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## Transformation in one UK University: Impact on Employees of a Dental School

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### Abstract

University transformation has been previously studied, but little research on the effect of organizational transformation on dental schools has been reported. The purpose of this work was to analyze the impact of the transformation on full-time faculty members of a dental school at a UK university. In addition, the study aimed to understand the perception for change and the environment surrounding the transformational plan by means of a questionnaire distributed among 30 faculty members. Negative attitudes predominated among the employees. Perhaps this was somewhat related to a lack of information and communication. Several issues surfaced as those of concern to the employees: (1) the plan's negative manifestations has already had an impact through changes implemented on staff such as downgrading and forcing employees into either voluntary severance or redundancy which has led to an increased workload and an overall sensation of staff uncertainty and job insecurity; (2) the plan lacked an explicit underlying objective, framework and strategic basis; (3) the plan eased a rather undesirable expeditious execution of staff grading processes that were held hastily under stressful situations. Only very few positive issues were mentioned such as an improved managerial system and committee structures within the school. Overall, most employees revealed a degree of stress and uncertainty.

**Keywords:** University transformation, education management, university, staff.



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## Introduction

The ever-increasing pace of global economic changes, technological growth and business competition have obliged organizations to undertake certain changes to their core organizational culture in order to survive and to sustain their competitive advantage. Clearly, this will not be music to everyone's ears, but the change is here to stay. Moreover, organizations that resist the mere act of change risk being sidelined by their competitors. This will eventually lead to business organizational breakdown or even closure.

Transformational change can be defined as a radical change of the structure and management of the organization. This also involves a change of the organization's inherent culture and values (Lukas et al., 2007). The transformational change usually takes place when the organization experiences a severe change where the organization completely transforms. This change form is the most challenging among other forms owing to the fact that the process itself is of an unpredictable outcome where usually several sacrifices are to be made along with certain risk inherent plans. Yet, the perceived outcome in such changes outweighs the short-term "losses" for it is usually introduced to resuscitate an already deteriorating structure. One integral part of this transformation is the involvement of the organizational culture which has developed within the organization since its first existence and throughout the years of its development. This culture has deep seated beliefs and values that will be almost impossible to change, hence the aforementioned sacrifices and risks. Moreover, fear of an unpredictable future and the stress associated with such changes are stereotypical of the consequences that cannot be overlooked if this change is to overcome the failure threshold (Ackerman, 1997).

Change is considered as an important element at both the operational and strategic levels for the proper organizational development and growth. Therefore, any organization should determine which position and competition level it is aiming for in the future; also, it should determine the most efficient way to manage the planned change in order to achieve its goals. Ideally, both organizational change and strategy come as one entity that cannot be separated (Burnes, 2004).

Successful organizational change management should reach the aims that were set prior to its commencement; it should also be delivered on time and within a preset budget. Finally, it should be perceived as a success by all stakeholders of the organization along with the employees themselves where, ideally, a positive outcome will be achieved by the end of the plan's implementation period.

Change management models are useful tools that can simplify and describe procedures of how the change strategy can be managed and implemented. In past years, several change management models have been devolved in order to facilitate management, implantation and sustainability of changes within organizations. There are many change management models available. Surprisingly, no reports were found in the literature that specifically focused on the change management models within universities and higher education institutions. The literature shows, however, that different change management models share several common processes and criteria; with the difference in how and when those elements are applied (Mento, Jones, & Dirndorfer, 2002).

Data for one university are given in this study, but the university is only identified as "University X" in order to maintain its anonymity. University X has undergone several eras of

development and change in order to become one of the leading universities in the UK and worldwide. Moreover, the dental school is well-known for the value it placed on traditional dental education since its establishment over a century ago. Recently, University X has introduced a five-year transformational strategy. From the university's perspective; these changes are being introduced in order to reach higher organizational outcomes and therefore to improve the university's impact in the world.

