Lessons in empowerment: The status quo is the enemy

Colin G. Scanes, Editor-in-Chief

There is an inherent conservatism or resistance to change in many organizations. This is characterized by the saying, “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it,” variably attributed to Bert Lance or proverbs from Texas or Italy or Sweden and probably other places. Respect for the traditions of an organization or loyalty to it should not blind us to the constant need to improve and innovate. Status quo is a Latin phase that means “the state in which” but is commonly used to mean the present state; the phrase has been accepted in the English language since about 1830. There are many apt quotations about status quo: “The status quo is the only solution that cannot be vetoed” (Clark Kerr, president of the University of California) and “Status quo, you know, that is Latin for the mess we’re in” (Ronald Reagan).

It has been said that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing in the same way over and over again and expecting different results. Our language is replete with sayings extolling the status quo: “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it” or “tried and true,” or “it worked well in the past” or “this was good enough for my father or grandfather” or “that’s the way we do it in X university or Y company.”

An equally odious practice is the policy (or embedded practice) that is fixed in concrete allowing no flexibility and no thought. Some universities have travel policies so convoluted that faculty need to use a particular travel agent rather than looking for the cheapest fare on Expedia or other web-based travel agents. In some universities, erecting a new building will take 5 to 6 years from start to finish even when the funds are available. In contrast, private developers can complete a building project in 18 mo or less. What causes the delays and puts up the price? There can be so many steps, each costing the organization’s employees valuable time together with tremendous opportunity costs. Equally, in some institutions, it may take two or more years to develop a new degree program or revise an existing program. Other institutions are so slow to promote that few of the faculty ever reach the career grade of full professor. A university’s senior faculty may view so few faculty members as eligible for the rank of distinguished professor that it becomes an “old boys club.” Similarly, there may be several classes of employees with different roles but only one group receives a high level of respect. What is the result of such bureaucratic systems? For many employees it is to opt out—getting to work at about the right time and leaving as early as possible; the body is there but the heart, soul, commitment, and passion are elsewhere. The response from creative people is to look for ways around the policies, with creativity devoted to getting around the rules or ignoring them and looking for other job opportunities. My advice to young researchers is to assemble a cadre of people who know the system and can help you find ways to make things happen.