

## Positioning Theory and Building Quality into University Services

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### Abstract

This paper calls for a rethink of how Universities can engage in activities that are consistent with their customer expectations. Leveraging the core competency of Universities - Knowledge, the challenge is how can this burgeoning knowledge-based economy be exploited through the provision of academic-related quality service. With the rapidly increasing services sector, usually at the expense of the manufacturing sector, the importance of 'service' as a competitive advantage is increasingly espoused. It is clear that contemporary pressures require university services to be delivered via effective and efficient processes, that have been based on customer needs, from clear specifications, implemented through a robust delivery system, and monitored to ensure conformance to specifications. The services that can emanate from research-based knowledge pool can be leveraged as a means of increasing the revenue of Universities. This is particularly true today, where there is increasing competition for government-funded student places and a looming threat of training services provided by the private sector. However, the success of this revenue generating strategy is strongly linked to the quality processes underpinning it. Whilst strategic planning can result in clearly stated objectives, the implementation of intentions is often elusive. Implementation of change can be opposed by barriers, that are created by people. It is put forward that barriers can be lowered only through effective discursive practice. This is particularly relevant in universities that are notorious for nurturing 'silos of knowledge'. Positioning Theory will be particularly effective in these types of organisations.. Positioning Theory provides a way to understand discourse and may offer hints as to how best to lower barriers, thus improve the likelihood of successful implementation of quality in university services.

**Keywords:** *Positioning Theory, Implementation, Service Quality, Knowledge Management, Marketing Strategies, Core Academic Values*

### 1.0 Introduction

Where John (1999) identifies the 'GAP' to be dealt with in order to satisfy expectations, how this 'GAP' is to be resolved remains a challenge. Successful implementation of any change is the greatest challenge of any *new way* and its attainment is elusive in many cases. Building quality into any organisation is often very much a *new way* and its introduction presents a significant challenge.

Whilst all organisations are unique, the introduction of quality into any organisation is very similar. Certainly academics will demand that they are unique and have peculiarities that cause great incongruities with commercial efficiency measures; but people are people and any group is composed of people.

People are the barriers to the implementation of a *new way* (Boxer, 1993). They can be part of a constraining process or bureaucracy, but in the end, it is people's behaviour that must change if a *new way* is to be implemented. Furthermore, it is not people in isolation, but people in community, who engage in discourse that

result in barriers being raised or lowered. Through Positioning Theory, it is possible to understand how people exchange in their discourse.

This report applies draft PhD research conducted by Boxer, here drawing on John (1999) to explore how to build quality into university services, through engaging in effective discursive practice. This will involve drawing on work done with Positioning Theory in general and the specific work of Ling (1998), regarding the use of Positioning Theory to understand how change can be effectively led in academic institutions. The application of Positioning Theory to business situations is new. Whilst it has been previously used in academic and social research, Ling's work especially demonstrates that it can be successfully applied to organisational change issues.

## **2.0 Background to the importance of Service in the University System**

As the systematic reduction in government funding of Universities in Australia continues, so does the impetus for Universities to find ways and means to meet this funding shortfall. John (1999) identified that looking at competencies of Universities and how these competencies can be exploited to generate both government-funded and non-government-sourced income would be an approach to dealing with this challenge.

Whereas John (1999) acknowledges a conflict between the demand for the conjoined principles of process standardisation and fiscal efficiency with an academic's 'individual freedom and solitude' (as defined by Von Humboldt), the obligation of any employee to deliver cost effective service that conforms with requirements must be at the centre of any employment arrangement. This presents a challenge to the building of quality into university services.

## **3.0 Barriers to Implementation of Quality**

Boxer (1993) has identified three key barriers to the implementation of quality. These are discussed in the context of the university below:

### **3.1 Intellectual Laziness**

It is perhaps surprising that even in academia people can be heard saying things like, 'but that is just common sense.' While such a statement might seem appropriate at times, Wilson (1991) explains, 'Intellectual laziness and common sense are the same thing, common sense is just the trade name of the firm.'

