

**The Challenges of Leadership Development in the Higher Education Sector**  
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To be invited to talk about the challenges of leadership development in the higher ed sector is a mixed opportunity for me.

As I was preparing what I could share with you today I found myself becoming too immersed in the enormity of some of the challenges, which probably most of you are aware of on a much more day to day basis than me! My natural preference is to focus on how to move beyond some of those challenges to achieve some success and some level of satisfaction – because I have to tell you, after spending a few days with one of my university clients, I need to feel like success is possible!

So what I thought I'd do today is to share with you some of my experiences and observations about assisting the learned to become better leaders. I'll look at what can get in the way of progress and what appears to work, and then open the floor for some broader discussion because I bet some of you have your own fair share of experiences and I think we could all learn from each other.

My assumption is that you are all working at some level to develop leadership within your own universities – is that correct?

## **Context – My Frame of Reference**

Some background, first.

In life we're all drawn to those things that have a certain resonance and familiarity with our own experiences. I grew up with a couple of often distracted academic parents, left home as soon as I could to play on the glorious ANU campus – hardly venturing off it during my first two years there. Completed a couple of degrees, used one of them for 6 months until I decided that I could not spend all day in an office surrounded by lawyers. I decided to follow some of my law school friends into a sales role at IBM where I learned a lot about organisational life, homogeneous, hierarchical and male dominated workplace cultures and how workplaces don't work well if you don't fit the dominant profile (in my case, white middle aged, heterosexual blokes with their good wives at home looking after their domestic lives).

An interesting and uncomfortable experience that I took personally – fearing there was something wrong with me, a single mother, for not fitting in, despite my concentrated, diligent and successful efforts at generating IBM additional revenue of tens of millions of dollars a year. However after too many pitiful entreaties with my manager who was fed up with continually doing what he considered favours so I could obligingly exceed my revenue targets, I applied for and won a Fulbright scholarship to go and study what goes on in organisations to create the

dynamic I found myself in. I returned to Canberra after completing an MBA at the only business school in the world designed for women and working in a diversity consulting practice for 2 years.

I've been back in Canberra for almost 10 years committed to developing leadership, with a particular commitment to women's leadership and creating inclusive workplaces that provide opportunities for everyone to achieve their potential – as I said, a vocation that has a particular resonance with me.

I soon found myself back on the ANU campus and back in law firms doing the work I'm destined to do. And I have to say – I don't know which is more challenging – the academic or the lawyer.

If I analyse the individual characteristics of academics (whether they have a teaching, a research or administrative focus) there is a lot they share with lawyers.

### **Challenges - Generalisation**

From the outset, I need to say that most people I've worked with have wanted to develop their leadership skills and have been wonderful to work with. That is probably the first lesson – before engaging on leadership development, it's essential people want to learn or unlearn so they can be more effective leaders and managers. Often the first part of any engagement is to reinforce the value of leadership development – for each individual.

And this is now the time for sweeping generalisations, and a full paragraph on the challenges of leadership development in the higher ed environment. My university clients are typically academics who are individualistic, ego driven, well intentioned and committed know it alls with usually an impressive IQ, extraordinary subject knowledge or technical expertise, with a preference for detail, minutia, and solitude, working in competitive, often paternalistic, resource scarce, under funded, micro-managed and demanding environments with others of equal brilliance and similar temperaments who are also rewarded for the status they can bring their university from their particular research and publication citations rather than for how well they manage teams, lead people, deliver feedback and delegate responsibility.

These people are well supported by equally brilliant people such as yourselves – whom they need, but don't quite understand why.

This has been my experience, anyway.

Perhaps I'll elaborate a little..

### **Examples**

What have I done in the uni sector?

1. Developed and delivered a series of workshops for lower level groups, students, faculty and staff to develop communication skills, leadership programs and such like. Those that were supplemented with coaching, feedback, peer support and ongoing opportunities to

reflect on progress and development were more successful than those that weren't. This is not an anomaly of the higher ed sector, it's the case with all stand alone training.

2. One on one leadership coaching – of Heads of Schools, Deans, College convenors, senior administrators, faculty and staff – male and female.
3. Worked with a quasi executive team of a particular School – to assist them better distribute the workload, responsibility and ownership across the whole School
4. Developed and am delivering a structured leadership development program for senior women at a university that focuses on skill building, includes coaching and provides the opportunity to lead a cultural change initiative that will improve opportunities for women and others within the university. These initiatives include changing hiring and promotions criteria, imbedding best practices, 'giving women a voice' amongst other things.

### **Detail and Observations**

Let me share with you some more information about how I've worked to develop leadership.

- My observation and perspective on one off workshops are they are limited – they need to be supplemented with feedback, coaching

and ongoing opportunities to discuss and reflect on progress practicing different behaviours, skills and strategies.

