



RESEARCH INSTITUTIONS

The Importance of Group Process

As senior leaders, we must build a culture in our organizations that creates a positive, energizing environment for current and future work. Yet, too often in our institutions, we have hardened silos within our portfolios, hardened portfolios across campuses, and hierarchical customs about how to behave and interact.

While I have always been motivated by a desire to engage others, I have learned over the years that if I jump on the first idea that is spoken, rather than encouraging more ideas, it often blocks participation from others. Or, when I speak, others tend to assume “it’s coming from the boss,” and so what I say tends to go unchallenged.

In spring 2017, I asked Catherine Lilly—at the time a senior adviser on my staff—to lead a two-day workshop for supervisors and leaders in business and finance. The focus: to help increase the ability of supervisors within central administration to empower staff to fully participate in their everyday work. The training centered specifically on learning how to implement Liberating Structures, a set of engagement techniques

that anyone can adapt for use with groups—large and small. The various exercises encourage individuals to share their ideas by showing everyone at the table that it’s OK to speak up with different points of view. (Read also “Tools of Engagement” on page 80 for details on Liberating Structures and how the technique is being used throughout higher education.)

Initial Efforts

At the University of Michigan, we are now consciously employing these tools in many aspects of our daily work. For example, we are currently looking at how to reinvent our procure-to-pay process. We have used a variety of Liberating Structures to flesh out the assumptions that exist on both sides with regard to this end-to-end process and the need for change. Our desire was to truly explore what could be possible if we didn’t have certain limiting beliefs representing the status quo, such as:

- This process reports up several silos, so it can’t be changed.
- We already automated to the degree we can.
- Customers will complain no matter what.

On the other end of the take-the-plunge perspective, leaders entertained ideas such as:

- Could we automate the end-to-end process in a workflow?
- Should we create a new position in charge of the whole process to counter the silos?
- How can we increase the empowerment of departmental staff?
- Where can we manage undue fears of risk?

While we are not yet far enough along in this process to identify outcomes, our discussions have been less about understanding the technicalities of the procurement process and more about the group exploring new ways of out-of-the-box thinking. Only then does it make sense to come back to the constraints.

Reverberating Benefits

During the past year we have also become engaged in culture change using the principles of positive leadership from our Ross School of Business. Liberating Structures is absolutely front and center in doing this. For example, in the October 2017 senior leadership forum with the top 160 leaders in my organization, the group used several structures to solicit the most important things to create a

more positive and inclusive organization. Among the core themes to emerge: training and professional development, employee engagement and empowerment, communication, building a people strategy, work and workplace flexibility and facilities, line-of-sight and employee recognition, collaboration, management support, and diversity and cultural competency.

We have since taken action based on that input. To date, the forum has (1) brought in speakers from Ross School to talk about positive leadership; (2) brought in culture expert Adrian Gostick to lead a half-day training session on how to build organizational culture and increase employee engagement; and (3) convened working groups comprising forum members to take a deep dive into testing a variety of workspace flexibility options via a number of minipilots.

During our November 2017 forum, we took a deeper dive into the theme of training and professional development that had emerged in October. This included methods for finding what staff want and need; strategies for changing culture; resources for developing teams, leading more effective meetings, listening better, and conducting difficult conversations; more training resources to develop core leadership skills; and lesson plans and tools for cascading information effectively to their teams.

We’ve since created a working group to further explore one of the topics: creating on-the-job development opportunities for staff.

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By implementing Liberating Structures, a set of engagement techniques, the University of Michigan has fostered a positive leadership culture across the business office.

In other instances, we have used various Liberating Structures techniques to engage in enterprise strategic risk planning and to clarify expectations among the various stakeholders in our public-private partnership ventures. On a related matter, our president and university leaders have embarked on an institutionwide strategic effort to positively impact the diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) climate on our Ann Arbor campus. I believe that having laid the groundwork of building a positive leadership culture across the business and finance enterprise—one that values the input of everyone and nurtures new thinking—we are well positioned to help university DEI priorities take hold.

Hit the Refresh Button

In an environment where immediate results are expected, investing time and effort to change a culture takes managerial courage. Since we are only beginning our journey to change our culture, it is far too soon to conclude how successful we ultimately will be. The feedback that I have received from a survey of our leadership and from my near-daily discussions with staff members from across our portfolio of nearly 3,000 employees has been very positive. People are beginning to notice our efforts and to believe it is OK to take risks.

In truth, everyone wants to engage in positive processes. Yet, given these times of significant financial pressure on colleges and universities, leaders must find new ways

to renew employee interest and energy in the important work of their institutions. The Liberating Structures tools enable those who feel worn out by the grind of the daily routine to become motivated once again.

Using these tools can help people think outside their specific roles and functional constraints and provide opportunities for everyone to participate in the conversation by bringing their individual experiences and interests to bear on a particular question or challenge. Of note, these approaches seem to resonate especially well among younger generations in particular who are less hierarchical in their thinking and whose work patterns tend to be more fluid and less rigid.

Bottom line, when you can engage everyone in a more direct contribution to the mission in a way that they feel valued in that process, you will reap the added benefit of higher levels of satisfaction and motivation among your employees. Actively engaging individuals can move the entire group from a state of unconscious, business-as-usual interaction to conscious and intentional involvement—and investment—in creatively solving any challenge. ■



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