Leadership in Higher Education: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract: The study reports and documents an analysis of responses of three leaders in a tertiary institution in Australia. An interview schedule was prepared to obtain responses from the leaders on various aspects of leadership, which were examined in the context of RAMSDEN's conceptual framework of leadership in higher education. The study finds that the responses of the three leaders were close to the theoretical model of RAMSDEN in many respects. However, some differences were found in the style of leadership of the three leaders. The study finds that academic leadership poses problems that are distinctly different than leadership in business or government agencies. Academic leaders need to stay close to teaching, learning, research and scholarship to bring out the best among academics. The study could help leaders in tertiary institutions to reflect on their own qualities as academic leaders and such reflection may help improve their leadership style to achieve positive outcomes.

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1. Introduction

This study reports and documents an analysis of responses of three leaders in higher education regarding leadership at their level. All the leaders were selected from a medium sized Australian university. The responses received from the leaders were analysed in the context of extant literature on leadership in higher education. Before contacting the leaders relevant literature was perused and a short open-ended interview schedule was prepared. The interview schedule contained 10 questions that sought responses from the leaders on various aspects of leadership (see Appendix 1 for the interview schedule). The study found wide variations in what each of the leaders understood by "academic leadership" and their practice of leadership role. The next section reviews the literature on academic leadership, section three provides the conceptual framework that underpins this study, section four is about data and methods, section five provides the case studies of responses received from the three leaders, section six provides the findings and section seven concludes. [1]

2. Literature on Academic Leadership in Higher Education

At the outset it is important to define the concept "leadership" in general and "academic leadership" in particular. The term leadership has been variously defined in the literature on strategic management. According to BIJUR (2000, p.167) "leadership means enhancing human potential". It is about creating the right environment for people to develop as leaders. It is also about communicating clearly and effectively. HEIFETZ and LAURIE (1997) state that leadership involves three fundamental tasks: (a) creating a holding environment (environment that facilitates achievement of goals), (b) directing, protecting, orienting, managing conflict and shaping norms, and (c) maintaining presence and poise. Good leadership is about ensuring unity and cohesion upon decisions up and down the line. Academic leadership is a special case of general leadership in as much as it refers to leadership in an academic setting or institutions. Academic institutions present a different setting than private or public sector organisations. Private organisations are guided solely by considerations of maximising shareholder value. The government agencies and public sector organisations are guided by considerations of maximising the value to stakeholders, which includes community at large. In academic institutions, maximising stakeholder value refers to maximising value to stakeholders such as students, staff, community, and funding agencies. Thus, the stakeholders in academic institutions are more diverse. These special features of academic

institutions pose a different set of challenge to leadership. This means that though academic leadership has some commonalities with leadership in general, there are special challenges involved as has been indicated in paragraphs that follow. Research on academic leadership is evolving. In Australia, notable work has been done in recent years by RAMSDEN (1998), HARMAN (2002), WOLVERTON et al. (1999) SARROS et al. (1997) and MEEK and WOOD (1997). In particular, RAMSDEN (1998) has developed a model (which this study uses) that defines the characteristics that influence effective academic leadership. [2]

Academic institution is a broad term and includes all institutions that provide some form of academic instruction. It includes institutions like primary and secondary schools, professional training institutions like TAFE (Technical and Further Education) colleges, and tertiary institutions like Universities (also known as the higher education sector). Given the constraint of time and resources, the scope of this study is limited to a higher education institution. There are 37 higher education institutions in Australia. It was not possible to make a study of leadership in all or a sample of these institutions again due to constraint of time and resources. Hence this report is based up on interviews conducted with academic leaders in one university only. The author is familiar with the University's mission and vision as also with general ethos of work culture. It was therefore considered appropriate to restrict the interview to three academic leaders from the university given author's knowledge about the institution. As the setting in which the leaders operated was common, it was easier to compare how the three leaders operate under the same conditions. The author is familiar with the setting, which helps in bringing additional insights in this study, as the author is able to verify from observing the leaders whether responses during interviews are actually translated into practice. It also helps in validation of responses collected during interview. [3]

