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Developing a course for teaching system design

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'As part of the initial implementation process, ensure there is widespread information about the system.'

A well designed and smoothly operating system offers the following benefits to an organisation:

- Minimising the numbers of disputes.
- Constructively managing those that do arise.
- Formalising procedures for achieving enduring resolution of disputes.

The University of Western Sydney Macarthur decided to develop a subject in system design as part of its Graduate Certificate in Dispute Resolution for second semester, 1998. It was challenging to design such a course for students who included company executives, members of tribunals, public servants and other professionals.

The course delivered was a three day intensive with assessment through: a daily personal journal recording individual student's learning each day; attendance at the three day intensive workshop; presentation of a designed system; and a written assignment on a topic in the subject area that students could choose themselves.

For the teaching in the three day intensive, a balance had to be found between theoretical and practical input, 'war stories' and an exercise enabling students to design and present their own systems. The latter was to ensure they integrated the learning as the course progressed.

The theory included the five approaches to resolving disputes, the recognised range of dispute resolution processes, the relevance of four models of group dynamics (Tuckman, Schutz, Hartford and Schwartz), the chaos approach to organisational change (Boyle) and the seven steps in system design discussed below.

Seven steps

The following basic steps are recommended to design a system.

1. Research existing system

Know what is happening now before looking at what can happen in the future. You need to know whether or not there is a system already in place and, if there is, you need to look at what is working well in that system and what is not. Build on what is working well already.

2. Consult

Listen to the views of all the people who will be affected by a new system: what they do want and what they don't, and why. Also assess the organisational culture and its possible role in embedding a new system.

3. Design the system

When designing a new system, use as a framework the widely accepted tiered sequence of processes. This framework starts with the least interventionist processes of negotiation and facilitation and ends with the decisional processes of adjudication and arbitration. It should also include any legal and corporate requirements that bind the organisation.

4. Consult on the designed system

Having designed a prototype, re-consult for feedback on the proposed system. The people who will use it always have practical ideas on how to make it work better.

5. Implement

As part of the initial implementation process, ensure there is widespread information about the system. Training courses and education programs that will give people the knowledge and skills to make the best use of their new system also need to be developed.

6. Evaluate

The designed system should be independently evaluated to ensure it does ➤

➤ meet its objectives. The evaluation needs to be conducted impartially and should be both qualitative and quantitative.

7. On-going support

Encourage the organisation to implement and use on-going support programs for all users of a new dispute management system. Education programs need to be provided for this purpose — with an emphasis on allowing the organisation and its people to take responsibility for the system and its operation.

The course's practical input included statistics on both customer and employee disputes, together with studies on their causes and effects. Also addressed was the cost of disputes to an organisation, both direct and indirect each of which can lead to a loss of productivity and profit. The estimated costs of grievances to an organisation are summarised in the table below.

Long-running disputes can result in people becoming 'whistle blowers'. In one long running dispute it has been estimated that a whistle blower cost the organisation at least $50m.

In one organisation employees listed the human costs of unresolved disputes in their workplace:
- Dispute keeps going
- Ill health
- Escalation of conflict
- Anger
- Affects life out of work
- Frustration
- Depression
- Loss of job/demotion
- Potential law suit
- Flow on effect to fellow officers
- Loss of home
- Dissatisfaction with job
- Alcohol abuse
- Divorce
- Suicide
- Productivity goes down

Having absorbed all that information, students were then exposed to some really informative and humorous 'war stories' [from experienced practitioners].

Then the students spent time working in small groups to develop systems for organisations of their choice. They developed presentation plans to persuade the CEO to support the development of the system and went through the steps of designing their chosen system. As part of their assessment, students had to present their designs in a manner that would convince the board of the organisation to adopt the design.

One very important challenge that students sought to address was how to embed the system in a way that supported change in the organisational culture around disputes and their resolution. As everyone is aware, too often organisations adopt new systems that wither over time. We would be very interested in the Bulletin publishing reports of effective organisational culture change around resolving disputes, as well as reports of lessons learned in trying to effect such change.

The students in the course displayed excellent innovative approaches and synthesised the knowledge given to them in very creative ways. Feedback from students and teachers has been constructive and valuable for the development of both academic and in-house system design courses. ❖

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ESTIMATED DIRECT COSTS OF FORMAL GRIEVANCE	INDIRECT COST OF A FORMAL GRIEVANCE INCLUDE
• At least $60,000 in salaries • At least 167 direct employee work hours	• Immediate disruption to work colleagues • Long-term disruption to work colleagues • Absenteeism • Time spent preparing formal processes • Time spent attending formal processes • Lost business opportunities

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