Transforming a Culture of Blame-Seeking to one of Problem Solving: Reflections from a PA Scholar Turned Practitioner

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Challenge: A longtime student of public administration, I have been attempting to practice what I preach for the past four years in my role as an Associate Dean. In this case study I reflect on one difficult challenge I have faced: transforming my home department from a culture marked by incessant blame-seeking to one characterized by an ethos of problem-solving.

Context: Six years after a merger forced by the previous Dean, the three sub-units of the new Department of Human Ecology emphasize differences and tend to blame other units for longstanding concerns and problems. Little problem-solving energy is generated and sustained and cross-unit sniping creates concerns for faculty and for the Dean, who sees a troubled unit despite having invested many new faculty FTE in the past few years.

At stake: For college, we want a strong social science department that is integrated with ag and environmental sciences; for many faculty there are key equity issues, including how diversity is defined and pursued by the department, how junior faculty are treated, and whether academic differences will be embraced or rejected. While the setting is academic, the challenges mirror concerns in our broader political culture. Indeed, the future health of democratic politics will hinge decisively on our ability to transcend scapegoating and engender a sense of common responsibility for public work and its outcomes.

Literature: mostly scant on this topic, but see: Fast and Tiedens (2009) on blame contagion in organizations; and Provera, Montefusco and Canato (2010); Lloyd-Walker, Mills, and Walker (2014); and Vince and Saleem (2004) on how a culture of blame can block organizational learning and innovation.

Tradeoffs and tensions: to managed in the course of culture-transforming administrative work:
  • between top-down leadership and allowing participant voice and ownership;
  • between the use of formal administrative mechanisms to set norms and boundaries and the use of informal persuasion to win hearts and minds;
  • between relying on existing internal resources and seeking external help and support; and
• between the administrator as part of the community versus being seen or deliberately taking a stance as separate and distinct from the community.

Emerging principles:

• **Holding space as a humble leader:** As described by Owens and Heckman (2016), leader humility and modelling desired behavior can begin “shifting the conditions that are holding the problem in place.” Rather than approach situation with solutions, approach humbly as one who doesn’t have all the answers; hold space while things develop, without letting cynicism take over but also allowing opposition to the process to play out...space for all voices, supportive and not supportive to be heard. Trying to shift negative emotional contagion to positive contagion takes time and good role modeling by oneself and key allies helps.

• **Affirmation of what participants are proud of:** blaming others can be a way to preserve a positive self-image, and can dissipate when individuals feel better about themselves (Fast and Tiedens 2009); find out what people are proud of in current scenario and lift that up; to the extent possible, indicate that needed changes will not infringe on the good that exists. Use the criticism sandwich principle to surround reminders of the need to change with affirmations of the good that exists.

• **Reality checks can support strategic imperatives:** remind participants of the costs of doing business as normal; typically these costs are more evident to some participants than others and need to be shared to underscore the issues to be confronted. In this case, convincing individuals that they were stronger together than in separate, warring camps was key to turning the corner on governance issues. (“CAES doesn’t need an HD unit, a CD unit, and LDA unit; it does need a strong applied social science department.”) Implied threat of Dean on future FTE made the reality tangible.