### **3.2 Ignorance**

Whereas intellectual laziness seems to be out of place in a university environment, ignorance clearly is outside the scope of academic pursuit. However, simple concepts, that seem beneath people might be ignored by some people. The respected quality guru Philip Crosby has said, 'the problem with quality is not what people do not know about quality; the problem with quality is what people think they know about quality.' (1989)

### **3.3 Poor Leadership**

Whilst there has always been a void of strong leadership in society, the situation may be worse in academia. If there are people who value von Humboldt's 1803 concept of 'individual freedom and solitude' (de Winter-Hebron, 1993) in academia they will likely be hard to lead and if academics are promoted to positions of authority, it is unlikely that they will have developed leadership skills.

Initial research into this area suggests that these barriers could likely be caused by a lack of effective discourse and that through appropriate discourse they could be eliminated.

## **4.0 Positioning Theory**

A relatively recent approach to understanding discursive practices is Positioning Theory (Harré, van Langenhove, 1999), which endeavours to understand people's positions rather than the roles they assume. By doing so, the

dynamics of unfolding storylines and metaphors used to describe situations can unveil what is happening in a given group. A person can assume a position or a position can be imposed on that person. Likewise, a person can challenge the position assumed by another, or challenge the position imposed upon themselves. While discourse produces position, it is the resulting position (from the aggregate of jousting) that influences outcomes of discourse. For example, a person seen as an authority (who has positioned themselves, or been positioned by others) can influence the outcome of discourse. The various types of positioning defined by Harré and van Langenhove (1999) are as follows:

	Of Self	Of Others
By Self	<u>Deliberate</u> • Self initiated express personal identity	<u>Deliberate</u> • May or may not be taken up by the other
By Other	<u>Forced</u> • Reply to the question from someone else	<u>Forced</u> • Must be taken up by the other

Positioning occurs through discourse; it is not a process that functions in isolation or through a monologue. Whilst a first order positioning may be done without the involvement of the person being positioned, the reaction to first order positioning may result in second order (or reflexive) positioning. For example:

Consider this simple conversation, with three possible replies:

Tom begins:

Tom: 'Fred would you please get me a cup of coffee.'

*Here Tom is positioning (first order) Fred as someone who he can ask to get coffee.*

Fred replies with the following options:

Fred1: Says nothing and gets the coffee for Tom

*Here Fred acknowledges that Tom can ask him for coffee ... accepting the positioning that he is obliged to get Tom coffee whenever asked to do so.*

Fred2: 'Get stuffed ... get your own coffee.'

*Here Fred engages in second order positioning ... challenging the positioning.*

Fred3: 'OK, your shout next time.'

*Here Fred acknowledges that Tom can ask him for coffee, but may be suggesting that he does not accept the positioning.*

That provides a simple explanation for the purposes of this paper. There are other dimensions or modes of positioning that are used to expand the definition of the discourse. The discursive practice of an organisation will determine what happens with new ideas or issues that are raised from time to time. It is likely that positioning theory holds the key for effective implementation of any sort of change and it is with this in mind that positioning theory is introduced into this discussion.

Let us look at the three general classes of barriers that were identified earlier.

#### 4.1 Intellectual Laziness

What happens when people are intellectually lazy? They tend to say things like, "awe, that is just commonsense". Then they proceed to do nothing. When someone suggests that a proposal or idea is common sense, they are positioning themselves as part of a blockade to the *new way*. Sitting with their arms crossed and a stern look on their face, they emulate 'a "naval blockade", with (their) "big guns trained" on the (new way.)' (Ling, 1998, p75)

Intellectual laziness might seem like a passive form of resistance, but it creates a confrontation for the initiator of the change. They are in effect being positioned as someone of less authority and capability. Unless the initiator of change deals with that position and demonstrates that they are indeed in a position with more authority and

capability to affect a change, the *new way* will be doomed. The person with the new idea needs ‘... to position (themselves) as a liberating agent (focussing) on the differing needs of individual(s) ...’ (Ling, 1998, p74)

#### **4.2 Ignorance**

Whilst laziness is something that a person can influence, their ignorance might be more likely a result of situations beyond their control. For example, people may not have had opportunities to experience what other have, or perhaps they are just plain stupid and incapable of a necessary level of enlightenment.

