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The Faculty Developer as Witchdoctor: Envisioning and Creating the Future

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Faculty developers are an interesting group. At POD Network Conferences we see amazing diversity and a sense of commitment, excitement, and willingness to explore a variety of new frontiers. More and more, faculty developers are becoming agents of institutional change, leading the way individually within our respective institutions and collectively as a profession toward “new ways of being” in higher education. These new ways of being involve major shifts in values in our culture from production-oriented, individualistic, competitive, and mechanistic ways of being toward new ways that are based in the humanistic values of relationship, responsibility, and meaning, even movement into what Parker Palmer (1987) has called “the dangerous realm of the spiritual.” These cultural changes call for profound changes in higher education. Many faculty, instructional, and organizational developers are well-placed by position and disposition to facilitate these changes within their institutions.

In this time of transformation, there is a need for visionary leaders. We need the skills of ancient healers like the kahunas of Hawaii, those versatile shamans who could use the power of the word and the power of imagery to facilitate change (Whitcomb & Whitcomb, 1985). The shaman

or “witchdoctor” is a healer whose methods are based in ancient earth-cherishing traditions; he or she treats illness as imbalance or lack of harmony within the person, within relationships, or with the larger world of spiritual forces (Doore, 1988). In order to address the current “disease” within the academy, we need faculty development leaders who, like witchdoctors, can act as healers and problem solvers. We need faculty developers who, like witchdoctors, can see the larger picture, who can support individuals while working to create and maintain balance and harmony in the community within the context of cultural change.

We invite you to consider four cultural transitions which have the potential to bring a deeper sense of meaning and a more balanced way of functioning within academe. These include the following: the transition from production toward personal meaning, the transition from individualism toward interconnectedness, the transition from centralization toward community and personal responsibility, and the transition from science toward spirituality.

From Production Toward Personal Meaning

The movement from a focus on achievement and production toward a focus on personal meaning appears everywhere in our society, particularly in a growing awareness of issues of human development, personal growth, and quality of life. Today is a heyday for psychotherapy, for self-help books and support groups, and for other systems which offer the promise of a more satisfying life. This trend is reflected on campuses in the application of adult developmental theory to models of faculty career patterns and personal growth (Mann, 1987). Faculty developers have come to respect the crisis of midlife as an opportunity for growth (Boice, 1986). As the demands for academic production are satisfied and professional identity is established, many midlife faculty find higher order needs emerging, such as the search for meaning and purpose (Sanford, 1980).

It is important that faculty developers continue to provide support for the traditional professional skills of teaching and research. At the same time, we must seek to meet the needs of those faculty members who are ready to move beyond “proving themselves.” As the witchdoctor assists the individual to look within the self for knowledge that will restore balance, so the faculty developer can begin to create for faculty members a milieu of support for self-reflection and individuation. Career counseling, wellness programming, and faculty exchange programs are some of the ways we have begun to address these needs. In the future, we will be called to help create learning experiences, faculty retreats, and other

opportunities to help faculty balance and integrate their personal and professional lives. The values which will shape the university of the future will depend less on our modes of production and more on our conception of what it means to be human.

From Individualism Toward Interconnectedness

Our culture is shifting away from its obsession with individualism and personal gain toward an awareness of our interconnectedness with each other and with our environment. M.C. Richards (1973) calls this a “hunger deep in people for coming into relationship.” The conflict between our fierce, competitive individualism and our need for community may be the most urgent moral dilemma of our society (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985). Increased awareness of our interdependence with other human beings leads ultimately to an ecological perspective. For the witchdoctor, all things are alive, and life is sacred. Faculty development witchdoctors are beginning to glimpse a vision of the academy as a living, organic system in which each component is vital, and diversity is necessary for survival and growth. Alexander Astin (1987) suggests that cooperation and teamwork, as complements or alternatives to competition, are the essential ingredients to reform in higher education.

While continuing to support the individual accomplishments of faculty members, faculty developers are now beginning to promote interdisciplinary collaboration, conflict management, team teaching, and an appreciation of the context of the university as a human community. Just as the witchdoctor works as a mediator and community builder within the tribe, we can take leadership in making academe a place in which both individual and collective efforts are enhanced by an environment of mutual support and respect.

From Centralization Toward Community and Personal Responsibility

John Naisbitt (1982) observes several shifts which are occurring in our society—from institutional help to self-help, from representative government to participatory government, from hierarchical structures to networking systems. The new leader, he says, will be a facilitator (a witchdoctor rather than a “chief”). Empowerment, honesty, trust, responsibility, communication, and consensus will become the hallmarks of community (Morrow & Hawxhurst, 1988).

In universities, hierarchies—the structural manifestations of patriarchy (French, 1985)—have reached the limits of their usefulness. Individual autonomy and personal responsibility are now recognized as important faculty needs to be respected and supported in universities of the future (Hageseth & Atkins, 1988).

Just as the witchdoctor is often called upon to balance individual needs with the welfare of the tribe as a whole, the faculty developer is called upon to help balance personal responsibility with participation in collective decision-making. Faculty development of the future will involve collaborative efforts to empower faculty working in academic governance and leaders within academic departments to shape the new structures of the academy.

From Science Toward Spirituality

The fourth trend pervades each of the other three. Our culture is undergoing profound changes in the perceptions and values that shape our reality (Capra, 1982; Ferguson, 1980; French, 1985; Leonard, 1972). According to Thomas Kuhn (1962), a paradigm shift occurs when our methods of posing questions and finding answers no longer suffice to address the meaningful questions of the time. A number of scientists, social scientists, and philosophers observe that we are in the midst of such a shift. Naisbitt (1982) describes this period as a “time of parenthesis,” a time between eras. We have not quite given up the past—the centralized, industrialized, economically self-contained society in which we built hierarchies and approached problems with an eye toward high-tech, short-term solutions—but we have yet to fully embrace a future in which the preservation and enhancement of life on earth becomes the ultimate value. Such a future will be characterized by responsible technology, cultural exchange, a prizing of diversity, and a long-term global perspective.

According to physicist Fritjof Capra (1982), our old perceptions and values have included the belief in the scientific method as the only valid approach to knowledge, the view of the universe as a mechanical system reducible to its material parts, the view of life in society as a competitive struggle, and the belief in unlimited material progress through economic and technological growth. During the past several decades, these values have proven to be inadequate. Our contemporary social problems and the progressive destruction of our natural environment are reflections of our collective shortness of vision. The role of the modern witchdoctor is to reassert a value system based on the sacredness of life and the intercon-

nectedness of all things, a value system which gives purpose to our existence and which provides a humanistic system of ethics to guide the use of our powerful technologies. We in the academy have a responsibility to help balance mechanical, rationalistic, reductionistic ways of thinking with the witchdoctor's more intuitive, wholistic, and integrative views.

Conclusion

Higher education, like our culture, suffers from narrow perceptions of reality and loss of meaning. If we as faculty developers are to play a significant role in institutional change, we must recognize that, like the witchdoctor, our work is a calling. We are called to assert a visionary perspective, to rekindle the passionate pursuit of truth, and to celebrate the nobility of teaching in the important work of creating the new culture.

As faculty developers, our goal becomes the creation of an academic community which nurtures the development of mature, caring human beings able to achieve deep satisfaction in life and capable of full participation in a society which can meet the challenges of the future. We, as faculty development witchdoctors, must use our own particular brand of magic to create an environment of harmony within our universities where individual differences are prized and respected, where human beings nurture and care for each other, and where learning and the pursuit of truth can flourish.

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