Change Management Capability: The Missing Link in Marketing Education?

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Abstract

Contemporary marketing professionals increasingly need to operate within a complex and fluid environment. This paper considers the challenges presented to marketing education by the changing boundaries of the marketing discipline and the marginalising of the marketing function within organisations. If the marketer’s role is conceptualised as an agent of change within organisations there is a gap in the training, skills and knowledge of marketing graduates (particularly at the postgraduate level) in the area of change management. We conclude that including change management theoretical frameworks within the marketing curriculum would better prepare future marketing professionals for the demands of a complex and constantly changing workplace.

Introduction

Worldwide there is ongoing debate about the performance and relevance of business degrees. The forces of globalisation and the rise of knowledge management (as a key driver of competitive advantage) create an increasingly complex and fluid business environment. These changes in the business environment have triggered debate both within and outside higher education about the capacity and relevance of business schools to prepare graduates for the challenges of dealing with an unpredictable working life (Pfeffer & Fong, 2004; Bennis & O'Toole, 2005).

Business degrees have been criticised for presenting knowledge about specific topic areas without the integration necessary to produce flexibility and a complex problem-solving ability (Walker et al., 1998; Mintzberg, 2004). The traditional focus on knowledge building that assumes unproblematic transfer of knowledge from the university context in which it is learnt to other contexts is increasingly contested (Tennant, 1999). Attaining a specific body of knowledge, it is argued, is less important than developing the ability to learn and to transform knowledge.

Paralleling the discussion on the relevance of business schools has been an ongoing debate about the state and influence of the marketing discipline (Carson, 2000; Bolton, 2005; Wilkie, 2005) and calls for a broader perspective on marketing to help address the contemporary challenges and issues facing the discipline. A common concern is the marginalisation of the marketing function within organisations. While the importance of being customer led and market focussed is widely accepted in organisations, creating customer value is no longer seen as the sole province of the marketing function.

In this paper we bring together a number of contemporary debates about the marketing discipline and business education and weave them together to make the case for an explicit focus on change management as part of a postgraduate marketing curriculum. We argue that change management capability is the missing link between strategy and implementation and should be seen as a necessary inclusion in the repertoire of skills and knowledge of contemporary marketing professionals. Exposing marketing students to theoretical frames that help them to recognise, direct, discuss and implement change within organisation, is one way of assisting future marketing professionals to reclaim some of marketing’s lost ground.
The Marketing Discipline in Transition?

To set the scene for our discussion of changing needs in marketing education we present a brief discussion of some of the debates around the current state of the marketing discipline. Two collections of invited essays from leading marketing academics provide critical insights into the key issues and challenges facing the discipline. “The Sages Speak” (Wilkie, 2005) in the *Journal of Public Policy and Management* had its genesis in unsolicited responses to Wilkie and Moore’s (2003) article “Scholarly Research in Marketing: Exploring the 4 Eras of Thought Development”. From this came the idea of a more formal process to invite comments on the article and observations on past, present and future developments in the discipline.

At about the same time the *Journal of Marketing* invited a range of distinguished scholars to critically examine the field and contribute essays on the challenges, opportunities and imperatives for improving marketing thought and practice. This resulted in a varied collection of essays under the “Marketing Renaissance” title. While predominantly presenting a North American perspective (with the exception of Stephen Brown), the issues raised in both collections of essays share common concerns with ‘future visioning’ by European marketing academics (Carson, 2000).

From these substantial resources, key issues of relevance to this paper are the changing content and boundaries of marketing, the increasingly distributed nature of customer value creation within organisations, and the need for a greater focus on implementation. In introducing the “Renaissance” article Bolton expresses the view that “marketing science and practice are in transition, bringing change to the content and boundaries of the discipline” (Bolton, 2005: 1).

Marketing has become more distributed within organisations. Gummesson (1991) moves beyond the formal marketing department to introduce the notion of the *part-time marketer* with responsibility for customers being shared across, and customer value being created in, all parts of the organisation. Thus the importance of creating and delivering value to customers remains a key priority for organisations; despite the reduced role and stature of marketing in many firms (Brown, 2005).

