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Wakonse: A Case Study in Organizational Sustainability

Abstract

Organizations are built on interactions among leaders, members and the larger culture (Schein, 1990; Sessa & London, 2006). Beyond the people and communities of which they are a part, organizations carry history and face issues of both internal and external change. The combination of people, culture, organizational history and change set the stage for whether organizations can successfully learn and remain sustainable. Very little research has been done on a case study level regarding how organizations – specifically those that address higher education needs – begin, evolve, and adapt to change. This study seeks to fill that gap by looking at the specific case of Wakonse, a small teaching and learning conference held annually for the past 25 years. By focusing on a single case, we begin building the opportunity to make meaning of other organizations and why they persist (or not) and what strategies and key elements must be in place for organizations to remain viable.

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Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research | Educational Leadership | Educational Methods | Higher Education

Wakonse: A Case Study in Organizational Sustainability

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Abstract

How organizations navigate challenges and changes determine whether they will persist over time or will cease to be relevant. While generalizations about every organization are difficult to make, case studies afford us the opportunity to explore bounded systems in an in-depth way (Merriam, 2009). In this case study, organizational learning theory was used to examine the origin and sustainability of a higher education teaching and learning conference (Wakonse). By interviewing Wakonse founders and staff, the importance of culture, community, leadership and holistic attention to members emerged as themes related to organizational sustainability. As a result, an understanding of how this small conference has persisted as a learning organization for 25 years emerged.

Organizations are built on interactions among leaders, members and the larger culture (Schein, 1990; Sessa & London, 2006). Beyond the people and communities of which they are a part, organizations carry history and face issues of both internal and external change. The combination of people, culture, organizational history and change set the stage for whether organizations can successfully learn and remain sustainable. Very little research has been done on a case study level regarding how organizations – specifically those that address higher education needs – begin, evolve, and adapt to change. This study seeks to fill that gap by looking at the specific case of Wakonse, a small teaching and learning conference held annually for the past 25 years. By focusing on a single case, we begin building the opportunity to make meaning of other organizations and why they persist (or not) and what strategies and key elements must be in place for organizations to remain viable.

Review of Literature

Higher education organizations, similar to other complex organizations, have seen the creation, restructuring and demise of institutions, educational organizations, and academic conferences (Brancato, 2003; Kezar & Eckel, 2002; Lesniaski, et al., 2001). It is likely, given current internal and external influences on higher education that higher education organizations will need to continue to evolve and adapt. Demographic changes such as an aging professoriate, decreased public support for funding higher education, and increased pressure to demonstrate effectiveness are a few examples that demonstrate challenges faced by higher education organizations. In order to survive,
organizations need to exhibit both consistency and adaptability (Bassis, 1989; Kimball, 1989; Scanzoni, 2005).

Organizational learning theory focuses on the management of organizational knowledge – how it is created, kept and conveyed across the organization and into the future (Argyris & Schon, 1996; Senge, 1990). Organizational learning focuses not only on leaders and members, but also on how people serve as actors in helping the organization learn (Argyris & Schon, 1978, 1996). Additionally, this theory takes into consideration concepts such as organizational history, the impact of external factors and the constancy of change (Argyris & Schon, 1978; 1996). The purpose of this study was to use the organizational learning lens to examine Wakonse as a case study in order to determine how leadership, membership and culture impacted the conference's sustainability.

Before exploring this particular case study, it is important to put in place a foundation of the existing literature. The learning organization is able to deal with change through human resources as well as organizational culture (Senge, 1990). This study make the case that a learning organization is more likely to be sustainable over time than one that does not engage in learning organization strategies. Just as a learning organization values the human element of the organization, so do human resources (leaders and members) contribute to organizational sustainability (Bartlett & Goshhall, 2002). The organizational culture as a means of conveying knowledge in a learning organization (Argyris & Schon, 1978; 1990) also sets the stage for organizational endurance or vulnerability (Kezar & Eckel, 2002; Schein, 1990, 1993). Finally, organizational strategies for managing constant change are parts of learning organizations (Senge, 1990) and are also necessary to ensure continuity and success (Battilana, Gilmarting, Sengul, Pache & Alexander, 2010; Boyce, 2003; Burke & Litwin, 1992; Gumport, 2000; Robertson, Roberts & Porras, 1993). In this study the organizational learning lens aligns with the participant responses to the research questions – why did Wakonse begin and why has it continued over time?

