic arrived in Vancouver, ASM made arrangements to move all teaching and services online and vacated the campus by the end of that month. Since June, ASM has been planning for the autumn session against a background of considerable uncertainty and evolving guidance from public health officials.

The challenge of change in higher education is the theme of this paper. The literature of change distinguishes different approaches to preparing for and managing change, each appropriate to particular situations.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic erupted, ASM was engaged in *change management* through strategic planning. But when the pandemic struck ASM, like most HEIs worldwide, had to take all its operations online and vacate the campus in a short time. This called for *crisis management* and, to judge by surveys of students carried out during and after the first term online, ASM responded successfully. ASM is now charting its future for the rest of 2020 and 2021, using the approach of *change leadership.* It is aimed at creating a resilient institution that will be able to thrive in the uncertain times that will follow COVID-19. Change leadership may also involve occasional recourse to *crisis management*, since new waves of infection could occur at any time and require operations to go back online at short notice.

We begin by recalling the key features of COVID-19 and its impact on societies, noting its effects on education. This will lead us to address the practical issues of responding to the pandemic; using the experience of ASM and juxtaposing it with theories of change management. We conclude by asking how educational institutions and governments can build resilience to address future crises? We must not let this COVID-19 crisis go to waste. These

are turbulent times, so future threats like political unrest and climate change will require education systems to make adjustments again. We must prepare to cope with disruptions.

Coronavirus and COVID-19

The coronavirus behind the COVID-19 disease has attracted daily news coverage and commentary worldwide for months, so we make just two points.

First, COVID-19 is a very infectious and lethal disease, especially for older people and those with other illnesses. It is now present in all countries of the world and had infected over 20 million people and killed more than 750,000 by mid-August 2020. At that time the number of new cases per day was still rising quickly.

Second, in order to try to slow and limit the spread of the disease, most countries imposed restrictions on movement and economic activity. This caused widespread hardship, so governments are now trying to strike a balance between lifting these restrictions and containing the disease. COVID-19's incubation period is up to 14 days, so the many large gatherings and protests held around the world in mid-2020, when there was often less physical distancing among people than medical advice recommended, are having a delayed impact on the global tally of new infections and additional deaths.

Impact

COVID-19 has caused great difficulty for education systems. According to UNESCO (2020), 90% of students were out of schools and universities by the end of April 2020. This created huge uncertainty for students and parents about how education would continue and for teachers about how they would provide it. Students were torn suddenly from their friends and social groups, reminding us how important schools and colleges are as social units. Because the change was sudden, teachers had very little time to train and prepare for a new way of teaching.

COVID-19 will not be the last global or local upheaval to impact education. This major crisis provides an opportunity to build resilience into our education systems so that they can cope better with sudden change. During the pandemic HEIs 'crashed into online learning' and most did not do it very well (Bates, 2020). Now is our chance to integrate elements of open, distance and online learning into whole education system so that we can perform better next time.

How did HEIs respond to the pandemic? We take ASM as an example. How did it cope with this challenge of change? Tracking the example of ASM allows us to see how proceeding through the processes of change management and crisis management has led us to the approach of change leadership.

Effecting change: Theory and Reality

Higher education is made up of complex organizations. They have highly educated work forces, whose members usually know something of the concepts of organizational design, leadership and change. But despite their commitment to ideas, learning and innovation, HEIs are not always amenable to change. Their decision-making follows the collegial tradition of

academia, which values discourse and dialogue. This does not usually sit easily with the bureaucratic approaches of traditional theories of change management.

Change Management – Theory

HEIs are influenced by many factors: political, economic, social, technical and environmental. Organizational cultures embed values that affect how an institution functions and how it approaches change. Therefore, embarking on a change process normally requires a considered plan that integrates these factors and lays out an appropriate leadership approach to preparing the organization for change. Complex environments place high demands on information, so systems which collect and manage information are vital for the decision-making process (Smart & Verinsky, 1984).

Lewin posits a three-step process of "unfreezing" the organization before it can change, and then re-freezing it after the change is made (Lewin, 1947, Cawsey et al., 2012, p. 56-58). People often react negatively to change. Indeed, Kubler-Ross compares their reactions to change to the five-step process of grieving at the prospect of death, where individuals go through stages of denial, anger, bargaining and depression before they reach a point of acceptance (Kubler-Ross, 2005).

