MANAGERIAL ROLES OF DIRECTORS OF COMMUNITY COLLEGES IN NORTHEASTERN THAILAND IN SUPPORTING AND CREATING VOCATIONAL NETWORKS IN COMMUNITIES

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Abstract

Thailand has approximately 63.4 million population as of 2009. The northeastern part of Thailand occupies the largest land area of Thailand with approximately 21.2 million population which is nearly one third of the total population of Thailand. Many people, especially the youngsters, fled from the area because of the arid land and poor economy to struggle for jobs in other parts of Thailand and send money back to support the elders and young children they left behind. This situation breaks thousands of families apart. Hence, this region is the largest pool of labor to businesses and factories throughout the country. The downward trend of the current economic condition results in shrinkage of many industries. A large percent of labor force is laid off and have no choice but to return to their home towns where there are limited job. They need to develop self-employed careers for living. These workforces need training for such purpose. The Thai government has established community colleges to provide knowledge and training with the emphasis on the development of vocations for people in local communities. These community colleges have an important role in providing short courses to offer knowledge in developing professions. The aim of this research project was to investigate the role of directors in community colleges in supporting and creating vocations' networks within and among communities. In-depth interviews were conducted with directors of community colleges in northeastern part of Thailand together with administrators of vocational programs as well as leaders in communities. Data were content analyzed and inductively interpreted. Results suggested that communities are keen in building networks with other communities but they need community colleges' assistance in linking to organizations.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The Institute for Population and Social Research of Mahidol University (2009) reported that the total population of Thailand as of 2009 was estimated at 63.4 million. Out of this, northeastern region housed the largest number of population, 21.2m compared to 6.7m in Bangkok, 15.3m in the central, 11.7m in the northern, and 8.4m in the southern regions. The northeastern region of Thailand consists of nineteen provinces which covers one third of the area of Thailand. The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency's world factbook (2009) reported that Thailand's GDP per capita was USD 8,500 in the year 2008 (U.S. Department of State, 2009). The northeastern region occupies the largest land area but has the lowest income among all regions (Bank of Thailand, 2009; National Statistical Office, 2009; Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, 2009). Many people, especially the youngsters, have to migrate from the area because of the arid land and poor economy to struggle for employment in other parts of Thailand and send money back to support the elders and young children left behind. Poverty has broken thousands of families apart.

Community College

To cope with poverty and unemployment situations in the rural areas, the government initiated 10 community colleges around the country to distribute aid and introduce vocational training courses through several agencies. At present, there are 20 commu-

nity colleges in all regions of Thailand. By definition, community colleges are higher education institutions that manage learning and offer certificates and diplomas to adults, to offer formal degree education and vocational training for the needy. The latter purposes coincide with the community colleges founded in other countries. For example, according to Holzer & Lerman (2007), community colleges in the US play important part in training workers for business. In Thailand, the objective of vocational training courses is to assist local people to learn skills to start their own vocations and become entrepreneurs.

The community colleges are governed by the Bureau of Community College Administration. Each college appoints a board of trustees composing of academicians and community members. The role of the college is to analyze vocational needs in the local area and create courses to satisfy those needs. Most participants requested for courses that teach skills to make handicraft products and services. Many participants earn their living through selling of handicraft products and they want knowledge to produce other products so they request the college to organize courses for them. Participants form a group of approximately 20 people and request the college to open vocational courses they need. Some participants become trainers for other communities. They have the same vocations and make similar products, hence, it is very likely that they form networks among themselves. The objective of this research project was to examine the role of community college in supporting and creating vocational networks among members in communities (Bureau of Community College Administration, 2008).

The target group was adults who incorporate their personal goals and vocational proficiency in their learning (Kegan, 1994). It is important that the planning of adult education should incorporate more direct and practical vocational knowledge rather than only theories. Training programs are flexible and adapted to each locality's needs. Community colleges were established on the belief that everybody has potential and should receive proper guidance to unleash these potentials. The focus of education was on practical knowledge so that people could build their vocations (Nong Bua Lampoo Community College, 2008).

History

The first community college in Thailand was established in 1977 in the Phuket campus of the Prince of Songkla University. The college was reverted back to the university in 1984 as the result of the educational reform during the period. In 1994, 77 specific-purpose educational institutions throughout Thailand such as agricultural college (governed by the Ministry of Agriculture), art college (governed by the Ministry of Culture), and other colleges were combined under the umbrella of community college authority. Again, the process failed and the schools were returned to the original authorities in 1996. That ended the early attempt to establish community college in Thailand (Bureau of Community College Administration, 2008).

