

## Effective Strategic Planning for Accreditation In Higher Education

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### Abstract

In response to expanding demand for access to higher education globally, governments and private sectors have reacted through massification, both in terms of numbers and sizes of institutions. While this has generated quantity, many argue that a corresponding rise in quality is lacking. This increasingly consumer-driven marketplace is under pressure from stakeholders - students, parents, governments, funders - to demonstrate quality. This may occur through internally generated reports, or from external accrediting bodies. For many higher education institutions, particularly in developing countries, these are novel practices. This paper makes the argument that the use of frameworks such as Bolman and Deal's Four Frames as well as Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond's Distributed Leadership can offer those charged with planning and implementing quality assurance initiatives the tools to effectively diagnose the current readiness within their organization to undergo a quality assurance initiative. The rationale is presented through the lens of a case study.

**Keywords:** Accreditation, Quality Assurance, Distributed leadership, Strategic Planning

### 1. Introduction

Higher education, globally, once again finds itself in a unique transitional period. Multi-national campuses, MOOCs, micro-credentials, and massification characterize many of the conversations around where higher education is, and where it may be going. Despite conversations around the end of higher education as we know it (Cite), the overwhelming impression is one of expansion, whether domestically or internationally (Altbach, 2015). The last two decades have experienced substantial growth in the higher education sector via online learning - predominantly in the U.S. - as well as bricks and mortar just about everywhere else. Across developing economies and throughout Africa access to higher education has experienced a sharp upward trajectory as policy changes in many countries have created a warmer climate for private higher education. Poland is an oft-cited model (Kwiek, 2009), as is Turkey, where nearly half of 200 higher education institutions are private, and have opened their doors in only the last twenty years. Prior to this growth period, higher education - primarily public higher education - was accessible to the relatively few that managed to successfully navigate rigorous admittance systems (i.e. high stakes exams). As higher education opportunities have opened up to greater percentages of populations, we are seeing a transition to a more consumer-driven market. In other words, while there still remains high demand for (low-cost/free) public higher education, for the vast numbers of consumers, "choice" and "quality" are driving higher education decisions. Furthermore, other major stakeholders, be it the government or investors, are also inquiring about quality (Blanco-Ramírez & Berger, 2014). And this focus on quality, commonly referred to as the accountability movement, is not predicted to be going away anytime soon (Burke, 2005; Shah, Nair & Wilson, 2011). Indeed, while in this period of substantial growth in higher education, we are also experiencing increasing emphasis on quality assurance (Cao & Li, 2014). Whether quality assurance efforts are driven internally, by a university administration, or externally by a governmental or certifying body, more and more institutions are turning to accreditation to verify quality; this may take place at the institutional level or the unit (i.e. program) level. This movement is considered to be well-justified, given the emergence of "dubious" and "bogus" institutions (e.g. Levy, 2008; UNESCO, 2005; Ozturgut, 2011) around the globe that are purportedly taking advantage of the widespread desire for a higher education diploma. Accreditation schemes range from "desk-top" exercises that essentially require few participants and much paperwork to comprehensive, rigorous, cyclical processes that require sustained input and engagement from all stakeholders in the enterprise.

Accreditation schemes are generally characterized by: 1) a set of standards identified and articulated by an accrediting body; 2) the educational unit demonstrating achievement of those standards, through written descriptions and some form of evidence (this is often referred to as a self-study); 3) inspection of documents, evidence, and practices by qualified external reviewers, who make a recommendation for (non) approval of accreditation; 4) a final decision rendered by a board of officials from the accrediting agency. This has resulted in many established accrediting bodies, originally founded in the West and

established for the purpose of accrediting schools in that particular region, are seeing demand grow for their services internationally (Eaton, 2015; Knight, 2015; Morse, 2015; Salmi, 2015). While the process of demonstrating achievement of standards through written responses and the assembly of appropriate evidence is demanding and time-consuming, it is still the type of work that can be carried out by a team of knowledgeable, focused individuals. This is where criticisms of the external accreditation process emerge; issues are raised concerning where the actual impact of the accreditation process lies – on administration, processes, and policies, or does the impact reach the core mission (e.g. teaching and learning) (e.g. Kis, 2005; Stensaker, Langfeldt, Harvey, Huisman, & Westerheijden, 2011). While external review processes are generally believed to be of value, there is a strong belief that internal quality assurance processes may result in greater benefit to the organization, particularly the core processes (i.e. Instruction and learning) as well as in increasing staff engagement (e.g. Carlsson, 2016; Gayef & Hurdag, 2014). However, in order to reap the maximum benefits that quality assurance can offer to an organization, it is critical that a solid foundation exists, which may only result from a deliberate planning process (Albon, Iqbal & Pearson, 2016; Young, 2003).

