

Complexities of multiple paradigms in higher education leadership today

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Abstract

This study explores the complexities of multiple paradigms and overlapping influences in university leadership today. The perceptions of the key issues and challenges facing higher education leaders in their work are discussed. The study found that much challenges centred around the need for strategic leadership, flexibility, autonomy, managing and motivating staff, responding to competing tensions and maintaining institutional quality. The study also came up with some proposals for university leaders to deal with the challenges they face.

Keywords: university leadership, academic freedom, motivation, quality assurance

Introduction

This paper explores the complexities of multiple paradigms and overlapping influences in higher education leadership today. It commences with a review of literature relating to issues and challenges in higher education leadership. The second section outlines the findings from participants about their perceptions of the university leadership. The final section of the paper provides some implications of this study for the higher education sector.

Much research have been done on competing challenges impacting academic staff and administrators. The goal of the university is to offer quality higher education experience to students and to fulfil the needs of society (Longden, 2006). University leaders may, however, focus on competing paradigms such as "student as scholars" versus "students as consumers". Snyder et al.(2007) and Giroux (2005) noted the interactive forces of mass education and of sound pedagogical principles in university education.

University leaders have different views on delivering education based on sound principles of pedagogy *and* the need to create efficiencies of mass education (Coaldrake & Stedman, 1999; Meek & Wood, 1997; Pratt & Poole, 1999; Ramsden, 1998; Szekeres, 2006). In the United Kingdom, higher education providers have opted for either larger classes or reduced contact time, or a combination of both due to resource reduction (Longden, 2006, p.179).

Stiles (2004) and Whitchurch (2006) pointed to the challenges for academics to partner with industries and government to compete for industry-based funding and undertake research and development. The academic has to interact with the various parties to synthesize academic and business agendas (Whitchurch, 2006, p.167).

In today's competitive environment, leaders need to have the courage to take action when the future remains unclear (Barnett 2004) and Hanna (2003). The capacity to support and develop leaders capable of handling complex issues and engaging people effectively and leading through changes is a strategic necessity for today's higher education institutions (Fulmer, Gibbs & Goldsmith, 2005, p.59).

Methodology

This qualitative study investigates the perceptions of mid to senior level executives of a private Malaysia university college on what were they see as the main issues and challenges facing them today. A total of fifteen executives, ranging from Head of Schools, departmental heads and faculty administration managers, participated in the interviews. Open-ended questions were posed as they provided the opportunity for the participants to express their views. This methodology, where interviews were normally held in informal settings where participants felt comfortable to provide their views is the most effective method in qualitative research (Silverman 2000).

Each participant was asked the same set of questions with flexibility to explore issues that may surface during the interview (Merriam, 1998). The advantage of this type of interview is that they reduce interviewer bias during the interview and facilitation of organization and analysis of data (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003). The interview protocols consisted of ten semi-structured, open-ended questions in the endeavour to gain insights into the participants' perceptions on leadership practices:

- a) How do you assess the university college climate?
- b) How much academic freedom exists in the university college?
- c) What do you think should be done to maintain academic quality?
- d) Are staff generally satisfied with their jobs and remuneration?
- e) How concerned is the leadership team about staff welfare?
- f) How effective is the leadership team?
- g) What do you think are the main causes of stress in your work?
- h) How responsive is the leadership to change?
- i) Does the leadership team makes an effort to treat others with trust and respect?
- j) How serious is the leadership team in their beliefs to encourage others to improve their skills and abilities?

Findings and Discussion

The study found four key issues and challenges facing university leaders today. These are:

1. Ensuring academic freedom
2. Maintaining staff motivation
3. Maintaining institutional quality
4. Providing effective leadership

Ensuring academic freedom

Academic freedom is defined as right to speak freely without fear of reprisal, the right to determine specific teaching methodologies, the right to transmit knowledge openly, and the right to research in one's field.

Barnett (1990) argued that academic freedom should be expanded from its narrow definition of staff immunity from censorship towards a universal mandate to present and to criticize ideas. Fessel (2006) urged universities to issue clear statements affirming their commitment to academic freedom and controversial debate.

