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Organisational climate and strategic change in higher education : organisational insecurity

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Abstract

This research introduces the concept of organisational climate and contributes to an understanding of the recursive relationship between organisational climate and strategic change initiatives. In the 1990s there was recognition that higher education worldwide was moving through a period of rapid change. Alterations in the external environment were put forward as rationales for universities to reconsider the way they organised from their traditional governance and management structures through to the way in which they performed their primary activities of research, teaching and learning. A common approach to this adaptation or change has been through an increased emphasis upon strategic planning. This was accompanied by discourses rooted in technological determinism and the unquestioning belief in the rightness of a particular brand of corporate management. This research focused on one such approach to strategic change: the development of information strategies in 12 UK Higher Education Institutions. Using a grounded approach to theory generation, it highlights the influence of different styles of management on organisational climate. The paper discusses the

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antecedents and influence of one of the dimensions of organisational climate identified: insecurity/security. It establishes that that climates of insecurity (or security) can exist within an HEI and can be shared on an organisational level, or can be rooted in sub-cultures. Six issues were identified which affected the climate of insecurity or security within the different HEIs. These issues related to perceptions of change management and its frequency, predictability, openness, degree of participation, discontinuous or incremental nature of change, and whether or not decisions are implemented by use of persuasive power or coercive power. The paper goes on to discuss the multi-dimensional nature of insecurity. It notes that 'managerial' approaches are more likely to create highly insecure environments which reinforce a vicious circle: staff being de-motivated, cautious, less willing to take risks or exercise discretion and are more likely to resist change. In contrast, in environments where a more "collegial" approach had been used, a virtuous cycle was created, whereby there was a willingness to be open and share information, there was a greater degree of cognitive conflict, and more positive interpersonal relationships. These factors helped create consensus, the widespread understanding of decisions (acceptance of their legitimacy) and commitment to both the strategic decisions and the university. The paper concludes by arguing that a more sophisticated approach to strategic planning and change should be utilised reflecting the need to view the HEI as a symbiotic community. (HRK / Abstract übernommen) Allen, D. K., E-Mail: david-k-allen@1c24.net