### **1.1 Theoretical Framework**

Therefore, in this paper, we present the argument that in order for quality assurance and accreditation processes to engender a deeper, sustained effect across the given unit, there is an additional, critical self-study that units must undergo in order to assess preparedness for undergoing the accreditation application process. We contend that there are certain factors that must be taken into consideration as planning for accreditation and quality improvement begins to take place. In order to organize our case, we turn to two separate theoretical frameworks from organizational management and educational leadership. Bolman and Deal's four frames of structural, symbolic, political, and human resources provide planners with a useful tool to analyze the current state in the organizational unit, and build a roadmap that will help strengthen the foundation for any accreditation and quality assurance initiatives. Additionally, we will draw on the work of Spillane and Diamond around Distributed Leadership. For practitioners and students of quality assurance, these two frameworks provide a set of lens through which roadblocks and leverage points can be realized prior to embarking on QA efforts; likewise, they may serve as analytical tools when conducting a post-mortem on a QA initiative.

Bolman and Deal view the organization as comprised of four elemental frames: the structural frame, the human resource frame, the political frame, and the symbolic frame. The structural frame includes such aspects of the organization as rules, roles, goals, policies, technology, and the environment. Bolman and Deal see that "structure is a blueprint for the pattern of expectations and exchanges among internal players," (p. 38). For the leader (see Distributed Leadership, below) of a quality initiative, analysis of the structure leads to a better understanding of where the leverage points are in terms of garnering support, recruiting active participants, and increasing sustainability of the effort. By understanding which administrators and faculty are in a position to support a quality initiative, and by understanding where the incentives and roadblocks lie, a careful analysis of the structure can reveal to the leader the means to broaden and sustain engagement in the quality initiative. In terms of planning, Bolman and Deal (2003) view the structural frame as the realm for creating strategies to set objectives and coordinate resources.

The symbolic frame consists of culture, meaning, ritual, ceremonies, and stories. The key to this frame, Bolman and Deal point out, is not necessarily what happens, but what it means. In this context, they suggest that "activity and meaning are loosely coupled." They further suggest that much of life is uncertain and ambiguous, and therefore people rely on symbols for making sense, and from those symbols arise myths, rituals, ceremonies and stories "that help people find meaning, purpose, and passion," (p. 217). Therefore, when a leader goes looking for the ways to motivate teachers and staff to more thoroughly engage in the quality process, they would be well-served to pay close attention to this frame, as this is, as they say, "where the people live." If this frame is ignored, then the staff will see themselves as being ignored, which is not an effective way to inspire commitment.

The political frame, perceived as power, conflict, competition, and organizational politics, becomes a useful lens for analyzing the unit for barriers to engagement. Bolman and Deal view organizations as coalitions of individuals and interest groups with enduring differences vying for scarce resources, which results in competition, negotiation, and ultimately in policies and structures based on these dynamics. When planning to undertake a quality initiative, the leader of the effort must have a

reasonable understanding of who has power and influence (again, see leaders and followers under Distributed Leadership) and how they are connected throughout the unit. Leaders also need a keen sense of "what makes people tick," and what resources they can bring to bear to increase engagement in the quality process. It is also perceived as the arena to air conflict and realign power (2003).

To determine needs, barriers, and leverage points, it behooves leaders to look through the lens of the human resource frame, with its consideration of needs, skills, and relationships. This frame highlights the symbiotic nature between the needs of individuals and organizations, and how a positive relationship can be struck between the two to foster a healthy, productive environment. In the planning phase, Bolman and Deal (2003) illustrate this frame through gatherings to promote participation.

