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LEADERSHIP COMMUNICATION AS A BARRIER TO ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING

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Introduction

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this paper is to explore leadership as a significant role in the organizational learning process. It will also recognize it as a potential communication barrier to the effectiveness of learning. Organizational Learning Theory will be explored, along with leadership and its role in communication, to get a foundation of previous literature. The current crisis at Penn state will be used as a case study for theory application. Finally, results of the observed content and its implications will be discussed.

The scandal at Pennsylvania State University, commonly known as "Penn State", reveals areas of opportunity for the learning process to take place. The recent crisis in its sports department (specifically football) has pressured the organization to disclose information that goes deeper into issues of leadership and response. Due to the timeliness of the allegations, investigators must bring information that dates back 15 years. Current information forms miscommunication links between coaches and assistant coaches, the athletic director, executive board members, the president, staff, and invested organizations. The title positions of these people place them in leadership roles, meaning that decisions can be made among them that will affect the entire Penn State football department. Even among these leaders, there is a hierarchy of command, which places the lines of communication in a certain flow. As a result, the behavior of the department's leadership communication should be observed for evidence of miscommunication.

Organizational learning is a critical and essential part to the strategic activity of an organization's improvement and success. When incidents such as scandals or emergency situations occur or get out of control in an organization, these incidents are considered crisis situations. Organizational crises present an opportunity for observation, assessment, and evaluation of procedure and cultural norms (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003). The importance of this crisis event is that there is an opportunity for resolution to old problems while opening a discussion for improvement of previous behaviors. Organizations that incorporate a complete double-loop learning process are able to minimalize the consequences of crises and provide an effective response strategy in its communication strategies.

Research in crisis communication and manage lacks in its amount of information on leadership duties in crisis response (Devitt & Borodzicz, 2008). Organizational learning takes on a structure that requires action and guidance from its leadership. Although, leadership is difficult to define (Slaven & Flin, 1997), leadership is still essential in the implementation of lessons taken from crises. When evaluations and assessments are made, the leadership of the organization is significantly involved in carrying out new procedures and cultural behavior. Therefore, it can be said that leadership is essential to the organizational learning process.

This means that leadership must take action in order to make necessary changes throughout the organization. Contrarily, leadership's failure to change behavior after a learned lesson becomes a barrier to the learning process.

Review of the Literature

Organizational Learning Theory

Organizational learning is described as an adaptation process that organizations can participate in for their improvement (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003). In other words, when a crisis event takes place in an organization, organizational learning is the process used to "learn" from that event and make the necessary changes to improve the organization. The ability to adapt keeps an organization open to the necessary restructuring of their behaviors and cultural norms. When crises present themselves, the learning process provides organizations with the opportunity to evaluate their current procedures. These current procedures, in the midst of crises, are no longer valid and new behaviors must be established.

The learning process for organizations uses different learning types that can be applied depending on the crisis situation. There are two types of learning processes considered the most in organizational learning, which are single- and double-loop learning (Deverell, 2009). These two learning types refer to the way an organization decides to evaluate its procedures. When using single-loop learning, organizations evaluate and change behaviors at the first level. This means that behaviors, which can be quickly seen and adjusted, are the only ones that will be resolved; The organization does not choose to go deeper into its investigation. As a result, resolutions may only be temporary and not completely solved. This establishes the possibility of another occurrence of crisis.

The double-loop learning process applies a complete restructuring of the organization (Deverell, 2009). Investigation looks to the root of the organization's procedures and behaviors in order to reduce the frequency of risks and crisis situations. The decision to use the double-loop learning process seeks to change the culture of an organization in its present and future existence. More importantly, it gives an organization the ability to start without the lingering of previous risks.

The Role of Leadership in Crisis

Leadership plays an important role in the presence of crises. In these situations, decisions must be made to guide the organization in its next direction. Additionally, leadership in crisis is difficult because of the nature of the situation. Decisions are being made in the presence of chaos, including information from organization staff, stakeholders, the general public, and the media which may receive incorrect information at times (Boin & 't Hart, 2003). As a result, leadership during this time must be effective so that change occurs and the image of the organization is not damaged beyond repair. Organizational leaders face the challenge of making sure they communicate with their staff, the media, and the public as needed. Information needs to be dispersed throughout the organization, while the appropriate information gets passed to the media and the general public (Deveritt & Borodzicz, 2008). As a result, the role of leadership during a crisis is one of the most essential to the success of the organization's image and existence.

