

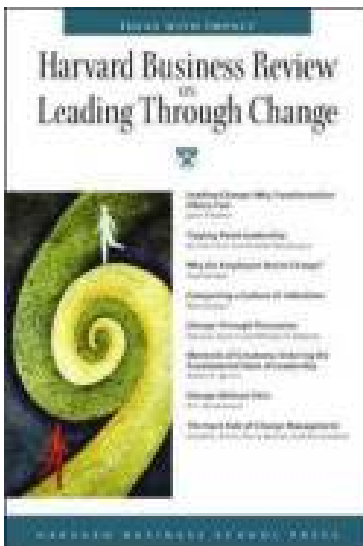


ODL COMMUNIQUÉ 33, 6 OCTOBER 2010

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1 **LEADING THROUGH CHANGE: WHY TRANSFORMATION EFFORTS FAIL**



One of the issues the ODL implementation plan faced in 2010 was the history of ODL as 'project' at Unisa since 2007. In general, I suspect that there may be a sense of frustration and disillusionment at Unisa amongst staff regarding ODL because many staff may feel that (so far) the hype around ODL has not delivered much except for some broken promises and disillusioned staff.

I thoroughly believe that organisational change is very complex and that there is no single reason why the previous efforts failed or were less successful. Like student success in an ODL context, there are multiple, non-linear, interdependent and inter-constitutive variables which interact and change. I have come to believe that Unisa as an ODL institution resembles the description by Snowden and Boone (2007, discussed in the ODL Communiqué 32) of complex (if not at times chaotic) systems. Often minor changes "can produce disproportionately major consequences" (Snowden & Boone 2007:3), while other times major institutional change projects (like ODL) fail to make an impact.

The Harvard Business Review's "Leading through change" (2006) has a number of essays on leadership and change. The first essay, written by John P Kotter "Leading change: why transformation efforts fail" (2006: 1-18) shares some pointers to consider. Kotter (2006:1-2) writes: "One lesson is that change involves numerous phases that, together, usually take a long time. Skipping steps only creates the illusion of speed and never produces a satisfying result. A second lesson is that critical mistakes in any of the phases can have a devastating impact, slowing momentum and negating previous gains". Kotter (2006:3-18) then discusses eight common errors in transformation projects.

Error # 1: *Not establishing a great enough sense of urgency*

Kotter (2006:3) warns that over 50% of companies fail in this regard. It is immensely hard to move people from their comfort zones. The fear of change and the fear that events will spin out of control often results in a paralysed senior management and not enough leaders. Interestingly, Kotter (2006:5) suggests that a sense of urgency can be created by crises (whether real or manufactured). The need for a profound sense of disequilibrium is in agreement with other authors on complexity (such as William Doll) and in student experiences the work of Pizzolato (2004). Kotter (2006:5) suggests urgency is 'enough' when about "75% of a company's management is honestly convinced that business-as-usual is totally unacceptable. Anything less can produce serious problems later on in the process".

Thinking about the ODL implementation at Unisa, the danger may exist that the implementation of ODL is seen as the pet project of an individual or a portfolio and that there is not a shared sense of urgency, or that the sense of urgency is not necessarily shared by all.

Error #2: *Not creating a powerful enough guiding coalition*

Kotter (2006:6) warns that if the guiding coalition does not include members "who are part of senior management, it often tends to operate outside of the normal hierarchy by definition". Kotter (2006:7) further cautions that companies often "underestimate the difficulties of producing change and the importance of a powerful guiding coalition". When there is no powerful enough guiding coalition, "the opposition gathers itself together and stops the change" (Kotter 2006:7).

This was one of the major concerns of the previous attempts to institutionalise ODL at Unisa. The members of the different task teams were often junior members of departments and had no clout or authority (or institutional backing) when proposals suggested by task teams were tabled. This year the teams were constituted differently with many Deans and heads of departments playing an active role, despite their busy programmes. I sincerely think that this was one of the plusses of this year's project. The down-side of involving very senior members of the establishment is that the project can be drawn into institutional politics and claims and counter-claims for positions and turf.

