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Altena, Sharon & Theobald, Karen
(2022)
Leading successful programme transformation.
In Lawrence, Jennifer, Moron-Garcia, Sue, & Senior, Rowena (Eds.) *Supporting Course and Programme Leaders in Higher Education: Practical Wisdom for Leaders, Educational Developers and Programme Leaders.*
Routledge, Abingdon, Oxon, pp. 188-190.

This file was downloaded from: https://eprints.qut.edu.au/231645/

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https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003127413-36

Leading successful programme transformation: Bachelor of Nursing

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Introduction

The Bachelor of Nursing is a flagship undergraduate programme at Queensland University of Technology, with 3500 students studying for the degree at any one time. This case study describes how two programme leaders (PLs) from different areas within the university formed a partnership to lead and empower a team of academics in delivering long-lasting, transformational curriculum change. The learnings presented here will benefit PLs wishing to achieve sustainable, holistic, student-centred changes to teaching practice at their institutions. The curriculum renewal was not a 'business as usual' approach or 'a box ticking exercise'. Instead, renewal was a deliberate attempt to undertake an in-depth examination of the existing curriculum and to fundamentally redesign and invigorate.

The two PLs appointed to implement the new curriculum were the Director of Academic Programs and a Learning Designer. The former had existing relationships with academic staff and a thorough knowledge of the curriculum, external accreditation and industry requirements. The latter brought expertise in curriculum design, pedagogy, student-centred learning and digital technologies. Blending these areas of knowledge was essential for this bold curriculum transformation to be successful.

The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership framework guided our approach to the process as we sought to model the way, inspire a shared vision, challenge the process, enable others to act and encourage the heart (Kouzes & Posner, 2011). Below we explore the actions we took in each of these areas to show how such leadership models can be applied in practice with programme teams.

Modelling the way

Our approach to leadership involved 'modelling the way' through our actions and words. We remained consistent and passionate about the vision, maintained an openness in communication, authentically invited opinions, and accepted feedback. Importantly, we demonstrated the benefits and outcomes of working in partnership by setting an example for others to follow and explicitly showing how harnessing different skillsets and working together could bring about extraordinary results.

Inspiring a shared vision

During an on-site retreat, we shared a vision for a holistic, future-focussed, student-centred and digitally enhanced programme. This shared vision was consistently communicated to our academics at every opportunity, it became the mantra of the School of Nursing and, in many ways, took on a 'life of its own'.

> *the process was sort of the bringing together of all the academics, to get them onto the same page… I felt that that was so important for us to… remind ourselves about our purpose as educators.*
>
> Academic C

Challenging the process

To achieve a holistic curriculum, we found it was critical to 'challenge the process' and facilitate new ways of working. We, as PLs, guided staff in relinquishing their control over individual courses, resulting in shared ownership of the curriculum, where courses were 'owned' by the School. Although this was challenging for some, belief in the vision seemed to move the team through this.

Enabling others to act

The central means by which we enabled others to act emerged from organising academic staff into three course streams. Each stream had a leader who was empowered and mentored by the programme leads to think differently, elevate their thinking to 'whole-of-course' consistent approaches, and examine all aspects of programme implementation through a student-centred lens. The stream leads 'modelled the way' for their teams, by being the first to redesign their course.

> *From when I started, to now, is worlds apart. We very much worked on our own when we first started … once the streams came in, it became really clear who we needed to be working with, and how we could help each other.*
>
> Academic A

Encouraging the heart

We felt it vital to provide opportunities at a School forum for early adopters to showcase examples of the innovations incorporated into their courses. This showcase sparked interest, further enlisting academics to deliver the implementation vision. When the first group of courses was released, the overwhelming positive reaction of students built further engagement and commitment, as academic staff could see the vision come to life.

Applying the five practices approach

Taking the five practices approach (Kouzes & Posner, 2011) to leading programme transformation has broken down academic teaching silos, fostered collegiality and united a team of academics behind a vision to strive for excellence in active, engaging, digitally enhanced and student-centred nursing education. Through a belief in the vision, academics relinquished some control over their courses to create a holistic, integrated curriculum that offered a consistent student experience. These consistent approaches have been noticed by students, who have responded positively to the changes:

> *The layout of the Blackboard (Bb) page for this unit is excellent - very clear and easy to navigate. I love how Bb has been set out, with pre-learning/post-learning activities.*
>
> Student A

Importantly, follow-up interviews with academics after three years have revealed longevity and sustainability of the changes in teaching practice. However, programme transformation was not without its challenges. Development of new courses occurred at the same time as a full teaching/research load with no release time. The entire curriculum was changed all at once rather than progressively, resulting in student experiences changing part-way through their programme. In the spirit of innovation, new technologies were introduced and trialled as part of programme transformation, however, discontinuation of funding for these technologies by the university resulted in much frustration and disappointment by affected academics.

Conclusion

Key lessons were learned through this process. PLs need to have a clear vision and paint a compelling picture of the future. The equal partnership and blending of the expertise of the two PLs was instrumental in achieving the vision. Finally, creating opportunities for early adopters to shine was a turning point by providing a vehicle to showcase innovations that inspired those next to embark on the journey, and helped even the resistors to engage.

Reference

Kouzes, J. M., & Posner, B. Z. (2011). *The five practices of exemplary leadership*. Pfeiffer.