

Concurrent Session D
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2.25pm – 3.15pm

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Novotel North Beach Wollongong



Session 2

Achieving Effective Change Management through a Dynamic Communication Strategy

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Dr. Ann Cheryl Armstrong is the Director, Academic Year Optimisation at the University of Western Sydney. In 2012, Ann Cheryl led the review of the Academic Year Review which canvassed the views of staff and students of the University about the possible move to a trimester system, resulting in the decision to establish an enhanced Summer School. Ann Cheryl has an international track record in strategic and transformational leadership and the design, management, implementation and evaluation of strategic initiatives.

The Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw argued that: “The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.” We all communicate every day in a number of different ways and to different audiences. It is easier to talk about desirables than to achieve them. We therefore assume that it is just a matter of sending an email, putting a poster on a wall or posting something on Facebook, Twitter or Yammer. Unfortunately, nothing could be further from the truth. Shaw in his argument alluded to the missing link in communication. What actually happens as a result of communication taking place? Did the recipient receive, read, and most importantly, understand the communication in the manner that it was meant to be understood? Most change management strategies fail or are not properly executed because of the lack of recognition of the virtues of a well designed communication strategy. Communication should be authentic, perceived to be relevant to employees and students, consistent with action, endorsed by senior management and continuously monitored and evaluated.

These desirables are easier said than done especially when one is trying to institute change across a geographically-dispersed, multi-campus university. This was the case with the University of Western Sydney (UWS) which also reflects the diverse culture of the Greater Western Sydney region. This paper reviews the complex communication strategy that was developed to support the UWS Summer initiative where the ultimate aim was to enhance the student experience by introducing an additional teaching and learning session to provide students with flexibility and choice in their study - a popular intervention for students but not for staff. A key driver behind the staff communication strategy was to build a foundation of engagement and enthusiasm about UWS Summer that would radiate outwards to the students. Promoting the opportunity of UWS Summer and encouraging students to participate was an entirely different challenge for the team.

This paper traces the development of such an interventionist change management strategy where it was critically important to ensure that any communication framework that was developed was perceived to be inclusive and all pervasive. This paper will also discuss how the communication strategy for UWS Summer was refined and executed over a two-year period, with a focus on stakeholder engagement, cross-unit collaboration, multi-channel delivery and information cascading. The main goal was to build communication excellence and encourage teamwork, active participation and a flow of communication between the central co-ordinating team and the various academic and business operation groups with the University. Sometimes, this would prove to be exceedingly frustrating but for the most part it became an

extremely rewarding endeavor: a bit like joining the dots in a numbered puzzle and sharing the big picture with your colleagues.

This change management process is located within the context of a strategic initiative at UWS. The very focused and clear intention was to build and maintain relationships across the University so that the intervention was understood and, through that initiative, a measure of organisational effectiveness was achieved and could be modeled in other initiatives across the University. It will explore the ways in which the communications strategy was designed to communicate with key publics to support organisational transformation and growth. Also discussed are the challenges of applying a communication strategy where the subject of the communication is a brand new, complex initiative that requires the participation and cooperation of Academic and Professional staff within multiple Schools and Business Units.

The paper will also explore the approach that was taken to dealing with pockets of resistance and scepticism, converting sceptics into project champions, and communicating the serious or mundane aspects of the project while instilling a sense of fun and excitement.

Relationship building played a major part in the success of the strategy, particularly in the first year when success hinged on winning the hearts and minds of those key stakeholders who would not only be recipients of communications but, in some cases, the conduits of them. The project team managed to bring together individuals and teams from across the University that had never interacted before. Many of the activities and processes executed by the team led to improved communications overall within and between Schools and Business Units.