Getting Rid of the Student in Advisement: Using Business Management to Fix our Communities

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For organizations to survive they must adapt. Successful organizations are those who are able to continuously learn new methods of functioning while letting go of ineffective practices. To stay stagnate is ultimately to fail. Organizational growth can exist in a variety of forms, whether it is the creation of new elements or the adaptation of components from outside entities. The fraternity and sorority movement is no different with changes occurring that mirror movements in external industries.

One of the easiest ways to bring new life into an organization is the continual adoption of outside practices. Organizations become hybrids by learning from other entities, such as when business practices are applied to higher education and vice versa. Examples of this can include the adoption of social media practices, the push for fraternities and sororities to serve as sources of leadership development, or the gradual embrace of servant leadership by different institutions. Fraternities and sororities adapt just like any other industry.

One specific vein of theory that has been adopted into student affairs is organization development (OD). Organization development is an effort "planned, organization-wide and managed from the top, to increase organization effectiveness and health through planned interventions in the organization's "processes," using behavioral-science knowledge" (Beckhard, 2006, p. 3). The goal of OD is treating organizations as complex systems to manage in their entirety, producing cultural change. Due to the emphasis this field places on developing the entire organization over its pieces, OD does not always consider individual needs but instead weighs decisions based on the entire system.

Although OD is not designed to focus on individuals, some of its practices such as team building workshops, measuring an organization's different units by standardized criteria, and conducting interviews of an organization's members to trim detrimental parts have become more common within our industry. The danger in adopting these practices lies in the watering down of elements when attempting to apply them between diverse fields. In the effort to be innovative, it is damaging as professionals to scavenge parts of practices without taking into account all pieces. While continual evolution is important, there must be care in how outside assets are adopted.

Despite concerns that applying business theory to student affairs will lose the emphasis on students, this application can work given the proper time, effort, and the right understanding of how to apply OD to advisement. The following practices are not the only ones available but are initial ideas to encourage conversation about alternative methods to current advisement. Additionally, it is important to consider these practices in their entirety.

The following five practices, as commonly seen within organization development, are built upon the idea of business consulting. When applying these practices to advisement, consider the scenario of approaching a chapter or student as a complete outsider. Considering this relationship as new, it must be built intentionally and mutually agreed upon. Overall, the goal of any professional as a consultant is not to fix the organization's problems for its members but instead to help illuminate recommended solutions. It is then dependent on the organization's members, (the students) on whether or not to accept these answers. The five beginning practices to recommend when applying organization development to advisement include:

Treating Students as Clients

Treating a student as a client means establishing boundaries, setting up measures of accountability, and acknowledging a partnership built in mutual respect. When engaging a client, consultants recognize both parties must be willing to equally participate if the relationship is to be successful. This means both the consultant and client have to sacrifice some of their organizational power. This relationship requires buy in from both and allows either party to rewrite, or leave, the partnership if unsatisfied.

The first piece of this, establishing relational boundaries, is not overtly difficult. When meeting with a student, have an open dialogue concerning what each party is responsible for within the partnership. Focus on levels of engagement and determine clear boundaries. Each party must be willing to participate in this relationship but this involvement requires a mutual understanding of what the process involves. In advisement, spend time discussing the types of support the student can expect, your expectations for them as leader, and clarify what they would like from you in your role as advisor.

The potential for changes in the relationship should also be addressed. If at any time either participant is unsatisfied with the partnership, conversations should take place on what to change or alternative solutions. Treating a student as a client requires providing them with an equal voice in setting boundaries and being open to redefining your role as an advisor based on student expectations. The benefits of such are that it helps produce greater commitment levels among participants, and it can help you learn about the needs of students previously undefined.

Using Contracts

Having initially discussed the boundaries of the relationship, utilizing contracts allows you to set these boundaries in stone. This contract does not need to be legally binding; however, it does signify a commitment from both the advisor and student. With this contract, pull language from the initial discussion on expectations. Using already discussed language helps strengthen the partnership by laying out the components both parties acknowledge.

The terms in this advisement contract will vary depending on the student and organization but can range from participating in a set number of meetings to a requirement that both sides are honest in all conversations. Each party needs to agree on these stipulations and, as with consulting, once these stipulations are set they must be followed. Within the contract, considerations need to be made in case of a breach. If a violation to the contract occurs, there should be a process for parties to revisit expectations and potentially renegotiate roles.

