CHANGE MANAGEMENT AND TEAM MENTAL MODELS: THE SHIFT TO EXPERIENCE-BASED LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

As colleges and universities consider curriculum change as a way to address the skills gap between what employers desire and the skills graduates possess, one challenge is determining what combination of passive versus active learning will best close this gap. There can be resistance to both curriculum change as well as the specific learning approaches (active versus passive) included as part of this curriculum change. The authors discuss the roles of team mental models and change management as important considerations to increase acceptance of both curriculum change and the trend toward active experiential-learning approaches.

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

As business schools strive to prepare their students for the dynamic workplace they will enter after graduation, the challenge of how best to do so faces them. There is no silver bullet, yet insights from employers clarify what business schools can be doing to prepare students for the demanding and fast-paced business landscape. As helpful as said insights are to business schools, they are disruptive in the sense that they essentially demand curriculum to be reworked. The concepts of change management and team mental models are vital in the situation facing business schools, as the modification of long-standing curriculum requires support and cooperation among various stakeholders. The garnering of this support and cooperation must be a concerted effort in order to be successful, and the concepts of change management and team mental models have the means to make it successful.

Issue – The Skills Gap

There are a lot of layers to this issue, yet the ultimate driver behind the need for curriculum change is the gap that exists between the skills students possess and the skills employers desire. Similarly, there is a gap between how prepared students think they are and how prepared they are perceived to be by their manager (Philbrick et al, 2017; Strauss, 2016). As a result, the credibility and weight that a college degree has in the job market is not what those paying thousands of dollars in tuition would like to see. Companies are not hesitating to hire individuals without college degrees, a startling wake-up call that business schools must respond and adapt to (Selingo, 2015). They must ensure that they are providing a world class education that sets their students apart not just in the job applicant pool, but once they are hired and handed tasks and responsibilities.

Although there is sufficient evidence that there is a gap, there is still a lot of ambiguity in the skills that students need to improve upon to close this gap, more specifically discipline-specific hard skills (Levy & Rodkin, 2014). As research on these hard skills progresses and business schools are able to pinpoint exactly what is lacking, curriculum modification is the next step, specifically transitioning to more experience-based learning.

Passive Learning versus Active Learning

The vast amount of approaches that institutions take to learning can be placed into one of two categories: passive and active. Each serving their own purpose, passive and active learning are often represented in differing capacities in a curriculum, largely depending on the discipline being taught (Roberts, 2014). Passive learning can be thought of as a fixed, structured approach to education, ultimately providing students with a foundation of knowledge (Cannon & Geddes, 2019). The application of such knowledge is the active learning piece of one's education, which may come in the form of a simulation, role playing, or an internship, to name a few (Gomolka & Ward, 1998).

The traditional institutional setting has primarily utilized passive learning, yet a trend towards active learning is the reality of recent years. Experiential Learning Theory, the brainchild of intellectuals such as Kurt Lewin and John Dewey, postulates that experience is absolutely crucial to our development as humans (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Still yet, critics point out the biases present in experience, arguing that passive learning must complement active learning in order to correct these biases. As individuals, we become so attached to our own experiences, generalizing them to all subsequent experiences and creating an availability heuristic (Kolb, 2014). Nevertheless, active learning has the power to build hard skills in a way that passive learning cannot (Teach &

Schwartz, 2004). With the skills gap facing today's college graduates, active learning is the desired path to develop the hard skills necessary for one's discipline and ultimately close the gap.

TEAM MENTAL MODELS AND CHANGE MANAGEMENT

Shifting to more experience-based (active) learning for the sake of developing hard skills and giving students exposure that will make them more competitive in the job market is a challenge in and of itself, especially when facing resistance and hesitancy from stakeholders (i.e. professors, university administration, students, etc.) (Waddell & Sohal, 1998). The concepts of team mental models and change management are applicable to this situation, allowing proponents of the experience-based learning shift to garner more support and buy-in, an important step in effective implementation.