In the year 2002, the Thai government revived the community college idea and established 10 colleges in all regions of Thailand. By the year 2009, 19 community colleges were established; four of these were in the northeastern region i.e., Burirum, Mukdaharn, Nongbua Lampoo, Yasothorn (Bureau of Community College Administration, 2008). The aims of community colleges were to provide low cost education to assist poor people in local communities to start their own occupations and provide formal degree for those who lacked opportunity to study in the childhood. Community members' opinions are surveyed in order to plan for curriculum and design appropriate teaching programs. The participation could lead to innovation and proper utilization of the community's potentials (White, Nair, & Ascroft, 1994). One of the strategies of community college was to create network with members in the community, i.e., business organizations and other government authorities such as the Local Development Authority, The Irrigation Authority, and others to find assistance in facilitating the participants' vocations.

Managerial Roles & Responsibility

Managers have to following roles and responsibilities (Bateman & Snell, 2009; Kreitner & Kinicki, 2004; Robbins & Coulter, 2009; William, 2006):

1. Plan for mission, vision, objectives, goals

and activities of organizations.

2. Organize people and organizational structure including staffing and selecting people to perform tasks in organization as well as career development plan.
3. Direct, coordinate, and motivate subordinates towards organizational goals.
4. Control and supervise activities of subordinates.

In addition, managers need to have the following skills:

1. Technical skill. This skill is related to the way to perform tasks.
2. Interpersonal skill. This is the skill managers to deal with people.
3. Conceptual skill. This is the skill to see the overall picture and understand the relationship among elements of organizations.

A manager needs to provide satisfaction to employees by putting priority on health, safety and cleanliness issues. A satisfied employee will satisfy customers by giving good quality of service or product and take care of their needs. Moreover, a manager needs to keep updated on new and different methods and technologies. As a result, he/she will be able to become the agent of positive change to the organization and thereby improve overall efficiency.

To conclude, a manager has to become an exemplary role model (Shanley, 2007). Great leaders or managers set high standards and show subordinates that they can attain those standards by examples.

Networking

King Rama IX of Thailand had introduced the sufficiency theory that promotes self-contentment and the creation of networks among members in and among communities. The sufficiency network could create strength for Thailand and help to reduce the vulnerability of dependency upon other economies (Subcommittee on Sufficiency Economy, 2005).

A network is characterized as having several nodes connecting individual and group to each other. Inter-organizational networking can increase competitiveness of organizations and the group (Morris, Bessant & Barnes, 2006). Porter (1998) suggested that a network can be categorized along the value chain into horizontal network among firms in the same level of value chain and vertical network among firms in different level of value chain. Goold & Campbell (1987) reported that Japanese firms normally network with each other to increase their competitive advantages. Exchange of information, or networking, is a popular practice among Japanese companies (Nonaka, 1990). Networking of firms can create clusters of industries which can enhance and create collective strength among members.

Thai society is characterized as a collective society (Hofstede, 2001). Although, the urbanization may drive people to be more individualistic, people in the provinces are still collectivistic. With such characteristic, networking behaviors are likely to occur, especially in less urbanized areas. Iacobucci and Zerrillo (1996) explained that network occur in the individual, dyadic, or group relationship where members connect to others. Individuals are motivated to get into relationship with each other in order to obtain needed resources (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1992). Members within the same community with similar vocations are likely to establish networks with others. Individuals and organizations in a network would exchange information for the common purpose of the network through both formal and informal communication for the benefits of the professions and societal development (Kemm & Close, 1995). Modern businesses need to pool knowledge and expertise from others (Mankin and Cohen, 2003). Clarke (2006) suggested that commitment in the network was an important contributor to overall performance of members in the network. Martin (2009) suggested that interpersonal communication is an important element for entrepreneurial success. Social network among entrepreneurs provides opportunities for social support (Hogg & Adamic, 2004). The communicative and transformational learning approaches for adult learning enhance the intimacy among members and results in strong network.

Johanson and Mattsson (1992) explained two levels in network as the network of exchange relationship and the network of production system. The network of exchange relationship refers to the resource exchange process among members while the

network of production system refers to the collaboration among members for the production of goods and/or services. Members in a network possess something of value and exchange those with each other in a reciprocal manner. Blankenburg et al., (1999) argued that the exchange process would bring about the development of knowledge among members. Trust can be developed along with the exchange (Hallen & Johanson, 2004). The longer the history of exchange, the more solid the trust becomes. The collaboration could combine complementary skills which could enhance the effectiveness and efficiency among network members (Powell et al., 1996). Chiu (2009) supported that network competence resulted in innovation performance.