University transformation has been studied within other settings, but little research has been applied on the effect of organizational transformation on dental schools. The purpose of the current study was to analyze the impact of the transformation on members of the full-time faculty of the School of Dentistry at University X, and to understand the perception for change and the environment surrounding the transformational plan.

### **Methodology**

A questionnaire and covering letters were designed according to the principles of Dillman (1978) for distribution to all members of staff at the university's school of dentistry. Prior to its finalization, the questionnaire was piloted upon convenience samples of the target group in order to ensure maximized clarity of the questionnaire.

The questionnaire was constructed (see Appendix A) so as to allow for its anonymous completion and return, and was handed directly to 30 staff members by the author personally visiting the school of dentistry. This was two years following the initial implementation of the five-year transformation plan.

An introductory letter invited potential participants to take part, and which stated that non-return of the questionnaire would be indicative of a lack of consent to participate in the study. To ensure maximum confidentiality of all respondents, no hidden codes were embedded in any part of the questionnaires and therefore it was impossible to identify the participants.

The questionnaire researched the dental school faculty views and experiences of change management at University X.

A relational database was constructed using Paradox (Version 3.5) software for the input of data gathered from the completed questionnaires. Statistical analyses of the responses were undertaken thereafter.

Throughout the questionnaire, respondents were asked to state their views and opinions regarding several issues which in part included six out of the 18 questions in total. These responses were categorized according to their frequency of occurrence and according to their subject (i.e., presented in tables). Responses that belonged to the same subject category were summed and therefore presented as a single entity.

Several questions were cross-tabulated with other questions in order to more fully understand the relationship that connects different views and opinions, if any.

### **Results and Discussion**

In response to the invitation to participate in the questionnaire; 26 out of the 30 potential respondents returned the questionnaire duly completed (representing a return rate of 86.7%). Respondents were all members of the full-time faculty, and all of whom currently work at the Dental School of University X.

Surprisingly, to start with, a total of 38.5% of the respondents were unaware of the five-year transformational plan of University X (see Figure 1-A). This may be indicative of a communication problem between the senior management and faculty members of the dental school.

In general, the attitude of 40% of the total respondents towards the transformational plan was negative; the attitudes were distributed equally between being negative and very negative (see Figure 1-B). Only 25% of the respondents had a positive view about the change, while 35% had a neutral view towards the plan.

In the part where the respondents were allowed to express their thoughts regarding the issues in favor of the transformation plan, the respondents listed several issues (hereafter, bracketed numbers denote the number of respondents having expressed the same opinion) as follows. The plan will create income and reputation for the University, develop the local region and its economy, improve health and the environment and value the lives of a wide range of individuals (7). The plan will make updated systems and modernized management processes available; implant employability and enterprise in mainstream learning and teaching; maximize the effectivity of resources coordination and management; and increase globalization while maintaining educational, cultural and business interests locally (3). The plan will allow for more profitable collaborations within the University, within the UK and overseas; raise the standards to fulfil the highest requirements for excellence (1). The plan will equip the university with systematic methodology to reconstruct job roles which will, in turn, provide a better definition for the impact of jobs (1). The plan will provide the employees with a state-of-the-art vision that can be shared among employees, among institutions within the UK and even globally (1). The plan will allow for more and deeper channels with employers at local level and with other hubs and/or centers (1).

It is worth mentioning here that the views stated by the respondents were all in the future tense, reflecting the respondents' anticipation and contemplation rather than realization of outcomes already achieved. This coincides with the fact that the final judgment of an episode is usually determined when the episode is known to have ended (Ariely & Zauberman, 2000). Any attempt to do otherwise would most probably lead to a sub-ideal or even a biased outcome (Kahneman, 1999).