People are resistant to change not because they fear change, but because they actually fear loss (Buller, 2015 p. 30). Kotter proposed a change management process in eight steps. These are:
1. Create Urgency; 2. Form a Powerful Coalition; 3. Create a Vision for Change; 4. Communicate the Vision; 5. Remove Obstacles; 6. Create Short-Term Wins; 7. Build on the Change; and 8. Anchor the Changes in the Corporate Culture (Kotter, 2012). Previously he had explained the difference between change management and change leadership and also the uses of tools and structures to control the process to minimize the impacts of change (Kotter, 2011).

The Beckhard and Harris approach to change management puts greater emphasis on why change is needed, and the 'people' factor in the change process (Cawsey et al, 2012). In the case of higher education, Kezar and Eckel emphasize the importance of helping people make sense of change (Kezar & Eckel, 2002).

Change Management: The ASM Reality

Before the COVID-19 pandemic erupted, ASM was engaged in change management through strategic planning. One aim was to assess how best to incorporate online technologies into ASM's future teaching and learning activities. This planning work called for gradual change and a blend of teaching and learning methods. It was not intended to convert ASM into a largely online institution.

The general view was that Acsenda's key strength, and the characteristic most valued by students, was the personal contact among students, faculty and staff, implying that online teaching and learning might be helpful at the margins but was not a mainstream objective. Nevertheless, in 2017 the Strategic Planning Committee was asked to examine the potential use of online methods in more detail, to assess the pedagogical, organisational and

technological opportunities that they might afford, and to make recommendations. This led to the presentation of a Strategic Technology Plan in November 2019.

This plan aimed to achieve the following impacts between 2020 and 2022:

- To use technologies that enable ASM to achieve efficiencies in the deployment of institutional resources;
- To use technologies that enhance the quality of programme curricula, improve flexible access to courses, and, enhance learning effectiveness;
- ASM graduates are able to demonstrate competencies related to using technologies that support continuing education activities throughout their lives.

Key outcomes of the plan are to:

- Use a 3-hour block format for all courses;
- Render students and faculty competent in the use of common business technologies;
- Improve efficiencies of scheduling and facilities use.

Crisis Management - Theory

Most institutions aspire to be strategic in their planning. However, change can also occur as a result of a major event, such as COVID-19; which was both unexpected and very problematic, since it both threatened corporate goals and also required a rapid response. Herman (1972), calls such a situation a crisis.

Leonard explains that crises are qualitatively different from routine emergencies. In crises, the situation is unfamiliar and there is no playbook for responding. Organizations face a real-time decision-making situation which feels chaotic and unsettling. Crisis management requires "rapid innovations, under stress and embedded in fear". In a new and unprecedented situation, priorities conflict in odd ways. In the COVID-19 crisis, for example, HEIs were faced with decisions juxtaposing safety and business continuity. Leonard emphasizes that "crisis management does not need answers, it needs a process". Leadership in crisis requires rapidly setting up a critical incident team to help the organization learn its way through the response (Leonard, 2020). Effective leaders must be honest about the realities of the situation, while at the same time offering hope, which is referred to as the Stockdale Paradox (Collins, 2001).

Institutions can respond to crises in different ways. A crisis can provide an opportunity for entrepreneurial responses, that can lead institutions in new directions, or more adaptive responses, which tend to result in less change to the organization. Long term-entrepreneurial responses are seen as strategic approaches; short-term-entrepreneurial responses are considered as tactical. Whereas long-term adaptive responses are referred to as a planning approach, short-term adaptive responses are often called 'fire-fighting' (Smart & Vertinsky, 1984). An effective crisis management strategy, however, is not a response but a planning approach.

For Pauchant and Mitroff (1982), crisis management is not about the specific response, but more about the organization's process for anticipating and preparing for potential crises, thus allowing it to respond effectively, mitigate possible damage and let the business recover and

learn from the experience. Crises bring opportunities for change. Attitudes evolve and systems then become permeable. Nevertheless, if the change is to be deep, long-lasting and strategic, it must win acceptance within the underlying organizational culture.