To help rebuild the relevance and influence of marketing in organisations, marketing scholars need to both broaden their view of what they can contribute to business practice/practitioners (Brown, 2005) and give greater attention to implementation of strategy. In arguing for a reconceptualisation of the marketing field as a business practice and an academic discipline, Webster (2005: 5) highlights the need for greater attention to implementation and the organisations within which this implementation takes place:

> Our understanding of marketing must be embedded in our understanding of organizations, not just markets, and it must focus on issues of implementation, not just strategy formulation.

Implementation continues to be a neglected aspect of marketing scholarship. Discussion of implementation provides a key link back to explicitly fostering change management capabilities in marketing education. In addition to viewing marketers as advocates for the consumer in organisations, we can also conceptualise marketers as change agents. Change management specialists do not only recommend changes; they see to their implementation
The change management literature recognises, and gives prominence to, marketing issues as drivers of change (e.g. Senior & Fleming, 2006; Waddell, Cummings & Worley, 2007). In other words marketing managers act as triggers of change. One of marketing’s key roles within the organisation should be to initiate and help shape the direction of organisational change to ensure that the organisation responds to its market. By viewing marketers as change agents we draw the focus back to the neglected area of implementation. To implement programs effectively, the marketers’ repertoire of skills and knowledge must include a good change management capability. But change management is seldom found in the marketing curriculum.

Managing change requires a particular set of knowledge and skills. To have a change management capability, an organisation needs to have people with the capacity to motivate change, lead change, develop political support for the change, manage the transition, and sustain the momentum for change (Cummings & Worley, 2005). It is the collective skills of the individuals (change agents, marketers, etc) embedded within the organisation that give the organisation its change management capability.

Without this the change effort is likely to fail.

A Marketing Education Response?

Is there a marketing curriculum response required and if so what should it be? There are certain implications for marketing education created if marketers were to view themselves as, and take on the roles of, change agents. If marketing education like marketing practice is dynamic, (Walker, 1998) how should it be evolving to reflect the changing boundaries of the discipline and the role of marketing in organisations? Is the current marketing curriculum changing to satisfy the diverse interests and demands of stakeholders including government, business and students?

Used in a broad sense curriculum is concerned with the question: “What are we educating students for?” The scope and complexity of curriculum is beginning to receive more attention in Australian universities (Hicks, 2006) and worldwide. Barnett (2000: 256) argues that “We need to situate curricula amid the wider social and even global context. The curriculum is likely to be influenced by many factors external to higher education.”

While the term curriculum is commonly associated with schools and other educational institutions, it can also be viewed as a feature of workplace learning. Moore (2006) argues that we need to view curriculum in the workplace as a dynamic process by which members of a social organisation (in this case a workplace or work group) define, organize and use various forms of knowledge. In this sense the workplace curriculum is not a static, immutable body of codified and planned learning. Rather that knowledge emerges, evolves and changes over the course of its use. In a study of knowledge-use by learners in a workplace (Moore, 2006) three major categories were identified: internal features of the organization; personal features of the participants; and features of the external environment. The actual unfolding process of the experienced curriculum, Moore (2006) argues, is a function of the interaction between these three sets of factors.

Most models of change management view organisations as open systems and take into account the same three factors as targets of changes. Internal features of an organisation in terms of its structures, technologies, processes, systems and strategies; the participants in
terms of their job requirements, motivation, performance, skills, knowledge and capabilities; and various features of the external environment as a source of information and resources, a source of restrictions (legal and behavioural), a destination for its goods and services, and its overall level of munificence and/or hostility. By understanding the holistic and systemic nature of the organisation within which they operate, marketers can better deliver customer value.

