

Leadership in Higher Education

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Abstract

This study explores leadership in higher education. It is essential for professionals at the university level to be aware of successful practices to better serve students and fellow staff. By investigating leadership skills and styles, this research sheds light onto successful practices when working in a higher education setting. This research exposes positive leadership qualities so that professionals can build relationships with students, associates and colleagues and better understand how to effectively lead when working with collegiate populations.

Teaching Notes

This case was developed as a contribution to those working in the higher education community. Leadership qualities uncovered at the conclusion of this study exposes successful practices for both faculty and administration to further foster relationships with students, associates and colleagues. This research allows professionals with university careers have the opportunity to adopt techniques of effective leaders who have seasoned experience in the field.

Keywords

successful post-secondary leadership; higher education leadership; effective leadership skills; transformational leadership; academic leadership trends; leadership styles; positive leadership; professional leadership practices

Literature Review

Collegiate populations interact with a variety of professionals in higher education; often those in positions who use particular leadership skills and styles. Mitchell (1990) explains, “leadership cannot be broken down into separate behavioral specifications such as management or ... supervision” (p. 186). Therefore, it is key to look at all aspects of being a leader; autocratic, bureaucratic, transactional, etc. Within the realm of higher education, however, it appears elements in these models are not highlighted as often as transformational leadership. Effective leadership at the university level often points away from acting as an authoritarian and utilizes more transformational styles that include collaboration and mentorship. In the following sections I will better describe transformational leadership and the ways in which this model functions in higher education. Furthermore, I will allude to other key leadership qualities that prove to be effective when working as a university professional.

Transformational Leadership: Vision, Voices and Values

When working in education, teams of professionals bring personal commitment and passions toward planning and improving their collegiate community. Bleedorn (2003) explains, “transforming leadership... creates a dynamic connection to the ideas of other enlightened, systematic thinkers and observers” (p. 33). This model offers students and staff the “affordances to extend their cognitive abilities, problem-solving skills and knowledge” (Thoonen et al. p. 502). College administrators act as transformational leaders by integrating (1) a shared vision of change; (2) empowering voices in a collaborative community and (3) reflection on vision value.

Vision. Professionals in 21st century education must be aware of clarity and purpose. Davis (2006) tells us the ability to “articulate an educational vision” is key to “fostering continuous improvement” (p. v). Furthermore, that “educational leaders must be the stewards in a vision of success for all to achieve” (Knoeppel, p. 24). It is evident that working in a student atmosphere with today’s educational needs, university instructors and administrators need to be transparent in expectations and vision building in order to support change. Leaders have found success in acting as facilitators rather than authoritarians. Including other minds in vision development allows individuals to be “empowered, feel committed, take appropriate risks, be imaginative, and get involved” (Sousa, p. 42). Sharing a clear vision also leads to an understanding of how to properly determine and evaluate goals and outcomes. “The creation of a clear target is essential because it guides what is taught and assessed” (Knoeppel et al. p. 25). Crum & Sherman (2008) further reiterate that, “clearly communicating the purpose and rationale behind decisions ... facilitates success” (p. 572). This includes communicating with those who have assisted in the new

idea, process, or protocol that will lead to change, which allows individuals to further develop a solution to student or faculty needs.

Voices. As one continues to build on a clear and concise vision, collaboration can enhance teamwork processes leading to success when working towards a common goal. Sousa (2003) explains that, “effective leadership is a partnership with others rather than a one-person operation” (p. 9). Furthermore, Amey (2006) tells us that effective leaders in higher education “lead via teams in systems that are web-like and non-hierarchical” (p. 56). If a leader opts for the most successful end product, he/she needs to look at all minds involved pinpointing who can bring individual expertise. One principal explained this as “a function of getting good people in place and letting them do what they do best” (Crum & Sherman, p. 568). Moreover, a collaborative culture is developed when a leader allows for an environment where team building can be fostered. Professionals “make sense” of participatory environments which is a “key factor in effectiveness as a leader” (Amey, p. 55). This further solidifies a professional learning community that pushes team building and relationships, as well as encourages individuals to collectively work towards a common goal. Building this rapport “draws members ... together to build a culture [where] they feel secure” (Mitchell, p. 186).

