

University College Dublin Faculty of Veterinary Medicine

Managing Change:
Experiences of an Elected Dean in a
University with a Collegial Tradition

Michael Monaghan, Dean,
Department of Large Animal Clinical Studies



**MANAGING CHANGE:
EXPERIENCES OF AN ELECTED DEAN IN A UNIVERSITY WITH A COLLEGIAL TRADITION**

Michael Monaghan, Department of Large Animal Clinical Studies, Faculty of Veterinary
Medicine, University College Dublin, Belfield, Dublin 4.

Introduction

My background is in the clinical medicine of food producing animals and my career was following a routine path including teaching, research and committee work. In 1992 I was asked by the dean to initiate a fund raising programme for a new veterinary school, which had been identified as major need of the faculty for 30 years. While we had some successes in raising funds, it became clear to me that I needed to become dean of the faculty to make real progress. The post became vacant in September 1996 and I was the only candidate. There had not been more than one candidate in the previous twenty years.

Having seen this position coming my way for some time before it happened, I enrolled for a number of courses with the Open University which led to a Certificate in Management. The courses included marketing, accounting, organisational development and human resources management. As someone with virtually no management experience other than running an active research group, I found this training to be of huge value in starting my tenure as dean.

The Faculty (School) of Veterinary Medicine was established in 1900 and had been housed in the same buildings for all of its life. It had become a university faculty in the 1950's and was slowly adopting the culture and mores of a university faculty. Its successes in research were modest and the state of the buildings was adversely affecting morale, recruitment and the attitude of clients of the veterinary teaching hospital. In addition there were many aspects of management which were to put it kindly, not as effective as they might have been.

A few weeks after I took office the report of an external review by the Irish Veterinary Council (the body responsible for the regulation of the profession) was published. It was very critical of the Faculty:

- The curriculum was in need of 'radical overhaul'
- There was very little evidence of forward planning at faculty or departmental level
- Roles and functions of staff were not clear
- The buildings were in such a run down state that closure of the school was an option which should be considered.

At the first meeting of the Faculty Executive Committee (FEC), I proposed an ambitious change agenda for the Faculty which would address the criticisms which had been levelled at it, all of which I believed were warranted. In fact, this report proved a most useful instrument for the initiation of change. I also proposed at this meeting that I needed a clear description of my own role and what the Faculty expected of me. It was agreed that I would write this myself and bring it to the next meeting and I duly acquired a job description by this means. It now seems extraordinary that this was the way the business of the faculty was done 8 years ago; a dean was elected from the body of the faculty without any description of the role or the expectations of the faculty or indeed of the university.

I had done some theoretical work on the management of change during my training with the Open University and I would now like to describe my experience with a number of change projects which I undertook as dean. I will describe some which went well and seemed to achieve significant positive change and one project which got into great difficulty. I will then try to reflect on the processes which were used as they related to the outcomes of these projects.

Project I - Curriculum Review:

The Veterinary Council reviewers made the following recommendations:

a. a radical general overview of the curriculum is critically important so as to determine the core, breadth, balance, relevance, quality, continuity and progression, integration and coherence of the curriculum.

b. that planning of teaching methods should take account of shifts of emphasis in educational philosophy including

- *Managing versus memorising information*
- *Small group learning versus didactic teaching*
- *Multimedia versus single source learning.*

We started this project by establishing a Faculty Education Committee. The choice of title was significant and reflected our desire to focus on learning outcomes and constrain discussion on inputs. All debates about curriculum matters include contests about resources, reputations, relevance of different disciplines and these debates are informed by various interpretations of history and are coloured by the personalities engaging in the debates. Ours was no different. We decided to engage in a series of staged exercises, each of which would conclude with a faculty agreement, which would be non-negotiable.

Stage 1

We engaged the help of a number of leaders in veterinary education from Europe who described current trends in veterinary education. This was followed by the engagement of educationalists who ran seminars and workshops on issues such as learning outcomes and establishment of course aims and objectives. We also circulated a questionnaire to the classes of 1986, 1992, 1995 and 1996, the results of which were presented formally to Faculty.

At the end of this phase, Faculty agreed on the essential knowledge and skills required by a veterinary graduate and agreed on a general strategy for achieving these objectives.

- Presentation of basic concepts and principles by way of lectures and practical classes.
- Use of methods, which allow students to develop the ability to think critically, such as projects, seminars, and problem solving exercises.

Stage 2

We established a very large number of subject committees, each of which contained where possible:

- Faculty member who taught relevant material in advance of the course under consideration
- Faculty member who delivered the course
- Faculty member who taught a related course after the course under consideration
- External member with expertise in the subject area.

Virtually everyone on the Faculty was on a committee and each of the groups prepared a report on a single subject. The relevant departments were then invited to comment on these reports.

The Education Committee analyzed these reports and came forward with draft proposals. Each new proposal was market tested with heads of departments and subject to further review.

A draft outline of the new curriculum, including juxtaposition of subjects and the introduction of a lecture free final year, was agreed by Faculty.

