

Leading Organizational Change Through the Senior Capstone Experience

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This session will outline how a senior capstone project engages students in significant organizational change by using knowledge of problem-solving methods and change theory in assisting them to solve a critical problem within their own organizations. Using key principles from both Problem Based Learning and Action Research, the results of this process have been tremendous. This is a good overview for educators using or considering a capstone experience.

Learning Objectives

- To learn the strategies for integrating organizational problem solving strategies and issues related to organizational change into the curriculum.
- To understand the use of the key elements of Problem Based Learning and Action Research in a senior capstone experience.
- Understand the benefits of a cohort model for infusing learning principles into the curriculum.

Dr. Mindy McNutt has served for four years as Assistant Professor and Program Coordinator for Organizational Leadership at the Wright State University – Lake Campus, a rural regional campus located in west-central Ohio. The Organizational Leadership program is a baccalaureate degree completion program that was developed at the Lake Campus to meet the needs of local businesses and industries that had a need for baccalaureate graduates. Prior to coming to the Lake Campus, Dr. McNutt served as Interim Vice President for Academic Affairs a rural community college in southern Ohio. Additionally, she served as their Dean of Students Services and Director of the Center for Business and Industry. Prior to that, she served in a variety of staff positions at the Wright State University main campus in Dayton, Ohio. Most notably, she was the Director of Adult and Transfer Services, and has served and currently serves on the Ohio Board of Regents Articulation and Transfer Council, which oversees the statewide Articulation and Transfer Policy.

Leading Organizational Change Through the Senior Capstone Experience

Abstract

The key principles included in both Problem Based Learning (PBL) and Action Research (AR) provide a wonderful learning opportunity for a senior capstone experience for a cohort group of students in a baccalaureate degree completion program in Organizational Leadership (OL). Students in this program engage in a problem-based project which requires them to use an actual problem in their organization to engage in the problem-solving process. Throughout the OL program, students gain skills and knowledge of problem-solving techniques, and methods for dealing with change to assist with the implementation of their project. This program outlines the process for this senior capstone project, and how the instructor infuses the best of PBL and AR concepts into the project.

Introduction

Students learn best when they can connect learning to knowledge they already possess. Moreover, the curriculum becomes even more relevant when they can connect it to the world in which they live—their actual work experience. The Organizational Leadership (OL) program at Wright State University was designed and evolved to give students the practical tools and skills they need to be successful in today's workplace. The senior capstone project provides the opportunity to connect their learning to their actual work experience.

The senior capstone project is the culminating experience in the OL program. This extensive project requires students to bring together all of the prior skills, knowledge, and abilities that they have learned in preceding courses and apply it to solve a real organizational problem. Based on some of the learning principles in Problem Based Learning, and some of the principles of Action Research, this experience overlays organizational problem solving and knowledge of ways to deal with organizational change to assist students to have a meaningful learning experience based in their own work environment, utilizing a majority of the skills they learned in the OL program.

Through sharing experience and materials, the learning objective for this program include:

- To learn the strategies for integrating organizational problem solving strategies and issues related to organizational change into the curriculum.
- To understand the use of the key elements of Problem Based Learning and Action Research in a Senior Capstone experience.
- Understand the benefits of a cohort model for infusing learning principles into the curriculum.

Background

The Organizational Leadership (OL) program was developed at the Wright State University - Lake Campus in the late 90s. The first cohort of students (juniors) began classes in the fall quarter of 1999, and the first full-time faculty member began in the fall of 2000. Courses were already in place, including the Senior Capstone Project, however minimal guidance in terms of the philosophical principles was given to the faculty member to inform her use of this teaching opportunity.

Over the course of the three graduating classes of OL students, the capstone project and prerequisite courses have evolved to include a coherent stream of learning required to execute a project of this type and magnitude within an actual organizational setting. Several courses have been redeveloped to work better with the current model of teaching and requirements for the capstone project.

How it works

Using a method that could be called “reverse teaching,” the students are given all the key skills that they need in order to carry out the senior capstone project. The OL program at the Wright State Lake Campus consists of 12 courses taught over seven quarters—six Organizational Leadership courses and six companion courses from other disciplines. Students move through the program in a cohort model, which allows for some flexibility within the courses.

In the first and second OL courses, a skills-based course and a leadership theory/contemporary issues course, the students are introduced to the capstone project and are assisted in gleaning the specific skills, knowledge, and attitudes that they will need for the project. In the third course, they learn the specific problem-solving processes and techniques they will need to execute the project. It is here that they are required to contemplate the type of capstone project in which they might engage. The fourth class, training and development, is critical in that many change efforts in organizations involve training. The fifth class is where the formal capstone project proposal is required—and even when many of the students start the actual project itself. This course, a professional development course, includes critical information on handling organizational and individual change. The last class is the culmination of the project in which the students engage in all of the critical steps in the problem-solving process and ultimately are required to present the process and the outcome of their project at a public presentation.

Results to date

The results of this method have been beneficial to both the students and the organizations in which the projects have occurred. Students always express concern regarding the magnitude of the project at the beginning of the program, yet as they move through the program they see that they are receiving the skills needed to execute the project. Several

students who did not have specific organizational issues to solve caused the instructor to look to the community for projects—with extraordinarily good results.

Several successes of the senior capstone projects have included the following. One group of students who worked for a local Child Support Enforcement Agency developed a training manual for implementation procedures for an unfunded federal mandate that required noncustodial parents to include their children on their health insurance. These students won a state award for “best practices” in their field for this project and are sharing their program statewide. Another student developed standardized office procedures for several regional assisted-living facilities in response to increased state penalties for non-compliance with state requirements. The reduction in fines has been so significant that the company is in the process of adopting his procedures nationwide in all of their facilities. Finally, one group worked with the local Emergency Management Agency (EMA) to develop a part of the required mandate by the federal government that each county have in place a mitigation plan prior to applying for federal disaster assistance. Their portion, the hazard profile and risk assessment, saved the agency thousands of dollars that would have otherwise been paid to consultants. The director from the state of Ohio indicated that it was one of the most well-presented plans in the state.

Conclusions and Future Implications

The feedback that is received from the students is tremendous—they indicate that they never thought they would learn as much as they did through the capstone project. Several students have gotten promotions within their organizations because the capstone project allowed them to showcase their skills and abilities to upper management. The feedback from employers is just as positive—they are excited to have “free help” to solve issues and problems that are being experienced in within their organizations. Finally, the public, who have been invited to the final presentations, have been just as impressed with the quality of the work that the students have accomplished.

The program has been in place for four years now, and with each successive year has continued to be “tweaked” just a little until the right “mix” of skills and abilities is afforded the students. The instructor hopes to begin the process of moving some parts of this experience into the “service learning” arena for a different type of experience for the students—particularly as more younger students with little work experience are attracted to the degree program.