Values. With high levels of teamwork and collaboration, it is imperative to look at the overall process and final product of the vision to see the value of its outcome. Knoeppel (2010) states that, “the path to effective leadership requires reflection” (p. 24). In order to do this, the professional needs to “know when to be introspective” (Sousa, p. 11). Leaders in higher education must assess the outcome of the shared vision and see whether it successfully met student and/or staff needs or if challenges remain. Amey (2006) explains, “postsecondary leaders need to guide their institutions into the future” by “critical reflection ... and deep understanding of organizational culture and values” (p. 58) The act of reflecting gives the individual the ability to look at the accomplished goal, consider university needs or mission values, and professionally deconstruct what may be needed in order to shape or create a more efficient vision in the future. Furthermore, this contributes to sustaining positive leadership abilities; exemplary practices require “periods set aside for reflection, renewal, and relaxation” (Davis, p. 101). This allows for awareness of what functioned well in the process, as well as how to better improve results for times ahead. Myatt (2012) emphasizes this explaining that, “real leaders are always looking beyond what is, thinking about the possibilities of what if, and acting to ensure what is next.”

Transformational leadership brings teams together to co-construct, learn and reflect on visions and goals. Often this kind of collaboration supports positive change and broadens effectiveness of professional leadership practices. Furthermore, Thoonen et al. (2011) explains that the transformational model “aims to foster capacity development and higher levels of personal commitment ... resulting in extra effort and greater productivity” (p. 507). However, there are other elements that need to be considered in order to be an effective leader in higher education. These characteristics will be discussed in the following section.

Effectively Leading: Other Considerations

Being a leader in post-secondary education can be complex. Murphy (2002) describes that the key to handling such responsibilities and power is to “create an alternative platform ... when thinking about school leadership” (p. 78). At the university level, various challenges may occur that demand more proactive skills. Therefore, other leadership strengths need to be considered; interpersonal communication, creativity thinking and technology.

Interpersonal Communication. In a leadership position, often how we interact with colleagues and team members predicts the end result or outcome of our vision. Crum & Sherman (2008) explain an attribute to being successful in communication means “external awareness and engagement” within our professional relationships (p. 564). Myatt (2012) also discusses that “leadership is about acclimation, improvising and adapting” to various personalities and characters; including individuals who may not always bring forth ideal attitudes towards a collective vision. This is why interpersonal skills are significant when working with collegiate populations. Having the ability to listen appropriately is key when working with a variety of individuals, whether students or staff; “exemplary leadership requires practicing attentive and active listening... even with those who tend to waste a lot of time” (Davis, p. 97). It is imperative that the leader considers all voices and responds, rather than reacts, to those offering opinions or feedback. To be effective, Gardner (2004) concludes that a requirement of leadership is “interpersonal intelligence” which includes understanding of how to communicate with others and building on those relationships within your collaborative culture (p. 108).

Creative Thinking. When working towards a collaborative goal, leaders should inspire creativity to ensure a successful vision. To keep collegiate colleagues engaged, Sousa (2003) explains, “leaders need to think outside the box by developing their own creative skills and cultivating creativity in others in order to find innovative ways to bring about change” (p. 34). If a procedure during a university meeting produces yawns from professionals, consider

new protocol that could liven up the atmosphere for those involved. Myatt (2012) explains, “the difference between real leaders, and leaders by title only, is what they do when the creative juices begin to dwindle.” Innovation can be difficult because “it means doing something that people don’t find easy” (Robinson, 2010). However, creative thinkers use the same “cognitive processes others do, but they use them in a more efficient and flexible way” which fuels passion in a collegial environment. Often this brings new excitement to previous systematic routines, which encourages collective thinking. Azzam (2009) concludes that original creative thinking comes “through collaboration and through the stimulation of other people’s ideas” which drives individual tendencies to be visionary (p. 25).

Technology. When working with a group of creative thinkers at the university level, it is salient that professionals are dynamic and cutting edge. This includes being receptive and aware of technology and integrating it into the collaborative vision. Bleedorn (2003) explains that “technology pushes humankind to new dimensions” which creates a great opportunity for leaders in higher education (p. 83). There is a clear difference between a leader who presents by lecture only compared to one who provides handouts, shows a video or uses a power point to explain to their team their idea for change. Not only does technology help provide a pathway towards an innovative goal, it speaks to multiple intelligences and individual ways of learning. Moreover, it relates to student populations (The Millennials) and also functions as a great resource when working with fellow staff. Bleedorn (2003) concludes that the information age provides a new way to stimulate “the mind to make new connections” which aids in vision development (p. 87).

Conclusions

Being a leader in higher education is a multi-faceted role. Sousa (2003) explains leaders must “analyze, assess, plan, implement and evaluate” (p. 9). Being clear on the vision at hand, collaborating with your team and reflecting on the value of outcome are all elements of Transformational leadership. However, as a leader it is important to consider other aspects such as relationships with colleagues, creative thinking and the usage of technology.