Team mental models are abstract, impact team performance, and are generally defined as team members' understanding of the team environment around them: what the goals and purpose of the organization are, the responsibility of each member of the team, and how to adapt to the change facing the organization (Mathieu, Jet al, 2000). A team mental model can be fostered in a number of ways, one way being planning, an area extensively studied and discussed by Stout, Cannon-Bowers, Salas, and Milanovich in their effort to understand this abstract concept (1999). Planning ensures that all members of the organization are on the same page (Zhou, 2017).

This is meaningful in the context of the shift to more experience-based learning, as a strong team mental model may be the difference between effective implementation and ineffective implementation. If any one of the stakeholders does not understand the role they play in the cirriculum shift, other stakeholders will be negatively impacted in that the shift will not be successful and therefore not serve its purpose of better preparing graduates for the workforce. For example, the shift to active learning is made possible by access to the appropriate experiences (as mentioned above: simulations, role play, internships, etc.). Plentiful opportunities, resources, and experiences must be made available to students, both inside and outside of the classroom, which is in large part made possible by the curriculum decisions, professional connections, and guidance of university professors and administrators. In turn, the students' role is to take advantage of these opportunities. Team mental models ensure that professors, administrators, and students understand the goal and purpose of the shift, how each of them will play a part in the shift to make it successful, and what the desired outcome is.

In conjunction with team mental models is the concept of change management, another important component to making the shift to more experience-based learning successful. With change management being such a complex yet crucial process, it has been extensively studied, with many frameworks and models being built over time (Kramer & Magee, 1990). Kurt Lewin's model, one of the most well-known models, describes change management in three steps: unfreezing, movement, and refreezing (Cummings et al, 2016). In order to overcome resistance and arrive at the desired state, Lewin's model says that an organization must break down the status quo, transition to the new status quo, and finally, solidify. Although critics of Lewin's model claim that it oversimplifies the change process, it lays a general framework of how to approach the change process.

Lewin's model, as well as other change management frameworks, shows how a leader can take a number of steps in order to garner support for their desired end state (D'Ortenzio, 2012). As previously mentioned, support and cooperation for the desired end state is critical, as there are various stakeholders that will play a part in the process and ultimately determine if the desired end state is reached. Approaching the curriculum change in an organized and intentional way, thereby taking the time to understand each stakeholders' reservations, challenges, and benefits in the face of the change, is important to make it successful. A student who has grown up and adapted their learning style to that of a traditional classroom will need to understand what this new curriculum means for them, "unfreeze" old tendencies, and move to a mindset that allows them to thrive in an active learning environment. Professors will also need to "unfreeze" their traditional curriculum plans and move toward plans that better support active learning. It will be necessary for employers to "unfreeze" traditional hiring practices, such as the evaluation of a candidate based on GPA and transcript grades, and begin to implement new hiring practices that evaluate students on the discipline-specific hard skills that they desire.

Although each stakeholders' change process looks a little bit different, awareness of employer dissatisfaction in college graduates' skill set is crucial, as this is ultimately driving the need for the change. This dissatisfaction will remain a constant theme throughout the movement and refreezing steps, constantly reminding stakeholders why the change is necessary. Upon arriving at the desired state, the leader must ensure that curriculum continues to grow and develop, avoiding retreating back to the previous state. This includes constantly looking to gain insights from employers on their expectations and perceptions of college graduates and the skills they bring to their first full-time job.

PLAN FOR FUTURE STUDY

After studying the application of team mental models and change management to the skills gap present in today's job market and the shift in curriculum that is necessary because of this gap, the authors have become more curious about the leadership that is needed to execute such a shift. Not only is it a structural shift in terms of how the curriculum is organized, but it is a mental shift, where students, faculty, and staff must be taught to believe in the value of experience-based learning. It goes without saying that a visionary, passionate leader is needed to implement such a change.

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