Leadership Development for Organizational Change in a "New" UK University

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This paper reports on the findings of a case study of an Organizational Development (OD) intervention within a new university in the UK. Previous research into the leadership of higher education has highlighted a number of apparently inevitable tensions. The findings of the case study uncovered a number of complex and interrelated tensions. The paper concludes by discussing the implications of these tensions for OD and HR practitioners, theorists and consultants.

Key Words: Organizational Development, Organizational Culture, Leadership

Introduction

This paper reports on the findings of a case study of an Organizational Development (OD) intervention within a new university in the UK. The intervention has sought to bring about major cultural change designed to enable it to compete in an increasingly unpredictable sector in which funding is no longer seen as the responsibility of the state. At the heart of this OD intervention is a leadership development program, designed and delivered by the authors of this paper. This paper reports on the findings of the early stages of the research into the program, and focuses on the tensions identified within the design of the program, both in terms of OD and its assumptions about the role of leadership.

The OD intervention was launched with a six-month leadership development program aimed at the top 120 academics and senior managers throughout the university. Module 1 is an experiential intervention with a focus on understanding the self and the emotional aspects of leadership and followership. Module 2 focuses on theories of power, culture and change within the university context. Action learning sets, facilitated by members of the university OD team, link the modules and enable the learning to become embedded in practice.

Theoretical Framework

We have spotlighted the crucial role of leadership within the OD process, to examine the tensions inherent in this process in the context of a Higher Education institution. To illuminate our study, we have drawn on the small literature, which focuses on organizational development in universities, and have also examined the literature on the leadership of universities. Previous research into the leadership of higher education has highlighted a number of apparently inevitable tensions. As designers of the OD intervention, this case study has enabled us to examine these tensions at close quarters and to examine their significance for future OD interventions in HE. *OD in Universities*

Many universities in both Europe and the US, under pressure as a result of the changing funding arrangements and increasingly global marketplace have introduced OD programs to facilitate the cultural changes to which they aspire. These universities, seeking to balance academic values and standards with market-focus in order to generate additional income have been labeled "hybrid organizations" (Mouwen, 2000). Mouwen suggests that this model is increasingly becoming necessary in many countries in the western world where governments are stepping back from the steering and funding of HE. He identifies a "serious friction" between the traditional academic culture and the modern market culture (Mouwen, 2000). He believes that these frictions are both inevitable and unavoidable given the changing landscape of Higher Education. However, he also suggests that it is possible to create the conditions for a harmonious coexistence of the two cultures by reshuffling and expanding core activities to create a better equilibrium between the task and market activities of the traditional university.

Mouwen does not deal with the practicalities of achieving this balance, although others have taken up this challenge. Greenwood and Levin (2001), for example, suggest "pragmatism in teaching and learning and democratization in the organization of university teaching, research and administration" (p. 434). They criticize universities for their predominant focus on "knowing what", proposing instead that they find a way of foregrounding the teaching of "knowing how".

Many of those who have entered the debate have tended to do so from a systems perspective. Hurley (1990), for

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example, uses two case studies of change in HE to propose a "general model" of organizational development in universities which takes as its starting point the standard "input/output" systems model, and focuses on OD as a system driven by a combination of strategic planning, change agency and organizational processes.

Greaves and Sorrenson (1999) also take a systems approach, drawing on Schein's (1997) "adaptive coping-cycle" as a systems model for organizational health: that is, the ability to: sense environmental change; get information to the right place; digest and utilize information; adjust and transform self without self-destruction; and get feedback on consequences of transformations. Their research focuses on how a multi college HE institution failed in its transformation effort and became paralyzed by a failure to meet these criteria. They conclude that the key inhibitors of change in this case study were organizational trust, empowerment and identity. The culture was divisive and blame oriented; the level of authority to make decisions was confusing and disempowering, and there was considerable inter-group conflict. Consultants were hired to diagnose and make recommendations, but the Board or the Chancellor never followed these up, and despite strong recommendations from the consultants to start action planning no action was ever taken.

