

Non-Academic Assessment in the Era of COVID-19: Utilizing Bolman and Deal's Four Frames

By Kadie Hayward Mullins

Amidst unprecedented challenges in the era of COVID-19, using assessment to determine the effectiveness and efficiency of higher education institutions is more important than ever. Striking the delicate balance between compassionately understanding colleagues' capacity to fulfill their duties during a crisis and maintaining high expectations requires careful consideration, forethought, and strategic thinking. Even in the face of this new environment of uncertainty, we made the decision, as a university, to move forward with a plan to assess our non-academic units.

The annual assessment process engages all administrative and student services units across three distinct campuses in a comprehensive analysis of performance and opportunities, assessment planning, and reporting on established benchmarks and metrics. Before the pandemic, the assessment office provided resources to unit leadership, including a webinar, tutorial videos, and a series of print resources such as a platform user guide and navigation tool.

While this foundation of resources and support had been established before the pandemic, the non-academic assessment office directed additional efforts for the assessment process in response to this crisis by leveraging Bolman and Deal's (2013) four frames. This framework is used to lead organizations through change and growth and includes the human resource, symbolic, political, and structural frames. Each frame provides a different lens for how to approach leadership, either for entire systems or the processes within systems. This framework is especially useful in crisis response due to its comprehensive nature and holistic consideration of the complexity of organizational systems (Goswick, 2016). The non-academic assessment office opted for this model due to previous success in leveraging the four frames in prior crisis response and change management scenarios.

The Human Resource Frame

The human resource frame, rooted in care for and support of human needs, emphasizes the importance of communication, especially during a crisis. In addition to engaging in regular and effective communication, providing emotional support is also vital (Bolman & Deal, 2013). As such, all our communications begin with a note of authentic care and connection. For example, each video meeting starts with an opportunity for participants to share how they feel about working from home and how their families are adapting. Following these discussions are reminders about available resources related to employee wellbeing, including links to available counseling services and the University's resource page for working from home.

Establishing this strong foundation of care for our colleagues will potentially improve perceptions of transparency and trust (Byrne, 2014) that make our stakeholders feel a greater commitment to the purpose, process, and benefits of assessment (Bolman & Deal, 2013; Byrne, 2014). Colleagues may also be more likely to candidly share their concerns and reach out for assistance if they feel we care (Bolman & Deal, 2013) because we consistently provide space to connect authentically.

Additionally, we adjusted the nature and frequency of our communications. During the initial weeks of the pandemic transitions, we ceased all planned training and postponed communications regarding deadlines to allow colleagues to focus on their most pressing needs. Once plans for the institution had been clarified and the office team members had time to adjust, we resumed our outreach with an important modification. Rather than impersonal bulk emails, we focused on unit/department-specific communications customized to the team's stage in their assessment process before the pandemic. Though labor-intensive, the return on investment of this personalized communication was clear. These personalized emails saw a 100% read and response rate compared to an average read and response rate of 85% on typical generic communications (i.e., mass emails).

The Symbolic Frame

The symbolic frame is the “storytelling” frame that provides examples of “comfort, reassurance, direction, and hope” (Bolman & Deal, 2013, p. 259). Utilizing the symbolic frame allowed us to cultivate a culture of compassion and commitment surrounding our assessment efforts. We’ve communicated the importance and value of assessment as unit leaders continue to manage their crisis response and plan for an uncertain future by sharing real success stories about their assessment practices both within and outside of our organization. Two units that utilized the assessment process to restructure their team member roles and redefine “success” shared their experience in short three-minute video clips. They expressed the cost savings, the increase in the number of students served, and how the planning process reframed their approach to their unit-level mission. These videos were embedded in the resources website.

The Political Frame

Assessment is highly collaborative, requiring assessment leaders to build strong coalitions, navigate complex terrain, and manage various stakeholder needs and wants. Bolman and Deal’s (2013) political frame considers these facets and utilizes a framework for ethics and organizational politics that empowers individuals; this further emphasizes that caring may yield positive results.

By sharing the department’s vision, expressing an understanding for our colleagues’ position, providing ample support to these colleagues, and sharing our strategy, we are empowering our colleagues to take action and leverage positive politics rooted in ethical leadership (Burns, 1978; Kohlberg, 1973; Maslow, 1954). In providing adapted support and demonstrating legitimate care, we promote accountability and buy-in (Burns, 1978). By asking our administrators to publicly hold their team members accountable, with each Core Leadership Team members ultimately responsible for the participation of those units they supervise, we level the political power they hold (Bolman and Deal, 2013).

We have accomplished cultivating this frame by understanding our colleagues are facing fluctuating work responsibilities, work from home adjustments, and the challenge of balancing work with other responsibilities such as caregiving, parenting young children, and supporting virtual schooling. We demonstrated our understanding of their unique challenges by pivoting the assessment office’s initial plans. We established a new training schedule with a greater variety of time frames to accommodate new scheduling needs. All trainings were recorded and made available within 24 hours. Additional slots at a variety of non-traditional working hours (6 a.m. to 8 p.m.) were also made available, with a promise of scheduling requested appointments within 24 business hours.

The Structural Frame

The structural frame represents the rules, policies, environment, and goals of an organization. This has been reflected by our continued commitment to excellence and the development of the necessary systems, policies, and technological support (Bolman & Deal, 2013). While a strong structural platform existed prior to the pandemic, including the submission platform and robust digital resources, the team has further leveraged technology to connect virtually for live meetings, create additional training resources, and develop a clear commitment to assessment policies and procedures by publishing statements in the digital resource repository and communications platform.

Our commitment has remained clear. Pandemics do not diminish the importance of assessment. This time of unprecedented uncertainty highlights the need to understand what we are doing well, what improvements we can make, and what we need to plan for in the future. For this reason, we have maintained all of our non-academic assessment deadlines and clearly, but compassionately, communicated this expectation. Our policies have been reaffirmed. Furthermore, our support networks have deepened with an emphasis on future-oriented strategic decisions that allow for appropriate adaptability as the dynamics of departments may change in response to COVID impacts.

Tapping into the human resources frame alongside this structural frame, we have also communicated the expectation that many teams may fall short of meeting some or many of their targets for success this year. We aim

to empower teams to transparently report their needs and challenges without concern for retribution or penalty (Bolman & Deal, 2013; Brunner & Oster Maier, 2019).

Conclusion

Utilizing Bolman and Deal's (2013) four frames, we have established a crisis-conscious model to continue quality assessment while giving grace and support to our colleagues. We have adapted our communication strategy as well as training and resource availability. We have leveraged storytelling and maintained our expectations and deadlines to emphasize the importance of assessment. By leveraging Bolman and Deal's (2013) four frames, it has allowed us to balance our colleagues' needs and concerns with our need to continue productive, meaningful assessment work.

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