The last critical piece of the contract lies in its ability to define desired successes. The contract should highlight what will have been achieved at the conclusion of the relationship. Using a contract to concretely define terms of the advisement helps with accountability of both sides and provides room to measure the health of the partnership throughout the year.

Focusing on Organizations not Individuals

Organization development is named such because it focuses on the organization as a whole instead of individual members. Part of the watering down of organization-development has come due to the taking of OD training practices and focusing them solely on individual leadership development. In OD, the practice of only training an organization’s leaders is avoided because focusing on these individuals neglects the needs of the entire organization being consulted. It allows members of the organization to slip through the cracks.

In advisement, emphasis needs to shift towards focusing on entire chapters instead of individuals or officer groups. Leaders should not be ignored, but advisement should instead focus on all members of a chapter. Direct efforts need to be made to engage entire groups, to provide a voice for unengaged members, and most importantly to provide training that develops the culture of the entire chapter. This means that at times it is appropriate to consult with students that are not assigned to leadership roles, to treat chapters as unified entities, and to develop skills for the entire group. Organizations are more likely to succeed because skills are developed that help the system thrive, not because of the abilities of isolated members.

Focus on Campus Cultures, not Chapters

The culture of an organization, while easy to maintain, is many times steadfast against change. Cultural change is difficult, exhausting, and takes time. Organizational culture is also influenced by membership in larger systems. While chapters form their own unique culture that defines their membership, this culture is influenced, shaped, and permitted by their greater environment. Due to this outside influence, rarely does broad, sweeping cultural change work within organizations. Instead change must be focused and built over time.

When applying OD to the cultural issues of fraternities and sororities, it is important to look at methods of proactively influencing the culture of the greater environment. This means looking critically at the cultures being fostered by institutions, student communities, and larger organizations. Policies, cultural artifacts, and traditions must be examined to gain a better understanding of root issues. Instead of focusing on single organizations which are violating policies, removing individuals found guilty of violations, or trying to implement broad sweeping change, problems needs to be solved from the system's perspective. This means all issues faced should take into account the environment that is allowing them to thrive and how organizations influence one another. To combat systems, partnerships should be built with outside allies that address the root issue at hand. It will never be enough to remove one negative chapter or member when an entire community’s culture promotes or permits the negative behaviors in question.

Setting Strict Requirements

The last aspect of OD to consider is the use of strict requirements within client relationships. These measurements should be made with the voice of the client, but once set, students should be prepared to meet these expectations. If applied across advisement, this concept could help, instead of making allowances for students to fail. Performance, at times, should be viewed in black and white. This strict nature forces decisions to be made, policies to be adhered to, and consequences to be felt. Instead of allowing students to justify their behaviors, conversations can become about responsibility. Using strict measurements helps organizations to run smoothly, removes room for excuses, and creates a standard of immediacy. Find the deadlines to enforce in your community and stick to them.

To implement any of these practices requires authenticity. Consultants only succeed if they are themselves and the client feels comfortable engaging in the relationship. When consultants build relationships with clients, there has to be a mutual match between both parties. If one side is not comfortable, the partnership will not work. In fraternity and sorority advisement, there needs to be a comfort to authentically engage students. This includes sharing with them your personal concerns, opening up to the potential of being let down, and allowing students to understand why you may feel disappointments. Organization development may take pieces of student advisement out of the equation, but it does not remove the human element.

The application of business practices to student affairs involves taking steps outside of comfort zones and a willingness to learn new methodology. While the practices above are general suggestions, applying them would allow for validated business practices to potentially find a place within fraternity and sorority life. These practices cannot be assimilated piece by piece into advisement but instead should be adopted in a manner that allows for new concepts to be explored. Understanding that trying anything new involves a level of risk, implementing these practices in their entirety helps to mitigate that risk. Although at times, OD may seem at odds with student advisement, it is important to step outside the comfortable practices used within student affairs in the effort of creating stronger chapters, communities, and institutions.

References

Beckhard, R. (2006). What is organization development? J.V. Gallos (Ed.), *Organization Development* (pp. 3-12). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.