Greaves and Sorrenson found three key leadership problems: *leaders* not displaying the desired new behaviors, *leaders* unclear about their objectives for the program, and the danger of a dependency relationship developing with the consultants as the *leaders* looked to them to intervene and **save** the organization from itself. These findings point to an important and much under-researched element of OD in Higher Education: the role of leadership in the process of organizational change, and in particular, the tensions inherent in the leadership role in HE today.

The Role of Leadership and Leadership Development in Organizational Development in Universities

Collins and Holton (2004) have pointed out that there has been a lack of research that focuses on leadership development at the organizational level. Only 10 per cent of studies of training interventions in their meta analysis between 1982 and 2001 identified leadership. This research project has set out through an illustrative case study to address this omission, and to ask what role leadership and leadership development might play in an OD program in Higher Education: "...outside pressures, largely governmental, have increasingly forced universities...to change, in line with social changes in the environment in which they are embedded." (Elton, 1999, p. 207)

These changes have provoked a consistent call for a fundamental shift in how universities and other higher education institutions are led (Brown, 2001; Davies *et al*, 2001; Froeschle and Donahue, 1998; Kulati, 2003), with many commentators suggesting that universities should learn from the private sector with a view to moving towards a more entrepreneurial outlook.

This in turn has led to a general call for *transformational*[†], visionary leadership in universities. Transformational leadership behaviors have also been shown to be positively associated with faculty satisfaction with departmental chair supervision, perceptions of organizational effectiveness and willingness to expend extra effort (Brown and Moshavi, 2002).

Pounder (2001) agrees, and suggests in addition that university leaders need to make use of a wide range of leadership characteristics, drawing on dimensions of both transformational and transactional leadership. Furthermore, he suggests, following Ramsden (1998), an emphasis on a kind of transformational leadership that is both distributed throughout the organization and is self-reflective. This focus on leadership development is reinforced by Brown (2001) who suggests that: "...leadership development is an underutilized strategy at most universities." (Brown, 2001, p. 313)

His description of "effective" reflects a transformational approach: "This new (university) organizational environment requires leaders who thrive on the challenge of change; who foster environments of innovation; who encourage trust and learning; and who can lead themselves, their constituents, and their units, departments, and universities successfully into the future." (Brown, 2001, p. 312)

However, Brown also highlights a fundamental tension underlying these propositions – that is the variety of diverse groups that university leaders must lead. This tension and others identified in the literature will be discussed in the next section of this paper.

The Tensions Inherent in Leading Universities

Leadership in universities, as Brown has suggested, presents unique challenges due to the different settings in which leadership must be applied, for example, across administrative departments, academic departments and in student and faculty organizations (Lewis and Smith, 1994; Rowley and Sherman, 2003). The challenge to leaders, it has been suggested, centres on balancing the demands between administrative control and faculty autonomy (Bennett, 1998; Birnbaum, 1992; Brown & Moshavi, 2002).

Another study of OD in Higher Education in Sweden (Norback, 2000) found that leadership development had been identified as the key requirement in order to bring about organizational change. Norback's study draws on that of Eriksson (1997) who found that a departmental head in today's university plays many conflicting, ambiguous and

contradictory roles. Eriksson found that this leadership development was impeded by ambiguous decision-making structures, ambiguous loyalties, and blurred boundaries between academic and managerial decision-making.

In a parallel study of organizational change in HE in South Africa, Kulati (2003) also points out that the nature of higher education today means that ambiguous and multiple goals will inevitably coexist. A collegial framework, he suggests, needs to coexist with managerialism. The challenge, he suggests will be to develop transformative leadership, which "is about devising strategies that will facilitate effective institutional leadership and management in the context of a professional culture that eschews being managed" (p. 24)

Within academic leadership there are important differences between departmental, faculty and university level leadership. Departmental leadership, due to its largely temporary and obligatory nature, tends to be collegial, since otherwise it would be difficult to return to a faculty position once the Chair had concluded (Rowley and Sherman, 2003). This bridge role between faculty and administration is a challenge to department chairs and heads as Brown (2001) has suggested: "...chairs need to learn to use their influence and persuasion, experience, and expertise to lead changes and make things happen in the department as opposed to using the power of their position." (Brown, 2001, p. 317)

Rowley and Sherman (2003) describe the role of the Dean, which, although sometimes also temporary and obligatory, relinquishes all teaching and research responsibilities to become a full-time administrator. They suggest that where the Dean does not return to the faculty, attention to leadership is similar to their business counterparts, i.e. managerial and professional in nature. At the university level (president, chancellor, vice presidents, vice chancellors) Rowley and Sherman suggest that the leadership may be seen as equivalent to top-level managers in large corporations.