A series of workshops on Problem Based Learning was organized with help from colleagues in the USA and the Dublin Dental Hospital.

Stage 3

The final shape of the curriculum, including the number of hours allocated to each subject was agreed in November 1999.

Outcome

The entire process took two and half years and the curriculum is now in its fourth year of operation. A recent external review by the American Veterinary Medical Association (2003) described the Faculty as being 'visionary in its implementation of educational innovation'.

Characteristics of Change Process

- Establishment of need for urgent change by peer review
- Genuine attempt to involve every member of Faculty in the process, through participation in committee work
- A carefully staged process involving
 - Initial agreement on a philosophical position regarding broad learning outcomes
 - Broad agreement on a shape for the curriculum
 - Agreement on detailed learning outcomes for each course and delivery methods
- Involvement of key players (especially heads of departments) in discussion of major change ideas in advance of formal proposals
- Informal conversation with all involved parties at all stages of the process
- Visiting faculty in their own offices and tea-room conversations were crucial parts of the process.
- Understanding of the emotional processes which underpinned the apparently rational debates which took place (for example, discussion of new delivery methods with senior professors who had taught in a particular way for a quarter of a century)
- Tenacity of the Education Committee, despite occasional major difficulties. Major difficulties usually included impacting on the ego or territory of a senior professor in some way.

Project 2 - Role of the Diagnostic Laboratories

The role of diagnostician is a key one in a veterinary school and the clinical pathology laboratories provide an essential service to clients of our own teaching hospital and to outside general practitioners. However, in a small faculty, the tension between teaching, research and service is more acutely felt. UCD is a research led university and the promotion system reflects

this. The increasing diagnostic caseload was becoming a burden to the academic, technical and administrative staff and it became clear that a strategic review of the diagnostic laboratory was required. A small working party was assembled which consisted of academic staff and technician, all of whom were actively involved in diagnostic work, under the chairmanship of a recently appointed and relatively junior pathologist. He describes how the group initially had very divergent views on how the problem might be solved and how the very long-standing nature of the problem made it difficult to address at all. My principal contribution, as dean, to this process was to stay away from it; the chairman kept me informed of progress and invited commentary on the various solutions as they emerged. After a relatively short period of reflection, a proposal emerged which was supported within the relevant departments and by the Faculty. I recently enquired of the chair of the working group on how the diagnostic laboratories were getting on now (three years later) and was told that it was no longer a problem or even a topic of conversation.

Characteristics of change process

- Acceptance that there was a serious problem which needed resolution.
- Problem was addressed by those whose lives would be intimately affected by the solution.
- Chair of group who was not concerned about initially divergent views and encouraged open expression.
- Genuine spirit of open-ended enquiry, evidence based analysis of the problem and solutions which were developed by those who would be most affected by them.
- Those 'who needed to know' (Dean, Heads of Departments) were kept informed throughout the process (no surprises).
- Eventual proposal emerged from conversations which took place within the working party, but also from other conversations which took place with a range of others outside the formal meetings.

Project 3 - The Structures Debate

The systems approach to management suggests that strategic planning should be followed by a review of the structures to ensure delivery on the organisations objectives. I chaired a small committee which led a faculty strategic planning exercise through the following stages:

- Faculty 'away-day' led by an external facilitator
- Production of a series of draft plans which were widely circulated
- Eventual agreement by faculty on a plan for the period 2001-2004

The small working party continued with deliberations on what structures might be appropriate for the Faculty to help it achieve its objectives. The structure of an organisation comprises all the arrangements by which the activities are divided up between its members and its efforts are co-ordinated. The organisational challenges facing our faculty were as follows:

- There was no clarity on roles and functions for Dean, Associate Deans or Heads of Departments
- The Dean was elected, was responsible for the Faculty budget and yet had no executive authority
- There were widely divergent leadership styles in Faculty
- The Faculty had eight academic departments and a total of fifty academic staff (a website survey indicated that this was a record in the English speaking world)
- Accounting and management procedures in our Veterinary Teaching Hospital were chaotic (with a turnover of €1 million)
- There were no formal reporting procedures

I recognised that this was going to be the most difficult change issue I had to deal with during my tenure as dean and deliberately postponed it until the end of my tenure as a damage limitation exercise. If I tried this and failed early in my tenure, it would have greatly reduced my capacity to succeed with other parts of the change agenda. My personal anxieties about this project also influenced the way in which it was managed and adversely affected the outcome.

The committee reflected on the issues facing the faculty and the four of us believed we had discussed them widely with colleagues. Early in the process it became known in the faculty that I believed that the three department model, which is the most prevalent one in veterinary schools around the world, was the most appropriate to our needs.