A developmental network aims to improve career growth and members' learning (Higgins and Kram, 2001; Lankau and Scandura, 2002). This type of network draws relationship from various individuals and groups. Whitely et al. (1991) reported that developmental network played an important role in the enhancement of individual's career advancement.

According to the Subcommittee on Education System Structure and Knowledge Network (1990), network has 4 components:

1. the transfer, exchange and dissemination of modern knowledge and local wisdom to apply and create new knowledge relating to each community.
2. the stimulation of intelligence, spirit to develop the community and participation in community development.
3. the exchange of information relating to developmental projects of private and public sectors to keep members abreast of each other's activities.
4. the co-ordination of resources, materials and equipment, facilities and budgets among various units.

METHODOLOGY

This research was designed as an exploratory research to gain an in-depth understanding of the roles of community colleges in the creation of vocational network among members of communities. The northeastern region of Thailand was selected as the location for this study. There were four community colleges in the region at the time of study.

The researcher applied for approval from the central authority, the Bureau of Community College Administration, to conduct the study. The Bureau approved and gave names and contact numbers of the directors in the four community colleges in the northeastern region. The directors were informed by the Bureau about this study. The researcher made appointments with directors to conduct in-depth interviews with director of each college. In-depth interviews were also performed with personnel who were responsible for the vocational training short-courses in each college. These personnel were the main link between the colleges and community members. They mingled with the locals to study their needs and designed programs to satisfy these needs. Leaders and members in communities were asked to participate in focus group interviews. These participants included leaders of the local administrative authorities, members of the community who were trainers, active members of the communities and local business organizations. Each focus group consisted of 4-6 members. The researcher also visited some groups' businesses such as weaving and homestay groups. Most interviews took place at the meeting room of the community college except one which was performed at one of the community leader's orchard.

Question protocol used with directors included questions relating to curriculum development, curriculum management, assessment, general policies and practices, and roles in creating vocational networks in the community. Particular interest was about their roles in creating or supporting vocational network among members in the communities. Question protocols for community leaders and members included questions relating to degree of participation in curriculum development, needs for advice in vocation and networking, credibility of the community colleges, trust in the community colleges and their collaboration with the colleges. These question protocols were assessed for content and face validity by experts in the Ministry of Education who were knowledgeable about the operations of community colleges before the interviews.

RESULTS

Managerial roles performed by the community college directors in supporting and creating vocational networks in communities are as follows:

1. *Intermediary role between or among other related public & private agencies*

One of the colleges' chairman of the board of trustees said that "*The survival of community colleges lies in the creation of network, without network we can do nothing*". Community colleges were small organizations that did not have many resources. Hence, the director was to become a broker connecting various groups together. In the capacity of an educator, the colleges seek for academic assistance from universities, business assistance from local business organizations, and development assistance from other governmental units such as the Water Authority or Electricity Authority of Thailand. There were courses organized for a local sugar factory to train farmers in sugarcane growing and harvesting, and to train factory workers in sugar production. Participants were both workers and members in the community. In other cases, professors were invited from a university to teach in a college's computer program of study and the graduates could further their study at a university. A director asserted that "*Lay people are not able to gain access to some units, we serve as the links*". Another college had a course for managing home-stay businesses. The college acted as the link to ask for support from the Thailand Tourism Authority for the community.

2. *Analytical role to enhance quality work*

One of the roles performed by the director and other staffs of a community college is frequent visits to nearby community. The proximity to communities makes the colleges prudent in social networks. Personal visits to communities aimed specifically at surveying their needs, so that the community college could effectively fulfill those needs. In addition, the community college may as well build up a good relationship with community members. This social network provides assistance in twofolds; one is in the training need assessment process. The need assessment becomes more accurate. Members in the community can request for courses they really want. Occasionally, the personnel may suggest courses that can benefit community members and discuss with them whether they want those courses. The second advantage is in the recruitment of trainers for courses. Trainers include professors or experts from organizations and local experts depending on the characteristics of each course. Due to limited budget, some trainers could be recruited from experts in locations close to training stations to save transportation costs. Social network helps the college to identify knowledgeable local wise men for this purpose. The result is that these trainers become nodes in the community network that links several groups to each other, a horizontal network.

