Collegial Leadership: Deepening Collaborative Processes to Advance Mission and Outcomes

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Introduction

Organizational effectiveness and leadership are intertwined. While it is possible for organizations to succeed when leadership is lacking, it is difficult to imagine a healthy, successful organization with good administration and employee relationships without effective leadership. In a collegiate setting, this reality is reflected in Criterion 1d of the Higher Learning Commission's Criteria for Accreditation: "The organization's governance and administrative structures promote effective leadership and support collaborative processes that enable the organization to fulfill its mission." Indeed, successful leadership is critical to the success of academic institutions (Wang and Berger 2010).

Efforts to develop effective academic administrators (academic leaders) traditionally focus on the dynamics of hierarchy in of the support of their supervisors or subordinates. This vertical focus grew out of responses to Taylor's scientific management (1911). As theories of management expanded beyond human task management into the interrelationships of humans at work, leadership theories with a horizontal focus arose. This paper seeks to extend our understanding of leadership, particularly in institutions of higher education (IHE), by focusing on an overlooked dynamic: the support of colleagues (hierarchical/structural peers) in advancing institutional objectives. Grace Hopper, retired U.S. Navy admiral, said that "Leadership is a two-way street, loyalty up and loyalty down. Respect for one's superiors; care for one's crew" (http://thinkexist.com/quotes/grace_murray_hopper/). We argue that leadership is, in fact, more than a two-way street; it also involves loyalty that is to the right and left. In keeping with Hopper's street metaphor, leadership is not merely a two-way street, but it is an intersection involving ahead (one's superior), behind (subordinates), and the right and left (hierarchical/structural peers). Within this scenario, a leader's engagement with, and support of, peers can be equally valuable in advancing institutional mission and outcomes.

Academic organizations are presently facing challenging environments: decreased funding; increased demands for accountability from society, employers, and government; and a consumer mentality from students are presenting colleges and universities with particularly vexing challenges. Do colleges and universities possess the leadership abilities required to face this environment? This paper describes collegial leadership as a perspective on academic leadership that may aid colleges and universities survive and prosper in the environment they face. Collegial leadership is a type of collaborative leadership defined by behaviors, communication, and paradigms that may deepen and sustain collaborative processes and forces.

Leadership has been defined as "a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal" (Wang and Berger 2010, 6). Research on organizational leadership has traditionally focused on the vertical influence of leaders on members (Kramer and Crespy 2011); such research has added to the understanding of how leaders can influence subordinates through communication.

Collaborative Leadership

Although different research approaches to conventional vertically oriented leadership and on the qualities needed by leaders in vertical settings have added to our understanding of successful leadership, a growing number of scholars and practitioners question whether top-down leadership is realistic and successful. Indeed, some believe that a vertically oriented leadership focus may actually be detrimental in complex situations (Bennis 1999). Consequently, there are increasing calls to examine leadership as a collaborative undertaking (e.g., Houghton, Neck, and Manz 2003; Pearce and Conger 2003).

Collaborative leadership has recently gained attention, but it has a long history (Pearce and Conger 2003). Recent research on collaborative leaders have reported that their subordinates experience a wide range of positive outcomes, including increased productivity, satisfaction, and success (Graen and Uhl-Bien 1995). Collaborative leaders approach leadership differently than vertical leaders. Collaborative leaders, for instance, are curators of talent who motivate rather than merely act as givers of directives and orders (Bennis 1999); they attempt to minimize power differences (Fletcher and Käufer 2003); and they empower others with the authority and responsibility to make decisions (Little and Little 2006). Collaborative leaders foster not only leader-to-group member exchanges, but also member-to-member exchanges (Graen 2006). Chrislip and Larson (1994) suggest that the tasks and roles of collaborative leaders differ from those of vertical leaders, requiring effective collaborative leaders to excel at (1) crossing boundaries and working with diverse groups with differing values, (2) facing complex problems in which strategies for solution are unclear and there is minimal agreement on how to proceed, and (3) focusing attention in the collaborative process in order to maintain progress and achieve goals.

Collaborative leadership, however, goes beyond the processes within an individual group. Collaborative leadership also includes the relationships between individuals and groups across different areas. It recognizes as possible organizations that do not comprise a series of noninteracting silos. Instead, it sees successful organizations as characterized by effective communication flows between groups, areas, and individuals. Thus, a distinguishing feature of collaborative leadership is the building and guiding of relationships between independent teams to advance a mutual mission.

Collegial Leadership

The academic environment seems to be particularly suited to collaborative leadership. The presence of numerous semiautonomous academic, administrative, and staff structures characterized by relatively highly educated individuals makes the academic particularly susceptible to silo thinking and a lack of a level of communication and interaction across areas necessary for optimal success.