On the other hand, the respondents were also able to express their opinions regarding issues that are against the transformational plan; the respondents listed several such issues as follows. The plan was undertaken in an undesirable manner which will most probably be reflected negatively on the integrity of the organizational lattice, especially from the employee's perspective (4). The plan's negative manifestations have already had an impact through the changes that were implemented on staff such as downgrading and forcing employees into either voluntary severance or redundancy, which has led to an increased workload and an overall sensation of staff uncertainty and job insecurity (4). The plan lacked an explicit underlying objective, framework covering and strategic basis (4). The plan included the rather undesirable expeditious execution of staff grading processes that were held hastily under stressful situations (2). Senior management failed in being transparent. Instead, they were considered Hippocratic, deceptive and disrespectful in dealing with the staff. Senior management hid the real agendas behind such changes (2).

It was notable that all of the negative responses were manifestations that occurred directly or shortly after the time when the plan commenced. Interestingly, it was also

noticed that there was no mention for any future shortcomings whatsoever. According to Piderit (2000), attitude is comprised of three variables, which are cognitive attitudes (beliefs), emotional attitudes (individual feelings), and intentional or conative attitudes (evaluations based on past or intended behavior). Clearly, the resistance observed here falls into the cognitive category, where employee's pre-adopted theories and beliefs that negatively affected their perceptions on the transformational change.

Of the respondents, 63.2% indicated that they received some information about the change, but that they felt they were not provided with sufficient information about the change. Full explanatory information that detailed the desired change was therefore lacking (see Figure 1-C).

Half of the respondents who felt that they received enough information had negative attitudes toward the change, while the other half were neutral. Surprisingly, one-third of the respondents who did not receive enough information had positive attitudes about the change. The available information was clearly deficient from the employees' perspective, where a more crystal-clear vision of such change was strongly desired. This, on the other hand, might not reflect the senior managerial point of view, where too much information might have precipitated a less well-perceived outcome.

The employee's trust in senior managers was found to have a significant impact upon their resistance to change (Barnard & Stoll, 2010; Elving, 2005; Nelissen & van Selm, 2008). Therefore, senior managers must possess advanced managerial skills throughout the whole duration of the planned change. Provision of the right amount of relevant information is thus a key element in this case (Jimmison, Terry, & Callan, 2004). However, excessive amounts of information provided to employees may lead to adverse results in understanding the change and may consequently increase their resistance against it (Bartoo & Sias, 2004). It is apparent that the employees of the dental school were expecting to receive relevant information in a systematic and concise way; yet in fact they have received very little, if any, attention at all from their senior managers.

Sharing information and using open dialogues with members at different levels of the organizational pyramid whenever necessary can bring condensable benefit to the organization before, during and after the transformation (Morsing & Schultz, 2006). However, senior managers are, more or less, expecting that the employees will "digest" the rather brief description of such change over time where an initial "resistance" is basically anticipated. Senior managers are usually aware of the possibility of going through negotiations, compromises and even to sacrifice certain aspects of the plan for the sake of keeping the structural integrity of the organization; still, such approaches are kept under wraps unless the organizational atmosphere degrades to such a level whereby their intervention becomes mandatory (Barnard & Stoll, 2010).

Analysis in this research suggests a three-category conceptual structure: the authors believe that conflict arises from the change process itself, and from the people involved in the process. Additionally, it was also found that communication factors and a broader institutional factor were key sources of conflict within the organizational structure whenever transformational change is planned. This goes in line with a previous study that discussed the negative impact of human factors in which people were referred to as obstacles to the transformational process (Mento et al., 2002).

According to the questionnaire, respondents were generally unsatisfied with how the transformational change was applied (see Figure 1-D). Less than one-quarter of the employees showed any degree of satisfaction. Interestingly, more than three-quarters of the employees expressed their dissatisfaction, with almost one-third of the dissatisfied employees expressing themselves as “very unsatisfied.”

Reasons for their dissatisfaction included the following: Improper management (5), lack of communication and consultation (5), negative atmosphere and an increased number of staff-related issues (staff clashes) (4), ambiguous job roles and descriptions (4), and masking important information about the poor financial position of the university (1).

