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**LEADERSHIP AND CHANGE**

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**TRANSFORMING ESWATWINI COLLEGE OF TECHNOLOGY INTO A UNIVERSITY; LESSONS LEARNT**

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

Change is inevitable. All organization have to undergo change at a certain point in time. Most planned change is usually easy to introduce because all the processes to determine if change will improve the organization are made. Contingency plans are made for any anticipated implementation challenges (Cooks-Campbell, 2022). Where skills will be required to be productive after the change, in planned change, people are capacitated way before the change occurs. The process just becomes smooth and we all wait to start reaping some benefits from the change. However, not all change is planned, and even it planning was possible, time usually determines whether to plan or go ahead and jump into the change. Whenever this happens, the change agents usually decide that they will be dealing with challenges as they happen. This essay will discuss the change process and how it should be managed if change should be a success. Lessons will be drawn from a case of Eswatini College of Technology where change was once introduced and whether it was successful or a failure.

## BACKGROUND OF ECOT

Eswatini College of Technology (ECOT) is a technical public college based in the capital city of Eswatini in Mbabane. The 76 years old college was established in 1948 as a trade school offering carpentry and building studies. Over the years, the college grew and introduced many other practical skill-based courses to feed industry and government with skilled labour. In 1967, the college became the Swaziland Industrial Training institute. SITI introduced additional programmes like engineering and machining. In 1974, it became SCOT and offered even more programmes. In 2018, after the pronouncement of his Majesty King Mswati III of the country’s

name, college became ECOT (Eswatini College of Technology, 2022). For this assignment, I will use the acronym SCOT to refer to ECOT.

Figure I Eswatini College of Technology (Eswatini College of Technology﻿, 2021)

One of the challenges I picked when I joined the college, is that the intake per academic year was very low, given that it was the only technical college in the country. Every year, students who qualify for courses are rejected because of space. This was worsened by the fact that a technical college has to limit the number of students accepted because, unlike academic institutions, their intake is guided by the number of machines per student. For example, I worked in the department that also has a hospitality course, where students learnt cooking; the number accepted per three years was 24, since there were only 24 stoves for training, to be used by one group for 3 years.

Another challenge that the college had was that some of its programmes were not accredited for international educational growth of the students. So most students just did the diploma and it was the only qualification they would have because there was no continuity. If students wished to further their studies to degree level, they found themselves having to start over with a university that offers programmes up to degree level.

# 2. UPGRADING INTO A UNIVERSITY

The Ministry of education and training headquarters had meetings with SCOT management to discuss the upgrading of the college into a university through the technical support and leadership of Vaal University of technology based in neighbouring South Africa. The possible objectives of the upgrade was to advance the skills of Emaswati so that industries who want to employ engineers with highest qualifications did not have to scout for these outside the country. Other objective could have been the enrichment of some of SCOT courses, since learning materials are usually advanced and up to date at university level compared to college, worse a public college.

## 2.1. THE AGREEMENT

I honestly do not know what went down in the high-level meetings that initiated this long overdue initiative. All I know is that the Ministry’s top management met and finalised the decision to upgrade the college into a university in partnership with Vaal University, after which the management from SCOT was gradually engaged as part of the implementation process. A good initiative suddenly turned into our worst experience. As lecturers, we had no

clue whatsoever about what was happening. Some information we ended up getting from print media. Even when we raised concerns with our management, they told us they were also trying to adjust to what has happened.

We were concerned about our jobs, what would become of us, since the minimum entry requirement to teach at university was a master’s degree and at the time, we did not have that qualification. In addition, a majority of our colleagues in the highly technical divisions was products of the college, and had no higher qualification than a diploma, what will happen them. Will they be absorbed by the new organization or redeployed? What we heard from the grapevine was that at that point of the transition, we were not going to be affected as lecturers since Vaal will be bringing her own faculty to run the adopted training programs. The initial implementation plan was that Vaal had agreed to provide all learning materials. Vaal also agreed that the university would not absorb all the existing programs at once. It was agreed that that courses would be taken gradually until SCOT was a fully-fledged university. It seemed like something that can be done.

It was soon announced that the change would start in our business administration department, which was very surprising because this was a technical university taking over the college. Why would they want to absorb soft skills first instead of targeting their core foundational courses? Again, the grapevine informed us that the university had done a comprehensive assessment of all departments and found that most departments are very low in terms of university standards, a lot of spadework needed to be done before they could take up those courses. For example, a lot of the training machinery was said to be outdated and needed to be replaced. Some workshops were dilapidated, they needed revamping.

