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Four Frame School Analysis

Four-Frame Analysis

This paper will present an analysis of Oxford High School by applying the reframing model of Bolman and Deal. This model contends that an organization can be more clearly viewed through the structural, human resource, political, and symbolic frames. These “frames” are merely different ways to look at a situation or organization, different lenses through which to view the same picture. The picture this paper will examine is Oxford High School, a Division 2 (of 8) school in north Oakland County, Michigan. Oxford is a small but growing country town with a predominantly white, middle-class population, which ranges from the very affluent, living on million-dollar horse farms, to lower socio-economic status residents, living in trailer parks. The high school has roughly 1,300 students, most of whom reside in Oxford, but some of whom live out of district in communities such as Brandon, Dryden, and Pontiac as school-of-choice students. In terms of academic achievement, Oxford is probably in the upper half of Oakland County schools, one of the most affluent counties in the United States. Oxford has a small-town, everybody-knows-everybody feel to it, and this is reflected in the many extracurricular activities offered by the school, especially sports. Oxford has a strong athletic tradition, especially in football, and over half of the student body is involved in some type of extracurricular activity.

Political Frame

According to Bollman and Deal, the political frame provides a view of the organization that focuses on the different coalitions of people within the group and how they interact with each other. This frame assumes that enduring differences in beliefs, values, perceptions, and interests exist among these groups and individuals and since not every group can be satisfied because of scarce resources, conflict is inevitable. Therefore, according to the political frame, organizational goals and decisions emerge from bargaining, negotiation, and jockeying for position among the different groups and individuals.

Viewing Oxford High School through the political frame, the political workings of the school definitely come into focus. While some political groups are formed through structure (academic departments, for example), most of the strong groups are social, based on personality. Some of these groups are rather benign, however. For example, many of the social studies teachers are younger males, and they definitely have a social group going, but this is not a very powerful one politically, as most of them are easy-going and not very opinionated. If there were ever a controversial issue at the school, this group would not be a major player. The science department is for the most part made up of veteran teachers who are opinionated and generally displeased with the way things work in the school, whether it be student discipline, administrative decisions, or anything else of note in the school. This group does have strong referent personal power. They like to talk, not only among themselves, but to other less opinionated teachers in places like the hallway or teachers' lounge, influencing them to join their cause. Much of what they say is venting, but much of it is negative. These teachers are the first to offer ideas at faculty meetings, in the vain hope that something might change for the better, and join committees to help improve the school. In a way, despite their lack of "position" power,

in some ways they are more influential than the people who do have position power, the administrators.

The administrators, for the most part, are fairly unpopular at OHS. Aside from the occasional teacher who likes one administrator or another, most teachers are displeased with the principals. This stems from a lack of personal power on their parts, as the assistant principals can only follow the building principal's lead, and the building principal has very little referent power. He is a very personable, likeable man, but many view him as unprofessional and not worthy of respect. The administration on the whole is seen as wishy-washy. I can think of one faculty meeting in particular where many teachers were practically begging the principals to hold teachers accountable for their responsibilities, such as disciplining students for tardies, leaving school early, arriving late, etc. I was amazed at how the principals bent over backwards to put the onus back on the teachers, saying they should police themselves. The administrators are aware of their unpopularity and seem to do everything they can to avoid confrontation and further entrench their poor reputation. Unfortunately, in many cases, this backfires, as seen in the faculty meeting example. I've talked with one of the assistant principals about this, and he feels handcuffed, as he can only enact the direction set forth by the building principal.

Human-Resource Frame

According to Bollman and Deal, the human-resource frame views an organization as an institution that exists to meet the individual needs of its members. When the members' needs are met, their productivity rises and therefore the whole organization benefits; conversely, when the organization fails to meet the needs of its members, their motivation and productivity plummet,

causing dysfunction in the organization as a whole. The human-resource frame seeks to nurture and develop the organization's members, viewing them as an investment.

Viewing Oxford High School through the human-resource frame, it is clear why the school's progress is not at its optimal level. Many teachers feel their needs as professionals are not being met, as many are satisfied with poor fits and unfulfilling roles within the school. A prime example would be the "teacher-leader" program at the high school. The role was designed in its inception to allow the best and brightest teachers to take leadership roles, learning and sharing best practices, developing curriculum, and coaching less proficient teachers. However, rather than focusing on how to help the teachers succeed in this role, the school instead has focused on turning the role into a dumping ground of undesirable tasks. Rather than teachers feeling empowered to hone their craft and help other teachers hone theirs, the teacher leaders feel overwhelmed with unimportant tasks that have little to do with the original vision of the program. The principal does do a good job of trying to recognize teachers when they succeed or excel, which alleviates some of the afore-mentioned frustration. However, since many of the teachers do not care for the principal, it is little consolation.

Structural Frame

The structural frame, according to Bollman and Deal, views an institution in terms of its organizational structure. In contrast to the human-resource frame, it views people as instruments to serve the organization's needs, rather than the organization functioning to meet the needs of its people. The structural frame puts an emphasis on efficient design, chain-of-command, clear goals and objectives, and rational execution.

