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University management: from successful corporate culture to effective university branding

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Abstract

The objective of the article is to define a framework for evaluating the state of the corporate culture at Higher Educational Institution (HEI) after reorganization. Using the case study of Kazan Federal University the research establishes the connection between the academic culture and corporate visual identity of HEI; highlights the need to interweave external brand promises with internal branding efforts not to lose its credibility. The study emphasizes the link between the choice of potential consumers evaluating a complex intangible offering of the university and the degree to which people within organization use the university brand value in their everyday work.

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Keywords: mission; environment; strategy; corporate culture; academic culture; corporate visual identity; internal branding efforts; communication model.

1. Introduction

Kazan (Volga region) Federal University is one of the oldest educational institutions of higher education in the Russian Federation. It has a history of more than 210 years. During all these years it has been at the forefront of scientific developments and educational endeavors both nationally and internationally. It is not only famous for its prominent scientists and outstanding people but also for the high level of professional training and profound scientific research.

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The transformation of higher education system in Russia in recent years has set certain challenges not only to those who are involved in teaching process but also to those who are in charge of university management (Safiullin et.al, 2014). This process is a complex issue and includes not only the transition to Bachelor-Master Degree structure but also the introduction of new Educational Standards of the Third Generation which are based on general-cultural competence and professional competence paradigm (Shaidullin, et.al, 2014).

Being the center of education and science of the Volga region the University is greatly responsible for keeping the status of one of a leading higher education institution in Russia. In accordance with the Decree of the President of the Russian Federation of October 21, 2009, # 1172 “On establishing federal universities in the Northwestern, Privolzhsky, Ural and Far Eastern Federal Districts”, the Development Program of the Federal State Autonomous Educational Institution of Higher Professional Education “Kazan (Volga region) Federal University” for 2010 - 2019 was elaborated. One of the ultimate objectives of this program is to enter the rating of top hundred world's leading universities. To guarantee the realization of these goals University authorities laid a lot of efforts to integrate 24 Institutions and 4 branches into one smoothly and successfully functioning unit. The Program is aimed to improve global competitiveness of the University and to shift from classical educational institution to the research university where entrepreneurial and innovative activities are paramount (<http://kpfu.ru/rector>).

One of the tools that helped University authorities to go through transition period successfully was thoroughly developed corporate culture that served as a framework to hold together all members of the organization.

2. Corporate culture and university branding

2.1. Concept of corporate culture

The concept of culture could be described as a variety of activities, beyond simply getting the job done, which constitute organizational life. These activities include interpersonal relations, principles and values of the company and internal-external images advice to new members. The concept focuses analysis on the processes by which the meanings of organizational events are produced and sustained through communication. Culture serves both as a description of the organization of activities and meanings in organization, its structure, and as a description of the activities by which these meanings come to be produced and shared in organization (Deetz, 1982).

Changing environment and such external factors as demographic, economic and political conditions play significant role in the performance of the HEI, but there are also some factors that arise from within and to gain strength from “the values, processes, and goals held by those most intimately involved in the organization's workings. An organization's culture is reflected in what is done, how it is done, and who is involved in doing it. It concerns decisions, actions, and communication both on an instrumental and a symbolic level” (Tierney, 1998).

The influence of the corporate culture is not limited to the university itself. It occurs at many levels starting from stakeholders and local authorities and including the state authorities. Since these organizations are very different the main purpose of the organizational culture is to be translated in such a way that the emergence and consequences of cultural conflict are kept to a minimum and the development of common goals is enhanced.

According to Tierney (1988) organizational culture encourages practitioners to:

- consider real or potential conflicts not in isolation but on the broad canvas of organizational life;
- recognize structural or operational contradictions that suggest tensions in the organization;
- implement and evaluate everyday decisions with a keen awareness of their role in and influence upon organizational culture;
- understand the symbolic dimensions of ostensibly instrumental decisions and actions; and
- consider why different groups in the organization hold varying perceptions about institutional performance.

A lot of executives believe organizational culture to be an important component of success. If the concept of organizational culture is communicated clearly, managers are given an opportunity to better formulate and solve company's problems to improve its performance. To implement effective strategy within the company managers should understand the structure and components of corporate culture that is its framework. Tierney (1988) defines the essentials of organizational culture in HEI by the following framework: environment, mission, socialization, information, strategy and leadership. The importance of corporate culture has been described as “secret to business

success” (Margolis, 2015). Core principles that are clearly defined and communicated, internal and external alignment, harmony between organization’s core principles and values and the employees’ principles and values provide smooth integration of increasingly sophisticated and complex ways of conceptualizing social reality into sustainable company development.

2.2. University branding

All employees of the organization as mentioned by Gummesson (1987) are its internal customers. Thus, the strategy of building a corporate culture implemented by the university management team needs to consider internal branding opportunities as one of its components since the values communicated externally will lose their credibility if not supported by the staff within an organization (Schiffenbauer, 2001).

A university is a service-oriented organization which exists in an increasingly complex and competitive environment. It not only seeks to tailor its activities to an established domestic and international education market (Hemley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006), but has to implement new governmental policies on “how higher education institution should be run and organized” (Waeraas, Solbakk, 2009).

New models of financing and managing HEI as well as entrepreneurial practices and performance assessment requirements have resulted into transformation of universities, which now seems more like a “stakeholder university” than a “republic of scholars” (Bleiklie and Kogan 2007). If previously all the promotional efforts were focused on developing external branding strategies, due to changing circumstances “service organizations have realized that brand messages conveyed to the employees of the organization are just as important as those sent to customers” (Judson et al, 2009).