In response to the news that the university was now interested in our very own department, we knew we needed answers to all the questions we had, so that we do not face another surprise that might shock us. In all this, after all these meetings and decisions, no one had called a meeting to engage staff about the looming changes. Instead, by asking some questions about the detailed implementation plan from our own management, we were labelled as being rebellious because we do not want change. Our genuine concerns were treated as symptoms of resistance to change. However, we went ahead a requested a meeting with the change agents at ministry level, to get clarity on what was going on, now that we have become the target “pilot” department. We were told that everything was under control; we have to concentrate of our programs that Vaal was not taking over. The change will be happening in our department, but it will not affect us in any way.

Figure II Resistance in change (FLIMP Studios, 2017)

## 2.2. WHAT WAS IN IT FOR VAAL UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

The South African based university signed a memorandum of understanding with the ministry of training and education. The university chose SCOT programs that will be offered at degree level. These programs will be run physically at the college for the first three years, then in year four (final year), our students will go to South Africa to complete their training, graduate and return home. Government was expected to pay all tuition fees straight to Vaal because they will be bringing materials and lecturers anyway. I am not quite sure what arrangement was made about lodging and meals, because our students stayed at the college fulltime at had all their meals catered for at the college refectory. Government paid the money for this. Let me assume that government paid the college that amount straight to SCOT.

Figure III Vaal University of Technology (Vaal University of Technology, 2020)

# 3. MOMENT OF TRUTH

All this was happening when the college was closed for academic year break. When the college advertised programs, the “degreed” programs were advertised alongside existing programs, and the demand was high, as it was generally since we were the only technical public college (fully funded scholarships). The first programs to run at degree level were (a) Human Resources Management and (b) Tourism. All intake and registration processes were done at college level, but documents were eventually sent to Vaal for further processing. It all seems on track. Registrations were done and we were back, the break was over and our new intake had arrived. However, there was no faculty from Vaal on sight.

Students woke up for days to come for lecturers in the department, but there were no lecturers for their programs. Senior management told us that Vaal was going to take care of everything, but here we were with students wondering around, and we did not know what to do about it. We asked our department head to go and ask SCOT management to tell us what we should tell the students, because what was happening would cause rioting from the students. I remember the response she got from management, they said let us bluff them with some pretence training, until the issue was sorted.

## 3.1. WHERE WAS VAAL?

Where were Vaal lecturers? Where were the teaching materials? We soon learnt that Vaal was not coming over until government had paid all monies due for the academic year. Our government had been paying the college tuition and lodging fees late year in year out, it was a

norm. Students rioted every year for the little allowance they got (Times of Swaziland, 2022), because it was also delayed, sometime by a whole semester (Sukati, 2012). Therefore, at that moment, degree programs were at a standstill because the partner university was waiting for a pay check.



Eventually, government emptied her coffers and paid Vaal University. As if we had not had enough confusion already, there were still no Vaal lecturers to resume lessons. Instead, as lecturers, we were now called individually to meet Vaal officials in the principal’s office to submit your CV, and we were made to pick courses that we would teach in the degree program we were initially told we did not qualify to teach. This came with a lot of work, coordinating programs between SCOT and Vaal. It was a completely new organization and we wondered how we were going to be compensated for what we are negotiated to do. We met again as a department and agreed to continue to engage management on the pay, because we knew that money was paid to Vaal already. Lo and behold, our management refused to arrange extra pay

for us. Another level of chaos began. We asked them to cut us off and go fetch Vaal. We downed tools; the programs came to a standstill. Degree programs were called off to fix some of the unintended consequences of the change (Thornton, Beattie, & Brackett, 2010).

The department closed indefinitely for about six months, too much was at stake. Parliament was questioning how government paid a large sum of money to the university that has not kept a single promise made in the MOU. It was all just confusion.

# 4. WHAT COULD HAVE BEEN DONE DIFFERENTLY

I think following the proper step of introducing the change would have minimised the challenges that were faced. The change was good, it was necessary. There was a high demand for the programs and our students, all else was fine, no one was disputing the idea, but the decision makers and change agents did not do justice in the manner they handled the change. Figure I shows some of the steps that need to be followed in order to realize a smooth transition from the current state to a desired future state. Unfortunately, especially with most government change initiatives, the decision makers are too high a level from the implementers of the change. Whatever decisions they make, they simply use the authority and power they have, with no regard for the practicality of the change at that point of implementation. If large sums of money are involved, you cannot afford to decide without proper feasibility study and proper engagement of all stakeholders that will be affected by the proposed change.

