Optimizing Shared Governance

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Athens State University (ATSU) is a public, upper-level, two-year university in Athens, Alabama. Athens State has been producing graduates since 1822. ATSU became an autonomous university in 2012 and continues to evolve the policy structure while preparing to address the many challenges of the higher education industry. To that end, the institution identified decision rights and communication in shared governance as ongoing issues and now anticipates that the completed research will provide a change management plan to revise the process and improve the ability of the organization to pursue its mission.

Significance and Purpose of the Study

Universities are struggling with increased demands for inclusion and accountability, threats to the sustainability of the financial model, changes in faculty composition, and changing student demographics. Navigating these challenges requires aligning efforts that typically occur through shared governance (Bahls, 2014). Shared governance is a long-valued essential university practice of including key stakeholders in decisions based on the stakeholder role and elements of the decision. Boards, administrations, and faculty can sophisticate their shared governance system to enhance the quality of both daily and difficult decisions (AGB, 2017). Shared governance efforts aim to address complex, boundary-spanning problems that, if ineffective, place the ability of a university to meet its mission in question. The effectiveness of shared governance impacts an institution's capacity to thrive.

Centralizing communication as the focus of the process and practice within the shared governance system can potentially enhance the agility and resiliency of Athens State University in the face of challenges (Norman, 2019; Staggs, 2021). Adapting the shared governance process to reflect the change in focus may potentially support the perceptions of goodwill, transparency, and trust among the key stakeholders and create a culture of a high-performance and engaged workforce (National Institute of Standards and Technology, 2019; Staggs, 2021).

The purpose of this study was to identify how to put into practice a shared governance approach at Athens State University that optimizes the decision-making and communication processes and promotes faculty empowerment and shared decision-making related to policies, procedures, and processes impacting them, the students, other key stakeholders, and the future of the University. Presently, the essential alignment of efforts and mutual understanding of stakeholders' perspectives is missing, causing wasted time and talent and diminished morale. For Athens State to thrive in the rapidly evolving environment of higher education, engagement by all stakeholders and alignment of efforts toward the mission is critically needed.

Research Question

The lack of faculty involvement and representation of faculty voice in critical institutional decision-making impedes full achievement and sustainment of appropriately shared responsibility and cooperative action per the Statement on Shared Governance[1] at Athens State University. This study aimed to improve this

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[1] Athens State University. (2014). *Statement on shared governance.* http://www.athensstate.net/pdfs/about/Athens-State-Shared-Governance-Statement-approved.pdf

situation and used the following research question as a guide:

> What communication and decision-making processes best ensure full achievement and sustainment of appropriately shared responsibility and cooperative action at Athens State University, as defined in the formal Statement on Shared Governance?

Data Collection and Methodology

A comprehensive literature review provided insights into best practices, the results of worst practices, and frameworks to approach shared governance decision-making and communication. The answers to the guiding questions laid the conceptual foundation to create a unique, multiple-perspective case study of shared governance of ATSU, including a shared governance document audit and self-search heuristic inquiry (Sela-Smith, 2002). Along with the analysis of the audit data and heuristic inquiry, the Nadler-Tushman congruence model (Nadler & Tushman, 1980) was used to support the recognition and choice of the test solution; the Virtuous Business Model (Brooker & Boyce, 2017) was also considered in the selection of the test solution.

Recommended and Selected Solution

Four potential solutions were identified from the analysis of the research: (a) development of a communication plan for shared governance, (b) the creation of a shared governance decision-making framework, (c) revision of existing documents, and (d) identification of a shared governance taxonomy. After evaluating the four potential solutions based on rating each by the ease of implementation, value in answering the overarching question, and contribution to creating social capital, creating a communication plan ranked highest and was selected as the test solution. Developing a communication plan was the best choice to answer the overarching research question because of the positive impact on social capital. The partner organization authorized development of a shared governance communication plan as the test solution. Representatives of Athens State unanimously agreed that creating a plan was the best choice because of the positive impact it would have on the relationships among stakeholders. Such a plan will signal that the organization values each person and their voices matter in the effort to achieve the University's mission.

Limitations and Generalizability

Generalizability is one limitation of the findings. The project involved the study of one two-year, upper-level university in Athens, Alabama. While the results may not be generalizable to the higher education industry, the results can inform efforts to improve the effectiveness of shared governance. This study can guide practitioners and scholars in methods to research shared governance. In addition, there is an inherent limitation in the need to rely on everyone involved in the change management plan to have genuine open-mindedness, flexibility, and commitment to a well-communicated shared governance ideal.

Change Management Plan

The Nadler-Tushman model (Nadler & Tushman, 1980) situated the change management plan within the organization's context and illustrates the impact of the successful change, as shown in Figure 1. The heuristic self-search inquiry (Sela-Smith, 2002) contributed to implementing the change management plan, as the results are framed within the history and context of the organization that will further shape plan implementation. Inclusion of the Virtuous Business Model (Brooker & Boyce, 2017) impacted the entire change management plan, which will be used to implement the shared governance communication plan. Successful implementation will support social capital generation as all stakeholders determine to be sincere about and supportive of the value of one another. Also, shared governance is part of organization service, and implementing the plan is a service to the participants.