Organizational Learning Theory

There are a variety of ways in which organizations learn. Levitt and March (1988) identified history, experiences (organizational and individual), and organizational memory as learning opportunities for organizations. Clark (1972) referenced organizational sagas as ways in which organizations not only learn but track what they have learned. Within the context of higher education, organizational vision (Martin, 1999), learning as survival in a changing world (Rowley, 1998) and learning through members via faculty development (Brancato, 2003) have been explored. Wakonse uses these strategies to sustain an organization focused on the value of teaching even when faced with an increased emphasis on research over the past 25 years since the conference began.

Human Resources: Organizational Learning Through Members

Organizational learning is, in part, the result of the learning of individuals. Greenberg and Baron (2008) defined an organization as being a group of people working toward a common goal. In this case study, the individuals included Wakonse founders and long-term participants who became staff members for the organization. The common goal is enhanced teaching, learning and student engagement.

Leadership. The leader of an organization sets goals and vision for the organizational work (Battalina et al., 2010). This study examines the role of organizational leaders – the three founders – and how they created and have sustained Wakonse. While some research on leadership has focused on what leaders *do* (Sessa and London, 2006), other research focuses on who these leaders *are*. Competencies identified as necessary for effective leadership in higher education include: academic credibility, university experience, the ability to crate and execute a vision, and people, communication and negotiation skills (Bryman 2007; Spendlove, 2007). In this case study, the founders of Wakonse exemplify these leadership skills – not in a single person, but in the unique team that has worked to keep the conference relevant throughout the past 25 year

Membership. While leaders are important, there is no organization without members. Who are Wakonse's participants? Why do they attend? The answers to these questions are linked to the philosophy and goals of the organization. Vogt and Murrell (1990) wrote, "Giving high priority to both the worth of individuals and their value in terms of contributions to the organization requires a close examination of the organization's values" (p. 47). Additional research has reiterated that in order to recruit, retain and develop talent in higher education, an understanding of the needs of organizational members is crucial (Mclawhon & Cutright, 2012; Michel & Michel, 2012; Trower, 2012). Carnevale (2003) wrote that organizations and their members are social systems that "must collaborate for mutual gain" (p. 123). This study explored how Wakonse as an organization connected with participants to the benefit of both the conference and the individuals.

Organizational Culture

Organizational culture exists in higher education (Light, Cox & Calkins, 2009; Meyer, et al., 2007; Middlehurst, 1999). Schein (1993) defined organizational culture as "the sum total of what a given group has learned as a group" (p. 705). With that in mind, new members are taught or must learn the culture of their organizations. Researchers found that the gradual process of learning new culture and unlearning previous cultures is how participants generate identities as members within organizations (Klausner & Groves, 2002; Tierney, 1997). With that in mind, participants were asked about their experiences related to the culture of Wakonse. They reflected not only on how they learned the culture, but what things are planned and intentionally organized to bring new members into the Wakonse culture.

Community. The community within an organization contributes to organizational culture or lack thereof (Tierney & Bensimon, 1996). Research shows that a lack of connection or a sense of isolation can lead to marginalization of faculty and staff (Aguirre, 1987; Gray & Conway, 2007; Tierney & Bensimon, 1996).

This is particularly important as staffing patterns on campuses change. A current example is the increased use of adjunct faculty in higher education (Feldman & Turnley, 2004; Forbes, Hindley & White, 2010; Kirk & Spector, 2009). Some studies estimate as many as 50% of undergraduate courses are taught by adjunct faculty (Feldman & Turnley, 2004). The use of organizational learning to identify the needs of these members can prove useful not only in recruiting and

retaining adjunct faculty, but to more successfully integrating them into institutional culture. In the case of Wakonse, the integration of new members into the institutional culture of the conference is essential. The conference is built on a need identified by the participants of this study for community in an otherwise isolated culture of academic work.