Error #3: *Lacking a vision*

Kotter (2006:7) states that key to any transformation is for the guiding coalition to develop "a picture of the future that is relatively easy to communicate" and which appeals to staff. The danger is that without a "sensible vision, a transformation effort can easily dissolve into a list of confusing and incompatible projects that can take the organisation in the wrong direction or nowhere at all" (Kotter 2006:8).

Visions provided by management can also be too complicated or blurry. Kotter (2006:9) suggests that “if you can’t communicate the vision to someone in five minutes or less and get a reaction that signifies both understanding and interest, you are not yet done with this phase of the transformation process”.

Since my secondment as ODL coordinator, many staff has asked me what my vision for ODL was. And I confess, I still don’t know. At this stage a get a sense of what is emerging, but it is not so transparent yet. I suspect (in mitigation) that the urgency to implement the list of actions as stipulated in the ODL implementation plan was so immense that the teams (and I) started running from the start. This may not be a negative at all. As the different tams grappled with the different elements of becoming a fully-fledged ODL institution, we got a succinct sense of the complexities of being an ODL institution in a developing world context where “best practices” from elsewhere are not appropriate and the paradox of fulfilling our social mandate and ensuring success often spiral into paralysis.

Maybe it is time for proposing a picture of what Unisa as an ODL institution will look like? Watch this space...

Error #4: *Under-communicating the vision by a factor of ten*

This is not only about communicating the vision, but *living* the vision. Kotter (2006:9) warns that often the vision is communicated, but the behaviour of some senior executives is antithetical to the vision. “The result is that cynicism among the troops goes up, while belief in communication goes down” (Kotter 2006:9).

“Employees will not make sacrifices, even if they are unhappy with the status quo, unless they believe that useful change is possible” (Kotter 2006:9). Communicating a vision therefore depends on words and deeds, of which the latter is the most powerful.

Prior to 2010 we had an “ODL walk”, ODL posters, brochures and launches, but somehow the institutional commitment to providing an enabling environment was lacking. ODL was mentioned in all the speeches (and still is...), but is their congruence between the posters and speeches and our deeds?

Error #5: *Not removing obstacles to the new vision*

Kotter (2006:11) states that transformation is not only about communication and getting people involved but crucially also about “the removal of obstacles”. Kotter (2006:12) warns that often a key department (or individual) torpedoes the transformation process by not contributing or providing the resources needed for the vision to take shape. “In the first half of a transformation, no organisation has the momentum, power, or time to get rid of all obstacles. But the big ones must be confronted and removed” (Kotter 2006:13).

Identifying obstacles can very easily turn into blaming and public or private shaming, but we will have to find a way to identify the obstacles that prevents Unisa from growing towards a more effective, more efficient, more caring institution. It is so easy to blame semesterisation for all Unisa's ills. A 16-week teaching and learning cycle increases the need for an effective, caring and efficient Call Centre. Unisa cannot afford to have anything less than an effective Production and Despatch. We cannot afford to provide students with incomplete study packages. We cannot talk another year about increasing our students' connectivity. We cannot afford to send assignments back to students with no formative comments and suggestions on how they can improve their scores. We cannot afford to have systems and data basis that are outdated. We cannot afford our data and information to be wrong. We cannot.

Blaming is different from identifying obstacles. May we know the difference.

Error #6: *Not systematically planning and creating short-term wins*

Kotter (2006:13) warns that because transformation is a long process that transformation process risk losing momentum if there are no short-term wins. Kotter suggests that hoping for short-term wins is different from planning for short-term wins (2006:13). "Commitments to produces short-term wins help keep the urgency level up and force detailed analytical thinking that can clarify or revise visions" (Kotter 2006:14).