This study will examine professional leaders in higher education. By interviewing those who work in the university system, effective leadership qualities will be identified that will either confirm the current trends discussed or allude to new characteristics that prove to be successful when working with collegiate populations.

Methodology

Participants. My participants included three professionals who work in higher education. All work within student services. Two participants work in private institutions located in Southern California. The third participant works at a public university, also located in Southern California. I attempted to balance data by obtaining a fourth participant who also worked in the public sector of higher education, however due to unforeseen circumstances and the time allotted for this research, I was unable to meet with this individual.

Participant 1 is the Director of Student Teaching, the Director of the University Intern Program and an educational instructor at Private University A. Participant 2 works at Public University B as an Information Literacy Coordinator and Participant 3 is the Director of LBGT (Lesbian, Bi-sexual, Gay, Transgendered) Student Services and Off-Campus student life at Private University C.

Settings for my data collection varied. Participant 1 was interviewed in his office at his home campus. The atmosphere was spacious and accommodating; we sat in comfortable lounge chairs. It was early afternoon when we met; there were no students on campus. Minimal interruptions occurred during our Q&A with the exception of one text message he said he needed to respond to.

Participant 2 was also interviewed in her professional office at her university library. Her office was large and open; she had quotes posted on her door and tropical memorabilia from her travels on her desk. It was a Friday afternoon and no one else was around her office with the exception of one young woman. She left shortly after our interview began.

Participant 3 was interviewed at his campus' University Hall which contained a café and many dining areas. The setting was open with lots of natural light. No one interrupted us during the interview session.

Methods and Ethical Considerations. The data was collected through a face-to-face interview of each individual. I am certified to work with human participants per the National Institutes of Health – Human Research (see Appendix A). Participants did not see the interview questions (see Appendix B) before my meeting with them. All participants were given a Leadership Model Chart (see Appendix C) after question three was proposed to assist interviewees in articulating their response.

Before meeting with interviewees, the questions were piloted to be sure there were no leading questions to reduce any and all biases. The pilot also revealed that the interview was no longer than 60 minutes indicating it could be conducted in a reasonable length of time. At each interview, the participant was recorded by their

permission and later, transcribed for data analysis. The literature review, research notes, appendices and all other documentation related to this research was housed electronically on my personal computer and was password protected. Participants were made aware that their anonymity would be maintained. It should be noted that this research is not aiming to generalize being that it is a small scale case study of leadership in higher education.

Data Analysis

Although each interviewee expressed a different perspective on the leadership role, common themes arose between all three participants. In searching for effective qualities and leadership characteristics, I have deconstructed these themes into two categories; core knowledge and key skills. A summarization of these themes are shown (Table 1):

Table 1

Common themes found during interviews

Core Knowledge	Key Skills
Vision and Cooperation Leading by Example Observing and Reflecting	Building Relationships Facilitating and Empowering Humor and Happiness

Core knowledge

Within this category, I define core knowledge as the essence of expertness. This includes not only having a deep awareness of certain leadership characteristics, but being an individual who naturally is an aficionado and possesses the following themes: vision and cooperation, leading by example and observing and reflecting (see Table 2).

Table 2

Core Knowledge of Leadership Equation

$\text{Vision and Cooperation} + \text{Leading by Example} + \text{Observing and Reflecting} = \text{Core Knowledge}$

Vision and Cooperation. Vision and cooperation integrate two aspects of Transformational leadership. As previously discussed, Sousa (2003) states that “effective leadership is a partnership with others rather than a one-

person operation” (p. 9). One interviewee, Participant 1 confirmed this explaining that he is a “visionary” who accomplishes goals by “inspiring and sharing visions [and] inspiring other people to do things and do well.” Clarity of ideas is also key in vision development and communication which is exactly how Participant 1 functions as a leader. He explains, “I make it really clear that I have certain beliefs [and] philosophies; if they are clear ... then they can go off and do what they want to help me fulfill my vision.” Participant 3 also spoke of using a shared vision with his associates stating that his team “should be going in the same direction” to accomplish goals within the university. Participant 2 reiterated she utilizes the Transformational method in her professional leadership practices as well. She connected to team vision and claimed that one must “inspire” others and give fellow associates individual opportunities; she claimed by doing this you create a “culture of collaboration, collaboration, collaboration.” This serves as promoting all professionals involved to put them “in place and letting them do what they do best” (Crum & Sherman, p. 568).