Organizational Change

The human beings and culture in an organization set the stage for how organizational learning will take place. Organizational learning is central to navigating change and sustaining organizations (Boyce, 2003). Additionally, learning and change can also be sources of fear (Kofman & Senge, 1993). Navigating change is also challenging because cultural transitions are often incremental and a result of internal and external mandates (Abelson, 1995; Hamel & Merz, 2005; Kyle, 2005; Sindelar & Rosenberg, 2000). While change is difficult, it does not need to be negative. Adaptation to meet changing goals, needs and members is progress. Duderstadt (1999) suggested, "Change equates to hope and is an opportunity to be strategic in order to control our destiny" (p. 39).

Similarly, change is central to organizational development and sustainability (Abelson, 1995; Hamel & Merz, 2005; Kyle, 2005; Sindelar & Rosenberg, 2000). Organizations persist because they meet needs by adjusting to change or fail because they do not adapt (Deming, 1994; Gumport, 2000; Henkel, 2000; Hirsch & Weber, 2001; Kogan & Hanney, 2000). Wakonse has used human resources, organizational culture and organizational learning in order to adapt to keep the conference relevant to faculty and staff in higher education.

Finally, the study of an organizational culture must be situated in the context of the organization's history. This study builds on the work of past research dealing with institutional life histories in higher education (Light, Cox & Calkins, 2009; Meyer, et. al, 2007; Middlehurst, 1999). The role of the history of Wakonse in charting the future of the conference is also explored in this study.

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Research Methods

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The purpose of this study was to answer two questions: Why was Wakonse created and why has Wakonse continued for 25 years? Through interviews with founders and long-time participants, these questions were explored. The result of this case study was the finding that Wakonse is a learning organization and uses learning organization strategies in order to stay viable.

This study utilized a qualitative case study as it's primary method. As Merriam (2009), described, unique aspects of the case study approach include: particularistic, descriptive and heuristic was (Merriam, 2009). In other words it focused on the particular case (Wakonse conference), included a thick and rich description based on interviews and observations related to the specific case, and serves to expand on the knowledge of organizational learning as a result (Maxwell, 2005).   Wakonse was considered an instrumental case study in that the case (i.e. Wakonse) was examined to provide insight into another phenomenon (i.e. organizational sustainability) (Merriam, 2009).

Qualitative Case Study

Context: Wakonse Conference on College Teaching and Learning. The context for this case study is the Wakonse Conference on College Teaching and Learning. For six days over Memorial Day weekend, approximately 125 faculty, staff and students gather at Camp Miniwanca on Lake Michigan. Faculty from the University of Missouri organize the conference. These faculty comprise the Wakonse staff who recruit through their own connections and those of previous attendees at a variety of institutions to bring new participants to the conference. The goal is to connect individuals with a passion for undergraduate education to share strategies and to reinforce the value of teaching, learning and student engagement.

Since 1988, Wakonse has been held at a children's summer camp on the shores of Lake Michigan. The Wakonse culture is structured to build community. Meals are eaten in a communal dining hall. Technology (cell phone reception and computer access) is limited and there are no televisions. Participants have a roommate with whom they share small rooms and each floor has a community bathroom.

One participant said, This setting allows participants to disengage from daily pressures and instead to think about themselves and their personal and professional futures." These conditions are an intentional part of the conference designed to encourage human connections and the development of community without the distractions of technology or luxurious accommodations.

The conference integrates sessions led by participants. In addition, however, dialogue groups are utilized to explore issues related to teaching, learning and student engagement in more depth. There is also scheduled time for reflection and goal-setting.

Finally, there are other activities to encourage engagement and connection in a less formal way. Social activities include horseback riding, hiking, golf and a high ropes course. Participants are given free time in the evening to have conversations with others, go into the small town nearby, participate in board game nights, or engage in solitary activities such as hiking or sitting on the beach. There are events such as an ecumenical church service, a Polar Bear Plunge into Lake Michigan and a Chautauqua (talent show). The conference concludes with a slide show that includes photos of every attendee.

The setting and structure of this conference are intentionally designed to encourage community building and to stimulate self-reflection. From the accommodations to the small- and large-group activities to the closing slide show where participants see themselves as a part of the Wakonse experience, participants are made to a feel a sense of belonging and fellowship with like-minded professionals in higher education. Wakonse has been developed as a safe place for faculty and staff to share their passion, successes and challenges related to student learning, teaching and engagement.