Analysis through Bolman and Deals framework cannot take place, nor can action plans be implemented, we argue, if there is an absence of effective leadership. For this reason, we find Distributed Leadership to be a compelling framework to examine whether and to what degree successful planning and sustained implementation of a quality initiative can occur.

Distributed Leadership is an attractive framework because it views leadership from the perspective of leadership activity, or practice, as opposed to examining the traits and actions of a single individual. It is also an attractive framework because it offers a means for not only explaining leadership practice, but also informing practice, and providing international program leaders with tools for fostering these environments and administering successful initiatives.

The central notion of Distributed Leadership is that "the appropriate unit of analysis is not leaders or what they do, but leadership activity," (Spillane, Halverson & Diamond, 2004, p. 13). In other words, leadership practice is not simply viewed as the abilities and characteristics of an individual leader, rather, it is the complex web of social interaction between the leader, followers, and the situation (Spillane, Halverson & Diamond, 2001; 2004).

Instead, Distributed Leadership posits that a leader's cognition is stretched, or distributed, situationally, over aspects and actors (Spillane & Sherer, 2004, p.30), thereby rendering decisions meaningful only within a social context. Therefore, the focus of leadership shifts from a single individual to the "interplay between the actions of multiple people" (2004, p. 37) utilizing particular tools and artifacts (Spillane, Halverson & Diamond, 2004, p.21). They explain that this "collective leading requires multiple leaders working together, each bringing somewhat different resources - skills, knowledge, perspectives - to bear," (2004, p. 25). Spillane & Sherer (p. 14), building on Thompson's (1967) work propose three ways in which leadership may be stretched over two or more leaders:

- 1) Collaborated Distribution: one leader's practice becomes the basis for another leader's practice (i.e. Thompson's "reciprocal interdependency");
- 2) Collective Distribution: two or more leaders who work separately but interdependently in pursuit of a shared goal and their independent activities generate leadership practices (Thompson's "pooled interdependency");
- 3) Coordinated Distribution: leadership practice in which different leadership tasks must be performed in a particular sequence (Thompson's "sequential interdependencies").

Collective and collaborated distribution of leadership occurs when cognitive activity is stretched over actors, artifacts, and organizational structures. Cognitive activity is defined as existing in two ways: situationally and socially (Spillane, Halverson & Diamond, 2004, p.11). Situational cognition refers to cognition that is distributed via material and cultural artifacts through the physical environment, such as policies, programs, and procedures. Social cognition is distributed when individuals collaborate in order to achieve a common goal.

Spillane, Halverson and Diamond suggest that leadership practice is "extended through organizational structures that enable the movement and generation of knowledge and incentives in the organization," (2004, p. 37), meaning that while leadership can be constrained by organizational structures, leadership can also shape structure, and create situations where practice can be extended to a greater number of followers.

## **2. Planning Considerations Through the Lens of a Practical Case**

Our objective at this point is to analyze the implementation of a specific quality initiative, through the lens of Bolman and Deal's Four Frames along with Spillane, Halverson and Diamond's Distributive Leadership. For organizations that are planning to pursue quality initiatives, prior to conducting the self-study that is prescribed by an accrediting body, it may be instructive to examine the organizational unit through these two separate frameworks. Accreditation can be a time intensive and costly endeavor. The development and implementation process may encounter a smoother road if this analysis and planning exercise is carried out prior to embarking on an accreditation or quality assurance journey.

### **2.1 The Context**

In 2014, an organizational unit (an academic program) in a private university in Istanbul, Turkey, undertook project to gain its first accreditation from an internationally recognized, proprietary accrediting organization. A Quality Assurance Coordinator (QAC) was appointed to lead the project. There was a list of standards articulated by the accrediting organization and it was the QAC's responsibility to ensure that a written response and sufficient evidence was gathered for each standard. This process was what was referred to above as a "desk-top exercise." A group of administrative staff wrote responses and gathered evidence for those standards that were relevant to their individual areas of responsibility. This was followed by a one-day onsite inspection visit that could be characterized as the inspector looking through paperwork and evidence, carrying out a few interviews with administrators, and conducting a brief tour of the premises. There was no interaction with students or teachers – other than those who were administrators as well – nor were there any lesson observations (it was understood that this would not take place). Soon thereafter, accreditation was granted. This gave the unit something to brag about and a stamp for the website, but it left the unit wanting something more rigorous.