This discussion evokes a tension between collegial or academic and management or administration, which is further reinforced by Brown and Moshavi (2002, p. 85) who suggest: "Professors not only expect to self-manage their research and teaching efforts, but also expect to participate in an environment of shared governance and decision-making with department heads and other academic administrators without fear of retribution for expressing their views (Plante, 1989)."

Research suggests that transformational leaders may be particularly effective at facilitating faculty self-management (Kirkby et al, 1992 in Brown and Moshavi, 2002). Pounder (2001) suggests that university staff prefer a "hand off-value driven" approach to academic leadership. He goes on to suggest that transformational leadership meets this requirement. However, whereas the phrase "hand off" suggests a laissez-faire approach, the notion of empowering others may be considered to be an active and engaged aspect of transformational leadership. This ambiguity in Pounder's definition may be a reflection of the discomfort and tensions often found in academic responses to questions of leadership, as illustrated in the following: "...the two cultures of management and the academy crossing swords along the frontier defined roughly by the caricatured problems that they have with each other." (Ramsden, 1998, p. 27, cited in Brown, 2001, p. 316)

Kulati (2003, p. 21) offers a solution: "The leadership challenge for strategic managerialists is to get the institution to think and act more strategically, and to convince the academics that 'being managed', and working in an institution that is run on sound management principles, does not constitute a threat to the traditional values of academe, such as academic freedom."

Research Question

The purpose of this research was to add to HRD theory about the role and impact of OD interventions in organisations, and specifically in higher education, by studying the impact of one such program from design to implementation. Our questions focused on the internal responses to the intervention, the barriers encountered, the dynamics of implementation and the successes of the program.

Methodology

This study set out to investigate whether and in what way the leadership tensions identified in previous studies of OD in universities are also apparent in the New University OD program. We have asked how the inherent organizational and cultural tensions identified are affecting the process and outcomes of OD in our case study. Finally drawing on our findings, we have made recommendations for OD in universities as a result of our findings.

It should be acknowledged that the authors of this paper have been instrumental in the design of the OD intervention and the supporting leadership development program, as well as in designing and researching its progress. Consequently, we have been unable to play the role of "neutral" observers of this program, and acknowledge that some of our findings have already informed the ongoing program design. Notwithstanding this,

however, our inductive research approach (data collection then literature review, analysis and discussion) has enabled us to gain insight into and report on the initial reactions to the program, as well as the responses of those participants who have attended the first module. Twenty three semi structured interviews (both face to face [12] and telephone [11] and two focus groups were conducted prior to the launch of the program. These were coded and analysed thematically, drawing on a grounded theoretical approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The aim of these interviews was to discover the views, opinions and understanding of the university's organizational change agenda, hopes, fears, and concerns about the university's future and the possibilities offered by an OD intervention. Following this, one of the authors took the role of facilitator for the first two cohorts attending Module 1, in order to gain direct access to the participants as they experienced the program. This neutral observational role enabled the interview and focus group data to be combined with ethnographic data. Both sets of data were then compared thematically.

Cultural tensions impacting on leadership

The initial analysis of our findings pointed to two key areas of tension: cultural and leadership. On reflection, however, having identified the cultural and leadership tensions in the OD process, we recognized these were completely interconnected, and that any artificial separation of cultural and leadership issues would dilute the outcome of our research. As Edgar Schein has suggested: "...leadership and culture are two sides of the same coin." (1992, p. 1)

The tensions of culture and leadership identified through the analysis and briefly described above are discussed in more detail below.