Participants

The participants in this study consisted of the three Wakonse founders who have led the conference since its inception. In addition, another six participants who have attended for at least

four years and eventually became Wakonse staff members. There were four men and five women who participated in the study.

Data Collection

Interviews. Data was collected through individual, semi-structured interviews (Maxwell, 2005). The first question for the founders was, "Why and how did Wakonse begin?" The first question for each of the non-founder participants was, "How did you get involved with Wakonse?" Questions related conference sustainability (leadership, community activities, and vision) and why participants valued the experience were explored.

The interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. Each interview was recorded and transcribed. Themes were identified and both transcripts and preliminary results were shared with the participants for feedback and clarification.

Observations. In addition to the interviews, observations were conducted at Wakonse for two years. The first year observations were more limited and the intent was to experience the conference and develop an understanding of the goals and activities as strategies for developing a community dedicated to student learning and engagement. In the second year, more intentional observation was made focused on how the conference is structured. Additionally, the intentionality behind the location, the activities and how the Wakonse culture has been developed to support individual participation and cultivate community among participants was observed. The context for the event was explored along with opportunities to engage with other participants. Extensive note-taking and reflexive journaling were used to make meaning of the experience (Brown & Strega, 2005; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Merriam, 2009).

Data Analysis

Themes were identified through coding (Levine, 1985). As themes emerged, the frequency of themes was noted (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Categories were limited, as not everything discovered was relevant to the specifics of this study.

Trustworthiness. Validity threats (Maxwell, 2005; Miles & Huberman, 1994) in the study were addressed through acknowledging researcher bias (the researcher's positive Wakonse experience), reflective journaling and memo writing to insure data was collected consistently and the study could be replicated. Finally, member checks were conducted throughout the study.

Results

As a result of this study, several themes related to organizational sustainability emerged. Organizations learn based on the engagement of leaders and members, through an understanding and incorporation of organizational history and through responses to external factors and change (Argyris & Schon, 1978, 1996; each of these themes aligns with the framework for this study – organizational learning. Organizational learning focuses not only on leaders and members but

also on how people serve as actors in helping the organization learn and convey organizational knowledge (Argyris & Schon, 1978, 1996).

The conference originated based on the founders' vision that there was a need in higher education for community built on a shared passion for teaching and learning. That vision became the foundation for Wakonse. The conference organization has continued because of a combination of the involvement of the founder-leaders, holistic attention to conference attendees and a sense of participant community.

The participant responses to the research questions about how the conference originated and why it has continued centered on people – founders and participants – and community. The results here are divided into three sections. The first focuses on conference founders and leadership in terms of both how the conference originated and decisions made to keep the conference going for 25 years. The second section also focuses on people, in this case, the participants. In addition to the tradition conference session experiences, this conference developed dialogue groups and other activities meant to focus on the whole person rather than the academic or professional person who is attending. Finally, those interviewed identified the need and search for a community with common goals and passions as a key element to the continuation of Wakonse.

Leadership

The founders had personal connections to the conference site (a summer camp in Michigan). Each of them brought a particular expertise to the roles they played at the conference. Joe serves as the coordinator and helped to institutionalize funding for Wakonse at his institution. At the conference, he welcomes and connects with each participant. Bill is the source of Wakonse wisdom and conference historian. Finally, Barb is the spirit of Wakonse. She acquired the initial grant funding and named the conference (Wakonse means mentoring someone to his or her vision).

During interviews, participants identified the role each founder played in Wakonse's evolution. One participant said "I would be willing to bet that Joe touches base with almost every person at the conference." Of Bill another person shared, "He's the quintessential professor and his philosophy is, 'The profession of the professor is to profess.'" A participant described Barb saying, "Her place was probably to be the outspoken woman." It took all three of these personalities – the leader to organize, the wise professor to represent the power of teaching, and the energetic, creative vocal supporter – in order for Wakonse to connect with and inspire attendees from a variety of disciplines and fields in higher education.