In terms of higher education a brand can be defined as “a name, an image, a compelling description of an organization that captures the essence of the value that your college provides” (Fredericks, et al, 2000, p.55). Since a distinct brand simplifies the consumer’s choice, universities took great effort to build brand identity which, according to Lawlor (1998), can be defined as “the essence of how you would like your alumni, perspective students, legislators and the public to perceive your institution” (p.19). But consumers will estimate not only the visual image of the brand but the people who communicate this image. As Berger and Wallingford (1996) have concluded “reputation” and “academics” are the most important factors in selecting the university.

As soon as a university has clearly defined the brand essence, who and what it is, what are its values and characteristics, it should be very exact and orderly in communicating it, so that not only top management is aware of the brand essence but all employees become brand managers and preferably “live the brand” (Ind, 2004).

Branding a university or in other words corporate branding is more complicated than a product branding, as “a corporate brand is intangible” and comprise “attitudes, beliefs and values that may vary consistently” (Waeraas, Solbakk, 2009). Hence the dependence between corporate culture and corporate branding is evident. The latter requires loyalty from the academics and personnel of all levels, as well as consistent and integrated communication model within a university.

Judson, Gorchels and Aurand (2006) state that implementation of internal branding efforts facilitates the process of understanding the brand, taking its ownership by employees and providing “evidence of the brand in their organizational responsibilities”. Here Kazan Federal University has introduced the evidence management approach, “turning employees into living, breathing advertisement of an organization” (Judson, et al., 2006, p.100).

3. Discussion

Within the framework of a presidential decree “On establishing federal universities in the Northwestern, Privolzhsky, Ural and Far Eastern Federal Districts” Kazan (Volga region) Federal University was formed. It incorporated 24 Institutions and 4 branches under the key strategic goal to expand and strengthen academic reputation of the University in the field of scientific research and to provide high level of internationally recognized (valued) educational programs. To guarantee the merger run smoothly and successfully, corporate culture was given the primary importance. It was elaborated based on the following framework: mission, socialization, information and strategy.

The key idea of the University mission is to foster innovative development of the country by improving competitiveness through providing high quality educational process based on research and technological developments. To achieve this goal all employees should implicitly share cultural norms that exist at the University and have a strong belief in its mission as providing sustainable development. Socialization occurs when people interact and communicate with each other. When they speak of their mission they share the same values thus providing the sense of consistency and cohesion across organization. Employees continue broadcasting these values externally when share their work experience with others adding extra power to corporate culture.

The strength of the academic culture is subject to test in the period of instability and under transformation when conflicts are inevitable and tensions could appear. If not carefully nurtured, the result can be devastating and can lead to low morale and personal alienation. The success of the merger and positive trend of Kazan Federal University proved by illustrative indicators is an example of a strong organizational culture brought up excellence and effectiveness.

To promote the achieved results and to continue its forward trajectory to “the Top-100” rating a set of events was conducted by University authorities. They created the climate that inspires and empowers scholars to undertake significant scientific research. Some measures were introduced to implement multidisciplinary approach to academic training to enhance students’ creativity.

The principles used by University management to establish a favourable climate for further development could be organized around five specific areas: recruitment and selection, flexible organizational structures, faculty engagement in decision making process, integration of praxis and education and unified vision of the University as a whole.

The initiatives taken by the University management to build the successful organizational culture, based on cooperation and entrepreneurial spirit, including the mechanisms of change management, as well as the model of effective integrated communication, allowing to inform both personnel and the students about all the transformations that occur in the university, have contributed significantly to building and enhancing the academic reputation of the University as well as its corporate visual identity (Kalenskaya, et.al, 2013).

As a result the university staff is well informed about the strategic goals, supports the approach chosen and communicates these priorities to all stakeholders.

4. Results

The results of implementing the strategy could be observed via analyses of the main changes which have recently taken place in the university environment.

Due to proper motivation, direction and establishment of a separate unit responsible for providing publication support to the staff, the publication activity of the KFU researchers has increased nearly four times from 2010 to 2014, thus leading to the sharp growth of articles in journals indexed by such citation databases as Scopus and ISI Web of Knowledge, followed by the 50% rise in the number of citations. The active participation of KFU employees in the international scientific conferences proves their significant research advancement. At the same time Kazan Federal University is involved in organizing top-rated international conferences and congresses on its premises, and over the next few years their number is going to increase two fold. All these provide evidence of the KFU recognition in the world academic and research environment. Hence the world famous scientists willingly accept the proposals for lecturing and researching in KFU, as well as for being reviewers of journals published by the University.

The support, provided by the University to its staff, led to a significant increase in the academic mobility indicators for both students and faculty, as well as in the number of international and double-degree programs offered for international applicants.

Comfortable education environment provided for international students has resulted in 50 % increase of their share over a year.

Internal changes together with a profound marketing strategy have led to significant transformation of KFU brand image. The University is perceived as an institution with strengthened academic reputation, that is recognized internationally. This is proved by the number of partner agreements signed recently with universities of different countries and by the improved positions of KFU in the world ratings. Over a year the University has enhanced its

position in QS Stars (by 50 positions), in QS University Rankings for BRICS (by 10 positions) and in Ranking Web of Universities (by 400 positions).

Conclusion

The strategy chosen by the University management team to enhance the academic reputation of Kazan Federal University in the world educational environment has resulted in significant changes both in organizational culture and in visual image of HEI. Moreover the implemented strategy has a long-term nature and according to the ambitious plans of the strategic task force in 5 years time the research projects will mostly be funded via mega-grants with participation of world leading scholars and nearly 100 world-class laboratories will operate, 150 new post doctoral positions will provide the opportunities to attract young and promising professionals, 50% of academic staff will have international research and management experience, the number of academic programs designed in collaboration with international partner-universities will reach 250 and the number of international students will exceed 15%.

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