The hard challenge for institutional leaders is to keep the organization ready for change at all times. Safi Bahcall, in his book Loonshots, applies concepts from physics to organizational change, concluding that a leader's role is maintain a state of agitation so that things can easily be reconfigured (Bahcall, 2019). Whereas Lewin suggests that organizations must unfreeze, change and refreeze, Bahcall might say that they should remain in a constant state of slush.

Crisis Management: The ASM Reality

When COVID-19 struck, ASM's two-year plan for change became a two-day plan. We had to transform completely our methods of instruction as well as our administrative, student and support services. Change management became crisis management. A collaborative, distributed approach promoted engagement in the process and ensured that processes and changes occurred quickly. Acsenda responded effectively and minimized the financial and organizational impact of what could have been a disaster for this small private-for-profit degree granting institution.

Information gathering had an important role in the response to the crisis and provided data to evaluate the effectiveness of the organization's response and illuminate its future choices. ASM introduced an evaluation component early in the process and collected data on different aspects of its response to COVID-19. This included feedback from various stakeholders: returning students, new students, faculty and staff, information which is helping to guide decisions and provide a basis for future change. It allowed ASM to identify what it has done well, which is an important guide both in the short term, with the prospect of another term of online learning, and in the longer term with a return to on-campus delivery of courses and services. One of the authors prepared a narrative account of the experience (Daniel, 2020).

How did ASM rise to the challenge of crisis management successfully? Key elements were:

- Good leadership at all levels of the organisation, with a senior team that met daily and made decisions quickly, benefiting from some previous planning for going online;

- Effective communication across the organisation;

- A collegial, caring and collaborative work environment with a strong focus on individual support and care for students;

- Competent and well-networked professional staff;

- An owner, EduCo International Group, that gave consistent support and encouragement.

Change Leadership: Theory

Today, as it looks to the future, ASM's focus is on both change leadership and the management of future crises. Unlike a process change, which can be done with a management approach, change leadership means modifying the organization's underlying principles. This transformation can be profound and involve fundamental changes to the organization, to its culture, to its beliefs, and in the basics of what it does and how it does it.

The distinction between leading change and managing change is that leading is about the 'how' of change more than about the 'what'.

Kotter considers change leadership as more suited to larger scale, 'big vision' changes which require a broader organizational effort (Kotter, 2011). Change leadership places greater focus on the process and the skill of influencing people to engage in change and helping them to transition from the current state to a future state. In contrast to a management approach, "change leaders have to see themselves as part of the system being changed, not as controlling it from on high". Leading change means understanding the organization and its people, nurturing the institutional culture to accept change, building a 'coalition' for it and support around it, and helping people make sense of what they are experiencing so they can develop meaning from it (Buller, 2015; Hawkes, 2015; Kezar, 2018).

Change Leadership: ASM's Aspirations

As it adopts the approach of change leadership, ASM will also continue to employ a crisis management strategy, including ongoing environmental scanning, the development of signal detectors and scenario planning to prepare responses to potential future crises, whether from further waves of COVID-19 or other causes.

Six months into the COVID-19 pandemic, ASM has responded to the crisis well. Teaching and learning have continued. Enrolment has remained strong, although new student enrolment has declined. We have ensured the continuity of ASM's services. People have settled into a new routine. ASM has not had to lay off any employees. However, a new challenge looms: when and how do we return back to the delivery of classes on campus?

The province of British Columbia, Canada has made good progress in containing the virus. It has moved into Phase 3 of its plan and aims to have elementary and secondary schools open in September. Higher education has been somewhat more cautious but some HEIs along with ASM are planning to resume some classes on campus. On-campus delivery is important for a number of reasons. First, while we have adapted to online delivery of classes and are doing it quite well, according to feedback from students, we are not equipped to compete with larger, more established online programs. Second, ASM caters to international students who want to come to Canada. If international students are unable to come to study in Canada, they may choose to defer or change their educational plans. Canada's Immigration and Border Services are also restricting travel to Canada unless it is 'non-discretionary'. If students could study online with ASM in their own countries, their travel to Canada would be considered discretionary and therefore, they would not be admissible at this time. Students must also demonstrate that they are prepared for their travel and, in particular, have a detailed arrival plan in place for a 14-day quarantine period. Institutions must provide the necessary support and monitoring of students during this time, as well as evidence that appropriate safety measures are in place on campus.

