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Leadership in Higher Education: A View from Below

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LEADERSHIP IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A VIEW FROM BELOW

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Abstract

From a mountaintop, we can easily see how the little parts of the world fit perfectly and harmoniously in the total view. Much like a complex puzzle with many pieces, unless we know what the final picture should look like, we scramble, guess, and make many mistakes; until we can finally envision what we are building. Higher education, and its leadership is transitory and involves many complex parts. This paper offers some stakeholder perspectives for academic leaders to ponder, and some possibilities for them to consider.

Keywords

competency transfer, authenticity, change agents, collegiality, relationship management

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"It is the boss – the manager – the master in people's lives who makes the difference in their destiny." – Phillip W. Keller (1970)

Introduction

As renditions of Edward Elgar's "Pomp and Circumstance (March No. 1)" mark transition for members of academic communities at many colleges and universities in the US, the numerous open positions for upper-level leadership from two of the nation's top academic job sources, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and *Inside Higher Ed*, along with the *Chronicle's* listings of new presidents and provosts at universities and colleges around the world, indicate change is coming. It is unclear the way in which those changes will impact higher education as a whole; however from the position descriptions, some conformities and commonalities in academic workplaces in various parts of the world are desired by both leaders and followers. A closer analysis of the announcements suggests universities are indeed guided by the belief institutions and their leaders can and do shape behavior. One particular announcement expressed belief in this way: the leader must possess the "ability to foster a vibrant and empowered community through a proven leadership style that evokes trust, welcomes collaboration, reflects confident decision making, and effectively engages the talents and experiences of employees," and has the "capability to engage and influence the general, civic, corporate, and governmental communities effectively" (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2016, June 2).

Followers are not always in search of, or in need of, leaders who are architects or policymakers – rather leaders who are gatekeepers, negotiators, policy enforcers, and effective crisis communication managers. Based on which is described as the expectations and roles of potential leaders, the global academic world seeks to become a futurist, creative, collaborative, diverse, socially responsible, and a conflict-free environment that, in turn, fosters those tenets in and among primary stakeholders particularly, students, alumni, staff, and faculty. No matter where these leadership hopefuls go, the task is to synchronize stakeholders around the initiatives, policies, and issues to accomplish common, rather than competing, gains and goals. Competency transfer and trust, two key components required to rally stakeholders around a common goal, usually difficult tasks at the beginning of new institutional relationships; however, they are possible through two-way communication channels and tools. Person-to-person, face-to-face communication is the most powerful means of building effective, trustworthy relationships.

BACKGROUND

The view from the bottom

Widely recognized and highly regarded business executive Lee Iacocca, who served as president of Ford Motor Company and president and CEO, as well as chair, of Chrysler Corporation, defined a leader as using the "Nine Cs of Leadership – charisma, character, curiosity, creativity,

communication, courage, conviction, competence, and common sense" (lacocca, 2007).

Leaders do not have all the answers but are able to surround themselves with savvy individuals who are capable of rallying stakeholders around common goals. They also have a *sense of humility*, which is evident in their desires for their stakeholders: 1.) that which they did not, or do not have, or 2.) the best of what they had or have. These are the essence of lacocca's Nine Cs. Focusing solely on the academic side, the ranks of leadership utilized for this article are three tiered: 1.) chancellors and presidents, 2.) provosts, and 3.) the deans and school directors who lead the scholarship and teaching of academic departments.

Aside from the interest in understanding the leadership qualities desired in academic leadership, the 2015 and 2016 academic years were interesting, principally because they were a period of crisis in the "presidential suite" at several universities and colleges in the country, as students and faculty rallied for the resignation of the president at a number of institutions.

Laura McKenna, a writer for *The Atlantic*, wrote an article titled "Why are Fewer College Presidents Academics?" pointed to the trend in higher education of "putting non-academics in leadership positions" (McKenna, 2015). McKenna cites the American Council on Education's statistics that "[20%] of U.S. college presidents came from fields outside academe," many from top positions in business, law, and government. The desired attributes of the potential president with strong academic groundings is expressed in this announcement:

> The ideal candidate is an energetic, inspirational, and collaborative leader with a strategic mindset and an unwavering commitment to academic and research excellence. The ideal candidate will possess a doctoral degree, a distinctive record of academic achievement, and a successful track record of administrative leadership experience in a university or similarly complex organization. A confident, articulate, and compelling communicator, the new President will be a relationship builder who is able to engage a wide variety of external stakeholders and position the University strategically to attract students, faculty, and support. The President will possess a demonstrated commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusivity and a proven understanding of aboriginal perspectives and communities (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2016, July 4).