Looking back on the ODL implementation plan for 2010 a number of actions has already been completed. As such I think there were a number of short-term wins – but the scope of ODL is so immense ranging from technology, to our PQM to student support to admission requirements – that it is crucial that we need to plan and commit for some short-term wins early in 2011. Closer to the end of 2010 I think it may be beneficial for the ODL project to evaluate progress made and to plan for short (and longer) term wins. We cannot afford to lose momentum.

Error #7: *Declaring victory too soon*

Interesting that Kotter (2006:14) discusses this error immediately after suggesting that short-term wins are important in keeping the momentum! Kotter (2006:14) warns that until "changes sink deeply into a company's culture, a process can take five to ten years" and in this time "new approaches are fragile and subject to regression". The credibility afforded by short-term wins should create the momentum to tackle bigger problems.

The impression may have been created in the past that ODL can be implemented in a year's time. There may have been hope that the 'power' and 'pilot' courses could have changed Unisa's systems and culture. These hopes were shattered. It is crucial that we should not have unrealistic hopes for this year's ODL project. But we should also not lose hope. A luta continua.

Error #8: Not anchoring changes in the corporation's culture

Transformation is not completed until it “seeps into the bloodstream of the corporate body. Until new behaviours are rooted in social norms and shared values, they are subject to degradation as soon as the pressure for change is removed” (Kotter 2006:16). Kotter (2006:16-17) suggest that there are two strategies to ensure that change is anchored in organisational culture. The first strategy is to show people “how the new approaches, behaviours, and attitudes have helped improve performance” (2006:16). The second strategy is to ensure that “the new generation of management really does personify the new approach” (2006:17). Kotter (2006:17) acknowledges that organisational change is complex and that there is a danger that the eight errors he described may be seen as being too simplistic. But then it is true that “fewer errors can spell the difference between success and failure” (Kotter 2006:17).

2 FURTHER DETAILS REGARDING THE USERS OF MYUNISA

In the previous ODL Communiqué (number 32) I shared statistics of the profile of the students using myUnisa. Ms Magdaleen Arlow (ICT) provided me with two additional aspects of the users that are very interesting, namely the race profile of students using myUnisa and the country profiles.

RACE	Users
Black	119356
White	61607
Asian	23225
Coloured	15311
Other	181
Chinese	44

Table 1: The racial profile of students using myUnisa

The following pie-chart illustrates the above statistics (Figure 1):

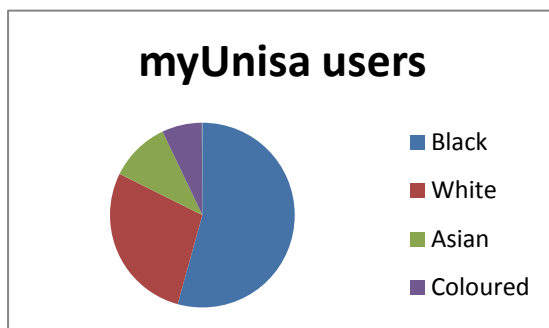


Figure 1: A pie-chart illustrating the racial profile of myUnisa users

Country	Students per country
SOUTH AFRICA	205853
ZIMBABWE	4131
NAMIBIA	1918
BOTSWANA	1746
SWAZILAND	938
ETHIOPIA	772
KENYA	712
MAURITIUS	610
UNITED KINGDOM	595
ZAMBIA	298
UNITED ARAB EMIRATES	285
U S A	225
AUSTRALIA	224
LESOTHO	216
NIGERIA	193
MOZAMBIQUE	184
MALAWI	167
ANGOLA	126
SAUDI ARABIA	116
GERMANY	112
CANADA	111
NEW ZEALAND	86
UGANDA	84
SOUTH KOREA	60
TANZANIA	58
ENGLAND (U K)	56

Table 2 provides an overview of the distribution of myUnisa users in different countries (with more than 50 myUnisa users).