When considering the Penn State scandal, leadership can be clearly seen as the focus of the scandal. In the midst of all the questions and concerns from public and media, leaders from the football department were constantly looked at for answers and comments.

Especially as the beginning news broke, the first people looked at were the leadership figures (Sandusky, Paterno, Penn State Provost, etc.). They were expected to give constant update and answer all questions, while many media sources provided their opinions and information which was not always accurate. This adds a chaos factor, and requires these leaders to be prepared for all of the misinformation that will be spread while they themselves try to hold the organization together.

Within organizational settings the communication and relationships that develop between leaders and subordinates becomes the centerpiece for pathways to success. In accordance, Leader-member exchange theory becomes an imperative measurement and discovery tool that encompasses the dynamic relational quality exchanges between leaders and followers. The primary contribution that the leader-member exchange (LMX) perspective has brought to researchers' understanding of leadership lies in its fundamental premise: leaders form different types of exchange relationships with their subordinates (Sparrowe & Liden, 1997, p.522).).

LMX emphasizes the differing relationships that supervisors develop with subordinates within a work unit (Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975; Greene & Scandura, 1987). In nearly all units, leaders differentiate among their subordinates in terms of leader behavior. A "nonwritten" contract seems to be established between leaders and subordinates on an interpersonal basis, as leaders differentiate among subordinates (Liden & Graen, 1980). An example of this process can be seen within the hierarchical formation of college athletic programs. The coach acts as a leader while his/her players play the role of the subordinate. Often the leader can simultaneously play the role of leader and subordinate. For instance, a coach can be a leader, but may also enact the role of a subordinate when he reports to someone of higher departmental stature, such as the athletic director. The difference in leadership style and quality of exchange between leaders and subordinates is determined through several factors that exist within the individual relationship with each group or team member. Factors such as competence and skill, extent to which subordinates can be trusted, and motivation to assume greater responsibility in a unit result in "preferential treatment" by the leader (Liden & Grean, 1980, p.2).

Sagas and Cunningham (2004) provide research attributing that Leader-Member Exchange quality is pertinent in determining the success of formalized groups of all dynamics. This framework may serve as a generalization and may be applicable for athletic teams and organizations. When LMX quality is low between members, communication often breaks down during periods of high stress. Players, coaches, and departmental participants are susceptible to communication breakdowns because of varying levels of LMX between each level of persons in an organization. Research has indicated that each superior-subordinate relationship within a group differs in nature (Yammarino & Dubinsky, 1992; Somech, 2003).Therefore we can draw the conclusion that the relational, personal, and tactical differences among leaders in each level of superiority (such as coaches, players and directors of an athletic program) can create a division among all organizational participants, creating a lack of homeostasis in communicative transactions.

During crisis, effective response is normally evaluated by the performance of the organization's team (Pearson & Clair, 1998). However, the decisions made by an organization's leader will make an impact on its staff, board, stakeholders, and associates. As a result, it is significant to understand how leadership performs with the organization during a time of crisis (Deveritt & Borodzicz, 2008). These contributions, together, form an effective response and develop a positive result for the organization.

It is valuable to note that the assessment of an organization's crisis management goes beyond task-oriented details. The way in which an organizations people are managed, during and after crisis, is equally important to the success of the culture's restoration

During crisis, effective response is normally evaluated by the performance of the organization's team (Pearson & Clair, 1998). However, the decisions made by an organization's leader will make an impact on its staff, board, stakeholders, and associates. As a result, it is significant to understand how leadership performs with the organization during a time of crisis (Deveritt & Borodzicz, 2008). These contributions, together, form an effective response and develop a positive result for the organization.