The same attributes were expressed in another article announced:

> The successful candidate will demonstrate vision, a record of innovation, a commitment to exceptional scholarly inquiry, appreciation of the value and importance of interdisciplinary research and education, a proven commitment to diversity and inclusion, and boundless energy and enthusiasm to elevate an already outstanding institution and to lead the discussion about higher education's future on a national and global platform" (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2016, July 13).

Proponents have presented compelling arguments on both sides on the issue of whether non-academics are more capable of handling the complexities of academe than "academic-turned-leader" (Selingo, 2016). For the purpose of this study, the author randomly selected formative research studies comprised of 28 positions announcements for new presidents and chancellors at four year public, four year private, and two-year community colleges in the United States, Canada, and Europe from the websites of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and *Inside Higher Ed* (15 from March 2015, and 13 from July 2016). A list of the tasks assigned to provosts and deans/school directors was compiled after screening five (each) job descriptions from the March 2015 issues. The president/chancellor announcements were scrutinized for words or language describing the following leadership qualities: charisma, character, curiosity, creativity, communication, courage, conviction, competence, and common sense. Figure 1 shows the leadership attribute and frequency with which it was described in each of the 28 announcements.

Figure 1.

LEADERSHIP QUALITY	FREQUENCY
Charisma	*25*
Character	*28*
Curiosity	*17*
Creativity	*14*
Communication	*28*
Courage	*19*
Conviction	*11*
Competence	*28*
Common Sense	*28*

Figure 1. *Frequency with which the leadership attribute was described in each of the 28 announcements.*

What is Situational Analysis?

The view from the bottom

The ordinary thoughts, ideas, and activities inside the classroom and educational administrative walls can rise to amazing heights and can have infectious, expansiveness, and long-term consequences. As academic leaders transition through the ranks and from one institution to the next, they are viewed as potential change agents and masters of competency transfer. These leaders help institutional stakeholders see, understand, manage, and stay focused on "the big picture" in order to achieve realistic, obtainable goals despite the changes. The big picture perspective is not viewed from the bottom, as that perspective is not commonly communicated and shared in a clear two-way communication style. In addition, leaders often spend little time looking up from the bottom, understanding the two-way communication that necessarily must be instilled in a classroom environment. As changes in the hierarchy occur, as well as to synchronize efforts, it is important that leaders clearly and accurately view the organization from the bottom. The need for policies begins at the bottom, to include that which department heads/managers (faculty members with administrative responsibilities) generally should be able to articulate, contribute, and transfer on behalf of faculty and students through open and clear communication with academic deans.

The awareness, values, hopes, and dreams in the institution are increasingly shared by the industries in which the academic world is educating and shaping its stakeholders to become engaged participants. The relationships formed in the workplace are significant for many reasons; longevity and reputation of the organization are perhaps two of the most significant – in essence, *it is all about business*.

The Business Of Higher Ed Leadership As Viewed From Below

The term "community" is frequently used in the academe to describe the collegial atmosphere leaders hope to inspire and to cultivate. A position announcement on the *Higher Ed* jobs website described "building relationships with and engaging individual students and student organizations in local communities" (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2016, August 1). Listed as "volunteer programs and service learning," the 28 positions posted between February 1, 2016, and August 12, 2016 included 27 institutions that defined and confined "community" geographically as

"the immediate area affected by company policy and production" (Newsom, Turk, & Kruckeberg, 2007, p. 380). The one exception encouraged the idea of promoting and supporting faculty-led service learning abroad programs. The terms "community" and "universality" should be, however, interchangeable when used in academe. Under an umbrella of universality ideas and actions have expansive reach across geographic borders, particularly due to of the globalization of educational institutions. Although the geographic reach varies, similar to most large organizations, post-secondary institutions have an intrinsic international presence, whether by strategically planned efforts in enculturation, Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC) courses, scholars exchange programs, courses offered to expatriates and working professionals, or use of technology to explore current news and events across borders. Unfortunately, internal stakeholders in the US understand this basic concept of internationalism based on the way in which institutions define and brand international reach and impact through exchange programs, study abroad, or areas that fall under the umbrella of an international office or center.

The organizational structure of academe is designed to ensure that effective leaders are able to transfer a cooperative spirit at all levels of the internal community by adeptly choosing management tools and staff to seamlessly integrate principles and ideals. The CEO (president/chancellor) and the COO (provost) are main guardians of the institution's reputation and thus, must strategically plan for its spread and growth. An effective leader recognizes the different levels of hierarchal interaction, which at times is strictly bureaucratic, and at other times contingent upon the style of the leader. The leader identifies and develops relationships important to its stakeholder subunits in order to advance relevant and productive collaboration; i.e., again common, rather than competing gain. Leaders may be viewed by their institutions as crisis or conflict managers, rather than opportunity managers. True of any organization, as the gap widens between leader and follower, communication gets muddled and lost, and followers may become contumacious. The point of synchronization is that the dean is able to view the issues from both the top and bottom and to synthesize the two parts. Ultimately, the leaders guide stakeholders through the art of discovering "what neither of us could produce [nor] invent on our own" (Coleman & Levine, 2008, p.17).