Leading by Example. In order to inspire others and build a community that works together, professionals must have the natural ability to provide a positive example to their team. Participant 3 explains, “I always use myself as an example,” saying that he offers himself as a model for his associates. He discussed that being personally invested in his teams collaborative vision as well as “using” his “personality traits to be a good leader” can help others learn from him and inform fellow professionals of positive leadership practices. Furthermore, Participant 2 said that she, too, tends to “lead by example and provide a good example” for the staff she works with and students she teaches. She said that acting in this manner further emphasizes her professionalism and passions in higher education. Both Participant 2 and 3 shared in their interview that acting as an example can inspire varying colleague populations across the board, whether working with higher administration or one-on-one with staff. Interviewees identified that having the core knowledge to lead by example encourages and prompts others to act in the same manner; this causes positive influences in work ethic and performance, further solidifying cohesiveness to a collaborative team. Participant 1 described specifically when working with a student population (The Millennials) that it is crucial to “do what you say you believe in.” He states, “they watch what you do, they don’t really care about what you say.” He concludes that the key to leading by example is to offer a model others would hope to emulate and to consistently “practice what you preach.”

Observing and Reflecting. In addition to providing an example for your team, it is essential for professionals to be observant and reflective of their practice. Knoepfel (2010) states that, “the path to effective

leadership requires reflection” (p. 24). This is a critical tool to continue growth and awareness in leadership and is an element in assessing value in the Transformational leadership model. Participant 2 said she is “very mindful” which contributes to her work ethic in managing and building relationships with colleagues. She also described that “listening to others and learning from others” was one way in which she naturally developed her ability to be a peacemaker. Participant 3 expands on this explaining that he loves to observe how people “interact in meetings with each other” in order to see “different leadership qualities.” Moreover, he discussed how he loved “going to big meetings and seeing how people sit around” because this act of observation “definitely informed the way” he worked. When Participant 3 described this, not only did he learn from acting as a fly on the wall, but he described that observing and reflecting on his own practices helped him to learn new ways to be a top notch leader. As stated previously, Sousa (2003) described the importance of “being introspective” in a leadership role (p. 11). Participant 1 spoke of this saying, “you can learn so much from people around you if you just open your eyes and sit back and watch.” Similar to how Participant 3 described his tendency to observe, so did Participant 2. She stated that “listening is a really good quality” and that she “learned” from others by doing so. Davis (2006) confirms that “exemplary leadership requires practicing attentive and active listening” (p. 97). In the interviews from all participants, each mentioned the value of listening, observing and reflecting on how others functioned to help them to grow in their own personal performance as a leader.

Key Skills

Within this category, I define skills as a polished characteristic or strength used in a leadership role. This includes not only being proficient in the following qualities, but being a master in the themes of: building relationships, facilitating and empowering others and humor and happiness (see Table 3).

Table 3

Key Leadership Skills Equation

Building Relationships + Facilitating and Empowering Others + Humor and Happiness = Key Leadership Skills

Building Relationships. Creating and building relationships is a key element that is discussed ubiquitously within the Transformational leadership model, highlighting the significance of interpersonal abilities. Participant 3 expands on this saying “interpersonal skills [and] knowing how to interact with people is really important; part of

being a good leader is just understanding that.” Gardner (2004) reiterated that effective leadership is having “interpersonal intelligence” which includes understanding how to communicate with others and build on relationships within your collaborative culture (p. 108). Participant 2 explained the weight, in particular when working with higher administration, of knowing “the playing field and the players.” She further explained there should be a level of awareness in terms of politics and that it is key to “be strategic.” Participant 2 discusses that in his leadership role “90% of the job” is “being able to read people” and having the capability to “manage everyone’s different personalities.” As mentioned previously, it is imperative to display an “external awareness” to create depth and understanding in professional relationships (Crum & Sherman, p. 564). Participant 1 explains that working in higher education “revolves all around relationships.” He continues, “leadership is so relational – there are a lot of leaders that fail simply because they do not develop relationships.” Many environments in post-secondary education require professionals to have a rapport with their team. This allows for engagement of colleagues as well as encourages individuals to be collaborative and work on team building. Participant 1 concludes, “being a genius at fostering relationships... is what great leaders do.”

Facilitating and Empowering Others. As a leader, building relationships with colleagues is crucial; however giving those involved an opportunity to have responsibility empowers individuals and creates trust in your team. Participant 1 explained when you “empower people, you give them the authority to do things themselves and be responsible ... you hire people you trust; people you believe in.” By pinpointing those who can bring individual expertise, a leader can co-create a group of professionals that can seamlessly produce a great result. Participant 2 connected to this saying, “I see how people thrive when there is trust,” explaining that often times this “hands-off” method can help everyone “get to that goal” in their own way. Amey (2006) described that effective leaders in higher education often find the most success when working in systems “that are web-like and non-hierarchical” (p. 56). Participant 2 claimed she observed leaders who found success in using a philosophy of: “I am going to sit back and allow you to shine even if that means I am not shining.” This integrates having trust in your team, but also includes feeling confident in the work that will be produced by individual staff members. Giving colleagues a role where they become liable for specific tasks “allows them to take ownership ... which makes them want to do better” says Participant 3. He continues, “involvement and accountability” is “much more empowering” for professionals involved. Because each team member involved is delegated a particular function to complete for the overall

outcome, Participant 3 concludes, “it makes much more sense why [they] come to work [and] gives them a purpose.”