It is valuable to note that the assessment of an organization's crisis management goes beyond task-oriented details. The way in which an organizations people are managed, during and after crisis, is equally important to the success of the culture's restoration (Deveritt & Borodzicz, 2008). Therefore the role of leadership is significant not only in its technical responsibilities to repair void procedures, but its responsibility to its surrounding people who must experience crises with leaders.

Often times the changes made during crises evaluation is in its leadership, signaling a change in the direction of the organization (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003). This means that no matter what the issue of the crisis may be leadership is at the front of the investigation. Leaders are the face and voice of the organization and as a result are subjected to the majority of the blame. Since leaders make the decisions, it is on their shoulders that any credit or criticism is placed. The role of leadership in crisis is key to success or failure of an organization especially sports related organizations. Changes in leadership can be made if the organization is not satisfied.

Communication in Crisis

Considering communication, leaders must be aware of the communication process that is used within the organization. During crisis it is important for communication to take place at all levels so that the organization is informed across the board (Heath, 1998). When communication is effective, an organization is able to take better control of the crisis situation and filter messages to the appropriate audiences. Therefore, communication must be present in an organization for crises to be managed (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003). Within the case of the Penn State scandal, it cannot be said that communication was effectively used. The differing messages between leadership of the same sports department, explained later on, will show a clear breakdown of the communication lines.

Organizations may have specific ways that they communicate; this is considered to be a intentional language used by the organization (Moynihan, 2009). Frontiera's (2010) work showed an emphasis on how leaders in sports use communication to keep everyone aware of that culture's issues. Sports leaders were shown to have increased amount of disclosure within their organization for a more cohesive unit. As a result, information can be safely disseminated within an organization without compromising the image or releasing confidential information. An organization's ability to use appropriate language, inside and outside the crisis, will allow for all parties to receive their necessary information correctly. Proper communication will also keep the media and general public satisfied as the organization will be seen as staying transparent in the duration of the crisis (Deveritt & Borodzicz, 2008).

It is important to note that miscommunication can be increased during crises as the organization and inquiring entities often disconnect (Boin & McConnell, 2007). Communication can be disconnected from outside members of the organization, allowing for an increase in rumor and misinformation. As a result, the organization must not only repair the crisis but also re-inform the public about the previous information they have received. The danger in this situation is that by the time the organization responds, the damage is done and the opportunity to receive the truth may be lost. Frontier's (2010) study supports this as he explains not only the significance of communication, but the significance of timing communication in and

out of the organization.

Case Study

Procedure

The present scandal at Pennsylvania State University (Penn State) provides an opportunity for leadership and organizational learning to be explored. This paper used articles posted on the internet from three news sources, including CNN.com, NYtimes.com, and USAtoday.com. Only articles published between November 7 and March 12, 2012 were collected and observed. From these sources, four representative articles were primarily used for coding from that time period. Since this case is ongoing, new developments and information have not been considered, making the cutoff date for included information March 12, 2012. It is important to note that articles posted at the beginning of the crisis (November 4, 2011) were not used as the information was partial and not enough significant information was provided for observation.

Article One

An article posted to USAtoday.com on November 7, 2011 gives an in-depth look into the nature of the case. The allegations of child sexual abuse shocked the campus of Penn State and put a spotlight on the life of previous assistant coach, Jerry Sandusky. The article notes other cases of scandal at other colleges, but frames them as "common" financially-related issues and dishonesty. When referencing Penn State, the author notes the highly respected name of the school and the practically un-blemished reputation it had until the current allegations were made.

The writers, Steve Wieberg and Jack Carey, state that Sandusky has been buried under at least 40 counts, with over half (21) being felonies and the rest being misdemeanors, that allege that he abused eight young boys over a period of 15 years. Dating back to 1994, these cases are related to Sandusky's years of employment with the university and his association with his founded charity organization, Second Mile (1977). The boys in this case were participants in the organization's youth program. The writers noted that Sandusky encountered the boys through this program.

Most importantly, the writers mention two significant points pertaining to the scandal. The first is that there were already ideas that abuse was taking place. In their article, the authors use a quote from a season ticket holder and former student:

> "There were whispers about it," said Alex Ricker, a former Penn State student and current football season ticketholder who has worked several Second Mile camps in State College and Reading, Pa. "But when it came out, I don't think anybody expected that big of a hit or that serious of an indictment, as well as that many charges. It was sad."