Oxford High School has sound structures in place to meet its educational goals and objectives, although some structures could be tweaked to improve the efficiency of some less important areas. In general, the structures in place in Oxford work effectively to make the high school an efficient educational environment. The school day, the way it is planned out, each person's role in the school, and many other structures that are in place to make the school "work" are all well-thought out and executed. A symphonic system like this does not come about automatically, as I have witnessed firsthand in one other particular school I've worked in. In my previous school, the structure to accomplish many basic objectives were arranged in such a way as to make someone think it was arranged that way as a joke. For example, we sent home progress reports on triplicate forms that the students carried with them to each class, handing them to their teacher, who had to alter their lesson for that day to hurriedly fill them out for each student, writing brief comments and stapling grade print-outs to the forms while the students did something independent. Often, as a teacher I would have to un-staple previous teachers' printouts in order to flip to the correct page in the triplicate form. The last teacher of the day would tear off the bottom two pages of the triplicate and arrange alphabetically to hand in to the main office for the school's records and to be sent home; within ten minutes of the final bell ringing at the end of the school day, the secretary's desk was littered with yellow and pink piles of paper, completely disorganized and not even containing all students' reports (many less academically inclined students would "forget" their progress report and have nothing to give to their last hour teacher.) Now obviously, most schools don't function this way, but it is a good contrast to the efficiency of the structures in place at Oxford. Teachers submit all grades and attendance electronically and in real-time through Powerschool, and progress reports (or any types of reports) can be initiated through this efficient system. Even on extra-ordinary days,

such as exam-schedule days or days where students receive yearbooks, things are ordered in an effective and well-thought out manner.

There is some room for improvement, however. Lunchtime is a big concern, as we don't have in place an effective system to keep all kids where they belong, whether it's in a classroom or the lunchroom. This results in many kids skipping class and even stealing things out of the locker rooms. We need to come up with a new structure to help this time of the day run more smoothly. Another area for improvement is to get all teachers to adhere to the structures in place, especially the attendance policy. Tardiness and class attendance is a big problem at the school because many teachers do not enforce the policy, which creates problems for the entire school because students alter their expectations based on the lowest common denominator. I think the administration needs to build its human-resource frame to coax teachers into adhering to these structures.

Symbolic Frame

Bollman and Deal's symbolic frame views an organization with an emphasis on its culture and the creation of that culture through. It emphasizes the success of the organization by inspiring its members through emotionally charged symbols, be they speeches and assemblies, token gestures, or even the manipulation of the physical building itself. It assumes that the "why" behind these symbols is more important than the "what" they actually accomplish.

Oxford understands the importance of the symbolic frame, I think, but the school needs to have a more thought-out implementation of it. The high school is steeped in tradition and symbolism when it comes to student life, be it the hallowedness of Friday night football, the all-night parties for the seniors on the first and last days of school, or the sense of school spirit.

Most kids have Oxford apparel of one type or another, mostly sports-related, and genuinely support one another by attending their events. However, morale in general is low for many students. MyVoice surveys reveal a large number of students feel that school personnel do not care about them and that they are not happy in school. The million-dollar question is whether this is a product of teen-angst and an extension of their unhappy home lives, or a problem within the school itself. Either way, I think the school would do well to address this morale problem by more actively acknowledging the significance of symbolism. The school took a step in that direction this year, with a school-wide pep assembly that went beyond merely getting kids fired up for the homecoming game. Students from all strata of the school population were recognized for their achievement in athletics, academics, and extra-curricular activities. Teachers remarked afterwards that they were amazed how attentive and respectful the students were during the assembly as their classmates were recognized for their achievement.

In terms of staff, the symbolic frame is becoming more prevalent with our new superintendent. He seems to understand the importance of casting a vision and trying to inspire motivation to achieve that vision. He commonly emphasizes that “everything matters,” referring to everything from the appearance of the building to the friendliness of staff members. Poor execution in other frames, however, (as detailed previously in this paper) has derailed some of this symbolic momentum. Hopefully, the school’s administrative team can correct some of these fumbles and move the school forward.

Conclusion

Oxford High School is highly functional in the structural frame but needs some major work in the other three frames. Structurally speaking, OHS does a good job organizing the day,

assigning support roles, and putting structures in place that support the academic and extra-curricular goals of the school. Unfortunately, this structural success is nearly negated by the lack of interpersonal understanding that is central to the other three frames. While symbolic understanding is present in the school's leadership, more thoughtful consideration of how to use this frame to build both student and staff morale would greatly benefit the school. Similarly, although the administrators are good people-persons, they would do well to utilize these interpersonal skills for more than simply being friendly; the human-resource frame could greatly enhance teachers' feeling of accomplishment and utility and thereby greatly enhance the way students and staff both feel about being at OHS. When this human-resource improvement happens, the administrators could feel free to exercise their political power to enforce the policies that need enforcing.

This writer proposes the following recommendations, given in their respective frames, to improve OHS's functionality as a school:

- **Human-Resource:** Survey teachers on job satisfaction, feelings of their level of utility in the school, and any suggestions they might have for any school improvements. Use this data to reassign and re-define different teacher roles in the school.
- **Symbolic:** Based on human-resource analysis, determine which teachers would flourish in a committee to help improve staff morale and analyze reasons for low morale. Do some team-building activities that would send the message we're all in this together and to help people in different "factions" understand their colleagues' needs and struggles. (This overlaps with the human-resource frame.)

- **Political:** Earn teachers' respect by enforcing school policies. The politically strong teachers are, for the most part, the ones clamoring for accountability from their colleagues.
- **Structural:** Continue to run day-to-day operations efficiently and look for areas to improve, such as lunchtime monitoring.

This writer asserts that if these changes were acted upon, school morale would improve, and academic and social achievement of students would rise. It would take an overhaul of current interpersonal philosophies on the part of the school administrators, but the results would be overwhelmingly positive.