In 2016, the unit director made the decision to pursue accreditation through a different organization. This latter process would be more comprehensive and rigorous. Whereas it was similar to the initial effort in that written responses and evidence were still required, the clearly stated aim of the onsite inspection by external reviewers was that little time would be devoted to looking over documents, with nearly all of three-day visit dedicated to focus groups with students, teachers, and administrators, as well as lesson observations of approximately 75% of the 80 teachers on staff. At the debriefing, the inspectors were rather positive concerning what they perceived as solid alignment between what had been articulated in the written responses to the standards, and what they had observed "on the ground." This is the good news. This was the result of some of the factors that will be discussed below through Four Frames and Distributed Leadership. The not-so-good news is that in the end – particularly in the final run-up to the onsite inspection – a number of tense moments arose that could have detrimentally impacted the outcome of the inspection. Upon reflection, the unit was most likely able to weather the last-minute storm because of the strong foundation on which the project had been built. At the same time, there were a few windows that should not have been blown out. If a proper (i.e. utilizing the two frameworks) internal analysis had been conducted prior to commencement of the process. It is our hope that the lessons we share below become learnings for others who will be pursuing accreditation or quality assurance initiatives in the near future.

### **2.2 The Structural Frame**

The structural frame includes such aspects of the organization as rules, roles, goals, policies, technology, and the environment. In terms of planning, Bolman and Deal (2003) view the structural frame as the realm for creating strategies to set objectives and coordinate resources.

Implementation of an effective quality assurance program is not a one-time, stand-alone initiative. It is one component in an integrated process that includes curricular design, teaching, assessment, and professional development – all of which feed into learning. In this way, the quality assurance program must be developed in such a way that is both integrated and systematic. And, equally important, it must also be perceived as such. In other words, quality assurance, and, as a by-product, accreditation applications, require that they be integrated into the structure – the fabric – of the day to day operations of the unit. Policies should exist to support these activities (e.g. a quality assurance policy; a professional development policy). Roles must be clarified via job descriptions; e.g. who is responsible for gathering and analyzing data (whether from student performance or student opinions), who is responsible for reporting the results of analyses. Moreover, what process is developed to identify goals and objectives,

who is responsible for reviewing and revising action plans and progress reports. These should not be activities that are identified once it has been determined that the unit will pursue accreditation; they should be built into the permanent operations of the unit.

An additional example of how organizational structure may become a barrier to engagement is workload. How many hours are instructors expected to teach in a normal semester? How many hours are allotted for office hours or planning? How much time is organized to provide common planning and discussion times for instructors? Another structural example might be the rewards offered to faculty and staff for their participation in the assessments process. Leaders should seek ways to maximize inclusion and engagement by examining possible structural supports and impediments.

Productive planning for quality assurance also requires time. The simple logistics of gathering and analyzing the data generated by stakeholders is time consuming. The additional layer of ensuring that consensus is achieved means that more time must be dedicated to the process. This is in sharp contrast to what generally takes place – an edict comes down, a deadline is given, a small committee or task force is assigned responsibility. These tasks may indeed be effectively completed, however, their results have also leapfrogged the most critical aspect of planning: Securing consensus and engagement. These can result from a deliberate process of seeking input and achieving buy-in. One important caveat is that over-planning can be toxic too. There is nothing more frustrating, and de-motivating, to very busy faculty members than talk that leads nowhere. Those planning the planning must work a careful balance between ensuring achievement of goals and creating a deadly impression that the process has no end in sight.

Reflection: In the particular university program examined for this case, there was clear establishment of units – for curriculum and assessment, for quality assurance unit, for professional development – and roles and responsibilities were clearly defined through job descriptions. However, these three units often found themselves vying for the same valuable resource – staff time – which resulted in frequent conflict. An additional issue was that each unit established annual objectives, and they ostensibly fed into the organizational goals and objectives, yet in reality, there was infrequent follow-through in terms of formative and summative evaluations and reporting. On the surface, by each of the units carrying out responsibilities individually, things appeared to be working well. A lack of coordination was not debilitating for the unit, but it did hinder efficiency and concerted improvement efforts. By analyzing the unit through the structural lens, the lack of coordination and collaboration could have been brought to light and actions could have been taken to address the disconnect.