Participant Experiences

Participants focused on the role of dialogue groups, conference sessions and the holistic attention paid to individuals as key elements of the Wakonse experience and why the conference has continued for a quarter of a century. They said that the stage is set for these unique experiences by the location of the conference. One participant shared that the setting itself lends to human connection, as there is not much else to do at the camp. Another added, that the camp setting

was a location where "people can voice their fears, their anxieties, their things that they feel like they don't do well, things that frustrate them about students or whatever…"

Dialogue groups. The dialogue groups are the places intentionally cultivated to be safe spaces for this kind of risk-taking. Each participant is assigned to a dialogue group of eight or nine people. Attending these meetings is the only requirement of Wakonse. These meetings happen daily and are focused discussions on topics identified by each group based on its needs. Dialogue might center on tenure, family, creative ways to engage students, syllabi writing, or whatever else the group decides.

Participants described the dialogue group as "integral" and "the hub" of Wakonse. One participant said, "I can't really place enough importance on the whole dialogue group thing… And it's not important because it's a rule, but because so much happens there." Another participant shared that participating in this groups is essential, saying, "The requirement to be active is definitely one of the rituals that goes on at camp."

Another reason the dialogue groups are essential to the continuation of Wakonse is the easy connection made between these groups and the teaching experience of the attendees. Participants shared that creating a safe space for people to share and take risks in dialogue groups mirrors creating a safe space for students to share and take risks in the classroom. This connection between the conference and the campus experience – between Wakonse and the work done by conference attendees creates a sense of purpose and a pragmatic use for these dialogue group experiences. Participants shared that coming together from different institutions in this safe space was a unique experience. Two of the founders and one participant stressed the idea that there are few places for these conversations – interdisciplinary conversations about the value of good teaching – to take place.

Conference sessions. While the learning from conference sessions may be a more common outcome of conference attendance elsewhere, this is only a part of the session experience for Wakonse attendees. One participant shared that from the beginning attendees are told by one of the founders that "Teaching matters, and you matter." Rather than bringing in outside experts, conference sessions are facilitated based on participant skills and backgrounds. Attendees submit topics of interest or expertise. When they arrive, they find out what sessions they will be co-facilitating. The expectation is that the sessions are conversations rather than presentations. This is uncomfortable for some at first, but it is central to the Wakonse experience. One participant said, "To me the most important feature of the conference is that foundational philosophy that faculty learn best from each other. Particularly that they learn best about teaching from each other."

Holistic attention to attendees. Beyond sessions and teaching and the job of being a faculty or staff member in higher education, there is a focus at the conference on the whole person beyond his or her job. The role of the "best self" at Wakonse is central to why it has continued as an organization. One of the founders said this holistic approach was a part of the original Wakonse planning discussions.

[Wakonse] would have something intellectual. It would have something social. It would

have something physical. There would be some sort of spiritual thing to it… The idea of
how you put all these things together in your life is important.
Another participant added, "[Wakonse is about] focus on the whole person – the
beauty of the place and people... opportunity for rest away from the work of home
and work. It's just completely different from the rest of the year, in every way.

This quote exemplifies Wakonse as a learning organization. Kofman and Senge (1993) described
the learning organization as "based on transcendent human values of love, wonder, humility, and
compassion" (p. 27), practices for conversation and action, and the ability to see work as a part
of one's larger life experience. The founders set the stage for participants to attend to their whole
selves at the beginning of each conference when Joe says, "We need you to go to dialogue group,
but if you need to skip other sessions to sit on the beach or hike in the woods or read a book or
even take a nap, you should do that instead." The message is clear that each person is
encouraged, given autonomy and given time and space to do what he or she needs. One
participant put it this way:

> [Wakonse] addresses you emotionally, socially, physically… along with the
> whole cognitive arena that we're in so much. You're still in your head, but it gets
> you out of your head and into those other human needs… It's that holistic
> approach. That ability to breathe and to address and take care of yourself that has
> kept it going.

Participants across the board shared that this was a unique experience they had. They also said
that because of their experiences, they encouraged others to attend which helped to sustain the
conference over time. Despite the fact that very few attend the conference more than once, those
interviewed shared that new attendees are recruited by past Wakonse fellows and encouraged to
take this reflective time to attend to themselves holistically.