More than half of the respondents indicated that the transformational change was negatively perceived, when individual work and personal issues were considered (see Figure 1-E). The reasons for their dissatisfaction were expressed as; senior managers and their way of managing changes (5), the way the staff have been treated (3), human resources management and staff roles (3), and lack of information and communication (2).

Such a high percentage of employees stating that their work outcome was going to be affected should be alarming to senior management. This should be dealt with on the spot and individually, where senior management is expected to communicate more comprehensively with their employees. Such communication would therefore have an overall positive impact, especially in the absence of such communication which would aggravate the atmosphere of disturbance already present within the changing organizational structures.

According to the change curve suggested by Kübler-Ross (1973), most employees are expected to emerge from the low point to eventual acceptance of the transformational plan. However, the time necessary within which individuals move through the process differs dramatically among individuals. While this change curve was originally intended for describing the grief that individuals who lost a close relative feel, it proved equally useful in describing other phenomena such as the one under consideration here. It is therefore expected that employees who seek help via support groups or networks aimed at becoming more resistant to change end up going through this curve more slowly compared to others.

From the respondents, 31.8% believe that the transformational plan would have no effect on their productivity as researchers, yet 13.5% argued that the transformational change would have a negative impact (see Figure 1-F). It should be pointed out here that none of the respondents reported a positive effect upon their productivity. The reasons behind such a negative effect was stated by some as lack of investment in staff, less resources and less services being made available for research. This particular effect is alarming, especially for an institution that considers research to be one of its prime pillars as stated in its vision.

According to the respondents who are clinicians, the transformational plan had little negative impact on their productivity (see Figure 1-G). Although Figure 1-G is neutral, certain issues were stated by the respondents such as a lack of an accessible pool of replacement clinicians whenever there is a shortage (i.e., annual leave or due to health-related absences), but this is more probably due to the university’s poor financial position at the time the questionnaire was conducted.

According to the respondents who are course tutors, the transformational plan had a negative effect on their productivity (see Figure 1-H). Again, any negative input here would undermine another prime pillar of the academic institution where education is by far the purpose upon which it was founded. However, similar to the response received from researchers, a negative overall attitude was found. In addition, a few “more specific” negative comments were added by respondents such as diminished numbers of academic staff along with scarce funding which might potentially increase the workload and limit the introduction of new courses and/or modules.

Staff members were asked to list the issues that they believe could be categorized as “positive” outcomes, which the transformational change has brought to the school of dentistry. Similarly, they were also asked to state the issues that they believe could be categorized as “negative” outcomes (see Table 1).

As the transformational process is ongoing, the respondents were asked to list the most important issues that have surfaced within the past 12 months (see Table 2). This was sought in order to identify the aspects that have changed the most three years after commencement of the plan.

Interestingly, 82% of the issues stated were negative, which shows that the transformational plan, which was in its third year, has failed to fulfil the expectations of the respondents with a positive attitude, while it continues to be considered a bad plan for respondents who responded negatively. It is yet to be seen whether these issues would change in the future.

In order to evaluate the effect of the transformational plan on the work of staff members at the school of dentistry in the past 12 months, the participants were asked to name the aspects that changed the most in their work during this period. Again, most of the respondents had a negative attitude. Such an attitude was reflected on the part where they were given the chance to express their opinion freely; with their responses summarized as follows: The workload and pressure were increased (3); undesired increase in bureaucracy (1); lack of leadership at the most senior level (1); low staff morale (1); and, lack of communication (1).

The respondents also where asked to express their opinion about the future outcome of the transformational change. This question was sought in order to reveal the anticipated future outcomes of the plan. It is worth mentioning that the respondents, almost entirely, agreed upon one compound issue. This issue revolved around the fact that further restructural reorganization and staff reductions were still likely to bring about further negative issues (see Table 3).