ASM will introduce a hybrid instructional approach for the term beginning in October 2020. A limited number of classes will be offered on campus and students in those classes will rotate; with two groups of students coming to class in person in alternate weeks. Students not on campus will participate simultaneously through a video conferencing system. We

recognize that, in a crisis, an institution must be readily adaptable to constantly changing conditions. Therefore, ASM's planning process has anticipated multiple scenarios and the ability to adjust quickly in the event of an outbreak of COVID-19 recurring. Faculty, staff, and students are aware that they may need to revert to fully online delivery at a moment's notice. Planning must also take into account the possible reluctance of some students, faculty and staff to come on campus. We have given priority for campus attendance to first year students and to courses on English language development, mathematics, and accounting. We have made it voluntary for faculty to teach on campus. Likewise, student participation on campus will be optional.

We see this partial return to campus as both an interim solution and also as a broader part of a return to campus strategy. This process will guide the gradual re-introduction of faculty and staff to the workplace. While we have been successful in making the change from on campus to online learning for the last six months, we realize that people have adapted and adjusted to new work environments and methods. We now sense resistance in some quarters to returning to the workplace. The leadership challenge is both to maintain a crisis management process, while also preparing people for this transition. We have learned much so far and have discovered better ways to deliver our services and our academic programs, which will change much of what we do in the future. We recognize that there will be a 'new normal', but its shape is still evolving. We are, however, clear that we need to continue with the effective process used throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, which has emphasized a team approach to planning, effective communication and a culture of learning and innovation.

Conclusion: Building Resilience

What does ASM's experience in 2020 tell us about the future? It provides a telling case study about how an HEI prepares for change and responds to it. What began as a gradual change management process quickly changed to crisis management and is now an opportunity for change leadership as the institution moves forward. Its aim must be to make ASM more resilient to shocks of all kinds. Analogous to the cybernetic Principle of Requisite Variety, this means having systems ready with responses for the crises most likely to confront them (Naughton, 2017).

There were several factors which contributed to ASM's ability to respond effectively and adapt to the COVID crisis. First, through an inclusive planning process, the organization was thinking about change and envisioning the future. Kezar notes that "when institutions embark on change, they often do so in a reactionary way that is unpredictable and prompted by a sudden crisis" (Welton et al, 2018, p 7). This often does not allow for appropriate measures to garner support or buy in to a long-term solution, sustainable solution. However, in the case of ASM, all sectors of the organization were engaged in the process and this contributed to a state of readiness to adapt. Second, a crisis management approach helped ASM prepare for different scenarios, which allowed the organization to remain flexible and adjust to constantly changing conditions. It has also reinforced the importance of ongoing crisis management practices where the organization is now anticipating future events that could occur in order to mitigate future disruptions. Third, this experience has reinforced the importance of providing the necessary support for those affected to adjust to change. In the case of ASM, this included

providing training sessions in the use of the new online tools, a responsive system for receiving feedback and regular discussion forums to provide the opportunity to share experiences and ideas. Fourth, during a change process, communication is important. ASM provided regular updates to all stakeholders on developments, the challenges that the institution was facing and our response. The ASM senior leadership group met daily throughout the first four months and continues to meet weekly. Regular updates were provided to students through email and social media. The communication strategy also included other stakeholders such as the parent company, Academic Council, educational agents, peer institutions and the Ministry of Advanced Education. Finally, it was very beneficial to develop an evaluation plan early in the process so that we could collect data. This was important to monitor and measure the effectiveness of our responses as well as reinforcing a culture of learning and continual improvement.

So far ASM has responded effectively and minimized the financial and organizational impact of a crisis that could have been a disaster for a small private-for-profit HEI highly dependent on international students. An important aspect of its success in managing this crisis was that, as well as taking teaching online, ASM gave strong and consistent attention to providing student services at a distance and animating social life through virtual connections among students confined to their homes. As it moves into the future ASM must hold fast to the holistic view that its relationships with students are not only academic and pedagogical but also, just as importantly, social, technological and psychological.

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