Community

The human resources – the leaders and the attendees – come together to form a community that
is Wakonse. The organizational culture of Wakonse is based on a strong sense of intentionally
developed community beginning with the accommodations and limited access to technology and
going through the wisdom from within structure of the sessions and the small, focused safe
environment of the dialogue group. Community has been a central idea in Wakonse's
development and a key element of its sustainability. Participants said Wakonse community
threaded together through a shared passion for teaching and learning, a holistic attention to
individuals, and activities that build deeper connections among participants.

Shared passion for teaching and learning. Beyond the logistics of the experience, the common
passion of attendees helps to forge community among those who attend. Wakonse is a place
where those inspired by teaching and learning connect around student engagement. According to
one founder,

> What comes to the fore is their basic curiosity – their love of learning –, which is
> what got them into academia to begin with. So now you have this powerful

community that's made up of people who realize they have so much to learn from one another. And that's explosive. In a good way. It's like fusion.

Participants shared that they had gone without a community that shared their values so coming together with like-minded people inspired them in new ways. When asked why the conference has continued, participants described Wakonse as a place – sometimes the first or only place – where individuals realized they were not alone in their pursuit of excellence related to student engagement. One participant said,

> I think it's important to build community around the issues related to teaching and learning and student engagement. We're all often isolated with those issues… Sometimes it's easier to connect with people away from [one's home campus] with people you don't know as well. You know it's this community of people who have persevered – probably because we have like interests.

The value of a community of faculty and staff with a shared passion related to teaching and learning is essential to the continuation of Wakonse. Participants in this study said that they had not found any other place – individual campuses, other conferences, workshops, etc. – where learning and teaching is valued and rewarded in the ways that it is at Wakonse.

Discussion

Theory to Practice Implications

While this study focused on a single conference, there are implications for how the information here can be applied other organizations as they engage in the processes of navigating change in order to persist and remain relevant. There are three key questions related to organizational development units should ask themselves in order to strengthen the work they do, enhance their communities and the experiences of their members, and remain relevant and sustainable over time.

1. Organizational Leadership: What are the strengths of the unit leaders?
2. Organizational Membership and Culture: What are the roles of organizational members and how is a sense of belonging (or community) cultivated?
3. Organizational Learning and Change: How do organizations evolve, grow and adapt to change?

Organizational leadership. The founders had individual and complementary strengths creating a foundation for Wakonse. Joe had the leadership persona and the connections at the home institution. Bill conveyed wisdom as the master teacher. Barb had an enthusiasm and the writing talent to secure grants for conference.

The "what leaders do" in this case worked in support of the organization. Other organizations should be encouraged to take the time to understand their leader(s) and make sure that there are not gaps in leadership that could negatively impact the organization. This leadership review is

not a one-time event, but should be ongoing – particularly in times of change or leadership transition.

This study helps us build on past literature about the role of leaders organizations (Bryman, 2007; Lesniaski, et al., 2001; Spendlove, 2007;Weir & Thomas, 2008). This research connects organizational development and learning with higher education. As higher education adapts to changing needs and demands, using organizational learning to assess leadership effectiveness can be helpful in adapting to anticipated and unexpected change.

Organizational membership. Next, the role of participants is essential. Participants as session leaders and dialogue group members help develop the Wakonse culture. Having members see themselves as the core of the organization – "experts from within" as study participants referred to them – is not only empowering to individuals, but provides buy-in and organizational support on a broader scale. Wakonse attendees see themselves as a part of Wakonse rather than apart from the organization.

So, how are new participants recruited? How do they learn about organizational community and culture? This study shows how individuals come to know themselves as members of the Wakonse organization in a relatively short period of time (six days). They participate in sessions and intimate dialogue as well as literally seeing themselves in photos and during events at the close of the conference. In fact, they identify enough with the experience that they are able to return to their campuses and encourage others to participate in the Wakonse experience.

