Who'd be a dean? Leadership in a low-authority environment

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Our universities represent continuity with a cherished ideal of the pursuit and the promulgation of knowledge or as eloquently expressed by Whitehead, “the justification for a university is that it preserves the connection between knowledge and the zest for life” (1932). From their roots in the medieval period, universities have been revolutionised by globalisation, deregulation and massification. At the second “business school leadership pipeline” workshop, held at the ABS in October 2014, it was clear that the success of UK business schools came hand-in-hand with related challenges if we are to stay true to Whitehead’s take on university life.

Other contributions noted that Business School Deans (BSDs) often operate as hybrid leaders (see Graeme Currie’s contribution) but that these dual requirements for academic excellence and leadership capabilities led many to question whether they saw the role as attractive (see Michael Jenkins’ contribution). Our own research focuses on the particular context in which BSDs enact leadership role since this context is marked by a combination of low authority and high degrees of professional freedom.

Framing

BSDs can be characterised in several ways. They are often portrayed as powerful individuals with the capacity to lead transformational change projects with little or no need for recourse to either the wider university, or their colleagues within the business school itself (see Parker, 2014 for one such account). Drawing on research conducted in other industries, BSDs could equally be conceptualised as middle managers (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992) tasked with the challenge of bringing senior management initiatives to life by working as intermediaries. A third view might see BSDs as entrepreneurs shaping their organisational units within a context set by the wider university and their own role as hybrid academic/leader. Like many other senior management roles, BSDs are typically appointed from within the university sector following a period of sustained excellence in research and other scholarly activities. This leads to a dual identity of both academic researcher and organisational leader. For BSDs, their expertise may be in some aspect of the management of organisations and in particular, the very colleagues that BSDs are asked to lead are also experts within the field of management and organisation. In linguistics terms, we are interested by the subtle distinction in daily university life between the labelling of administrative rather than managerial or leadership duties. In fact, the concept of leadership is often restricted to the context of role descriptors or promotion processes but rarely features in academic discourse. Nevertheless, BSDs are seen to constitute a profession in their own right (Starkey and Tiratsoo, 2007) and are open to
allegations that their approach places “journal article productivity, league table position and profitable products” as the only basis on which negotiations of performance can occur (Parker, 2014: 282).

Conceptualising Business School Leadership

Organisation theorists regularly suggest that new forms of organisation will come to dominate because of the underlying need for greater fluidity, flexibility and transience driven by the expectations of more demanding markets. Bennis (1968) used the term adhocracy to describe "free-moving project teams," as opposed to more traditionally bureaucratic structures, whilst the American futurist Toffler predicted the emergence of a "new, organizational system" (1970: 125). Mintzberg was dismissive of the ability of bureaucracy and divisionalisation to facilitate "sophisticated innovation," arguing that "innovation of the sophisticated variety requires sophisticated expertise" (1979: 434). Discussion persists within the organisational literature on how best to deliver and operate organisational forms which can cope with a series of seemingly ad-hoc tasks.

One of the more recent innovations in leadership research is the move toward so-called distributed leadership which is intended to engage and empower (MacIntosh et al, 2012) such that there is a vertical flow of power from the centre downwards, and perhaps even beyond the boundaries of the organisation. Where distributed leadership operates successfully, power distribution should be more equal than in a traditional hierarchy (Currie and Lockett, 2011) and staff at a variety of levels should be able to make decisions and act upon them in a concertive manner (Gronn, 2002). Elsewhere, we have explored the challenges of introducing distributed leadership in healthcare environments (see Martin et al., 2015 forthcoming). We are in the preliminary stages of a study of leadership in low-authority environments such as business schools and we would problematize the extent to which BSDs can engage in distributed leadership given the relative lack of authority or power at their disposal. Etzioni (1968) argues that resistance demonstrates the activation of power, whilst Cartwright (1959) suggests that resistance can only manifest once more coercive forms of power have been applied to achieve contested aims.

Leadership Challenges

The following example illustrates the types of challenges faced by BSDs and leads us to question the suitability of distributed leadership for business school contexts.
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Example: this is drawn from an annual review conversation in which teaching allocation is occurring.

BSD  (during PDR) So Jo(e), next is teaching and I was hoping you would teach the new [name of] course next session

Jo(e)  I don’t really want to do the new course. I’d prefer my old course.

BSD  Well, as you know, the old course has been removed this session. You are the best qualified member of the school and you’re relatively light in teaching terms compared to your colleagues.

Jo(e)  I just don’t want to do it. It’s not really my thing.

BSD  Okay, so let me rephrase this ... as your BSD, I am asking you to teach the new course

Jo(e)  If you make me do it, I’ll make such a bad job of it that we’ll both regret it.

We have used this and other similar examples with a range of different university audiences (including senior HR professionals from the university sector and senior academics). The usual reaction is a wry smile as people reflect on colleagues and situations that resonate. Our initial findings suggest that whilst staff within business schools may characterise the BSD as a powerful role, BSDs themselves often feel somewhat limited in the sanctions that can be applied for non-conformance and/or non-performance amongst colleagues. That the leadership process is beset by a fantasized view of the power of others is not a new observation (see MacIntosh and Beech, 2011). Yet leadership in such low-authority environments is not well understood. One of the clear challenges facing the wider business school community is to find ways of enabling the next generation of BSDs to prepare for a role which is complex and which may not lend itself to leadership models developed for other contexts.

References


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