Second, the article mentions the issue of reporting. A former graduate assistant, identified as Mike McQueary, is noted in the grand jury's document as reporting an incident he allegedly viewed between Sandusky and a young male. The document says that McQueary first reported the incident, which occurred over 9 years ago, to Head Coach Joe Paterno. After receiving the news, Paterno is recorded to have reported the news to Penn State Athletics Director, Tim Curley. Later in the article, the writers question why the allegations were not investigated after being reported. Additionally, they inquire why coach Paterno did not move

forward with the allegations after receiving no action from Curley.

Another article posted by CNN.com's Mallory Simon supports the fact that Paterno indeed reported the incident immediately after becoming aware. However, university officials released a statement noting their reasoning for firing the head coach as a "failure of leadership". Since Paterno did not make any moves to involve the police or go beyond Curley, officials say that he did not go beyond the minimal process of reporting. From this information it can be seen that while the proper communication took place initially, it was not reciprocated to resolve the situation. The lack of response from Curley shows a clear break in the flow of communication, adding to the trouble of the situation. It also supports the questioning of why Coach Paterno did not pursue more activity to resolve the issue with the chain of command.

From this article, evidence can be seen that there are present holes in the line of communication within leadership. As the allegations are reported, leaders become aware of the potential for crisis but there is no action taken. Since leadership was aware of the risks, but provided no response, a barrier to organizational learning is formed. This blocks the communication process and distills the lessons from being implemented into changed behaviors (Deverell, 2009). An opportunity for learning was presented as the allegations, which were only an internal crisis at the time, were presented to decision makers. The failure of leaders to engage in evaluation and assessment lessen the effectiveness of their crisis management. As a result, risks factors were increased and leaked information (as noted above) had a better chance of damaging the organization.

Article Two

Another key article was posted on November 16, 2011, by CNN.com, which was a reported timeline of Penn State scandal. The significance of this article is that the timeline begins over 15 years ago, in 1994, where the alleged sexual abuse takes place with boys from Sandusky's Second Mile organization. According to the grand jury report, several people viewed alleged abuse between Sandusky and the young boys. Among this group is graduate assistant Mike McQueary (previously mentioned), a Penn State janitor, and a wrestling coach at a Pennsylvania high school were Sandusky volunteered. One of the failures of leadership to effectively report and resolve the issue can be seen in this passage:

> March 3, 2002 -- Paterno reports the incident to Athletic Director Tim Curley, saying the graduate assistant had seen Sandusky "fondling or doing something of a sexual nature to a young boy," according to the grand jury. Later, the assistant is summoned to a meeting with Curley and Senior Vice President for Finance and Business Gary Schultz.
> [Specific date not provided] 2002 -- The Second Mile learns of the alleged shower incident. Curley tells the charity that "the information had been internally reviewed and that there was no finding of wrongdoing," the group said in a statement Monday.

According to the article's timeline, Athletic Director Tim Curley assured the Second Mile organization that the issue was solved, and more importantly, Sandusky was not guilty of wrongdoing. Further, between 2005 and 2006, Sandusky befriends another boy from the Second Mile organization and the same allegations are eventually reported. From the information provided, a consistency can be seen in the allegations formed while there are several inconsistencies made from leadership. Minimal communication between leaders and police officials occurs, leaving risks and doubt within the university and the charity organization. The lack of decision making from university leadership, and the charity's leadership, allowed for repeated

occurrences. As a result eight boys are able to make the same allegations with potential witnesses to back up their story.

Organizational learning would suggest that the inter-crisis learning type be applied in this situation (Deverell, 2009). There are at least three opportunities that university or Second Mile leadership could have evaluated the incidents enough to see where they could improve in their response. In addition to their assessment as an organization, Sandusky should also have been evaluated for his consistent role in the allegations. Incident reporting was constantly brought to leadership with the expectation to make decisions, but leadership proved to be a barrier to the learning process, as there was no response that was communicated to resolve the situation. As noted in the review of the literature, leaders are expected to effectively use communication to improve the situation to the satisfaction of their organization and the public.