### **2.3 The Symbolic Frame**

The symbolic frame consists of culture, meaning, ritual, ceremonies, and stories. The key to this frame, Bolman and Deal point out, is not necessarily what happens, but what it means.

Implementation of an effective quality assurance program is in part technical, but in large part, it is cultural. In order for an organization to establish a sustained quality assurance effort, it is critical for those leading the effort to understand the internal culture of the organization. If requirements and requests are seen to be in conflict with the culture – or sub-cultures – within the organization, then any well-designed initiative is going to struggle to succeed. Therefore, in order establish relevance, it is important that those associated with the quality assurance effort are viewed as part of the culture. And, to do so, takes time. This is where external consultants can fail. They are not viewed as insiders because they have not participated in the rituals – the year-end celebrations, the weddings, the after-lunch coffee chats – that gains them entrance to the culture.

The commonly accepted phrase for completing an assessment cycle is Closing the Loop. This suggests that the recommended stages in the assessment process are achieved: planning, implementing, assessing, analyzing, and acting upon the data. Completion of at least one cycle could be called a success, which is not uncommon. Most educational units generally have the motivation – whether it is internally or externally driven – to finish one cycle of the assessment process. Success, however, is not enough. What often occurs is a great flurry of activity for at least one year, or until the accreditation inspectors leave campus. This is usually followed by a rapid downward spiral in activity, until what remains is a minority of individuals who carry the torch because it is their stated responsibility, or because they inherently understand the value of assessment and evidence. This is why most accrediting bodies in the United States are not satisfied with data from a single cycle of assessment as evidence of an effective assessment

program; units that apply for accreditation are required to present at least three cycles of assessment data.

The ultimate goal of an effective Standards Assessment Program is for regular completion of the assessment cycle for all Standards. This is not to say that all Standards should be assessed at the same time, only that over time, they must all be assessed in a regular schedule. In other words, the goal is sustainability of the assessment program. The steps described previously in establishing the Standards Assessment Program may lead to one successful completion of the assessment cycle. Yet, to realize sustainability, the educational unit must move beyond the relatively short-term activities that are required for planning, and work toward establishing a culture of assessment or a culture of inquiry or a culture that values evidence. To do so takes time, effort, and planning.

If a culture of inquiry does not already exist, the process to establish such a culture takes time. Change takes time. And, the further away from a culture of quality that exists in the beginning, the longer it will take to get there. If faculty and staff are accustomed to an environment of suspicion and lots of sticks with few carrots, then the turn-around will take time. Likewise, if an accreditation review is hanging overhead, then the process can be rushed through for short-term gain, but it may generate long-term negative impact. Thus, a sustained, effective quality assurance plan begins with a long-view, and the understanding that a methodical, deliberate approach is necessary for solidifying a culture of quality.

To this end, planning for sustained quality assurance requires inclusion. Ineffective planning is a small group working in isolation in order to complete a task with a given deadline. Effective planning requires input and participation from a breadth of stakeholders. Just as good assessment should be comprised of multiple perspectives, so should it be for planning. At the very least, the list of stakeholders should include the faculty conducting the instruction and the assessments, the students who will receive the instruction, and relevant administrators. The next ring of stakeholders would be the schools that employ the program graduates, as well as the program graduates themselves. In addition to simply aggregating input via surveys, focus groups, advisory boards, etc., planning must result in shared consensus. There must be general agreement on those key qualities and quantities that comprise a good program. For if there is not, then the very stakeholders who must be completely committed to this process will not be engaged.

Reflection: This was perhaps the area of greatest strength as the unit moved forward with its quality assurance and accreditation planning. The teacher retention rate within the unit is strong, meaning that most staff have worked together for a number of years. The unit coordinators for Curriculum, Quality Assurance, and Professional Development had all been working in the unit for at least five years. Therefore, they were not viewed as outsiders trying to impose change without understanding, or having played a role in the internal culture. With that said, the accreditation implementation team still faced challenges as they tried to implement new practices that reflected the quality standards of the accrediting body. A pre-analysis of the culture in relation to the needs of the accreditation standards may have highlighted areas where difficulties would emerge. In turn, a plan of action for these critical points, implemented prior to embarking on the accreditation effort, may have reduced anxiety as the process moved toward a formal inspection.

