

## **Conducting a College through COVID-19: The Evolving Leadership Challenge.**

Keynote address for the Second International Workshop on Higher Education Learning Methodologies and Technologies Online - HELMeTO 2020, Bari, Italy.

Neil Mort <sup>1</sup>, John Daniel <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Acsenda School of Management, Vancouver

SPEAKING TEXT WITH SLIDE PROMPTS

### Introduction

**JOHN DANIEL**

Thank you for the invitation to address the HELMeTO 2020 conference virtually. We are sorry not to be in Bari.

### AUTHORS

My colleague Neil Mort is the President and I am the Chancellor of the Acsenda School of Management (ASM). Acsenda is a private higher education business school located in Vancouver, Canada with some 1,600 students.

### TITLE SLIDE

Our topic is inspired by the events of this unprecedented academic year and our title is: *Conducting a College through COVID-19: The Evolving Leadership Challenge.*

I shall begin this presentation and then hand over to President Mort, who will reflect on the evolving leadership challenge of guiding an institution through these remarkable times.

### THE ACSENDA EXPERIENCE: CHANGE, CRISIS, MOVING FORWARD

Like higher education institutions around the world, Acsenda has been through three distinct phases during the 2020 calendar year. It began the year teaching its programmes on its downtown Vancouver campus. In mid-March, after the COVID-19 pandemic arrived, we made arrangements to move all teaching and services online and vacated the campus. Since June, it has been planning for this autumn session in a context of uncertainty.

The theme of our paper is the challenge of change in higher education. Approaches to managing change must match each situation.

### SLIDE (THESE THREE STAGES)

Before COVID-19, *change management* at Acsenda meant strategic planning. But when COVID-19 struck Acsenda had to go online and close its campus rapidly. This called for *crisis management*. Now Acsenda is charting its future for the rest of 2020 and 2021, using the approach of *change leadership*. It aims to become a resilient institution that can thrive in the uncertain times after COVID-19.

## STATE OF THE PANDEMIC MAP

You all know the background. COVID-19 is a very infectious and lethal disease. It is now present all over the world, has infected nearly 30 million people and will kill more than a million this year. The evolution and impact of the pandemic have varied across the world, creating special difficulties for an institution like Acsenda, which recruits most of its students from 40 countries internationally.

COVID-19 will not be the last global upheaval to impact education. Can we use the lessons of this crisis to make our institutions more resilient and better able to address future crises?

What were those lessons? We take Acsenda as an example. I hand over to President Mort to tell you how proceeding through the stages of change management and crisis management led Acsenda to change leadership.

### **NEIL MORT**

## BACKGROUND TO ACSENDA

The Acsenda School of Management (ASM) is a private business school in Vancouver, Canada, that was created in 2004. It offers two undergraduate programmes, Bachelor of Business Administration and Bachelor of Hospitality Management, and is in the process of introducing a graduate programme in Management.

The student body numbers 1,600 and is 98% international. Until March of this year all instruction was conducted face to face and on campus.

## COVID CRISIS

This year began well, with growing enrolments. Indications of the coming COVID pandemic came in February and March, with the first case in another Vancouver HEI declared on March 7. We decided to close the campus for the final week of classes and end-of-term exams, but it was soon clear that the campus would have to remain closed. No one was sure for how long.

Six months later, we like many other in Canada and around the world remain closed for classes on campus.

## GLOBAL IMPACT

Acsenda was, of course, in the same boat as institutions the world over, which also had to shut down their campuses and switch to online learning and to offering fully online services.

Many, like Acsenda, with numerous international students, were hit by the reduction in student mobility as borders closed and airline schedules were slashed.

## GUIDING PRINCIPLES

In reacting to the crisis we began by articulating some guiding principles for our actions, which were:

- To place the health and safety of our students and employees above all other considerations
- To provide the best possible learning experiences for students
- To provide the best possible supports and services for student success
- To support our faculty and staff with training, technical support and resources
- To ensure regular and open communication

## KEY CONSIDERATIONS

We had to address the crisis taking into account a complex set of constraints and aims:

- Government guidelines on education and health
- Immigration and travel restrictions
- Student retention – getting new students engaged
- Time sensitivity – significant lead times for enrolment
- Faculty/staff level of comfort with institutional decisions
- Student level of comfort with decisions
- Guidelines set by the campus building in downtown Vancouver

## ASM APPROACH IN THREE PHASES

Looking back, we see that ASM's response to the crisis went through three phases: change management, crisis management and change leadership.

### CHANGE MANAGEMENT

Change management is controlled process to move from one state to another, often called strategic planning.