While the focus on collaborative leadership grew along with increases in civic partnerships, higher education has been experiencing administrative growth and professionalism of the workforce (Gornitzka and Larsen 2004), which has increased the risk of silo formation and, likewise, is increasing the need for collaborative leadership. Attention to collaborative processes in higher education has trailed that of industry. With the increasingly dynamic and challenging environment faced by colleges and universities, however, the last decade has seen a proliferation of organizational restructuring in higher education with a particular attention placed on increasing communication. An interest in administrative (re-)structures to capture a collaborative advantage has grown, most notably in aligning academic affairs and student affairs under a provost. Other efforts aimed at creating enhanced service, operational efficiencies, and cost savings include the merging of information technology with information resources/libraries, Web services with marketing, wellness centers with psychological services, and various business offices with the finance department.

Although the merging of administrative functions is effective in enhancing certain operations, institutional mission success is dependent on universal, university-wide collaboration. Centralization is effective, but broader associations are necessary to achieve the multifaceted goals and objectives of today's educational institutions. Hence, increased emphasis on collaborative leadership seems necessary in the academic setting.

Given the particular situation of higher education, we introduce a new term to apply to collaborative leadership in higher education. Specifically, we define *collegial leadership* as the process involved in leaders systematically, but informally relating to persons and groups of equivalent authority in a different area for the betterment of a college or university to advance a mutual mission. It involves individuals who possess the skills and abilities to effectively interact with colleagues in different areas at the same level across the college or university where a colleague is defined as a person of similarly equal authority/in a similar position, working in a different area (department) of the institution, with limited or indirect shared responsibilities, purposes, and supervision.

Collegial leadership furthers the theory and practice of collaborative leadership to advance the mission and strategic outcomes in higher education in that it (1) is most applicable within the day-to-day administrative activity of universities; (2) relates to behaviors among people of near equal authority; (3) is based on intrinsic motivation focused on leadership behavior that is not directly addressing an immediate shared interest; (4) is values-oriented—characterized by respect, support, honesty, care, and considering professional needs of others as equal to own; and (5) advances a mission-conscious culture and strategic goals.

How might collegial leadership be best understood? Given organizational dynamics, it seems natural to assume power plays a role. However, the forms of power popularized by French and Raven's (1959) work (coercive, expert, legitimate, referent, and reward) all are enacted by imposing power upon another. Being collegial seems to require a different way of manifesting power. We suggest this way is to offer power to others, essentially giving away power such that others give it back. Sharp's (1973) work on nonviolent action seems to be a good guide here. There certainly must be a communicative component to collegial leadership. Weick argues for an approach in which colleagues act within their organization's structures and systems and then look back to make sense of what was done. He captures this with his question, "How can I know what I think until I see what I say?" (1979, 207). And there must be an interaction between focusing on task and on relationships.

Kouzes and Posner (2002) observe that the most common qualities that respondents most look for and admire in a leader are being honest, forward-looking, competent, inspiring, intelligent, fair-minded, and broad-minded. Zupek (2011) suggests multitasking, taking initiative, creative thinking, expressing enthusiasm, working well with others, and problem solving. Our task in this study is to identify whether there are enduring and discrete behavioral and communicative attributes that define those who engage in collegial leadership.

Effective collegial leaders need to be able to successfully build and maintain long-term relationships with individuals who often are from very different backgrounds and objectives. These relationships, however, are important and essential in a higher education environment. Indeed, it is suggested that it is within informal, natural, unstructured relationships and interactions that an institution's mission and culture is carried. In other words, the essence of a university's identity and mission may be revealed in the expression and support of collegial behaviors and relationships (see Katzenbach and Kahn 2010 on the importance the informal organization, social networks, and social dynamics).

Implementation Challenges

Even if a college or university sees the value of supporting and facilitating collegial leadership, doing so is not an easy undertaking. Given the nature of the academic environment, performance appraisals, for instance, have the potential to directly affect individuals' behavior. Because of the informal nature of collegial leadership, however, collegial leadership generally does not appear on standard performance appraisals. By definition, collegial behaviors are positive and proactive and at the same time less obvious and unexpected. Furthermore, given the time that often must be invested into the development of relationships with other individuals in other areas, the results of attempts at collegial leadership frequently do not produce immediate observable benefits.

Within this setting, supervisors can enhance and support collegial leadership by inquiring and supporting such behavior during the appraisal process, by noting and recognizing collegial behaviors in appraisals, by publically affirming the outcomes resulting from collegial leadership, and by modeling. In other words, through formalizing and honoring unexpected proactive behaviors, such behaviors will increase and create a positive impact on the organizational culture.

Conclusion

Colleges and universities are facing challenges that their predominant organizational structures are unable to address. Given the dynamic environment, colleges and universities are increasingly being forced to reconsider their structures to become better able to quickly and effectively make necessary changes. The informal organization, as summarized in Wikipedia (2011), "can accelerate and enhance responses to unanticipated events, foster innovation, enable people to solve problems that require collaboration across boundaries, and create footpaths showing where the formal organization may someday need to pave a way." Collegial leadership appears to be one way that colleges and universities can better adapt to changes it the environment, permitting them to advance the mission, vision, and values of the institutions to provide the desired outcomes.

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