

It's Stuck!

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For those who grew up in the 70s or who embrace a more vintage lifestyle, a record player is a familiar friend. It is a relatively simple device with a platform that rotates a grooved vinyl disk so a needle can produce sound. The needle progresses easily from start to finish with maybe a few hiccups as grooves get more worn. If only moving forward in our profession was this easy!

If you think about the work of fraternity and sorority in this record player analogy, you can approach it with one of two viewpoints: either the needle is moving forward, or it is stuck in a loop. (Perhaps there is the third that it is regressing, but I am not in possession of enough information to support that pessimistic belief.) For those who see the needle moving forward, one can cite the continued growth of chapters, the expansions, and constructions. We could examine the new programs inter/national organizations are starting focusing on developing the whole person and the whole chapter.

There is also some validity for those who are feeling stuck. No one would call fraternity/sorority life an innovative industry. We are not likely to make the cover of *Fast Company* or *Inc.* for our forward-thinking. In general, we tend to be more reactionary than visionary, putting out fires instead of seeking out and stopping the issues before they arise.

I would contend the latter: our field is stuck in a loop. We are moving, but not forward, just in a cyclical rotation, seeing many of the same problems year after year and repeating similar actions to address them. We have all seen the headlines; many of them are not news to us as much as they are reminders there is work to be done. Some of our problems are merely a byproduct of working with developing young adults; we work with primarily 18-22 year olds, and just when our constituents grasp a point, they graduate. Our work and training on issues related to the big three – alcohol, hazing, and sexual assault/abuse – may never end.

Our lack of urgency has stopped the needle in its tracks. Should it take major racial or sexual assault incidents to move conversations about these ideas to the forefront? One would hope not, but those conversations seemed to be happening only on the fringes of the profession until the news or Department of Education made them a priority. In many ways, our profession mimics the students we advise: everything seems to be going fine, so there is no need to disrupt the system. Gary Hamel (2002) advises that “without an explicit recognition of the onset of decay, there is little incentive for a strategy reboot” (p. 56). That stagnant, complacent, unaware system is exactly where death and hurt grow.

So, what needs to happen to get out of our loop? In the words of Mike McRee, “we can’t get ‘there,’ or wherever we want to be, by working harder. We’ve got to radically change the way we are doing things or others will be citing this article in the future, the same way I’m quoting Chuck Loring 20 years later” (2011, p. 6). There are several things we can do to keep McRee’s words from being prophetic.

1. Get outside of ourselves. Jim Taylor notes “the more you pay attention to information that supports your worldview, the less you learn. There tends to be a convergence in what any group of people believe is important, despite what might really be important out there” (as cited in Hamel, 2002, p. 141). We cannot continue to exist in our tight network of fraternity and sorority, or even student affairs, professionals. In “Reframing Organizations,” Bolman and Deal (1991) articulate four separate ways of understanding organizational complexity: a structural or systems framework, a human resources framework, a political framework, or a symbolic framework. They note “too often [leaders] bring too few ideas to the challenges that they face. They live in psychic prisons because they cannot look at old problems in a new light and attack old challenges with different and more powerful tools – they cannot reframe. When they don’t know what to do, they simply do more of what they do know” (p. 4). Many of us have learned one way of examining and advising our organizations, through the student development or human resources framework. This frame alone has not and will not solve our problems.
2. Remember we are stewards of our communities and organizations. “Stewardship asks us to be deeply accountable for the outcomes of an institution, without acting to define purpose for others, control others, or take care of others” (Block, 1993, p. 18). In our work to decrease risks and raise standards, we have all too frequently acted as controllers and rulers of the fraternity world, rather than as stewards and care-takers of its future. We must remember we are not the rulers and “we can be accountable and give control to those closer to the work” (Block, 1993, p. 18). It is a simple reframing of our roles, but a difficult one in an industry that revolves around policies and mitigation. In a conversation with Jeremiah Shinn, he remarked as a whole, we need fewer rules, not more. The safety and accountability we feel responsible for can be accomplished through our forming and maintaining real relationships with our organizational members; choosing partnership over patriarchy allows for balanced and shared accountability while ensuring each stakeholder has a part to play in moving the needle forward.
3. Become better activists. Hamel (2002) notes activists embrace five core values: honesty, compassion, humility, pragmatism, and fearlessness. If we were to truly be activists in our work, some things would have to be different. We would throw away the Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors (AFA) currency and the political gaming that occurs and speak the truth and the “unspeakables” about our work. And, instead of being ostracized for this, the truth tellers would be acclaimed. We would embrace care for the whole community; success for one organization or institution does not have to mean detriment for another. We would throw our own egos aside and embrace the steward role; no one in fraternity/sorority life holds all the answers. We would chuck all the rhetoric and grandstanding out the window. We would not be “searching for Utopia; [we’re] trying to make stuff happen right here, right now” (Hamel, 2002, p. 205). Lastly, we would be courageous. Our “passion for the cause [would] regularly override [our] sense of self-

protection” (Hamel, 2002, p. 2015). No more covering our backsides and protecting our jobs; we need to be fearless for the change fraternity needs.

4. Accept and appreciate failure. It is going to happen. The new program or initiative we put together to address an anticipated concern may fail; it may miss the mark completely. “Change is powerful, but change always comes with failure as its partner. ‘This might not work’ isn’t merely something to be tolerated; it’s something you should seek out” (Godin, 2011, p. 44). The sooner we become comfortable with not succeeding, the sooner we can begin to try the new things that will move the needle. Start small, experimenting with something that is not guaranteed, then keep pressing to increase your willingness to say “this might now work...but we’re going to try it anyway.”

Ultimately, if the needle is not moving, it is on us. “Once you’ve engaged with an organization or a relationship or a community, you owe it to your team to start. To initiate. To be the one who makes something happen. To do less is to steal from them” (Godin, 2011, p. 64). It is time to stop stealing from all who came before us and everyone who will follow. It is time to start moving the needle.

References

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