Institutions are influenced by many factors: political, economic, social, technical and environmental. Therefore, embarking on a change process normally requires a considered plan that lays out an appropriate leadership approach to preparing the organization for change. Various authors have developed theories of change management.

### CHANGE MANAGEMENT THEORIES

**Lewin** posits a three-step process of “unfreezing” the organization before it can change, and then re-freezing it after the change is made. People often react negatively to change.

Indeed, **Kubler-Ross** compares their reactions to change to the five-step process of grieving at the prospect of death, where individuals go through stages of denial, anger, bargaining and depression before they reach a point of acceptance.

People are resistant to change not because they fear change, but because they actually fear loss  
**Kotter** proposed a change management process in eight steps. These are:

1. Create Urgency; 2. Form a Powerful Coalition; 3. Create a Vision for Change; 4. Communicate the Vision; 5. Remove Obstacles; 6. Create Short-Term Wins; 7. Build on the Change; and 8. Anchor the Changes in the Corporate Culture.

In the case of higher education, **Kezar and Eckel** emphasize the importance of helping people make sense of change.

## A PLAN FOR PROGRESSING TOWARDS BLENDED LEARNING

ASM was already engaged in a strategic planning process for introducing blended learning so that:

- ASM students develop competencies with technologies to support lifelong continuing education.
- Technology enhances the quality of programme curricula, improves flexible access to courses, and increases learning effectiveness.
- ASM can adapt better to obstacles to the delivery of classes
- ASM can achieve efficiencies in the deployment of institutional resources.

This planning process was grounded in the general view that Acsenda's key strength, and the characteristic most valued by students, was the personal contact among students, faculty and staff. Therefore, online teaching and learning might be helpful at the margins but was not a mainstream objective.

Nevertheless, in 2017 the Strategic Planning Committee was asked to examine the potential use of online methods in more detail, to assess the pedagogical, organisational and technological opportunities that they might afford, and to make recommendations.

## STRATEGIC TECHNOLOGY PLAN

This led to the presentation of a Strategic Technology Plan in November 2019.

This plan aimed to achieve the following impacts between 2020 and 2022:

- To use technologies that enable ASM to achieve efficiencies in the deployment of institutional resources;
- To use technologies that enhance the quality of programme curricula, improve flexible access to courses, and, enhance learning effectiveness;
- ASM graduates are able to demonstrate competencies related to using technologies that support continuing education activities throughout their lives.

Key outcomes of the plan are to:

- Use a 3-hour block format for all courses;
- Render students and faculty competent in the use of common business technologies;

- Improve efficiencies of scheduling and facilities use.

However, this gradual process of change management was pre-empted by the imperatives of the pandemic and became a process of crisis management.

## CRISIS MANAGEMENT THEORIES

People have also theorized about crisis management. We define a crisis as an unexpected and problematic event that threatens corporate goals and requires a rapid response

For Harvard Business School Professor, Dutch **Leonard** crises are qualitatively different from routine emergencies. In crises, the situation is unfamiliar and there is no playbook for responding. Crisis management requires “rapid innovations, under stress and embedded in fear”. In a new and unprecedented situation, priorities conflict in odd ways. In the COVID-19 crisis, for example, HEIs were faced with decisions juxtaposing safety and business continuity. Leonard emphasizes that “crisis management does not need answers, it needs a process”. Leadership in crisis requires rapidly setting up a critical incident team to help the organization learn its way through the response. Effective leaders must be honest about the realities of the situation, while at the same time offering hope, which is called the **Stockdale Paradox**.

Institutions can respond to crises in different ways. A crisis can provide an opportunity for entrepreneurial responses, that can lead institutions in new directions, or more adaptive responses, which tend to result in less change to the organization. Long term-entrepreneurial responses are seen as strategic approaches; short-term-entrepreneurial responses are considered as tactical. Whereas long-term adaptive responses are referred to as a planning approach, short-term adaptive responses are often called ‘fire-fighting’.

Crisis management is not about the specific response, but more about the organization’s process for anticipating and preparing for potential crises, thus allowing it to respond effectively, mitigate possible damage and let the business recover and learn from the experience. Crises bring opportunities for change. Attitudes evolve and systems then become permeable. Nevertheless, if the change is to be deep, long-lasting and strategic, it must win acceptance within the underlying organizational culture.

The hard challenge for institutional leaders is to keep the organization ready for change at all times. **Safi Bahcall**, in his book *Loonshots*, applies concepts from physics to organizational change, concluding that a leader’s role is maintain a state of agitation so that things can easily be reconfigured. Whereas Lewin suggests that organizations must unfreeze, change and refreeze, Bahcall might say that they should remain in a constant state of slush.

