

Defining Enrollment Management: The Symbolic Frame

Jim Black

As enrollment managers, we often focus on substance over symbols. Today's crisis or tomorrow's enrollment numbers capture our undivided attention while the symbolic decisions, actions, stories, and traditions that Bolman and Deal (1991) speak to in the symbolic frame go virtually unnoticed. Is this appropriate given the nature of enrollment management? Or is there value in the symbolic?

In relation to the symbolic frame, an organization is a unique culture driven by stories, ceremonies, rituals, and heroes. This is in contrast to other frameworks in which an organization is driven by rules, authority or policies (Bolman and Deal, 1991). *Symbolic decisions*, particularly those related to resource allocation, internal promotions or hires, job assignments, reorganization, and oddly enough, space allocation, often impact staff morale and consequently, performance. Intended or unintended messages conveyed from such symbolic decisions yield power within an enrollment organization.

These messages have the power to invigorate or kill a change effort. They can stimulate innovative, "outside the box" thinking or stifle creativity altogether. They can produce hope or fear within an enrollment management culture. And most importantly, the messages transmitted through symbolic decisions can engender trust or distrust. Successful enrollment managers are those who manage symbolic decisions and when necessary, even manipulate them to produce a desired effect on the enrollment management culture.

A culture where people share a common purpose and are willing to sacrifice to achieve that purpose is also fostered when consistent, *symbolic actions* are taken. There must be an internal consistency between what the enrollment leader is promulgating and actual behavior. The old adage, “people watch what you do, not what you say,” is relevant for today’s enrollment leader. “People will believe in your message only if they believe in you” (Black, 1999, p. 15). For staff to believe the messenger, there must be mutual trust, and such trust comes when the messenger’s actions and even inactions mirror his or her promises. Delivering on one’s promises is fundamental to establishing trust. Likewise, mutual trust is more likely to flourish when a relationship exists between the enrollment leader and staff. Cultivation of professional relationships is manifested in symbolic actions such as spending time getting to know people on a professional as well as personal level (e.g., take them to lunch, manage by walking around, or share life stories); demonstrating concern for individuals, especially during times of personal challenge or crisis; recognizing important events in the life of staff (e.g., birthdays, marriage, childbirth, completion of a degree); and recognizing individual and team contributions as valued by the organization and the enrollment leader.

Symbolic stories also have a powerful effect on organizational culture. Stories can be verbal (e.g., speeches, small group discussions, testimonials), written (e.g., internal newsletters, listserv messages, e-mails, personal notes, memorandums, journal articles, book chapters), or visual (e.g., photographs, slideshows, video segments). More important than the medium is the message. In their various forms, stories are usually more memorable and influential than mere facts and figures. Stories should reinforce the organizational ethos and convey real life accounts

of individuals or groups who have contributed in significant ways to the organization's vision. These stories can help shape behavior, primarily by reinforcing positive behavior. When positive behavior is recognized and honored within an organization, people typically want to emulate that behavior.

Lastly, *symbolic traditions* provide emotional and social anchors for an organization. In an enrollment management environment traditions might include celebrating enrollment successes, helping new students move into the residence halls, attending new student convocation as a group, having dinner together following special events such as prospective student information sessions or commencement, or hosting strategy meetings to prepare for semester start-up. Social functions are necessary parts of the traditions mix. Staff picnics, softball games, parties, whitewater rafting excursions, and the like are illustrative of the kind of social functions common among enrollment management organizations. At The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, a staff favorite is an annual breakfast where the directors and associate provost serve beverages and breakfast to the staff. Symbolically, the subservient role assumed by the leadership team makes a statement that we are here to serve the staff, not just that morning, but all year long. Our leadership mantra is that we want to serve staff so that they can achieve their full potential.

For enrollment managers who believe that their organizations will be most effective by changing the culture, first within the enrollment division and then throughout the institution, symbolism matters. By intentionally focusing on the symbolic frame rather than solely on strategies and

day-to-day operations, enrollment managers increase the probability of achieving and sustaining desired institutional results.

References

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