#### **2.4 The Political Frame**

The political frame, perceived as power, conflict, competition, and organizational politics, becomes a useful lens for analyzing the unit for barriers to engagement in quality processes. Implementation of an effective quality assurance program requires an understanding of the power structures within the unit. There is a formal power structure, illustrated through the unit's published organization chart. There is most likely a secondary, underlying power structure that may be equally revealing concerning who does what. This can have both negative and positive implications. Certainly, cliques and influence that comes from seniority or close relations with those who have positional power are a few ways that this sub-layer of politics may operate. This may be a harmful context if the players see themselves as power brokers, protecting their space, with the ability to block individuals, who may be competent but lacking political clout, from gaining recognition and perhaps advancement opportunities, which may benefit the organization in the long run. In this event, those who are leading a quality assurance initiative must gain an understanding of these relationships, motives, and leverage points in order to effectively engage – not aggravate – this structure. Realizing these relationships and how they function is something that takes

time; this is another reason why external consultants are not advisable as they are often not privy to these critical mechanisms.

Conversely, this underlying structure may also prove quite beneficial to quality assurance efforts. This is where Distributed Leadership plays a role. Distributed Leadership is generally viewed as a complex web of social interaction between the leader, followers, and the situation. It is what Spillane, Halverson and Diamond characterize as the "interplay between the actions of multiple people" (2004, p. 37) utilizing particular tools and artifacts (2004, p.21) within a particular situation. That is, leadership is not seen as actions of a single individual, rather it is the interactions of many individuals who are working to achieve a commonly shared ideal (i.e. the stretched cognition). Individuals may have formal, positional power or they may be informal leaders that have a degree of influence over "followers". Therefore, individuals who may not have positional power may still hold influence by virtue of their abilities and actions - that move operations in a positive direction.

Such an underlying power structure opens the door to effective and efficient practices and engagement throughout a unit, without the traditional top-down approach of request and approval in order to take actions. Individuals at all levels are expected to take actions that lead to achievement of the unit's goals and objectives (e.g. an accreditation process). In order for Distributed Leadership to take hold, there is a degree of psychological safety that is required. Psychological safety implies that individuals feel that ideas and actions taken in order to achieve unit goals and objectives will not be met with derision or retribution; that ideas and actions by all actors have value. For instance, if it is clear that conversations around poor performance focus on improvement, not punishment, then the door will swing open to greater collaboration for the sake of quality improvement.

Reflection: The unit establishing quality assurance practices - including an accreditation initiative - benefits from a relatively flat structure. There is a wide layer of individuals who hold some degree of administrative responsibility, yet all administrators are instructors as well; the unit director teaches a set number of hours per semester, and substitutes when necessary. To illustrate, of the 80 individuals in the program, 28 have some degree of administrative responsibility. Therefore, there is not a traditional us vs. them attitude in the corridors. This structure has also facilitated an environment that resembles distributed leadership. This takes us back to Spillane, Halverson and Diamond's Collaborated Distribution - one leader's practice becomes the basis for another leader's practice - and Collective Distribution - two or more leaders who work separately but interdependently in pursuit of a shared goal and their independent activities generate leadership practices.

Within the unit described in this case study, there are numerous examples of Collaborated and Collective distribution. The unit benefits from many individuals who have worked together for a number of years, which has created an environment where collaboration is widespread, both vertically and horizontally. A specific activity to illustrate this phenomenon occurred in the preparation stage for the unit's accreditation application. A team of 12 "influencers", the majority of whom were teachers (as opposed to a traditional "leadership team" often comprised of positional leaders) was tasked with drafting responses to accreditation standards. These individuals were selected not only because of their ability to effectively respond to the standards, but even more so because of their networks throughout the unit and their abilities to engage a broad base of "followers" throughout the accreditation process. In terms of planning for quality assurance processes, including an accreditation application process, it behooves the unit leaders to consider the networks of informal leaders and followers, and assess the degree to which psychological safety and distributed leadership are present. Certainly, this may lead to some of the "difficult conversations" that positional leaders must have. If a foundation of trust and collaboration is not in place, then successful attempts at quality improvement are in jeopardy.