3. Conceptual Framework

As already indicated above, a conceptual framework of leadership in higher education underpins this study. According to RAMSDEN (1998), effective academic leadership in higher education is a function of several factors or characteristics. These include:

·   leadership in teaching,

·   leadership in research,

·   strategic vision and networking,

·   collaborative and motivational leadership,

·   fair and efficient management,

·   development and recognition of performance and

·   interpersonal skills. [4]

RAMSDEN (1998) elaborates that teaching leadership refers, for example, to bringing new ideas about teaching to the department or creating excitement about teaching. Research leadership can be evidenced, for example, by inspiring respect as a researcher, or leading by example. Strategic vision and networking are demonstrated through furthering interests of the department across the university. Collaborative and motivational leadership is demonstrated among others by honesty and integrity and openness. Fair and efficient management is evidenced by delegation, highly organised working of the department and getting things done with little resistance. Developing and recognition of performance includes aspects such as praising and sustaining success of the staff of the department and giving good feedback to improve. Interpersonal skills refer to communicating well and having concern for others. The objective of the study was to describe how the practice of academic leadership of the leaders interviewed fits in with the theoretical framework of effective academic leadership developed by RAMSDEN (1998). It also compares the academic leadership styles of the three leaders with each other to understand similarities and differences if any. [5]

4. Data and Method

DANA et al. (1992) provide a useful guide for qualitative interviewing. These points were kept in view while designing the questions in the interview schedule and conducting the interview. [6]

To facilitate interview and to obtain the responses of the three academic leaders, an interview schedule with a set of questions was prepared. Having such a set interview schedule also enabled the comparison of responses of each of the three leaders: "The standardised open-ended interview consist of a set of questions carefully worded and arranged ... when it is important to minimise variation in the questions posed to interviewees" (PATTON, 1982, p.164). [7]

L1 and L3 were interviewed by the author and L2 by a colleague of the author. Hence a set open-ended interview schedule was used. PATTON (1982, p.168) advises that the strength of standard open-ended interview schedule is "respondents answer the same questions thus increasing comparability of responses" The interview schedule consisted of ten questions. Two of these were demographic questions. The remaining eight questions related to each of the characteristics described above that are known to influence effectiveness of an academic leader as per studies by RAMSDEN (1998) and others. The questions were open ended. It was meant to get the leaders talking about their reflections on each of the characteristics of effective academic leadership. Leadership is an area that has many aspects and open-ended questions were considered as the most appropriate way to gather responses of these leaders about aspects, which they consider important. For example, question number 3 of the interview schedule asked "Can you describe what you consider to be effective leadership in teaching? Can you provide some examples?" The respondents were contacted by email in advance and a time was set for interview. Each respondent was interviewed separately. All the respondents willingly agreed to give the interview.

The responses were recorded under each question and these were read out to them after they had finished and they were asked if they would like to say anything more. For each of the questions, respondents were requested to cite suitable examples from their practice of leadership. The intention was to know how the aspects of leadership considered important by them are brought into practice by them. To protect identity of the respondents, in the following para-graph, they are identified as leader 1, leader 2 and leader 3. It was clarified to them that the data gathered would be used only for the purpose of this paper. [8]

Several methods are available for analysing and interpreting qualitative interviews. KVALE (1996) describes five analysis methods that include 1) meaning condensation, 2) meaning categorisation, 3) narrative structuring, 4) meaning interpretation, and 5) generating meaning through ad hoc methods. PATTON (1982) also addresses a number of techniques for quantifying and analysing qualitative interview data. Depending on the purpose of interviewing one or more methods or a combination thereof could be used. As the purpose of this study was to compare the meaning attached to the concept "academic leadership" by the three leaders, we used a combination of meaning categorisation and meaning interpretation methods. Briefly, this involved categorising words with meaning similar to those in the framework of the study and interpreting the "whole" meaning of language used by the leaders to describe their styles and the meaning they attached to "academic leadership". [9]