Humor and Happiness. There is a transparent value to building relationships and empowering your team when acting as a leader. However, remaining positive and in high spirits when working with collegiate populations is key to leadership success as well. When working with students, Participant 2 explained that she “comes in with a lot of humor and energy” which is often reciprocated in the classroom. This is not only for those working with the Millennial generation. Participant 1 described his tendency to be light hearted and jovial, which created an “air where people actually enjoy being together.” Participant 1 found he could flourish and communicate more effectively with fellow associates as well as higher administration by “keeping things light.” He continues, “I think we take ourselves way too seriously in higher education,” explaining that he functions more sensibly when he is good-humored and can laugh from time to time. Participant 3 also discussed his gravitation towards a positive leadership style. He emphasized the importance of “being nice” which he feels “goes a long way ... and can go really far.” When working with a vast array of people in higher education, he also explained how the power of perception impacts your professional realities. He says, “how people perceive you is going to impact the type of work you are going to be able to to together” which is why he believes a simple smile creates positive energy. He continues “it may be really cheesy ... but it is so disarming ... if you are nice and you are positive, I think you get that back.”

Implications

By investigating various characteristics of leadership, this study shed light onto best practices when working in a higher education setting. The examination exposed positive leadership qualities that professionals can build upon to further solidify relationships with students, associates and colleagues and better understand how to effectively lead when working with these populations.

If this study were to be replicated, I would make two changes. First, I would be sure to confirm a fourth and final interviewee. Although circumstances were out of my hands and led to the elimination of a fourth participant, I believe it would have been beneficial and informative for this research had I had the opportunity to speak with a fourth individual who worked in a public higher education setting. Secondly, because of the thoughtfulness necessary to answer my interview questions, I feel it would have been appropriate to send interviewees my questions

the day before our planned meeting. I think in doing this, participants would have had more time allotted to consider the questions at hand and reflect on how to best answer my inquiries.

This research is a contribution to those working in the higher education community. Leadership qualities uncovered at the conclusion of this study exposed successful practices for student, faculty and administration to further foster relationships with associates and colleagues. Individuals with university careers have the opportunity to adopt techniques of seasoned professionals in the field which will further their practices and skills in higher education.

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Appendix A

Protecting Human Subject Research Participants

Certificate of Completion

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) Office of Extramural Research certifies that **Shay Davis** successfully completed the NIH Web-based training course "Protecting Human Research Participants".

Date of completion: 03/28/2011

Certification Number: 652743

Appendix B

Interview Questions

1. What is your official title within higher education?
2. How long have you been in this role?
3. What do you see as major components within your position? In these components where do you concentrate your energy?
4. Are you aware of different leadership styles?¹
5. Do you have a personal preference?
6. What attracts you to this particular leadership model?

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If Transformational Leadership was discussed, continue to question 9. If not, proceed here:

7. Have you come across the term Transformational Leadership?²
 8. Do you or someone who you work with at your institution utilize the transformational model in your profession?
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9. Can you describe leadership qualities that you use that function well within your role? How do you operationalize these qualities?
 10. Could you provide an example of when you were presented with a leadership challenge and the action that was taken?
 11. Are there any other colleagues who act as a leader in your community (within your specialization at your institution; for example Career Services/Advising... etc.)?
 12. Are there any creative or innovative leadership strategies have you used in your profession?
 13. Let's talk about your university's mission; could you share any aspects of the mission that resonate with you?
 14. Can you provide an example of how you (or perhaps a colleague) acted as a leader to help foster this mission?
 15. How do you operationalize your personal leadership qualities when working with:
 - a) student populations
 - b) faculty or staff
 - c) administration
 16. Do you believe you have any particular needs in terms of professional development in regards to leadership?
 17. Are there any topics I have not discussed today that you would like to share?

¹ If interviewee says yes, continue to question 5. If no, provide visual and continue with the following: There are multiple forms; some examples include autocratic, bureaucratic, laissez-faire, transactional and transformational. *"If you lead like this..."* or *"Where do you see yourself?"*

² Offer working definition if need be.

Appendix C

Leadership Models Chart