Leadership plays a major role in any transformational change process. The effective change management requires people who are able to communicate the new vision, set up the roles that will lead to effective implementation, and have sufficient managerial skills to highlight and deal with all aspects associated with the proposed change (Mento et al., 2002). With effective organizational leadership, therefore, the plan should reach the aims that were set prior to its commencement. It should also be delivered on time and within the preset budget. Such pressures can result in competent managers making wise decisions that are responsive to the needs of their employees and the organization.



The questionnaire was conducted within a single school, so it might be biased by the specific interpretation of the plan and the school culture itself; therefore, there is the issue of whether or not these results can be generalized to other schools at University X. There is also the possibility that respondents who are more negative towards the transformational plan are more likely to have wanted to return the questionnaire.

## **Conclusion**

Negative attitudes predominated among the employees. Perhaps this was somewhat related to a lack of forthcoming information and communication aimed at the staff. Several issues surfaced related to the concerns of the employees, with the most important being: The plan's negative manifestations had already impacted through changes implemented on staff such as downgrading and forcing employees into either voluntary severance or redundancy which led to increased workloads and an overall sensation of staff uncertainty and job insecurity; and the plan lacked an explicit underlying objective, framework covering and strategic basis. Furthermore, the plan eased a rather undesirable expeditious execution of staff grading processes that were held hastily under stressful situations. Very few positive issues were mentioned such as an improved managerial system and committee structures within the school. Most employees revealed a degree of stress and uncertainty. More information should probably have been needed in order to alleviate the negative consequences. The senior managerial point of view is still to be revealed. It would be interesting to conduct another questionnaire later on in order to see if the perceived negatives and positives changed over time.

In summary, a successful and carefully executed transformational plan will not only benefit individuals but also enable tremendous impact on a nation and its higher education institutions through modernization and internationalization. The senior managers have undoubtedly put an enormous effort and, needless to say, courage into a transformational plan such as this for it to resuscitate a rather endangered organizational structure. Yet, such an effort would not have a favorable outcome without proper strategic direction and clarity of vision.