5. Results and Discussion

The responses of the leaders to each of the characteristics are analysed below. Where required relevant references from literature are quoted to depict whether the response matches or differs from the literature. The author is familiar with the actual practice of leadership by the leaders interviewed and this first hand knowledge by the author has helped this study further. It has been ensured that personal bias of the author doesn't creep in the analysis. This was achieved by "bracketing". Bracketing refers to "self-awareness of mindset" of the researcher (HUTCHINSON, 1986, p.115). To become conscious of personal preconceptions, values, and beliefs even before collecting data and during the process of research, the author wrote a personal statement of what qualities he expected to find in academic leaders (see Appendix 2 for the personal statement). [10]

5.1 Profile of respondents

Leader 1 (L1) has been in the current academic leadership role for about 6 months. In previous positions he was in an academic leadership role for 17 years and corporate leadership role for 7 years (in higher education sector). Leader 2 (L2) has been in current academic leadership role for three years and was in academic leadership role in previous positions for three years. All these roles were in the higher education sector. Leader 3 (L3) has been in current leadership role for the last six months and was in a leadership position previously for 10 years. [11]

5.2 Leadership in teaching

L1 mentioned:

"I lead the staff in the department by setting an example. I have empathy for students and I prepare my lectures and tutorials adequately after understanding curriculum design. To me academic leadership involves mentoring younger staff and less experienced staff. I provide training opportunities to them and follow an open door policy". [12]

L2 said:

"I foster continual appraisal of staff within the department through student evaluation questionnaires of the Centre for Learning and Teaching [CELT] and also through peer evaluation and self-appraisal by staff themselves. This enables the staff to know the areas that require improvement. I encourage the use of new teaching techniques". [13]

L3 opined that "leadership in teaching means being current with subject matter, current with scholarship, and using different delivery mediums". [14]

The responses above show that L2 has taken definitive action to ensure that the teaching practice of staff within the department is improved continually through CELT evaluations, peer reviews and self-appraisals. Areas needing action are identified and acted upon. L2 specifically mentions that he encourages staff to use new teaching techniques. Evaluations as above would certainly help in identifying which teaching techniques work and why do they work. It is obvious that L2 follows a definite action plan. The introspection and desire to learn from feedback is definitely a desirable leadership attribute. L1 indicated that he provides leadership through setting an example. Theory tells us that leaders do set an example to their staff. However, this begs the question how does one determine that his/her example was worthy of emulation? To be worthy of emulation, leadership practice should clearly achieve set goals. These could be qualitative or quantitative goals. For example, building a collegial atmosphere in the school could be a qualitative goal or raising teaching standards (measured through CELT student evaluation scores) could be a quantitative goal. L1 did not clarify what trait of the leadership were considered worth emulating by him and why? The author gets a feeling that probably the statement was just rhetorical. L3's understanding of leadership in teaching seemed at variance with theory. [15]

5.3 Leadership in research

To the question "Can you describe what do you consider as effective leadership in research? Can you provide some examples?" L1 replied:

"I lead by setting example. I take active interest in research and provide support to interested staff. If the staff is not interested in research, despite ability, I give 'a kick on the butt'. I don't think research leadership means simply publishing in A1 [top

ranking journals] journals [L1 disagrees with other leaders on this]. I think it is about encouraging collaboration and it should be interdisciplinary". [16]

L2 mentioned:

"one couldn't provide effective leadership in research unless one has a strong track record of publication himself. Research is not easy and it is difficult to get started. This begs the need for mentoring which a leader with strong research record can provide". [17]

L2 heads a research centre and is also a national president of professional body. L2 has been successful in getting research grants from government and industry. L3 indicated "I think leadership in research refers to creating a demonstration effect, encouraging presentation of papers in conferences, and mentoring of staff with low self-esteem". It is obvious that L2 is a leader in research. Theory states that research leaders inspire respect about their own ability as researcher. Strong track record of publications, successful grant applications and assuming a mentoring role are examples of how one can earn that respect. L3's mentoring of staff with low-self esteem is a leadership quality as leaders are those who inspire. [18]