Language

The language of the market and business was found to dominate the agenda of many of the participants, silencing the more traditional language of academic freedoms and learning. In discussing the new university structure, for example, one participant mused: "The four faculties will be meeting different markets and different needs..."

Another remarked: "I see the University as a business, the University has been a business for a number of years"

Such comments were made as frequently by senior academics as by the non academic university managers, and although we do not have evidence as to how far down the hierarchy this view was held there was repeated evidence that the traditional language of academic values had almost been silenced at senior levels by the business discourse.

This finding either suggests an escalation of the phenomenon found in the other studies in Sweden (Norback, 2000) and South Africa (Kulati, 2003) or that the progress of marketization of universities may be more advanced in the UK. Further research will be needed to address this question.

Freedom versus structure

In relation to the tension described above the contrasting desire for freedom or structure was, as other studies have shown (Bennett, 1998; Birnbaum, 1992; Brown and Moshavi, 2002), found to be a fundamental aspect of academic and managerial identity in New University. This is illustrated in the quotations from participants below:

One of the non-academic participants explained: "Academics are a bit like self-employed people, they work individually or in groups for themselves whereas for admin colleagues there is a much more rigorously imposed structure of what happens, and in the degree of freedom as to what they can do within their jobs."

On the challenge of leading academics, another non-academic manager remarked: "They are managing people who don't want to be line managed- "I've come into education so that I wasn't having to be line managed" – that is how they see it."

Most of the participants felt that this was a fundamental issue, which would block change and cause the OD program to fail if not addressed. Most felt that it had not yet been addressed: "There is a huge issue around academic/admin divide which I think is ignored, is brushed under the carpet"

Whilst many viewed this as a deep cultural phenomenon, others pointed to tangible structural causes, such as differing conditions of service. It was felt, for example, that the academics were allowed much more control over their time and attendance. Whilst some responded to this issue by seeking to unify the terms and conditions, others accepted the differences as inevitable but called for a greater understanding between the two cultural groups: "It's that loop of understanding, and it's not about changing the academics' culture or admin culture, it is just about accepting it. I call it a cultural hills thing and you can look across the valley if you like, and they don't like what they see and it's about having some kind of bridge across it – filling that gap – not changing each hill but..."

It was clear that this cultural gap was long standing. However, it became a significant issue for the New University Leadership Development program, since the reality experienced by the non-academics appeared so contradictory to the university's unifying rhetoric of integration, symbolized by a common leadership framework.

Fragmented versus unitary culture (Martin, 1992)

Many of the participants recognized these distinct differences between academic and managerial sub-cultures, and the difficulties in achieving the university's OD agenda, since this would include the breaking down of cultural silos: "Culture change is a real barrier – there are cultures within support and academic, cultures within cultures within cultures, I think within this organization. If we are going to be successful we have to work as one organization."

The tension between academic and administrative subcultures was frequently mentioned as the most crucial issue for the program to address: "I think there will always be challenges... the classic ones between academics and people with administrative roles...different cultures which are absolutely valid for how we operate and the kind of things we do, but they're not the same and the biggest challenge to leadership is to address this..."

Many shared the desire for unitary values and beliefs, and the frustration that the achievement of this continued to be difficult to achieve. Others accepted this as inevitable: "It is about recognizing that an awful lot of people work in this organization with their own mindsets – they work in a way they like to see it as-which can often be quite different from the reality of how it really is"

The challenge of this tension for the enactment of leadership, and the tendency within the university for managers to create fieldoms was summed up by one of the participants as follows: "What I see is lots of people within the group who are leaders vying for position, which isn't helping the organization, all it is doing is helping their own individual ends. I joined the university. I happen to be working in a department but I joined the university."

The strength of these sub-cultures and the identification of these senior staff with the deeply held values of their own sub-culture presented significant problems for an OD agenda which sought to unify the focus of these leaders through a common university strategy.

Core values

Related to the debate surrounding the breaking down of sub-cultural silos and fiefdoms was the issue of values, vocation, and the changes to the psychological contract seen to be an inevitable element of the OD program. One participant summarized this issue as follows: "It is very hard for some people. They joined an organization with one set of values – it was about education for all and equality of opportunity and we are now in a business, in a marketplace...that for some people goes against their core values, and so you get a person who sits very uncomfortably...We've got to help people with the transition as humanely as we possibly can."

