“No one could have expected we would be where we are today,” was a speaking point scrawled in my journal from a faculty meeting some months ago. This is as true now as it was then. Intensive English programs (IEPs) in the United States face unpredictable enrollments, with language program administrators (LPAs) called upon by senior administration and faculty alike to chart a clear path forward. Conventional planning is nearly impossible when historical data cannot be used to accurately predict future programming requirements. That said, volatile environments exist across industries, in particular with entrepreneurial enterprises, offering a wealth of research on strategic management. To reinforce the LPA's toolbox, this article provides four core principles adapted from entrepreneurship for language programs facing change.

**Forego Forecasting**

The rational planning school of thought posits that organizations that work more meticulously to accurately predict dynamic systems will outperform those that do not. Until recently, IEP programming decisions could be made using a relatively sound forecasting heuristic, a predictive approach in which previous data sets were solid indicators of future student enrollments. LPAs knew the percentage variance between seasonal enrollment cycles, expected yield rates for applications, and even average length of stay.
Investing in these predictive calculations was a solid administrative practice, allowing for long-range strategic planning.

Within a dynamic system, however, LPAs should be asking the following question: “Is the current environment stable enough that we can reliably base future actions on data from the past?” If the answer is “no,” then an effectual approach may be more suitable. Effectuation examines the resources at hand with the aim of seeking out opportunities based on those resources. Here, LPAs can concentrate efforts on actions that will create an environment in which the program will have an inherent advantage or leadership position, instead of investing time and energy on prediction (Read, Dew, Sarasvathy, Song, & Wiltbank, 2009). This is done by identifying available means that will become the basis for taking action, including: resources (e.g., financial and personnel), networks/partnerships, and current knowledge assets. To apply this principle, programs can physically create a list of all available resources, thus starting the brainstorming process.

**Embrace Entrepreneurial Thinking**

Researchers have found that the expert entrepreneur’s decision-making process is unique to entrepreneurs (Dew, Read, Sarasvathy, & Wiltbank, 2009). In general, the average person tends to frame problems and choices in terms of positive predictive analysis (e.g., “How likely is a positive outcome?”). Related to the aforementioned forecasting concept, this mindset is reflected in the perennial question among IEP administrators: “What are your enrollment projections for next semester?” Expert entrepreneurs, however, frame planning decisions in terms of acceptable risk (e.g., “What is the affordable loss?”).

Entrepreneurs make countless decisions in the face of the unknown on an ongoing basis, and the simple act of reframing the problem allows for different emergent solutions. A good example for LPAs might be the development of a new online course for which a priori maximum loss is determined rather than waiting until after the project launch. Within this loss-focused mindset, entrepreneurs are driven to imagine ongoing new possibilities based on available means instead of trying to predict outcomes.

**Position Programs for Action**

Established organizations are challenged by their existing systems at the very time when they need to be flexible in the face of ambiguity. Internal constraints, such as sunk costs with facilities and personnel who have specialized to deliver current services, reinforce these hurdles. These constraints lead to a competency trap in which organizations become fossilized in continuing down routine paths, normative standards, and outdated practices (York & Venkataraman, 2010).

For long-standing IEPs with set programs, internal resistance to adaptation can prove problematic as members focus on the core organizational identity of current services instead of embracing new models in the face of emergent needs. Positioning programs for maximum flexibility through ongoing co-creation with stakeholders while simultaneously reducing constraints (e.g., contractual obligations) can help programs confront uncertainty more efficiently.

**Start Small, Iterate Incrementally**
Major budget shortfalls make the core principle of starting small difficult to embrace. The desire to launch new, large-scale projects with the hope of recouping lost revenue can be a strong driving force (see preceding positive predictive analysis). However, smaller scale projects that can be repeated in rapid iteration allow for flexibility in the face of quickly changing situations.

Incrementalism, one of the core strategic principles of an adaptive approach, calls for a short action and feedback loop (Wiltbank, Dew, Read, & Sarasvathy, 2006). Incrementalism allows organizations to respond to failure constructively through smaller, targeted investments of resources aimed at improving subsequent cycles (Read et al., 2009). Failure is likely during unpredictable times, but the small-scale method limits catastrophic loss.

To extend the example of launching an online course, if the program designs a semester-based class, the iteration cycle (and resource investment) is tied up for four months. Four months is an eternity and can be costly if there are problems during the launch. Shortening the cycle allows for faster optimization. The first iteration might be a one-off online workshop during which the administrative team works out the kinks with advertising, enrollment, and delivery platform. The second iteration may include the same workshop, or even a short series of workshops, building off previous lessons learned. The cycle continues to expand until the team achieves the desired scope.

In sum, the literature on strategic management amidst uncertainty offers a rich resource for LPAs seeking methods to support organizations responding to new constraints. Though the traditional model of formal strategic planning may be impractical during turbulent times, LPAs can navigate through the process with strategies that foster adaptation and creativity. In the words of Leon C. Megginson (1963), “It is not the strongest or the most intelligent who will survive but those who can best manage change.”

Note: The views expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy of the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center, the Department of Army, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

References


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