Relationship building becomes a core part of the institution. It grows and spreads horizontally, and somewhat passionately, to external communities through alumni and former members. A new secondary stakeholder group is

created with each commencement. At this pivotal juncture, alums become either advocates or critics. Internally, the diffusion is a strategic effort to trickle downward. All aspects from employee and associates' comments, community activism, and student and graduate success stories to the institution's charitable works can become tools of advocacy, reputation management, relationship building, and image. Conversely, the cause of a smoldering crisis, if left unattended, can irreparably harm a university's brand, providing fodder for prolonged public criticism and scrutiny. Fortunately for academe, its institutions appear to have greater staying power than many businesses, perhaps because the environment is transitory. As indicated in *PRWeek's Reputation Management Report*, on average it requires 3.5 years to recover from a damaged reputation.

Fortunately this era, plentiful with emerging technology, makes it easier for academe and its leaders to learn from the experience of others to employ effective two-way communication tactics. Daily headlines are littered with stories that provide identification of and solutions to crisis situations. These articles provide fodder for, Herbert A. Simon's concept of *Bounded Rationality*, in which organizations have adequate and abundant information for leaders to choose "optimal solutions, rather than the first acceptable one" (2009). Ideas, awareness, and information generated from the top should be an ongoing, frequent part of the strategic plan.

Collegiality

As leaders in university and college systems oftentimes oversee a very complex organization, they search for management systems to help with the processes of evaluating the effectiveness of teaching and learning and human resources, in addition to the various and complicated aspects of human satisfaction. Emphasis is on technological tools for quantitative analysis and demographic management, rather than investments in psychographic tools for qualitative analysis and relationship management. An important sense of time, to include attention and cost per person investments to print newsletters, is diminished with electronic tools. George Gerbner (1973) argued that those who engage in the use of newer technology view the world as threatening and merciless. Even more relevant today, mobile phones and other hand-held devices provide increasing opportunities to connect with others through social media and photographs. The new technology offers faster paces for disseminating information and communication, which are the main points, but the devices are ripe with security

failures and breaches, as well as ease in disguising truth and being anonymous. New course listings point to universities and colleges around the globe that attempt to keep pace with technology, perhaps addressing the fascination of a generation of users who can imagine the possibilities, but not necessarily the long-term consequences.

An organization's ethical practices, corporate social responsibility (CSR), and corporate citizenship behavior can have profound, positive benefits for the many publics and communities served by the organization, "… some of the very conditions that drive people inward (for instance, the economy, or other difficult times in communities) can provide impetus to work together to overcome them. If the administration, along with philanthropy and the broader social sector, can capitalize on the urge to work to make things better, we may well look back on this period as the time that civic engagement began to be embedded in public life" (Rourke, 2010, p.5).

Higher education often shapes cultures and environments of competitiveness. The increases in for-profit universities and the world's current economic state have resulted in a competitive culture that is even more commonplace. The blogosphere usually provides impetuous for spirited discussions, such as an article written by Paul Anderson and Sara Konrath (2011) that gives insight into what should be done in the declination of student empathy among higher education professionals. The majorities of postings were attempts to discuss, explain, and understand the concerns of students:

> "Powerful role models will have [a] greater effect than empathy workshops."

> "Might we not be witnessing a failure of authority figures (teachers) to address ethics and thus fail to provide their classrooms with principles that would otherwise transcend the good of the individual?"

> "In other words, perhaps it is not so much about relationships within the group--eg., empathy for one another--as it is about the existence or non-existence of principles that would otherwise guide the members of the group. Training in empathy might best be accomplished by education in ethics." (Anderson & Konrath, 2011).

Diversity & Equity

Commencement means that a cycle has ended and another has begun. This author noted observations of her past

several years in academe and pondered questions that warrant consideration and soul searching for academic leaders. The transitory world of academe sometimes is an environment of competitiveness – in which members move up, on, and out – in search of esteem, acceptance, and permanency. The past several years are pivotal in this observation, for the author noted in which she considers excessive turnover in upper leadership (for various reasons including retirement, promotion, character foray) in one particular four-year period that directly affected her academic unit – four deans in four-years, two presidents and two provosts in the university due to retirements. In another year, a much smaller university replaced an openly gay president with one who was the third in a succession of university presidents. These changes were opportunities to satisfy academe's desires and struggles for both creativity and diversity.