Following a number of meetings of our structures committee, we agreed on proposals which we believed would address the issues raised above. I spoke at some length to the University's Director of Corporate Planning and we agreed that enlisting the support of the President and senior management team (SMT) would be a useful way of strengthening the proposals. I made a presentation to the SMT along with my committee and the support of the SMT was forthcoming. It became clear that there were some HR issues which need resolution and we next spoke to the Head of the university Personnel department. Out of that discussion came agreement that we would invite the Registrar, as the member of the SMT responsible for HR issues, to attend the presentations to Faculty and hear about these concerns at first hand. This was arranged but the presentations to the Faculty received a very muted reception.

A few weeks later (the Christmas break intervened) I put the proposals on the agenda for a meeting of the Faculty Executive Committee. My hope was that the proposal would be fine-tuned in advance of going before a formal meeting of the full Faculty. This meeting of the Executive Committee was, without doubt, the most difficult of my tenure as dean. The senior professor in the faculty had been agreed on as the spokesman and he delivered a lengthy polemic which was extremely critical of the processes which had taken place. The Faculty believed there had not been adequate consultation and particular exception was taken to the fact that the university SMT had been consulted in advance of the Faculty. This was perceived as the proposals being 'rammed down the throat of the Faculty' and this perception was confirmed by the presence of the Registrar at the presentations. Another member said that he was less concerned with the process than with the quality of the proposals, which he regarded as deeply

flawed. At the end of these contributions, and following a long debate, it was agreed that further consultation was required but that this should be sufficiently wide-ranging to include everyone who might be affected by the proposals.

We adopted this approach and spent a further three months working with every group in the Faculty. We eventually made formal proposals which were adopted at my last Faculty meeting as dean. There was agreement on roles and functions for key players in the Faculty, the introduction of a selection procedure for the Dean (as opposed to election) and a new Veterinary Teaching Hospital Management structure. We withdrew the proposals on rationalisation of the number of departments. This is currently under review by the new Dean.

Characteristics of the change process

- General lack of conviction that there was a problem to be addressed
- My decision to take a 'stronger grip on steering wheel' while suffering from the illusion that an adequate consultation process has taken place was counter-productive
- My failure to pay sufficient attention to reports that unlikely alliances were developing in the Faculty and that cups of coffee were being shared in the most unexpected locations
- Failure to engage in genuine discussion with key stakeholders
- Apparent abandonment of collegial tradition of Faculty. Enlistment of support of SMT was seen as an act of treachery; the dean was elected to serve the Faculty, not the interests of the administration.
- Timing the process to coincide with the latter part of my deanship; there was a perception that this process could be strung out until my deanship was into its 'lame duck' period.
- My beginning to suffer from an ailment which affects those who have been in leadership positions for too long i.e. that they know what needs to be done, that these painful and tedious consultation processes don't need so much attention.
- Willingness to recognise that there was a serious problem and willingness to attempt a salvage exercise.

Discussion

My understanding of the management of change has been deepened by the experience of being a dean with an ambitious change agenda in a university which, up to now has been characterised by a strong adherence to the collegial tradition of decision-making. My understanding of change management commenced with the introductory management training I received prior to becoming dean. This training dealt with the standard processes and suggested techniques for moving an organisation forward including:

Unfreezing current situation (organisation being made aware of need for change)

Making the change

Freezing the change into place.

Making the change is described as a political process and models are described for maximising the chances of success. These would include Lewin's Force Field model, the essential ingredients of which are politically maximising the forces for change and minimising those which are against.

However, in my view, such models do not sufficiently stress the importance of daily informal conversation in the successful achievement of change. When I reflect on the different approaches I took in the three projects above, it seems clear to me that the first two were characterised by open participative processes during which divergent views were expressed and sometimes resulted in major change of direction. My leadership position was one of trying to encourage collective sense making, of joint movement toward some undefined position which was not known to any of us in advance.

While those of us on the Education Committee had clear ambitions for a radically new and more effective curriculum, we were prepared to listen and adopt many new ideas from our colleagues. A key part of this process was making the time to engage in private conversations in offices, and in other semi-public conversations in tea-rooms and corridors. The process of joint movement towards solutions was perceived to be happening.

The structures debate was characterised by everything that was opposite to that approach. The Faculty became alienated and rumours were rife. Alliances developed which were designed to frustrate the proposals; I became progressively more isolated as dean. In retrospect, it is not surprising to me that the volcano erupted in January, 2002. Since I was within 6 months of completion of my term as dean, it would not have been hard to abandon the process and leave the problem to my successor. We started again, however, and achieved a large proportion of the changes we had originally envisaged.

Questions

How would things have been different if the collegial tradition had not been prevalent?

Would it have been easier to achieve the changes if the dean had more executive authority?

How would the quality of the decisions have been affected?

How important is consultation, participation, open-ended enquiry in successful management of change in universities which have a more 'managerial' approach?

University College Dublin

Statistical Information

	UCD	Faculty of Veterinary Medicine
Students	21,000	375
Overseas (non EU) students	2,000	40
Postgraduate students	5,000	40
Academic staff	1000	50
Support staff	1500	70
Number of Faculties	11	-
Number of departments/centres	80	8
Total annual income	€260 million	€11.6 million
Research income	€27 million	€1.2 million