In the case of external or statutory requirements such as government imposed curriculum standards or ISO9000 requirements for quality management systems, people are often simply unaware that these standards exist; and in some cases they cannot distil the meaning from the published standards. Often such standards are critical to the continuity of the organisation and people are simply unaware. In these cases, change agents are sometimes placed ‘... in the “firing line” between conservative administrators opposing (essential) changes ... and those who support them.’ Ling, 1998, p74) Interesting situations develop, in which inner circles are established to maintain the status quo. Those within are conferred with a position to authorise how things happen and those without these *sactum sanctorum* are effectively impotent. Whilst privy councils have their place to discuss private issues in private, their use to establish and legitimise systematic bullying sustains ignorance and prevents cures from occurring.

In cases of both introduction of government legislated curriculum requirements and customer imposed quality standards, persistence forced repositioning is essential. Unfortunately, this forcefulness results in the instigator being ‘... positioned by others as a “barbarian at the gate.” ’ (Ling, 1998, p76)

Dealing with ignorance, as discussed here, seems to be best done by deliberative repositioning, but with great stealth. The tactics used by forward scouts in battle appear to be handy in this situation. (Ling, 1998, p76)

#### **4.3 Poor Leadership**

Laziness and ignorance may well be hallmarks of lifestyle in a declining society. (Gibbon, Womersley, 1996) Furthermore, leaders might be both victims and influences on that state. (Pultarch, Warner, 1954) From their study involving Australia’s top CEOs, Sarros and Butchatsky (1996) have summarised company weaknesses (p124) and leadership skills and attributes (p266) needed to deal with those weaknesses. Quality of employees and response to new ideas are two of the weaknesses identified, which seem to be congruent with laziness and ignorance. Sarros and Butchatsky conclude that leaders will counter this laziness and ignorance through setting directions, devising enabling plans, mentoring, challenging, and seeing through to completion. Dealing with the various conflicts that arise when *new ways* are being introduced requires this sort of strong leadership. That leadership is not only required from top managers, but those throughout the organisation.

Here is a rhetorical question: how often does a system install into a position of leadership and authority someone whose capabilities do not warrant the conferment? It is likely prudent not to publicise such a contentious statement, but there are certainly plenty of examples that come to mind. In short, it may be fair to say that there are cases where people have been promoted beyond their ability to perform.

In discussing positioning, discourse becomes a central factor. Discourse might well be the mechanism for enacting leadership; it is the means of positioning (Harré, von Langenhove, 1999.) At all levels in an organisation there is a continuous exchange and negotiation of positions. People joust with each other to determine ‘who is who in the zoo.’ Those who come out on top are those who ‘get things done’ their way. Whilst this is a simplistic and common way of looking at discourse it is perhaps an accurate reflection of what goes on.

It is put forth here that strong leaders engage in good deliberation regarding those issues at hand and position themselves and others as required to accomplish goals.

### **5.0 DO IT**

Quality is about ‘doing it’. (Boxer, 1992) Doing it requires a sense of urgency and an intuition that the instigator of change needs to lead the change; dealing with the various lazy, ignorant and ineffective obstructors. Instigators of change need to be enablers; they have to enable people to do *new ways*. Doing it will result in plenty of jousting; people will position themselves and others, they will be positioned by others, and they and others will likely engage in second order positioning. Eventually things will settle down to a state where positions have been accepted; but positioning is dynamic ... it can all change given appropriate stimulation. The effective building of quality into university services will be led. The leader will ensure they have positioned themselves and others to best accomplish this construction. The following cases are put forth to demonstrate this.

### **5.1 Dealing With Forced Positioning**

Dealing with the laziness and ignorance opposing *new ways* can be accomplished by being a catalyst, but the hurdle of the leader’s vanity is paramount. Bob is a fictitious hybrid vignette of several similar people who do this well. When faced with problems, Bob gets those together and initiates a discussion, which tends to result in a tentative solution. He then assembles a proposal and submits it to his boss. His resilient response to grammatical and technical criticism of his proposal enables his boss to be involved in the process. The resolution is focussed on the compliance with protocol rather than the issues and the proposed changes tend to be accepted. His boss saves face and the solution is implemented.