3. *Supporting role*

Some groups networked long before the colleges came into existence. One community leader said "*We have several active local networks going on for more than 20 years...there is no need for the college to help us in networking*". Some groups offered handicraft training courses by themselves. In such case the college assisted in making the training programs more systematic and added theoretical knowledge into the programs. The colleges helped in the application of technology to the handicraft system such as the assistance in computer graphic for the designs of weaving groups and packaging. Before a course could be opened, the program organizers had to write up proper documentation and asked for approval from the colleges' academic and the administration boards. The documents must spell out the rationale, background, material needed, formulas or recipes, budgets, and curriculum. Usually, local wise men did not have exact recipe or formulas so the personnel from the college had to talk to them and extracted their knowledge into formal documents or turned implicit knowledge into explicit knowledge. When a program organizer want to open a course for fertilizer production, they had to convert the approximate ingredients into recipes to be included in booklets and curriculum and submit the curriculum to the academic board and then to the college's board of trustees.

DISCUSSION

Currently, the colleges emphasize on the production side. Little assistance is offered for marketing of products or services. Members of several production groups participate in trade shows throughout Thailand taking with them products of members in the groups. Friendship and loyalty in the community created trust, commitment, and cooperation among members in the network (Pesamaa & Hair, 2007). The colleges were trying to link groups from different courses together such as organic fertilizers groups with rice growing groups. Those in computer classes might be asked to setup website to distribute handicraft products from several groups.

Some groups networked long before the colleges came into existence. One community leader said "*We have several active local networks going on for more than 20 years...there is no need for the college to help us networking*". Some groups offered handicraft training courses by themselves. However, these networks were limited to knowledge in production and selling of products but not modern or theoretical knowledge. In such case the college assisted in making the training programs more systematic and added theoretical knowledge into the programs. The colleges helped in the application of technology to the handicraft system such as the assistance in computer graphic for the designs of weaving groups and packaging. Before a course could be opened, the program organizers had to write up proper documentation and asked for approval from the colleges' academic and the administration boards. The documents must spell out the rationale, background, material needed, formulas or recipes, budgets, and curriculum. Usually, local wise men did not have exact recipe or formulas so the personnel from the college had to talk to them and extract their knowledge into formal documents or turn implicit knowledge into explicit knowledge as proposed by Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) for knowledge management. When a program organizer wants to open a course for fertilizer production, he/she had to convert the approximate ingredients into recipes to be included in booklets and curriculum and submit the curriculum for to the academic board and then to the college's board of trustees.

A few participants complained that "*some of the new teachers don't know who we are and they treated us like we knew nothing*". This reflects the hierarchical nature (Hofstede, 2001) in the rural area where governmental authorities, with their higher education than laypeople, who do not have formal education during their childhood, perceive laypeople as unintelligent. Actually, these laypeople, though some could not read or write properly, possessed a lot of life and work experience. Some of them are very intelligent. This misperception created a large gap between laypeople or wise men and authorities. Those authorities are in the field long enough get to know these people and could handle them properly. It is important to have an induction program to introduce new authorities to the nature and conditions of members in the communities else they will not be able to bridge the traditional gap between government authorities and communities. Some dissatisfaction were evident during one of the interview when a government authority from other unit called one of the participant on her mobile phone and asked if she would attend a seminar. She declined right away and told us later that "*I scheduled an appointment with them already, why should he ask me again if I would go or not, it is as if he did not trust my word*".

CONCLUSION

Communities do not need community colleges to assist in forming horizontal network with other communities. Thai people have the tendency to link to each other and call each other a cousin (Komin, 1991). People in the same community are related in some way or another either as cousins, neighbor, or others. Community members have similar needs and wants. They are in similar conditions and speak the same language. Networks exist naturally even across communities. However, community members feel that they have to be submissive to government authorities due to the hierarchical nature of Thai culture (Hofstede, 2001). They feel estranged from other formal and systematic organizations. Community colleges play a significant role in the vertical networks that link communities with organizations

especially government organizations that are inaccessible to communities. In this regard, directors of community college possess the capacity to create links with other public and private organizations in the areas. Community colleges should act differently from universities that emphasize academic knowledge and formal teaching and learning. They also should behave differently from governmental units that provide aid and assist in development. It would be appropriate for community college to act in between both and be closer to local people than other governmental units and bridge the gap between community and government authorities. Community college should act as a center for trainer networks and locator of academic assistance. Community members interviewed expressed their appreciation and satisfaction in the role of community colleges in supplying them with practical knowledge for their occupations. Future research should seek to identify the structure and pattern of network used by community colleges. Research into the efficient management of network by community members is warranted.

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