5.4 Strategy, vision and networking

To question 5 "what short-term (ST) and long-term (LT) vision have you set up for your department/school/discipline?", and to question 6 "how does this vision correspond with the University's vision", L1 replied "as regards question 5 [ST and LT vision of school], at this stage work is in progress". Interestingly, to question 6, he replied:

"school's vision fits totally with broad vision of the University, which is that of being a professional University teaching and researching for developing professionals. Core values of the University that is community service etc. are the same for the school". [19]

L2 said "we have an area specific vision statement. We want to develop professionals but would like to differentiate from our local competitor University". He indicated "our school does it by putting more emphasis on applied aspects keeping in view requirements of the profession". He mentioned:

"for us short-term vision is taking steps towards long-term vision and our school has vision set in respect of each of three areas like teaching, research and community service. Both short and long-term visions are reflected in the annual strategic and tactical plan of the school, which are subsets of the University's strategic plan. This automatically ensures consistency in vision at University level and school level". [20]

Theory tells us that setting clear goals and vision is an attribute of effective leadership. L2 demonstrates this quality. To L3, his long-term vision for the school is "to have international recognition for the school. The university should be a university of choice for students. For this to happen staff should be of high calibre". L3 did make some good points about leadership especially having long-

term vision for school and hiring and retaining staff of high calibre, which is consistent with the theory that leaders have broader vision. L3's statement that the university has no clear direction for the future was a bit shocking. One wonders if it arose out of frustration or out of ignorance. Either of these would not be characteristics of a true leader. [21]

5.5 Collaborative and motivational leadership

To question 7, "how do you motivate the staff in your discipline/school/department? Can you give some examples?" the following responses were received. L1 indicated:

"I provide leadership by example, by working hard and encouraging staff quietly. I help them plan their future and keep the staff informed about goals and developments. I have assured one member of staff to finish his doctorate and I will keep him free of any workload in semester 1 next year". [22]

According to theory inspiring people to do their best is one of the motivational qualities of an academic leader. The latter statement of L1 could be construed to mean that this is being done. L2 explained:

"I use a carrot and stick approach. I pick up key people in research and teaching who have demonstrated their ability and leave administration work to others. I establish a relationship with every one and determine their individual strengths and weaknesses and delegate clear tasks accordingly. I provide incentives to those who perform well and threats to others". [23]

According to theory honesty, openness and integrity, positive attitude to change and innovation and inspiring people to give their best are examples of motivational leadership. It was not clear how L2 motivates those who aren't good in either teaching or research. L3 indicated "I motivate staff by identifying their needs and supporting attendance at conferences. I consider that workload should be commensurate with research performance". Theory states that identifying needs and rewarding staff accordingly are qualities of a good leader. [24]

5.6 Fair and efficient management

Question 8 was, "what according to you constitutes fair and efficient management? Can you give some examples?" To L1 "equity, balanced workload reflecting level of capability and experience of staff constitutes fair and efficient management. Keeping tab on costs per EFTSU [Equivalent Full Time Student Units] and ensuring effective financial management also constitutes fair and efficient management". L2 says "openness, no special deals, transparency in workloads, allowing people to develop their strengths constitutes fairness. It involves delegation of clear tasks". According to theory, fair and efficient management includes delegating well, getting things done with minimum fuss and being highly organised. To L3, "fair and efficient management means holding staff accountable and managing them through development. Intelligent staff

needs to be recognised". All the leaders demonstrated that their leadership style is consistent with theory. [25]

5.7 Development and recognition of performance

Question 9 was, "What efforts have you made to develop staff in your discipline? Can you give some examples?". L1 indicated:

"I encourage staff. Seminar series is yet another way of encouraging staff to develop. I help staff in seeking their goals and supports conference attendance. I provide both financial and non-financial support and give lesser workloads to staff to help their attainment of research and higher degrees". [26]

L2 stated:

"annual appraisal is used for identifying staff development needs and also for rewarding performance. Discussions on teaching evaluations, self-appraisals, and strategic plan meetings all provide opportunities to identify development needs of staff. For informal discussion and reinforcing team spirit, a monthly drink is arranged". [27]

According to theory, praising, sustaining interest of staff and giving honest feedback to help them improve all help in developing staff. For L3, developing staff refers "to extensive encouragement in research and providing administrative support to staff who require it". Both L1 and L2 demonstrate the strategies they use to develop and reward staff. L3's stress seemed to be on research and selective provision of administrative resources to achieve the desired goals of the school. [28]

5.8 Interpersonal skills

Question 10 asked "how would you describe your interpersonal skills? Can you support with examples?" L1 described "I have empathy for people. I am friendly, decisive and prepared to admit mistakes. I am, however, impatient at people who don't pull their weight or don't do their homework or don't attend University". L2 said "I don't enjoy committees and prefer to deal with staff on a one to one basis rather than in a group situation. I am task oriented". According to theory communicating well and having concern for others are key interpersonal skills of leaders. L3 feels "I am sensitive to people and put myself in shoes of others and treat them with respect". It seems that all the leaders have good interpersonal skills. [29]

5.9 Other comments

After responses for all the questions were obtained and read out to respondents, they were finally asked if they would like to add anything further to what they have stated or raise other relevant issues if any. L1 indicated that different skills and styles are required to lead in higher education than in business. Academics are difficult to manage and don't work as a team. There is less control on productivity.

Leading academics is like herding cats. It's a management hurdle. L2 stated that it is important to have cohesiveness in different departments within a school. L1's comments that academics don't work as a team and they are like cats are interesting. [30]

6. Summary

In the following paragraphs, we summarise the attributes of good academic leadership indicated by each of these leaders and how they compare with theory. [31]

6.1 L1 as an academic leader

L1 indicated that he provides leadership in teaching and research by setting an example. This is consistent with theory. As for strategy, vision and networking, L1's comments were rather confusing. On the one hand he mentioned that school's vision is still being finalised, however, in the same breath he stated that school's vision is consistent with the university's vision. According to theory an academic leader has a definite strategy, vision and networking abilities. As regards collaborative and motivational leadership, L1 again explained that he leads by example. He said that he is encouraging one of the staff for early completion of doctoral studies. According to theory, inspiring people to do their best is a quality of an academic leader. However, it wasn't clear whether L1's encouragement is restricted to a single staff member or to all the staff in the school. As regards fair and efficient management, L1's view was that he ensures this through equity and balance workloads. This trait could be construed to be in line with theory that an academic leader is fair. However, L1 could not give any example of how he ensures "efficient outcomes". As regards development and recognition of performance he indicated that he achieves this among others through conference funding. As per theory, sustaining staff interest and encouraging staff is an essential quality of a leader. As regards, interpersonal skills he opined that he is friendly. Theory states that leaders have good interpersonal skills. [32]

6.2 L2 as an academic leader

L2 was very specific about how he goes about appraising staff performance in teaching. When he mentioned that he provides leadership in research by example the statement is not rhetorical but backed by hard evidence of his research excellence. He heads a research centre, which was successful in getting ARC (Australian Research Council) grants. This is consistent with theory. As for strategy, vision and networking, L2's comments were very clear. He indicated that school has strategic plan and tactical plan, which is used to monitor performance. The strategic plan was drawn from the university's plan and as such school's strategy, vision and networking is in line with the university's. According to theory an academic leader has a definite strategy, vision and networking abilities. As regards collaborative and motivational leadership, L2 said that he has one to one dialogue with his staff and picks up key people in research and teaching and leaves administration to others. According to theory, inspiring

people to do their best is a quality of an academic leader. As regards fair and efficient management, L2's opinion was that he practices openness and transparency in workloads. This trait could be construed to be in line with theory that an academic leader is fair. L2's assertion about the delegation of clear tasks and monitoring performance are attributes of an efficient leader. As regards development and recognition of performance, L2 thinks that staff development needs are identified in annual appraisal and then acted upon. As per theory, sustaining staff interest and encouraging staff is an essential quality of a leader. As regards, interpersonal skills L2 mentioned that he deals with staff on one-to-one basis rather than in a committee situation. This attribute of L2 was somewhat in variance with theory, which claims that leaders have good interpersonal skills. Thus, L2 need not have problems in dealing in groups but as per his statement it seems he has. [33]