The program design did not take account of this challenge to the psychological contract of many of the senior staff, and despite extensive consultation with all groups, the challenges of the new regime to the identities of some of the participants were a source of confusion, uncertainty and mourning.

Leadership tensions deriving from these cultural issues

Many of the cultural tensions identified above can be directly mapped onto tensions identified in the enactment of leadership in the university. These can be summarized as tensions between the enactment of matrix leadership and of vertical leadership and organizational leadership versus departmental leadership, both described below. *Matrix leadership versus vertical leadership*

Many participants spoke of the difficulties in leading in a matrix organization as the university had become: "Working in a matrix management you have got a lot of hierarchical line management and then you get people floating in from the outside having quite a broad role and responsibility...so you are floating in from the side, you haven't got line management but you are wanting tasks done so you have to cajole people in order that they would help you"

The key challenge to leadership identified as a result of this structure was the defining of roles and responsibilities.

Others perceived a detachment between those leaders at the top of the organization and those leading in the middle: "they are in a different world - they literally are- their organization in their minds is different to the one that is in my mind and different to the minds of the ones we are actually engaged with if you like"

This illustrates a second challenge for leadership in New University: to ensure effective downward and upward channels of communication. Upward communication was felt by many interviewees to be limited and consequently ineffective in New University, with a significant blockage immediately below the senior management team. It was recognized that this was not the result of a deliberate attempt to exclude, but rather from a lack of awareness of the issue.

Organizational versus Departmental Leadership

Leaders in New University were generally embracing the changes deemed necessary to survive in today's economic and political climate. They were also, as identified earlier, willing to use new commercial and business discourses when discussing the university. At the same time, the leaders were often fatalistic about the impact of these changes on themselves and their job roles. They lacked confidence about their ability to make a difference. The leadership role in New University was found to be under-developed and often misunderstood. Many of these leaders equated leadership with control or a transactional approach, and found the adoption of transformational models of leadership, even within the safe confines of the Module to be challenging and uncomfortable. Many of the leaders also appeared to be abdicating their responsibility for leadership of the university, more comfortable either with a functional managerial model or a *laissez-faire* academic model.

The responses from the semi-structured interviews indicated a tension between perceptions of organizational and perceptions of departmental leadership. For example, when asked - "What kind of leadership is required to meet the current challenges to the University?" – interviewees responded with largely transformational, strategic, charismatic and visionary leadership. However, when asked - "What does leadership mean in the context of your job?"- Transformational leadership was not explicitly mentioned. Respondents, therefore, appeared to understand the need for transformational and visionary leadership in higher education institutions (as has been highlighted in previous research discussed above e.g. Brown and Moshavi, 2002; Neumann and Neumann, 1998). The tension, however, appears to be centered on transformational and visionary leadership being considered more applicable to the highest levels in the organization and responsibility for these leadership behaviors not being taken at a departmental level.

Transformational leadership, as described by Bass (1985), is not about transforming organizations *per se* but about achieving performance beyond normal expectations by changing how *people* feel about themselves and what is possible and raising their motivation to new highs. This raises challenges to New University and the OD intervention in changing mind-sets around the concept of transformational leadership from the view that transformational leadership is an organizational phenomenon solely relevant to high-level leaders to the proposition embedded in the design of Leadership Trust's program that leadership can be found in individual action distributed across the whole organization, reflecting, for example, the suggestions of Ponder (2001) and Ramsden (1998).

This issue was also evident in the first module of the OD intervention, which encouraged the leaders to discuss their feelings. They found the question "How are you feeling?" to be particularly difficult, responding frequently with sentences which began "I think..." Understanding feelings and emotions are key to transformational leadership and are what sets it apart from transactional leadership (Bass, 1985, 1998). This fundamental shift to discussing emotions openly appears to be the foundation for developing a distributed transformational leadership culture within New University and possibly other organizations.