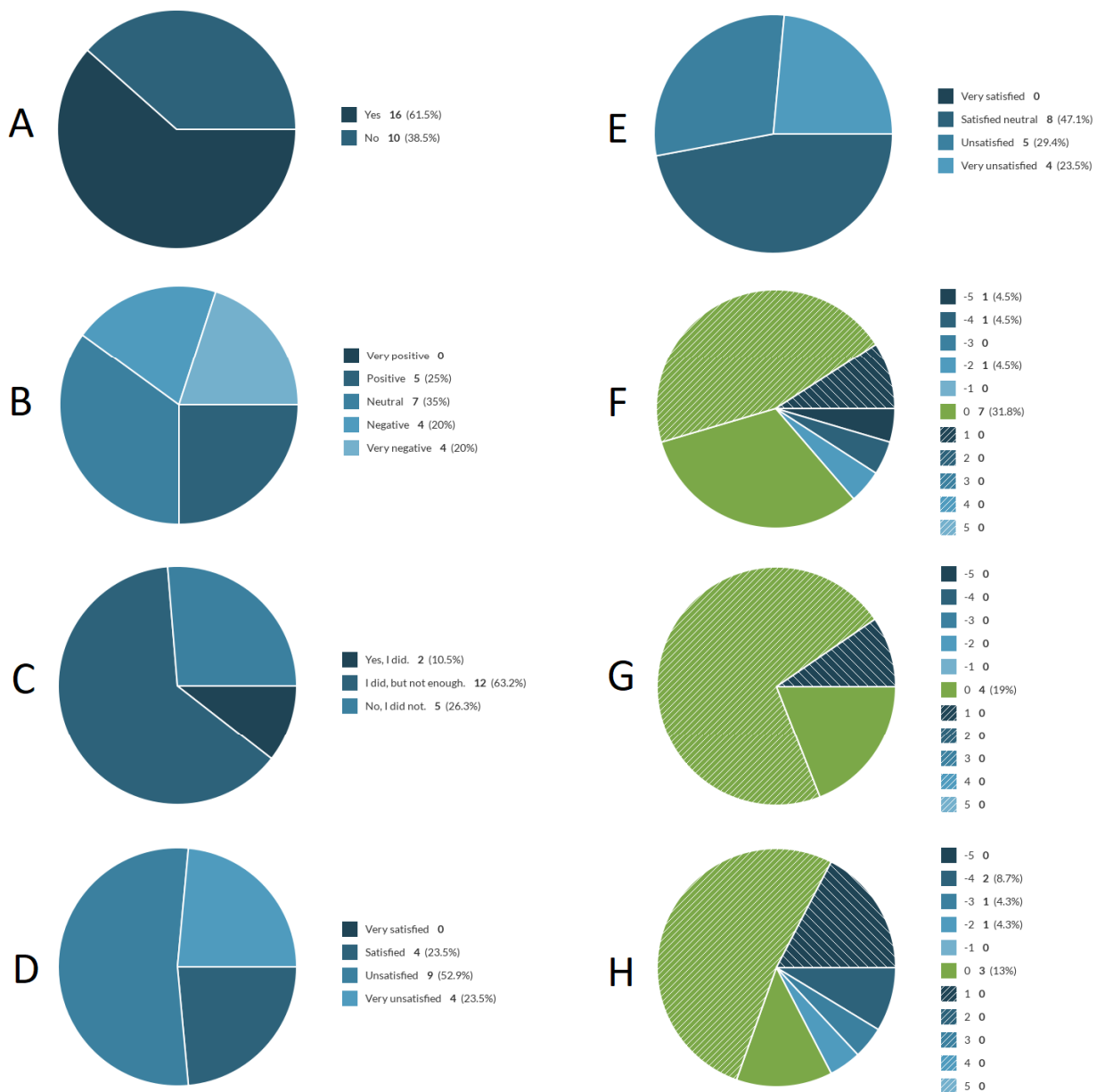
## **Notes**

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**Appendix**

*Figures*

*Figure 1.* Percentage pie charts representing of questionnaire results: (A) Percentage of respondents indicating awareness of transformational plan; (B) Attitude of respondents toward transformational plan; (C) Respondents response on whether they received enough information about transformational plan; (D) Satisfaction level of respondents towards way transformational change managed; (E) Satisfaction level of respondents towards effect of transformational change upon individual work; (F) Effect rank of change upon researcher’s productivity (G) Effect rank of change on clinician’s productivity; (H) Effect rank of change on tutor’s productivity.



*Tables*

Table 1. Summary positive and negative issues on transformational change

Positive
Improved management and committee structures within school
Independent school
Broad spectrum of students
Improved quality assurance process
Negative
Decreased staffing
Students recruited not suited to courses
Lack of investment
Decreased staff morale
Lack of trust in management
Lack of clarity over new roles
Uncertainty

Table 2. Respondents most important issues (positive, negative) in past 12 months

Positive
Becoming an independent school (4)
Improved Quality Assurance and Enhancement process (1)
Improved management and committee structures (1)
Negative
Reduction of senior staff and key teaching staff; no replacements (5)
Overcrowded staff due to small school (3)
Increased workload (2)
Low staff moral (2)
Student intake (reduced student numbers) (2)
Lack of unity among staff (2)
Regularity requirements post-General Dental Council's (GDC) inspection (2)
Tight budget (2)
Lack of direction (2)
Excessive stress (1)
Administrative restructure (1)
Ordering supplies (1)
Lack of communication (1)

Table 3. Changes respondents expected to occur in future

Changes respondents expected to occur in future
Smaller school
Increased demands on employees' time
Pay reductions for (experienced) staff
Funding cuts to dental school

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