Organizational culture. How is institutional culture communicated not only from the organization to members but from one member to another? This study shows that participants themselves are the primary means of spreading organizational culture and knowledge. Participants led sessions, set agendas for dialogue groups, and participate in social activities. In terms of higher education organizations, how is institutional culture communicated between members? Opportunities for this to happen can take place not only in departmental and committee meetings, but also in other activities such as professional learning communities, mentoring and recruitment of new faculty and staff.

It is crucial to remember that the development of individual members has implications for development of the organization. Faculty development activities have been shown to connect members across disciplines and increase the scope of projects undertaken by faculty (Camblin & Steger, 2000). In the case of this study, bringing together faculty not only from different disciplines, but from different institutions not only enhanced the experience for individual members, but inspired faculty to connect more broadly on their home campuses. The founders discussed how time is set-aside for participants to discuss how they will "Take Wakonse home" to their institutions. During this time they share how they will integrate what they have learned into their own work, share what they have learned with others, and strive to create communities dedicated to teaching and learning at their institutions.

Throughout the interview process, participants emphasized the importance of community at Wakonse. This idea went beyond shared interests and included both the conference curriculum and optional activities. The additional activities helped participants engage and connect on a

personal level beyond their identities within higher education.

Wakonse has persisted because it meets unique needs of faculty and staff not found in other communities. The Wakonse community is built on passions around student engagement that are not perceived as being valued and rewarded at some participants' home institutions. Wakonse fills a void and provides support and inspiration for excellence in teaching and learning combined with a perceived genuine sense of care about each individual.

Organizational learning and change. Finally, how did Wakonse learn in its first 25 years? In this case study, the founder of the organization identified a gap in the experience of faculty and staff in higher education. As there was no space for a community – particularly in research institutions – for communities dedicated to outstanding teaching and learning, Wakonse sought to create those communities. In addition, the conference has learned how to best serve the needs of its members through the development of a conference focused on the holistic individual and the idea that one teaches with his or her entire self and the holistic experience of being engaged in the learning process.

One example of an organizational change made to meet the needs of Wakonse and its attendees is the introduction of undergraduate students to Wakonse. Originally, students were not present at the conference. The conference mythology holds that the founders were sitting on a deck overlooking Lake Michigan when they worked at this same camp as faculty for a k-12 student summer experience. One of them said, "This would be a lot more fun without the kids." And that, according to the founders, was one of the catalysts for creating Wakonse.

Over time Wakonse leaders and staff realized that a conference about teaching and learning was not complete without students. Therefore, a key evolution of the conference was incorporating students. This also linked learning with teaching. As one participant described it,

> Historically, what was happening nationally was important because by the 90s there was this real change from the philosophy of looking at not teaching, but learning… It was a change a change for universities to even be talking about what was happening in the classroom.

Wakonse has adapted to other needs and trends, as well. The introduction of technology has been an important part of the conference. Barb shared that Wakonse was where she learned about e-mail. More recent sessions have discussed the use of clickers and social media in terms of building connections – particularly in large lectures.

The organization's structure has also changed. One participant shared that in the early days of Wakonse, there were no activities scheduled for the free time. Participants were left to figure out how they wanted to spend that time. Leaders began to introduce optional activities for participants to enhance community. This has evolved so that now there are menus of choices including shopping trips, golf outings, high ropes activities, and hikes.

Limitations

As a case study, this research is intentionally narrowly focused. It relies on the insights of the conference founders and staff who believe in the positive aspects of the experience. The conference has made adjustments to continuously attend to the needs of participants, but has not undergone major changes in leadership, structure, mission or logistics since it was created. Organizations dealing with more significant changes such as those mentioned here might have additional considerations they need to factor into their negotiation of challenges and change.

Additionally, while not all of the long-term participants were interviewed, a sample of six individuals from four different institutions was used. Finally, the conference is housed a specific institution. It is not a department, an academic college or a student affairs unit, however it is a long-standing program with faculty and staff committed to its work and continuation. Therefore, parallels can be drawn between this conference and other higher education units.

Implications

Despite the limitations outlined above, there are implications that can be useful throughout higher education and other organizations. Similarly, it has implications for a variety of higher education settings. Given the scale, as has been mentioned, it translates most easily to reviewing an academic department or student affairs unit. Considering the organizational development of a smaller piece of the higher education puzzle can help the unit prepare for change and continue to grow and be successful and relevant in higher education. Similarly, as a microcosm of the larger institution, there may be useful information which colleges and universities can use as they navigate change and plan for the future.