Developing trust in all relationships is essential for universities leadership to be successful. Trust provides the environment to motivate people to act and collaborate. Trust and power are closely interrelated. Power without trust destroys its own basis, while trust without power is not sustainable because there always will be the potential for conflict in a group. A good university leader must be endowed with appropriate means of power and be able to earn trust from his subordinates.

The study found that many participants remained timid and reserved expressing their opinions to the university leaders as they felt that their views were not be appreciated. Repression of ideas and opinions by top management came in the form of threat of dismissal or questioning the competency of the staff to handle a particular task. The fear of discrimination by university leaders have discouraged many participants to discuss openly important subject matters which could promote critical thinking about controversial ideas. University leaders should treat everyone with respect and encourage an open, honest and constructive environment for discussion to take place.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization and the International Labour Organization issued the statement: "The principle of academic freedom should be scrupulously observed. Higher education teaching personnel are entitled to the maintaining of academic freedom, that is to say, the right, without constriction by prescribed doctrine, to freedom of teaching and discussion, freedom in carrying out research and disseminating and publishing the results thereof, freedom to express freely their opinion about the institution or system in which they work, freedom from institutional censorship and freedom to participate in professional or representative academic bodies. All higher-education teaching personnel should have the right to fulfil their functions without discrimination of any kind and without fear of repression by the state or any other source".

Universities should adopt clear policies supporting academic freedom and steps to deal with challenges to academic freedom in order to support higher order thinking across the campus. Academics should be encouraged to promote critical thinking without fear of reprisals from university leaders.

Maintaining staff motivation

Maslow's (1954) needs theory raised the question as to whether people's needs would be met by choosing careers which related to job satisfaction. The absence of three higher-order needs (self-esteem, autonomy, and self-actualization) were shown to be a major contributor to low teacher satisfaction (Carver & Sergiovanni, 1971; Frances & Lebras, 1982; Sweeney, 1981; Trusty & Sergiovanni, 1966; Wright, 1985).

Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory relates to whether people believe they can be successful in their chosen careers and the number of career alternatives that they may consider. He suggested that self-efficacy influences performance, behavioral choices, and persistence and is related to career choice in a number of ways. Self-efficacy complements skill sets in individuals seeking careers and may facilitate career attainment for those seeking careers in areas that they are competent in.

Research has shown that a positive school culture was associated with increased student motivation and achievement, improved teacher collaboration, and improved attitudes among teachers toward their jobs (Sashkin & Sashkin, 1990; Sashkin & Wahlberg, 1993; Ogawa & Bossert, 1995). Teachers are transformational leaders and they may also influence students performance if they are motivated themselves.

Other research indicated that the higher the expected importance or value of present activities is in relation to future personal goals, the higher is the motivation of individuals and the better is their performance and learning (Raynor, 1974).

The study revealed that participants considered three main drivers of motivation. The first is the ability to make a difference in other people's lives. This includes imparting their knowledge to students. The self-efficacy theory of Bandura is centrally relevant to their beliefs in their capacity to successfully carry out their given tasks and the consequent impact this belief has on their motivation.

The second area is their working environment whereby they felt that their contribution will be appreciated. This includes opportunities for career advancement as well as personal growth. Rowe & Rowe (1999) found that teacher professional development has the potential for enhancing the educational outcomes of students and assisting teachers to operate more effectively in the classroom.

The remaining area relates to salary and benefits. While they are altruistic in nature, a low compensation package would lower their motivation and even prompt them to seek alternative employment elsewhere. All participants regard salary level and welfare conditions as factors affecting their job satisfaction. However, it is also intertwined with other factors such as university leadership, professional development and a sense of achievement through teaching.

Maintaining institutional quality

The quality management system in a higher education institution focuses on quality assurance and self-assessment at all levels according to the standards set up by the respective educational authorities. The implementation of the quality management system involves both an internal institutional development as well as an external one in which certain mechanisms of control can assure the quality of the educational process.

The development of a culture of organizational excellence could be categorized into eight major themes, according to the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) framework. These are:

- a) Leadership
- b) Policy and Strategy
- c) Staff management
- d) Resources
- e) Key Process Management
- f) Financial result
- g) Customer satisfaction
- h) Staff satisfaction
- i) Impact on society

Leadership reflects the attitudes and resolutions in which university leaders choose to sustain excellence. They have to set clearly defined policies and strategies to reflect the set of objectives and the means to achieve those strategies. The implementation of a quality assurance system poses much challenge since it requires a change in the work culture at all levels.