3 *ON A LIGHTER NOTE: RULES ARE RULES...*

It was a normal day in Sharon Springs Kansas, when a Union Pacific crew boarded a loaded coal train for the long trek to Salina. **The Good news:** They left sharply on time.

The Bad news: Just a few miles into the trip a wheel bearing became overheated and melted, letting a metal support drop down and grind on the rail, creating white hot molten metal droppings spewing down to the rail.

The Good news: A very alert crew noticed smoke about halfway back in the train and immediately stopped the train in compliance with the rules.

The Bad news: The train stopped with the hot wheel over a wooden bridge with creosote ties and trusses. The crew tried to explain to the higher-ups but they were instructed not to move the train! They were instructed that **Rules** prohibit moving the train when any part is defective! The result.....



So... remember, rules are rules! (Don't ever let common sense get in the way of a good disaster!)

4 VISIT TO THE UNIVERSITY OF LEICESTER

On 2 June 2010, Unisa's Senate approved two general recommendations namely:

- Academics are encouraged to make use of the wide range of technologies already available within Unisa. Every academic staff member has to take responsibility for teaching and facilitating learning by actively engaging with students using these technologies. The use of technology should become part of every academic staff member's performance agreement.
- Unisa should make extensive use of the many possibilities technology presents for new and innovative ways to assess students, especially for formative assessment.

In the light of these recommendations, a small team from Unisa will visit the Beyond Distance Research Alliance (BDRA) at the University of Leicester (UL) during the week of 4-9 October 2010. UL is a world leader in research in the innovative use of technologies in teaching, learning and assessment. The BDRA serves as a world-class example of innovative use of technologies in teaching and learning.

UL was founded in 1921 and received their Royal Charter in 1957. UL was named “The University of the Year 2008-9”. In awarding the title the judges cited Leicester’s ability to “evidence commitment to high quality, a belief in the synergy of teaching and research and a conviction that higher education is a power for good”. Leicester was according to the judges, "elite without being elitist". Leicester is ranked in the top 3% of universities in the world by two international studies:

- Times Higher Education-QS World University Rankings 2009
- Shanghai Jiao Tong Academic Ranking of World Universities 2009

UL is also a member of the 1994 Group of internationally renowned universities engaged in leading-edge research and high quality teaching and is the most inclusive of Britain's top-20 leading universities with the greatest proportions of students from under-represented groups. UL has furthermore one of the strongest student completion rates – 91% of our students leave the sector with an award according to government performance indicators and won the 2009/10 Award for Outstanding Student Support. The University directly employs over 3,500 people and indirectly supports the employment of just under 3,000 others (Source: <http://www2.le.ac.uk/about/facts>, accessed 1 October 2010)

The BDRA

- Builds capacity for research and development into information, communication and learning technologies
- Identifies excellent and appropriate ways forward to underpin e-learning strategy and policy for the 21st century; move from distance and campus based ‘e-learning’; provide a way of taking research into teaching through modes of learning
- Provides a focused way of networking and collaborating nationally and internationally in the field, a focus and an interesting place to attract external visitors and collaborators
- Deflect the ‘technology’ or ‘VLE’ driven narrative in the universities in the area of e-learning and instead addresses e-learning as a business and pedagogical development opportunity associated with positive change
- Promotes the possibilities of research into teaching across all departments and subjects
- Engages academic staff in research projects into their own teaching
- Provides a well-informed forum for discussion of e-learning strategy and choices
- Provides a forum and a focus for publications in the e-learning, distance-learning and pedagogical fields
- Provides a forum and good support for preparing income generating bids and resources
- Provides an arena for demonstration and discussion of new internal and external developments (http://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/beyond-distance-research-alliance/About%20Us/the_alliance, accessed 1 October 2010).