Ironically, despite the belief of the participants that transformational leadership resides at the top of the organization, there was a tendency by the university leadership to abdicate responsibility for driving the changes to the program designers (as found by Greaves and Sorrenson, 1999), thus creating a tension in the process. The Vice Chancellor and his senior team were tacitly supporting the program throughout, but appeared reluctant to engage in person with the delegates, preferring to send letters and email to participants. The effect of these ranged from mild interest to cynicism. The HR team played an administrative role in coordinating the program whereas we had expected them to play a stronger leadership role in the process. This slowed progress and reduced buy-in considerably, as the program lacked a visible champion.

Those who were enthusiastic about the new models of leadership introduced by the program found it difficult to use the new language with their peers, since to do so would risk being criticized or mocked by colleagues for taking the ideas too seriously. The non-academic delegates tended to defer to the academics when seeking signals about how to respond to the program. The responses of the academics was mixed, but tended to be an intellectual involvement rather than an emotional one.

Conclusions and implications for HRD

The findings, which have emerged from this first phase of the research into the OD process at New University, are striking in the complexity and interrelatedness of the tensions they reveal. These tensions inevitably overlap but can be summarized as being between administrative and faculty leadership, between the desire for transformational leadership and the preference for no leadership, between managerialism and collegiality, between organizational leadership and departmental leadership, between business interests and academic freedoms, between faculty autonomy and administrative control, between pragmatism in learning and teaching and democratization of teaching, research and administration. In addition there was a clear tension between the belief that leadership should reside at

the top of the organization and the acceptance that leadership responsibility should be distributed throughout the organization.

These tensions derive primarily from cultural norms within and across the university, which, whilst normally latent have been spotlighted as a result of the OD program. They are also a complex reflection of societal and economic trends, new discourses, and political change. A considerable amount of learning has already emerged from the program to date. We continue to role out the program, and to research its progress.

The following is a summary of our findings to date and some implications for HRD and OD practitioners, theorists and consultants:

- Without the symbolic engagement of the top leadership in the process the change program risks faltering after the Modules have been completed. As OD change agents it is vital that we ensure that this does not occur. Our focus must therefore now turn to supporting the transformational leadership skills of the top leadership.
- Without the enactment of new models of leadership at the top of the organization it will be difficult for leaders below the top to enact the new styles and behaviors, especially transformational leadership behaviors.
- An acceptance that leadership can be enacted throughout an organization is starting to build momentum in the university, but this view will need to be reinforced by congruent messages from the top.
- A greater number of academic leaders will need to engage with the process in order to build a critical mass
 of changing behaviors in the Faculties. Pressure to participate needs to come from peers as well as from the
 top
- The process of change is more likely to be sustained if ownership for the ongoing momentum is accepted by those in charge of the program, and not by the designers of the program. Our aim must therefore to be to reduce our profile in the organization and transfer ownership to within.
- The cultural differences between the academics and administrators have been mythologized and appeared less extreme during the program than had been reported at the focus groups.
- The ongoing support and facilitation of the Action Learning Sets will be a crucial element of sustaining the messages of the program.

Our study suggests that leadership lies at the heart of the OD process. Further research within HRD is now needed to investigate the impact of developing effective leadership on organizational performance and the subsequent success of the OD process. So far the initial evaluation of the program suggests a considerable imperative for change and a will to do so, but a lack of mechanisms to support the momentum required for change of this magnitude, and significant cultural resistance at all levels and in all areas of the university. The university context has been shown to be one, which is ridden with complexity yet under-researched by the HRD community. The tensions created by the shifts in the context of HE, the changing political values, the assaults on the psychological context, and a revised understanding of leadership has produced a challenging organizational context within which to undertake such an OD project. The extent to which this case reflects other HE change projects requires further research by HRD scholars. Whilst there appear to be similarities with other studies, a wider pool of research in OD in HE institutions is now needed, particularly studies of a cross cultural nature, in order to overlay questions regarding national cultural values and characteristics.

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ⁱ In this paper we take Bass' (1985, 1998) concepts of transformational, transactional, and *laissez-faire* leadership as the basis for discussion.