Focusing on communication is a different paradigm for optimizing shared governance. Shared governance is a commonly accepted approach to university decision-making, although the practice and the viewpoints

on its intent vary greatly (Bahls, 2014). Successfully achieving the university mission requires good decisions through effective, shared governance. Frequent, intentional, open, candid, authentic, and multidirectional communication is well-recognized as central to the entire endeavor of collaboration yet frequently undervalued in shared governance (Bahls, 2014; Boyer, 2016; Cipriano & Buller, 2017; Deemer, 2017; Rous & Shin, 2017; Sheffer et al., 2022; Staggs, 2021; Teibel, 2016; Tierney & Minor, 2004). Athens State University trustees, administration, faculty, and staff have struggled with communication problems in shared governance. Shared governance that works requires a culture of transparency that promotes trust based on mutual respect and effective communication that supports employee morale, satisfaction, engagement, and shared understanding (Glick & Licata, 2020; National Institute of Standards and Technology, 2019), which is the goal of creating and implementing a shared governance communication plan.
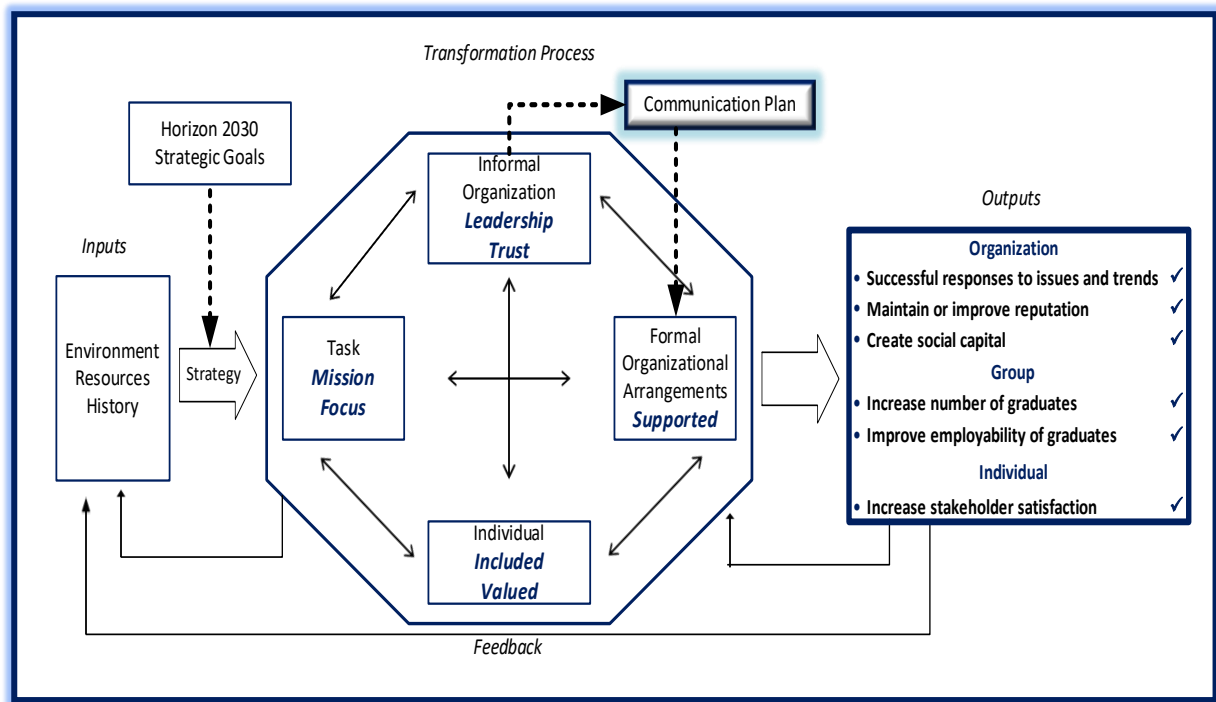

Figure 1. *Nadler-Tushman Congruence Model-Adapted.* From "A model for diagnosing organizational behavior, by D. A. Nadler & M. L. Tushman, 1980, *Organizational Dynamics, 9*(2), p. 47. https://doi.org/10.1016/0090-2616(80)90039-X *Note:* Copyright 1980 by Elsevier. Model adapted to show potential solution input, expected outputs, and the impact on components of the transformation process by improving fit.

A comprehensive change management plan was developed to implement the selected solution. Using the ADKAR model (Prosci, n.d.) for creating change, the plan included an overview, purpose, and a compelling vision. Creating a shared governance communication council, an action plan, scenario planning, a timeline, and an implementation communication plan were also included. The implementation timeline covered 67 weeks to accommodate university operations and multiple feedback and adjustment opportunities.

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