Despite the search for those who embody the spirit of a futuristic, creative, collaborative, diverse, socially responsible, and conflict-free leadership style, today's academic world is / can be uncompassionate, unable to effectively listen and to understand the roots of tentativeness. As higher education prepares its students for "what's next?" those nearing graduation are faced with the realization that the recent and lingering economic crisis has left many without the dream or hope of working in a collaborative world. Too often today it is an indifferent world. "We're all unconditionally like the other; it is just that we are in diverse lands, playing different roles in a variety of robes before dissimilar backdrops on various stages before foreign audiences. It would be interesting if we could often change robes and stand on different stages in our lifetime. It would give us great insight into man's universality" (Buscaglia, 1972, p. 121).

The expectation in classrooms is that educators prepare students for group thinking, which means that collaborative teams are comprised of factions from diverse and sometimes surprising mindsets and experiences. On a number of college campuses, male students participate in the international men's campaign, "Walk a Mile in Her Shoes, " as they put on high heels in a march to end relationship abuse. Similarly, male students assume visible roles in encouraging dialogue and execution of "Love is not Abuse" programs in high schools and colleges to bring awareness to relationship abuse and bullying that often begins in teenage years, and of which all genders are victims (Polenghi & King, 2008).

What If?

With the notion and belief that institutions shape behavior, academic leaders should consider the following three categories of reputation building and maintaining:

1. **Goals and values and a greater awareness of academic leaders' actions to achieve them in a multifaceted environment** (Cangemi & Miller, 2007). Perhaps the isolation of the COO, or the multiple tiers of the hierarchical structure, sufficiently blocks the stakeholders' opportunities for clear communication, dissemination. and equal access to ideas, goals and values. The role of the provost, at most institutions in this analysis, was to maintain the collegial tone and atmosphere among the academic ranks. More accurately described, the provost was responsible for all operations of the university related to academic leadership, curriculum, personnel management for the academic division, and budget planning and fiscal management for the academic division. This leader must possess, at the least, four of the nine C's that Iacocca identified: credibility, trust, candor, and consistency, and should be able to identify the same qualities in next tier appointments. As most organizational charts illustrate, this very large task requires a bellowing out and disbursement of responsibilities to individuals with highly regarded scholastic, but sometimes uncultivated, interpersonal skills. Academe also relies heavily, sometimes to an excessive extent, on the advocacy of alumni to build and to maintain its reputation and image, perhaps inadvertently dismissing or overlooking its current internal stakeholders (faculty, staff, and students).

2. **Address the needs of diverse global audiences and societies in light of changes in societal values.** The provost, as described in one of the announcements, has "the explicit charge to uphold the university's core commitment to diversity and social justice" (Fielding Graduate University, 2017). Do leaders, however, contribute to an environment of fear and hostility? Fierce competition among disciplines and programs at times exists for funds and funding within universities. Downsizing and collapsing bring about hostility and silo mentalities among academicians and academic units. "Bullying" in many forms and on all levels often is protected under an umbrella of anonymity -- is prevalent in workplaces, with academe being no exception. It is a regular occurrence to see and to hear news stories of bullying and violence in schools, and

increasingly in workplaces, through the lens of the Internet (particularly, social media) and television. Indeed stories of loss of human life and expansive devastation are catalysts or impetus for change in organizations and industries. Opportunities are born of tragedies, but change does not need to be reactive (Polenghi & King, 2011). As a blogger indicated, there are increases in social cognition disabilities on our campuses. Do leaders seek out and delegate these responsibilities to managers with cultural crisis and cultural conflict understanding and adeptness?

3. **Integrated planning and management** among disciplines. Do leaders provide internal stakeholders with an image of a collaborative, collegial relationship they will take with them and share with others? In order to achieve the communitarian goals and objectives of the institution, leaders, at the ranks discussed in this article must be able to create and maintain interconnectedness between all stakeholders. They also must possess the ability to create a system of trust stemming from their own personal values and identity rooted in who they are and not what they do (King & Polenghi, 2008). Finally, as a leader transitions, the interactions with stakeholders should be structured to produce desired outcomes -- in essence, they must exemplify the desired behavior.

Conclusion And Perspective

The tools are new and ever changing, although ethical principles are the "same old": credibility, trust, consistency, and candor. Ethical leaders understand and reinforce the organization's ethical stance by developing a planned framework consistent with its mission and philosophy. They encourage participation to inspire an open environment that promotes shared meaning and encourages diverse viewpoints. Ethical leaders value relationship building over image building and psychographics over demographics.

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