Forced positioning does not need to be counter positioned. A change agent in some ways needs to be a martyr of sorts; acting as a scape-goat for the inadequacies of those simply in roles, rather than having endured and achieved position themselves. Having said that, when it is appropriate good change agents will fight against institutional positioning, by engaging in second order positioning. This is the fine balance of parity and power dealt with by Ling (1998.)

### **5.2 Using Forced Positioning**

Just as others can oppose *new ways* through forced positioning, the change agent can achieve the status of leader of those who need to be changed. Sue is created to present a second hybrid vignette, to demonstrate how a strong leader can take control and drive changes through.

Sue has taken the time to understand the problems faced by key people. As such, she is respected and regularly successfully positions herself as authorised to drive through change and positions others as willing participants in the process. As in any leadership position, Sue is careful not to dilute her authority with too much familiarity. However, her relationship enables and enhances her ability to take the upper hand in all discourse and hence position herself and others as appropriate to circumstances. In short, she draws others in and successfully uses deliberative positioning simply through their willing involvement.

On occasion, Sue experiences a lack of discourse reciprocation, which inhibits the positioning process. Revisiting the balance of parity and power reminds Sue that people often are concerned about losing their power, demarcation or other status issue. Effective negotiation of parity and power results in a resolution of that anxiety.

### **5.3 Tripping over Minor Issues**

Bill exemplifies those who obstruct their own progress towards the *new way* through ineffective positioning. An effective change agent realises that there is an obligation to fall on one’s sword from time-to-time. Typically, change agents are out of the line-management and tend to take on staff roles. Line managers habitually position themselves with authority. Challenging that can be simply counterproductive.

Bill sees red and goes for the jugular. When he is confronted by a manager, who engages in forced positioning, to keep the change agent in their place, Bill leaps into second order positioning mode and creates a hostile environment. Enabling others to retain dignity – especially line managers – contributes greatly to the grander scale of the change to a *new way*. Furthermore, a strong manager who is used to the freedom of forced positioning will react negatively to second order positioning and will likely win any joust with a lesser opponent. A clever change agent perhaps should not include opponent in their vocabulary.

### **5.4 Meek and mild Permission Seeking**

The fictitious Tony provides a character for this hybrid vignette to demonstrate an ingratiating subservient approach. Through deliberative positioning, Tony involves others whenever crucial issues are considered.

Compliance of departmental managers is negotiated to ensure that they support the idea and that there is authority to deal with their staff. With this, Tony has authority to direct staff and force positioning to implement changes in teaching. Whilst he starts out meek and mild, the conferred authority enables Tony to carry on with certainty that he is in control; the question of second order positioning is not a question.

This may be exemplified through the system of appointed ranks in the military. A sergeant is positioned by virtue of the three stripes on his arm. A recruit is free to attempt second order positioning, but the resulting positioning will be predictable, repeatable and reliable. Until a soldier has been 'given permission' to wear the rank of a sergeant, they carry no formal authority. The instant they are wearing the rank badge they are positioned (forced) as a sergeant and expected to perform in a certain way. However, prior to attaining that rank (apart from merit and qualification) a soldier will be on their best behaviour; they are engaged in meek and mild permission seeking. The transformation can be quite remarkable, albeit subtle.

One might well ask how this differs from role.

## **6.0 Conclusion**

Universities will survive if they match the expectations of the wider community for effective and efficient utilization of resources. However, there requires a significant change in philosophy; the adoption of a *new way*. *New ways* do not just happen. They require leadership and conscious effort to learn something new; facilitation or mediation enables change from the old way to the *new way*.

Positioning Theory offers a way to understand the difficulties encountered in the change facilitation process. It demonstrates that people have to encounter their interpersonal shortfalls before they can move to a *new way*. The introduction of quality into a university is most certainly the introduction of a *new way* into a very stoic and staid environment. The positions adopted by people and imposed on others, and the various jousts that take place to alter these adopted and imposed positions can have a strong impact on the success or failure of the introduction of quality into university services. The challenge is not so much to build quality into individual roles, but to work with people to best position themselves to lead and work with the *new ways* that quality processes demand. Positioning theory explains the phenomenon and provides answers as to how best to deal with the challenges of implementing the quality *new way*.

There is clearly an opportunity for some meaningful research to be conducted within universities into how positioning theory can explain successful and unsuccessful change.

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