## **2.5 The Human Resources Frame**

The human resource frame views the organization from the perspective of needs, skills, and relationships. Bolman and Deal underline the point that when analyzing an organization through this frame, inquiries center on alignment between organizational needs and individual needs; that employees are viewed as assets that contribute to the success and well-being of the organization. If individuals feel that there is an inadequate fit between themselves - no matter their talents and capacities - they will underperform, and eventually depart. Conversely, if individuals feel a meaningful fit between their needs and their contribution to the organization, then satisfaction and productivity are more likely to rise. The human resource frame therefore becomes the centerpiece of employee retention programs. Quality assurance efforts, particularly as they are gaining a foothold, are generally viewed as, at best, extra work

added to an already busy schedule. At worst - and quite commonly - they are seen as a needless burden and a nuisance, with little relevance to their perceptions of what constitutes the core mission of the unit (i.e. "I'm a teacher and should only be required to teach"). Therefore, communication and transparency are central to the analysis of the human resource frame. Leadership must be willing to listen and respond to the needs of individuals; if a quality assurance initiative requires additional time and effort from staff, then a time-effort analysis should be conducted to see if staff can be offered something in exchange (e.g. release time, or rotation of responsibilities). Likewise, leadership must implement an effective communications plan for clearly articulating expectations and outcomes. If staff feel left in the dark about projects and practices, then they may not react as desired when their support is truly needed (e.g. during accreditation inspections or at end-of-semester data collection periods).

Thus, for planning purposes, it is advised that a detailed communications plan be designed prior to implementation of the quality assurance effort. This would include frequency of communications, form (short notes, open forum, etc.), and audience (all staff, administrators, etc.). The plan should also include a feedback loop, where staff are made aware that their voices are heard. This is most effective if responses come from unit leadership; i.e. staff feel that their contributions are recognized. A final important note is that staff are people too - they seek appreciation for effort. An organization that effectively operates because of distributed leadership, still needs top positional leaders to publicly recognize effort and success of individuals, teams, or the whole staff.

Reflection: Did the unit succeed in effectively carrying out an accreditation effort? Yes. Could they have done better? Yes. How? As mentioned previously, an analysis of time and effort was conducted of the teaching staff. A 12-person team was identified from those who felt they had the energy to commit one summer (a slow teaching time when teachers have more time to dedicate to projects) to working on responses to standards. While the work was intensive - meeting three times per week for three hours to review drafts - a significant effort was made to establish a low-stress working environment with coffee and food provided at each meeting, and an end-of-summer celebration dinner. This proved an effective approach as it created a team of dedicated, collaborative individuals.

Were there challenges? Yes. Following the summer success, when the unit swung back into an academic working mode, the process slowed. Which was expected, but so did communication. This led to gaps in information transfer, and concerns that the process had ground to a halt. As the accreditation inspection approached toward the end of the academic year, some staff felt out of the loop, which resulted in unnecessary levels of stress. Again, a tighter communications plan and greater transparency would have minimized tension when it was needed least.

### **Conclusion**

Effectively planning a quality assurance effort in a higher education institution is not a simple task. There are numerous competing factors that require attention in order to ensure successful implementation - whether it is establishment of a quality assurance entity or a start-to-finish product such as an accreditation application. In order to minimize complications, we have attempted to make a case for utilizing Bolman and Deal's Four Frames as a set of lens through which leaders may analyze and understand the current situation in their organization, and assess its degree of readiness to embark upon a quality assurance initiative. By viewing the organization through the lens of Structure, Symbols, Politics, and Human Resources, leaders can better understand those areas of leverage as well as those points at which challenges may emerge in the implementation process. Furthermore, we advocate conducting an analysis utilizing the Distributed Leadership framework, which provides a sense of how much or little the staff is working in collaboration to achieve a common vision and goal. In the end, planning is certainly an arduous, time-consuming effort. And, it may result in a delay to the start of an effort so that a stronger foundation may be put in place. Despite exigencies that often come from higher up in the organization to "get it done yesterday," time and effort devoted to careful analysis and planning may prevent an effort from not getting done at all.

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