- Senior people need to have a compelling usually personal motivator to seek assistance with managing people.
- When I was engaged as a coach by senior faculty it was because each of the individuals was experiencing a level of pain at how things were within their school/college. This pain manifested at a personal level as what I describe as the tumbling tower.
  - a. They were having difficulty running their School, doing their research, managing their teaching loads AND maintaining their personal relationships. It was this last one that in many of the cases caused them to seek assistance. This is why it's so important to help academics develop the leadership skills before they get to this point.
- Many people within the academic institutions I've been part of are cynical, feel disempowered and are frequently bullied to comply with agendas they may not feel any ownership of. They are rarely consulted by the university executive teams unless they are very senior or part of an elite clique with an 'in'. This means they can feel resentful, and marginalised. The type of behaviour that accompanies these feelings is not very helpful but completely understandable.

- To move beyond it requires assisting them to focus on a vision for their Schools, their work and their research rather than on specific skills and techniques to better manage people. It means that you need to help them see that they will be better positioned to do their research, achieve their aspirations for a better future (which much of their research can help create) if they find a way to work together.
- It means you must help them see that they will be better positioned to do their research, achieve their aspirations for a better future (which their research focuses on) if they find a way to work together.
- So for one school, I helped the Dean do was to articulate his vision which was to school leave a major intellectual footprint in the global market and be recognised as a global brand within the School, the University, nationally and internationally
- He articulated specific measures of success that spoke to faculty, students and the number crunchers. He shared these with his faculty and then engaged his staff by asking them how they could achieve the goals.
- For him to do this meant he had to practice different behaviours – we discussed what these were and developed strategies around assertive communication, team building, delegation and

accountability. We reviewed how he implemented these strategies over .

- The process I used was to help him
  1. articulate vision and seek agreement with management committee
  2. confirm measures of success (goals)
  3. identify what management committee are doing currently to support the measures of success (goals) i.e are their current projects/strategies aligned with the achievement of the vision?
  4. determine what else must be done
  5. review progress regularly and ensure accountability
  
- We met recently and he said that he had created 2 deputy positions, and a number of 'executive' positions, delegated more work to his deputies, was more consultative with his senior team, asked them what they would be doing to help the school achieve the vision, held them accountable and then gave them feedback about their performance. He stressed that he wasn't doing it perfectly, however it was a load off his shoulders and he was really enjoying some success.
  
- The next piece of work was to assist his team to be better delegators, team players etc, however there were not the funds to do it.
  
- In another school the Dean assembled a team of people he regarded as the leadership group. We met over 3 or 4 months to have conversations that he was unable to have unassisted. During these

conversations we talked about their vision, measures of success and motivators. We also developed a profile of each person – their strengths, interests, values, goals weaknesses etc – essentially building a team. It was all focused on the school and each of them creating an environment that was easier to work within. Once they had developed a greater sense of trust within the group they then talked more freely with each other, and we came up with a way to involve the rest of the school. It was very powerful.

- I'm currently in the middle of a 12 month leadership program at SUT. It has had mixed success so far. We started by shifting focus from cynicism to hope. We had 360 degree feedback and coaching which they valued. We have had project work but this has been difficult to sustain because of participants' teaching and research loads and lack of overt support from their executive. In fact, because there has not been broader and explicit engagement from the VC and his team, cynicism and disengagement has re-emerged.

**Lessons:**

- It's the people skills that are most lacking but a simple and low level focus on these skills alone is not sufficient to move people beyond what's familiar, comfortable and for which they are ostensibly rewarded.

- I've been given feedback from a number of academics about attending leadership programs that are mainstream and focused on management rather than leadership. I've been told that such programs don't seem to take into account their particular conditions.
- A focus on leadership means reminding people what they're capable of. Helping them see what's possible if they actually achieve their research vision, their scholarly ambition, working together they can achieve so much more.
- Reminding people of the value of working together, then providing them with the skills to communicate with each other in language that others hear is essential. What follows is development of skills to provide performance feedback, develop and implement processes that support them and imbued accountability, and skills to develop teams.
- Executive commitment and support is essential. People must feel that they are not an experiment or the problem that needs to be fixed.
- They must have their own personal needs met. They must be consulted and asked what they want to improve, they must be provided the time away from their research / teaching to spend on workshops and learning.

## **Pre Requisites for Success**

- Motivation to learn – it's either the initial impetus to develop leadership skills or you need to make it a driver.
- Relevance and context – leadership development has to be tailored to the academic. It must be practical, relevant and contextual.
- A focus on leadership is more compelling than a focus on management.
- Engagement beyond one person is critical. Support for leadership must be explicit, genuine and role-modelled at senior levels.

Where leadership development starts at the top, it is more successful than one-on-one programs and has a more sustainable and deeper impact.

When there is a focus on leadership, when there is engagement, better people practices follow.

The rub, of course is that tailored, individualised leadership development is more intensive and expensive than off the shelf training. When you're dealing with tight budgets it's difficult to get the approvals. To get around this, again we must start with leadership – remind everyone of the value of assisting everyone in each academic institution to achieve their individual and collective aspirations.

## **Questions.**