Article Three

The third article is again from CNN.com and deals with the beginning of the lawsuit process as the first victim files. According to the article, the victim's lawyer reports that they are suing the university, Sandusky, and the Second Mile organization. The key point of this article is the reasons stated for the lawsuit. The article reports that the lawsuit is for the "institutional failure" of the university, Sandusky, and the charity organization, which it states allowed for Sandusky to continue his activity.

The alleged victim, like the others, has come forward in an attempt to put a stop to any further incidents and bring closure to personal suffering. The article notes that all the defendants are investigating the issues, but Sandusky's attorney says they plan to prove his innocence. The difficulty in the matter, according to the article, is the high amount of allegations and alleged victims who have come forward. In addition to those numbers, the article is clear in wanting to understand why something wasn't done earlier. This passage from the article sums up the issues of the general public:

> In addition, Penn State President Graham Spanier and legendary head football coach Joe Paterno lost their jobs soon after Sandusky's arrest, following criticism that the football program and university in general did not adequately handle the matter when allegations arose years earlier. (p.2)

Again, with over 15 years of alleged abuse being presented, one can only wonder why nothing has been done even though leadership was aware of the allegations. Throughout that time, it would have benefitted the football department to have proper internal and external communication strategies so that information would not hurt the organization. The communication among its leadership was not effectively used to keep harmful information from being leaked to the public, while resolving the issue at the same time. The application of a double-loop organizational learning process would have greatly improved the lines of miscommunication that were present and reduced the amount of image repair needed for image restoration.

With this inquiry in mind, Penn State held a town hall meeting where students were able to share their concerns. According to the article students were able to voice their feelings and talk about what direction the university would move in. Among popular discussion was the fate of Joe Paterno, who after previously stating that he would move in. Among popular discussion was the fate of Joe Paterno, who after previously stating that he would retire at the end of the season, was terminated.

This passage from the article shows where the university is with its direction in leadership. Interim President, Rodney Erickson comments on the new direction:

> Asked why Paterno had been let go before an investigation into what happened was complete, Erickson said he wanted to look forward. "We have to remember what happened here; we have to learn from it, but we also have to look ahead."

It is not until the crisis has completely escalated that leadership sees fit to learn from this scandal. While it is a positive decision that they've decided to move forward, it must be said that the bulk of these incidents could have been avoided. The failure of the leadership, across the board, caused what could've been one isolated instance to turn into years of negligence. To the damage of the university, lack of proper communication and decision making leave it in a position that may hurt its reputation for some time. Subsequently, the university will have to spend a significant amount of time correcting and restructuring its entire environment. An action that is long overdue.

Article Four

The final article was posted from the NYtimes.com (New York Times Online) on December 3, 2011. In this article, writer Jo Becker gives an exclusive insight with Jerry Sandusky in his first interview since the allegations were released. One of the main points of this article is related to the communication between Sandusky and Coach Joe Paterno. In his interview, Sandusky states that he never had any conversations with Paterno about the allegations. He states that Joe Paterno only stated his concern about kids from the Second Mile charity being on the sidelines at football games.

Another point noted in the article is that Sandusky mentions that he was never restricted access from the Second Mile charity. He states that he was in full contact and association until he left last year. He notes that leadership at the university and the charity organization were aware of the allegations, but he was not stripped of any duty or penalized (outside of the incident investigated by Penn State police in 1998). The article mentions that Paterno was terminated due to his failure to aggressively do more investigation in the 2002 case. Although Sandusky said he felt bad about Paterno's firing, he states that he has no recollection of ever discussing matters of sexual abuse with Paterno. The significance of this article is that Sandusky's exclusive interview shows direct miscommunication in the leadership of the university and the Second Mile charity. It also reveals answers to why the case has to be drawn out longer than it had to. The accounts of different leaders have to be observed and compared since no two stories are similar. If communication was effective, leaders would be united in their responses and have the necessary documents proving an innocent or guilty verdict. The report of the grand jury says that the leadership failed to report incidents as they should have. One of the main reasons that could be is that no one communicated anything to Sandusky as far as receiving penalty or found guilty of wrongdoing. As mentioned previously, the first investigation noted in a report to the Second Mile charity that no wrongdoing was found by Sandusky. Other than that incident, no further reporting can be found. This matches Sandusky's claim that no one, including Paterno and other leadership, were in conversation with him about the cases.