The BDRA further provides

- Recognition of efforts already underway and opportunities for innovators to feel recognised and find a ‘voice’ and identity
- Synergies between individuals and small groups for the purpose of sharing good practice, collaboration and support
- For the potential for research and associated publications through a research strategy in the field
- Opportunities for identification, experimentation and exploration of ideas leading to further innovation and longer-term projects
- Provide a suitable environment to attract research students interested in this domain (http://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/beyond-distance-research-alliance/About%20Us/the_alliance, accessed 1 October 2010).

The team from Unisa will engage with the BDRA and other stakeholders on the following issues:

- (i) **Exploring the scope, structure and mandate of the BDRA:** The competencies of staff, the mandate and institutional role of the BDRA, key focus areas, structures, future plans for the BDRA, organisational structures, equipment, permanent/contract staff, etc. In the light of the fact that the Unisa Senate has approved a Unisa ‘centre’ for educational/pedagogical innovation and research – we foresee that we could learn a lot from the BDRA.
- (ii) **Exploring the Carpe Diem workshop as a proven methodology:** Unisa foresees a mandatory training/development of all academic staff in using appropriate technologies and strategies to increase the effectiveness of teaching and learning in the context of the modules they are teaching. Though Unisa faces different issues regarding connectivity, band width and the fact that our VLE is SAKAI based, we do think that we may learn a lot from you regarding the way you plan, conduct and follow-up after Carpe Diem workshops.
- (iii) **Sharing with the BDRA very draft and tentative ideas** regarding both the above initiatives at Unisa and get input.
- (iv) **Explore possibilities for future collaboration.**

The Unisa team will consist of:

- (i) **Prof Peter Havenga** (Executive Director: Academic Planner)
- (ii) **Dr Leonie Steyn** (Education Consultant, Directorate for curriculum and learning development, DCLD)
- (iii) **Mr Jason Ming Sun** (Portal and Academic System Design, ICT)
- (iv) **Dr Mpine Makoe** (IODL)
- (v) **Dr Paul Prinsloo** (ODL Coordinator)

Taking into account the track record of the University of Leicester and the cutting edge research and innovation in teaching and learning spearheaded by the BDRA, the visit will certainly help Unisa to move towards using technologies more effectively.

5 A CELEBRATION OF INNOVATION IN TEACHING AND LEARNING AT UNISA, 29 OCTOBER 2010

All Unisa staff is invited to a celebration of innovation in teaching and learning at Unisa on 29 October 2010 in the Dr Miriam Makeba Concert Hall, on the Pretoria campus from 08:30 - 13:30.

At this event we will celebrate innovative practices in teaching and learning ranging from the use of tutors, E-tutors, Mxit and other social media, portfolios, satellite broadcasts and video conferencing, etc. As we would like to provide lunch for everyone attending the event, it is essential that you book a place by sending an e-mail to the Project Administrator of the ODL Project, Ms Tshoanelo Mokoena, mokoets@unisa.ac.za.

Detail of the event will be circulated closer to the date. Don't miss this opportunity ...

6 ODL REPOSITORY AND BLOG

All the ODL task team reports, the overview of the recommendations of the STLSC and other ODL documents are available on the Unisa Library's Institutional Repository at <http://uir.unisa.ac.za/dspace/handle/10500/3072> (accessed 1 October 2010). The repository is updated on a regular basis and if you register on the repository, you will get notifications of any new uploads.

You are also most welcome to comment on this (and previous) ODL Communiqués on the Unisa Staff website. On the right hand side of the Unisa Staff website, you will see a section titled "Important links" under which you must then click on "Blogs". On the blog page, you will notice two links namely "E-connect" and "Open Distance Learning". If you follow the latter you will be able to read and comment on the ODL Communiqués.

Drafted by Dr Paul Prinsloo

ODL Coordinator, Office of the Vice-Principal: Academic & Research, Unisa

1 October 2010

+27 (0) 12 4293683 (office), +27 (0) 823954113 (mobile), prinsp@unisa.ac.za

Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in this ODL Communiqué represent my personal viewpoints and do not represent the viewpoint of any other member of the Unisa community.