6.3 L3 as an academic leader

To L3, leadership in teaching refers to being current with subject matter and using different delivery mechanisms. One would expect an academic is expected to be current with subject matter and try out different teaching modes. Hence this statement could be considered as consistent with theory. As for research leadership, L3 believes in creating a demonstration effect. This is consistent with theory that an academic leader should set an example. As for strategy, vision and networking, L3 wants the school to have an international image. Theory mentions that an academic leader has a definite strategy, vision and networking abilities. As regards collaborative and motivational leadership, L3 opined that he motivates staff by supporting conference attendance. According to theory, inspiring people to do their best is a quality of an academic leader. As regards fair and efficient management, L3 indicated that for him this means holding staff accountable for performance. This trait could be construed to be in line with theory that an academic leader is fair as the implicit assumption is clear goals are given to staff and their performance monitored. As regards development and recognition of performance, L3's stress was on research performance. As per theory, sustaining staff interest and encouraging staff is an essential quality of a leader. As regards, interpersonal skills, he puts himself in other people's shoes. As per theory, empathy is an essential attribute of leaders with good interpersonal skills. [34]

7. Conclusion

Academic leadership poses problems that are distinctly different than leadership in business or government agencies. Academic leaders need to stay close to teaching, learning, research and scholarship to bring out the best among academics. Issues of academic freedom are of great importance and relevance in this context. From above responses it seems that all the three leaders are close to a theoretical model of effective leadership proposed by RAMSDEN and provide further support to that model. Bracketing (personal statement) was used to separate author's bias from the views of the leaders interviewed. The author finds that L2 conforms to theory to a great extent and would like to emulate these attributes in his own practice of academic leadership with a difference that he

would be willing to discuss issues openly in committees rather than on one-to-one basis. [35]

Acknowledgement

Appendix 1: Interview Schedule

Name: Position:

Date of Interview: Time:

This interview is being conducted as a part of requirement for the subject "Leadership in Higher Education" in Graduate Certificate in Higher Education. The objective is to get your views about what you consider to be Leadership in Higher Education.

1. How long have you been in the current leadership role?
2. Have you been in a leadership role previous to current position? If so for how long?
3. Can you describe what do you consider as effective "leadership in teaching"? Can you provide some examples?
4. Can you describe what do you consider as effective "leadership in research"? Can you provide some examples?
5. As a leader what short-term and long-term vision have you set up for your department/school/discipline?
6. How does this vision correspond with the University's vision?
7. How do you motivate the staff in your discipline/school/ department? Can you give some examples?
8. What according to you constitutes fair and efficient management? Can you give some examples from your own experience?
9. What efforts have you made to development of staff in your discipline? Can you give some examples?
10. How will you describe your interpersonal skills? Can you support with examples?
11. Are there any other points that you would like to add?

Thank you for your time and patience.

Appendix 2: Personal Statement

The author expects academic leaders to have one or more of the following traits.

1. An academic of eminence having established a name in research in her/his chosen field and acknowledged by researchers in his/her discipline as such. This can be evidenced by number of publications, publications in recent years (so as to verify sustainable interest in research), publications in top quality journals etc.
2. They should have an outstanding teaching record evidenced by student evaluations such as those of CELT or of peers or of experts.
3. They should have good interpersonal skills evidenced by fair dealing. Fairness can be judged by measurable performance criteria being applied evenly across the school.
4. They should be apolitical. When leaders start playing politics, subordinates take the cue and respond accordingly. But if leaders specify that what matters is performance and not politics then that message permeates.
5. Leaders should specify clear goals so that everyone knows what is expected of him/her.

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