Discussion

Organizational learning in crisis is significantly related to the future success of organizations post-crisis (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003). When crises present themselves, they should be observed and evaluated to ensure improvement for the organization. The decisions made post-crisis that affect the organization are usually made by those in leadership positions (Boin &'t Hart, 2003). In the midst of a distracting crisis and constant need of staff, media, and public, leaders have to make important decisions that will move the organization into its next direction.

The failure of Penn State's leadership to effectively make decisions caused the outcry from the media and the public to result in the loss of positions. In the middle of the crisis, many leaders stepped down or were terminated at the university and at the Second Mile organization. This removal from position is a normal occurrence when leadership is not found to be satisfactory (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003). Considering the leadership of Penn State, Paterno had years of success with the school but his failure to do more as a leader did not satisfy the public and resulted in his termination. Other leaders decided to resign or retire, also due to the pressure of the crisis situation.

Therefore it can be said that leadership is essential to organizational learning. Organization's opportunity for restructuring and new direction will come from the decisions made by its leadership. As a result, it is possible for leadership to become a barrier to the organizational learning process. This means that leadership's role is significant enough to help or hinder learning. Final decisions in an organization can only be made by leaders, so it is important for leaders to use effective communication. The lack of communication will not only increase the risk, but leave the opportunity for an organization's reputation to be destroyed.

Although these findings cannot be found directly in the literature used earlier, the implications of the literature show an obvious need for more information to be provided on the role of leadership. The case of Penn State shows a fitting example of the importance of leadership in organizational learning. More importantly, it confirms the significance of organizational learning from crisis.

Limitations

This article focused on leadership communication as barrier to organizational learning. Some limitations can be found in this study. One limitation is the lack of research on leadership in crises. While there are numerous studies on leadership, there is a minimal amount that focuses on leadership during crisis. Lack of research makes it difficult for full discussion on related literature.

Another limitation is in the amount of information that can be provided at this time. The Penn State scandal is still a developing case that has yet to complete a full trial. All parties are innocent until proven guilty by a court of law, therefore all allegations cannot be considered true or false which limits the amount of discussion on what can be done in the organization. Additionally, any articles posted after March 12, 2012 have not been considered leaving content filtered to an estimated time of four months.

Considering the present crisis, a limitation of this study is that no direct interviews or interaction with primary participants was involved. Since content was gathered from public news sources on the internet, no exclusive information is collected. This also limits the study in its ability to gain extra inside information and accounts from all the parties involved. Since this case is based on allegations made by specific people, it would have been beneficial to have some interviews and collected accounts from victims, leaders, or even Penn State students and football players.

Future Research

Future research should be completed on leadership within organizational learning. The role of leadership is one of the most criticized and blamed positions. In addition to that, leaders are put under a different type of pressure when experiencing crises. Decisions have to be made and communication must be flowing between all appropriate parties. With such significant responsibility, leadership should be observed to see what types of characteristics make effective leaders and non-effective leaders in crisis situations. This would also contribute to understanding how leaders are expected to communicate and behave under the stress and chaos of the event.

With the presence of many groups looking for answers, research should focus on how these different groups prefer to receive communication. Depending on the receiving audience, the language of the message will be different. Effective leaders are able to prove appropriate messages to the right audience and keep confidential information reduced to the right people. It would be interesting to understand what expectations various audiences have during crisis situations and the amount of transparency needed for satisfaction

Conclusion

Organizational learning is an effective process that will allow an organization to improve its procedures and cultural norms. Decisions made in the learning process come from leaders of the organization. In the presence of crisis leaders are put under an extreme pressure and spotlight that will criticize their every move. The role of leaders and their communication is essential to the success of crisis management. Lack of communication among leaders can create a barrier to the learning process, resulting in a failure to resolve the issue.

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