 Figure IV Change management process (Setyanto & Ikhwan, 2019)

## 4.1. SUMMARY OF THE STEPS THAT COULD HAVE BEEN TAKEN TO MAKE CHANGE A SUCCESS

### 4.1.1. Identification

Decision makers were supposed to engage SCOT staff to take a lead in the planning for the change. Only SCOT staff knew programs and knew which programs could be upgraded to degree at the start. They would have defined the scope of the change, in light of the current state. Design the future state in light of Vaal was offering, craft what the results would look like and adopt the concept.

### 4.1.2. Presentation

The next step would have been to detail out how the entire process will flow, in light of the appraisal reports about the state of the technical departments that were found to be out of date and the old machinery and equipment. Implementation phases were going to be designed, to show when each department would be upgraded. This information was going to be shared with

government, in order for her to source the funds for building university level infrastructure and buying new technologies for the technical department in readiness for the transition. All these funds, and the money that Vaal was demanding to absorb SCOT were going to be costed and the right decision made, as to whether we were ready for this change or not.

### 4.1.3. Planning

If funds permitted the exercise to go to implementation, the plan was going to be broken down into clear steps, to be analysed by each department. This would result in a clear action plan of what needs to be done, by who, by when, and how results will be measured to see if all was according to Vaal prerequisites. Since change attracts a lot of resistance, strategies to minimise it were going to be put in place. However, if it was the SCOT staff driving their own change, resistance would be minimal. It was high during the process because even SCOT management was engaged to rubber stamp after the process was already finalized.

### 4.1.4. Evaluation

The next step would be to devise a monitoring and evaluation framework to evaluate milestones against the implementation plan. How far we were from becoming a university of technology. Evaluate whether the programs already running at degree level were running smoothly, so that challenges were dealt with early. Results would be reported to the ministry to support any additional requests that arose during the implementation process. Each activity on the implementation plan will be costed accordingly.

### 4.1.5. Communication

When all was in place, it was time to execute the plan, communication would be key at this point. Project coordinators would make sure that the process flows smoothly. All relevant stakeholders would be informed of the change, the plan would be shared. The goal would be to bring everyone on board, especially those who resisted the change in the beginning. Going forward, the process will be managed and modified where necessary.

# 5. CONCLUSION

Introducing change in an organization should be an interesting and enjoyable experience because, change, planned or unplanned usually has some kind of benefit that comes with it. However, the approaches used to introduce change, especially in public institutions is never transparent, and communication only happens at the strategic level. The people on the ground starts hearing about decisions that will affect their jobs from outsiders or even the media, this is very disturbing. It becomes worse when no one remembered to even to consider them in the new organization that is being created. If not, resistance is a given.

This whole experience changed my life in a positive way. Since we were being side-lined from decision making because we were no longer relevant because the upgrade meant the college needed to hire master’s degree holders. I took this as a sign that I had been comfortable with having a first degree; it was time to do a master’s degree. Since there was no local university offering an MBA, I decided to change programs to major in education. During the sudden halt of operations after the disagreement between staff and management about pay, a similar post was advertised at my current employment and I applied, got the job and moved. I do not know what happened after that. If they got the pay or if Vaal lecturers eventually arrived, or even if the college changed to a university. What I know it that it is still called the Eswatini College of Technology. I am even considering doing my thesis on the topic.

The course has helped me to remember what really goes into a change process, how the involvement of implementers can be a success or failure of a proposed change. I will use my skills at my current employment. In 2020, during COVID-19, a lot of our participants asked if we were considering running some of our programs online. We had talked about it, but nothing concrete was being done on the ground. So in response to the outcry, we tried to brainstorm and collect data on how we can transform our traditional programs into online programs. But again, the decision lied with our management. This time it was our initiative, we were going to be pushing the wagon, but we were met with some resistance at college management level. Even after submitting all the information they needed, and how were planning to finance the project by diverting funds from existing operations, a decision was not done, we eventually dropped everything. On a positive note, we have a new principal now, and he seems to be vibrant and he takes decisions that the previous management never took. We are planning to revive the online learning proposal and see if this time it can go through.

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