The question for marketing educators is how to design a curriculum that serves students both in undertaking their degrees and preparing them for professional practice beyond the degree. Examination of how practitioners operate can provide useful indicators for the type of capabilities we should be seeking to develop in our marketing graduates. Marketing practitioners, in common with many other professionals, generally deal with unstructured and ill defined problems in a dynamic and complex environment. What is increasingly demanded is an integration of knowledge, skills, personal qualities and understanding that can be used appropriately and effectively in new and changing circumstances (Stephenson, 2001).

Transfer of learning is more likely to occur where students are prepared for the complexity and ‘wholeness’ of practice (Greeno, 1997). Gummesson (1991: 74) argues that, “Marketing in the future must be presented and taught in a holistic perspective and truly integrated with other functions of the firm”. In addition, greater integration is needed within degrees so that students are forced to integrate rather than compartmentalise their learning from a range of subjects (Walker et al, 1998.) Given that development of knowledge and changes in professional practice occur at such a rapid rate, it has been argued that students need to learn current disciplinary knowledge in a way and with a purpose that develops their capabilities to deal with situations they have not previously encountered (Bowden & Marton, 1998).

Some would argue that flexibility and capacity to adapt to change is best viewed as a generic capability and that it is already a feature of discussion about graduate capabilities. We argue, however, that given the importance of change management capability for marketers, we need to address change management as subject content as well as looking at adaptability to change as a personal disposition. When looking at adaptability to change from a graduate attribute perspective, this is commonly understood as a personal disposition rather than the capacity to implement change at an organisational level. If marketers are to initiate and lead change in organisations they need to have a theoretical basis to inform this work.

Much of the time we forget the frames that mediate our experience. Yet, framing plays an essential role for functioning in the world. “It is only by relating new experiences to similar ones from the past that we can begin to make sense of the world” (MacLachlan & Reid, 1994: 42). Theoretical frames provide students with a resource to reflect on their work practices, challenge their existing frames, and develop new ways of knowing. If marketers are able to see the organisation through a political frame they are better able to influence others to achieve an integrated approach to marketing activities. Similarly an ability to understand the organization from a human resource management frame will enable the marketer to assist in integrating human resource systems such as recruitment, training, job specification and design to facilitate enhanced customer service focus. An understanding of how organisational culture develops and grow would assist the marketer in shaping a company culture that contributes to a strong marketing orientation.

In a complex and fluid business environment these understandings are desirable capabilities as Starkey and Madan (2001: S6-S7) suggest:
Experienced executives are more interested in concepts and ideas that can help them make sense of and deal with the problems they face in their day-to-day work. They are also concerned with how to think about an increasingly complex and dynamic future, which does not conform very closely to the perspectives that inform the average MBA syllabus. They are looking for the concepts behind best practice and are, therefore, more concerned with theory.

What Would Change Management Look Like In a Marketing Curriculum?

In a change management subject the curriculum should focus on developing the skills and knowledge needed by students so they can:

- Understand strategic change.
- Explain how support for change can be mobilised, with particular attention to aspects like exercising political insight and skills, garnering political support for the change, countering resistance to and fostering enthusiasm for the change program.
- Develop an appreciation for the concept of reframing as applied to organisational change and being able to analyse situations from the perspective of different frames.
- Distinguish transitional from transformational change and determine the leadership approach and strategies appropriate for each.
- Derive principles for the management of change and apply these when confronted with a change scenario.

The inclusion of change management in a marketing curriculum provides the missing link needed to equip future marketing professionals with the skills and knowledge needed to facilitate that transition to, and sustain, a marketing orientation. A change management perspective complements traditional marketing roles by enhancing the capacity of marketers to be influential throughout their organizations. Speaking the language of change management allows the marketer to communicate more persuasively across functional areas. This makes the marketer an integrative force providing focus and cohesion across the organization thereby restoring the marketing function as a whole of enterprise activity.

Conclusion

Change management capability provides a mechanism for integrating the distributed nature of the creation of customer value. A change management subject within the marketing curriculum would, we argue, better equip graduates for their professional life by providing theoretical frameworks that assist engagement with the demands of a complex and constantly changing workplace.
References