While the approach to quality assurance is in the right direction, the study revealed that participants felt that there were many underlying issues which require attention. These include:

- a) University leaders not actively listening to staff ideas and feedbacks. Rewarding staff for their good works and providing feedbacks to them will contribute to the positive working environment. The delegation of prerogatives within faculties and departments is essential when it comes to teaching and research. If academic freedom is not protected or being suppressed, the notion of university would disappear.
- b) Implementing a professional development plan for staff is an important working condition. The professional development plan should be a conscious and serious initiative. To be meaningful, staff participation is encouraged to determine the content of the plan.
- c) Many participants felt that there is a need to balance competing demands such as increasing student enrolment and maintaining academic quality. Raising the entry requirements of students will result in lower enrolment numbers initially. University leaders need to avoid two different direction-setting practices which influence stress levels of subordinates. The lack of transparency and the absence of useful information concerning academic activities contributed to low performance. Determining, then implementing the appropriate strategy, putting in place the organisational structure and developing conducive organizational culture present major challenges for university leaders. Barnett (1992) advised that senior staff can employ and encourage the more subtle "two i" approach of inform and involve rather than the army-style "two c" approach of command and control.
- d) Participants revealed the competing tensions around research and teaching, enrolment numbers and quality, and administration and academic work. Gayle et al. (2003) suggested that there are implicit tensions of managing universities in a business-like way. The challenge for universities leaders is to identify a sustainable collaborative model which balances the needs of administrative demands and academic quality.

Providing effective leadership

The assessment and evaluation of the effectiveness of a university leader is more than just his knowledge in finance, strategic planning or curriculum development. In the corporate environment, an effective leader is measured by his performance in bringing the company to profitability and maximizing the return on investment (ROI). In an educational setting, the emphasis on the development of dispositions to motivate the application of knowledge and skills, and technical expertise is of equal importance. Dispositions are defined by Perkins (1995) as proclivities that motivate and determine the direction of behavior.

The work of Goleman (1998) in the area of emotional intelligence focused on assessment and evaluation of leader behaviors not related to technical skills in the areas of finance, curriculum development, or strategic planning. Emotional intelligence is defined as the awareness of emotions and using emotions to make good decisions. Emotional intelligence involves empathy, managing emotions in relations, and persuading others (O'Neil, 1996). Coleman (1998) and Salopek (1998) stated that competencies associated with emotional intelligence are more important

in effective job performance than are ability and expertise. To be a successful leader, the individual needs to possess a high level of emotional competencies.

From the study, the participants did not question the technical competencies and cognitive abilities of the university leaders. However, they remained unconvinced about the leaders emotional competencies. The lack of trust in subordinates, the inability to keep emotions under control, the lack of empathy, the failure to proactively understand and meet other's needs and the difficulty to inspire others were some issues highlighted during the interviews. University leaders should find strategies to work through these situations if they are to earn the respect and trust of their colleagues.

Implications and conclusion

The study revealed the need for university leaders to acknowledge the human dimension in the process of achieving their corporate goals. They need to be able to engage staff to embrace strategic change rather than focusing on the structure itself. The study reflects the importance of getting individuals involved in accomplishing specific tasks. Leaders need to be able to enter into an honest dialogue with the team members and be willing to hear different opinions on all issues. The findings revealed that it is essential for university leaders to work to develop the positive people skills and necessary communication skills to maintain the respect and treatment that members of the organization deserve.

Participants indicated that continuous improvement could only be achieved in an environment where leaders are open to hearing their opinions. Organisational learning experience will be restricted unless there is a way of sharing the insights gained. Universities need to pay close attention to the tenets of leadership and selecting candidates based on their beliefs, skills and knowledge regarding the process of improving the educational institution.

Limitations

The main limitation of this study is the small sample size. The second limitation is whether the sample size may have been unduly unfavourable given that four participants have left the university college to join other educational institutions. Their opinion may be negatively biased against the university top leadership team.

Literatures on the topic of emotional competencies are quite limited. More research needs be conducted on this important topic with regards to improving the leadership of educational institutions today. The limitations of the existing research on emotional competencies could be due to the difficulty of establishing research settings which will enable us to further our comprehension of this topic.

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