An important limitation of this study is that Wakonse has not faced leadership transition. As people retire or no longer participate, Wakonse will transition. Developing a sustainability plan will be essential to Wakonse's continuation. A review of this conference in another ten years will provide significant information about how the organization managed larger changes than ones it has already faced.

Implications for Practice

This study suggests four implication areas for higher education organizations – leadership, members, culture and change. Addressing these areas will position institutions for success. Failing to consider them will have negative repercussions.

Align leadership planning with culture. Leadership planning should not happen only when there is leadership change (Battilana, et al., 2010). Organizations need to cultivate leaders on an ongoing basis. Preparing others to take on leadership roles makes an organization sustainable over time. So far Wakonse has done this by cultivating "expertise from within." Nearly everyone who attends helps lead a session. The idea that everyone leads is essential to empowering conference attendees and strengthening their connection to the organization.

Some participants move into additional leadership roles both informal (leading social activities or initiating conversation over meals) and formal (dialogue group leaders, staff to coordinate conference logistics). It is important that colleges and universities use similar models.

Empowering faculty and staff to see themselves as leaders creates a pool of future leaders from which the institution can draw during times of transition.

Engage with organizational members to inspire, develop and retain them.
Similarly, institutions must create a sense of belonging for faculty and staff. Wakonse does this through dialogue, self-reflection and community developed through shared space and social opportunities. Other units of higher education – departments, colleges, student affairs units, etc. – can enhance belonging among members through dialogue, showing respect for members as individuals, and providing opportunities for connection.

Re-examine organizational culture on an ongoing basis. While culture can be ambiguous and slow to change, it is important to understand the interconnectivity of leadership and membership and culture - people influence culture and as people change, so does culture shift. A reexamination of organizational culture affords the opportunity for organizational learning. If organizations – including colleges and universities – are not examining what has been learned, they are losing touch with their own institutional cultures.

At the end of each Wakonse, participants from individual institutions me discuss how they will build on the Wakonse experience on their home campuses. This results in strategic planning, but also provides feedback to Wakonse. What campuses are planning to do constitutes one lens through which to view what is learned and how the organization functioned in a given year.

Institutions need to engage in the same sorts of reflection in order to stay in touch with their culture. How are faculty feeling about class sizes or student engagement? What is the level of connection of adjuncts to a campus? How are students describing their experiences?

There are practical implications not just philosophical ones to the reflective process. Reflection is central to Wakonse. While some of it is individualized and personal, there are other opportunities – in dialogue groups, in sessions and in the institutional meetings at the end of the conference – where larger meaning-making can be done. Institutions would be well-served to adopt some of these strategies to better understand who they are and how that compares with how colleges and universities (or departments and units) describe themselves.

Anticipate change and plan for change at all times. Battilana et al., (2010) suggested that, "one of the defining challenges for leaders is to take their organizations into the future by implementing planned organizational changes" (p. 422). Anticipating and planning for change is a strong theme in this study. The major transition coming up for Wakonse has to do with leadership. While there have been some discussions, no intentional sustainability planning has been done for either the leadership or the Wakonse conference. The success of Wakonse in this area remains to be seen

A broader example of change planning in higher education that mirrors what Wakonse is facing is transition as the professoriate ages. According to the Association of American Colleges and University (2001), faculty turnover slowed after the 1993 elimination of the mandatory retirement age. The result has been a pool of faculty in leadership positions and classrooms for extended periods of time. That is now being followed by a period of tremendous change.

Conclusion

In closing, this study informs organizations in a number of ways. This study used a business-based model (organizational learning) to examine a Wakonse, a teaching and learning conference, as a specific case study. This study found that the role of leaders, members, culture and change are central to the sustainability and sustainability of a higher education organization or unit. Ultimately, the study also shows how this case parallels higher education regarding change. In the case of the conference, change in the activities offered at the conference are much more welcome than changes in the leadership. There is not only resistance to the change, but a fear to engage in conversations about leadership transitions or sustainability.

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