## ACSENDA’S TWO-DAY PLAN

When COVID-19 struck, ASM’s two-year plan for change became a two-day plan. We had to transform completely our methods of instruction as well as our administrative, student and support services. Change management became crisis management. A collaborative, distributed approach promoted engagement in the process and ensured that processes and changes occurred

quickly. Acsenda responded effectively and minimized the financial and organizational impact of what could have been a disaster for this small private-for-profit degree granting institution.

Information gathering had an important role in the response to the crisis and provided data to evaluate the effectiveness of the organization's response and illuminate its future choices. ASM introduced an evaluation component early in the process and collected data on different aspects of its response to COVID-19. This included feedback from various stakeholders: returning students, new students, faculty and staff, information which is helping to guide decisions and provide a basis for future change. It allowed ASM to identify what it has done well, which is an important guide both in the short term, with the prospect of another term of online learning, and in the longer term with a return to on-campus delivery of courses and services.

How did ASM rise to the challenge of crisis management successfully? Key elements were:

- Good leadership at all levels of the organisation, using a team based leadership approach the senior team met daily and made decisions quickly, benefiting from some previous planning for going online;
- Effective communication across the organisation;
- A collegial, caring and collaborative work environment with a strong focus on individual support and care for students;
- Competent and well-networked professional staff;
- An owner, EduCo International Group, that gave consistent support and encouragement.

## CHANGE LEADERSHIP

Today, as it looks to the future, ASM's focus is on change leadership that aims to make Acsenda a resilient institution that can thrive in the uncertain times after COVID-19. Change leadership means modifying an organization's underlying principles, with fundamental changes to its culture, to its beliefs, and in the basics of what it does and how it does it. The distinction between leading change and managing change is that leading is about the 'how' of change more than about the 'what'.

Change leadership places greater focus on the process and the skill of influencing people to engage in change and helping them to transition from the current state to a future state. "Change leaders have to see themselves as part of the system being changed, not as controlling it from on high". Leading change means understanding the organization and its people and helping people make sense of what they are experiencing so they can develop meaning from it.

Six months into the pandemic, ASM has responded well. Teaching and learning have continued. Enrolment has remained strong. We have ensured the continuity of ASM's services and people have settled into a new routine. Acsenda has not had to lay off any employees.

But we now have a new challenge: when and how do we return to the delivery of classes on campus?

## RETURN TO CAMPUS

British Columbia has made good progress in containing the virus so Acsenda now plans to resume some classes on campus. On-campus delivery is important for a number of reasons.

First, while we have done the online delivery of classes quite well, we are not equipped to compete with more established online programmes.

Second, ASM caters to international students who want to come to Canada. If international students are unable to come to study in Canada, they may choose to defer or change their educational plans.

ASM will introduce a hybrid instructional approach from October 2020. Some classes will be offered on campus and students in those classes will rotate; with two groups of students coming to class in person in alternate weeks. Students not on campus will participate simultaneously through a video conferencing system.

Acsenda's planning process has anticipated multiple scenarios and the ability to adjust quickly in the event of a new outbreak of COVID-19. We have given priority for campus attendance to first year students and we have made it voluntary for faculty to teach on campus. Likewise, student participation on campus will be optional.

## CHALLENGES

We see this partial return to campus as both an interim solution and also as a broader part of a return to campus strategy. As we have been successful in making the change from on-campus to online learning for the last six months, we realize that people have adapted to new work environments and methods. There is now resistance in some quarters to returning to the workplace. The leadership challenge is both to maintain a crisis management process, while also preparing people for this transition. We recognize that there will be a 'new normal', but its shape is still evolving. We are, however, clear that we need to continue with the effective process used throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, which has emphasized a team approach to planning, effective communication and a culture of learning and innovation.

## MAKING SENSE OF WHAT'S HAPPENING

In conclusion, how do we make sense of all this?

Acsenda, like HEIs the world over, faced a crisis in the unprecedented upheaval created by COVID-19 situation.

Unlike a routine emergency, we had to innovate quickly, with all our stakeholders, students, faculty, staff and their families often suffering from stress and fear.

Today we can't predict the future, which is constantly changing. We must accept that there aren't always answers to everything: sometimes we don't even know the questions, so we learn as we go.

We shall need creativity and as spirit of innovation to give our institutions the RESILIENCE they will need to face an uncertain future successfully.

The Role of Leadership is to move our organizations away from responding to change, and guide it towards a position where we are determining our future directions, maintaining a state of readiness to adapt, and supporting and enabling our people as we move forward.

We wish you well as you nurture these qualities in your institutions.

THANK YOU

Thank you

(2535 words of speaking text)