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Leadership Development

A Strategic Imperative for Higher Education

GIVEN THE COMPLEXITY and dynamism of life in American colleges and universities, the development of leadership talent throughout institutions of higher learning is fast becoming a strategic imperative. Yet most institutions have never analyzed their organization's leadership supply and demand. And when they do, many underestimate the negative impact of mediocre leadership. Linda Hill, Wallace Brett Donham Professor of Business Administration at Harvard Business School, applies her work on leadership development in the business world to the realm of academia. She firmly believes that leaders are made not born, and outlines lessons from business that suggest what people need to learn in order to lead, how they learn it, and what organizations can do to foster a culture conducive to learning to lead.

Challenges of Leadership Development in Higher Education

Developing leaders is an especially daunting task for higher education institutions. Like individuals working in professional service firms, academics are often ambivalent about assuming leadership roles. Their professional identity and sense of satisfaction from work are derived principally from their professional expertise and accomplishments. They are not recruited for their leadership potential, but rather are selected and rewarded for their research, course development, and/or teaching.

It is therefore not surprising that individuals in academic leadership positions often report an ongoing tension between research and teaching on the one hand and leadership on the other. Too often they abandon their people responsibilities for discipline-based obligations. The former seem so recalcitrant and out of their control. Because they feel overwhelmed by their many responsibilities, they tend to focus on execution and handling the complexity of their current assignments, neglecting their responsibilities relating to strategy, innovation, and preparing for the future. Rarely do they see themselves as change agents. Instead, unless they are in the very senior management of their institution, they are more likely to see themselves as targets of change, implementing the change initiatives of their superiors. Since organizations today must continually revitalize and transform themselves to sustain success, there are simply too many change initiatives required at any given time to leave change management to top and senior managers. Even those in junior leadership positions must be effective change agents who understand how to overcome resistance to change, deal with the inevitable stresses associated with change, and implement appropriate change strategies.

Lessons from Business

The last decade has seen an exponential growth in research on leadership development, the lion's share of which has been performed in the corporate world. Research in professional service firms (e.g., law firms, consulting firms, investment banks)—the organizational type most similar to institutions of higher learning—is likely most relevant to higher education. Leadership development, however, is probably less complicated in the business world because individuals tend to be less ambivalent about leading in business than in academic quarters. In business, career progress and rewards are generally associated with moving from the role of individual contributor to that of leader. That said, we in higher education can learn important lessons from the experiences of the private sector.

The Nature of Leadership

Leadership is an art requiring a mix of technical, conceptual, and human talents. John Kotter (1990) has identified three critical leadership functions:

Establishing direction. Developing a vision of the future, often the distant future, and strategies for producing the changes needed to achieve that vision.

Aligning people. Communicating the direction by words and deeds to all whose cooperation may be needed so as to influence the creation of teams and coalitions that understand the vision and strategies and accept their validity.

Motivating and inspiring. Energizing people to overcome major political, bureaucratic, and resource barriers to change by satisfying very basic, but often unfulfilled, human needs.

Although some of the qualities of effective leadership are innate or acquired principally through prework socialization (e.g., personal integrity, a high energy level, and a need for socialized power), we now know that much of leadership is learned. That is not to say that it can be taught in a classroom. Individuals must teach themselves by doing it, observing it, and interacting with others. Development and learning result from being stretched by life experiences. Leadership development is a long-term and challenging process for which there are few shortcuts.

On-the-Job Learning

Fortunately, we know a great deal about what experiences people need and how to help them take advantage of their experiential learning opportunities. In a groundbreaking study of executive development, Morgan McCall and his colleagues (2002) made this unsettling but all too accurate observation:

The essence of development is that diversity and adversity beat repetition every time. The more dramatic the change in skill demands, the more severe the personnel problems, the more the bottom-line pressure, and the more sinuous and unexpected the turns in the road, the more opportunity there is for learning. Unappealing as that may seem, being shocked and pressured and having problems with other people teach the most. For future executives, comfortable circumstances are hardly the road to the top.

The most powerful learning experiences are “stretch assignments” that give people work somewhat beyond their current capabilities. Assignments that offer some autonomy so that an individual has the opportunity to decide what to do (set an agenda) and how to do it (mobilize a network of people to get it done) are important preparation for his or her first leadership position. These assignments are riskier since the person is more likely to make mistakes that might set back his or her career progress or have a negative impact on organizational per-



formance. But they are also the kinds of assignments from which individuals can acquire new knowledge, skills, perspective, and judgment.

Individuals should be given assignments in which they can leverage initial fit to establish a self-reinforcing cycle of learning, contribution, and success whereby, year after year, they acquire more sources of power necessary to be effective. People should be placed in situations in which their strengths are really needed, important weaknesses are not a serious drawback, and their core values are consistent with those of the organization; in other words, the stretch should not be too big or the risk too great.

Good ethical judgment is an important leadership quality, yet many individuals neglect to develop it. The higher up they go in an organization, the more complex their interdependencies and the more perplexing their ethical challenges. Over the course of their careers, individuals need to develop and refine their internal gyroscopes for how to manage the ethical dilemmas they will inevitably encounter. As individuals progress in their careers and begin to acquire power, they must be vigilant about not abusing it. They should keep front and center their awareness that with power come not only rights and privileges but also duties and obligations. Ethical dilemmas are part of the routine practices of leadership. The judgment required to resolve them comes from multiple experiences of weighing many competing factors and making and living with tough choices.

Best Practice in Developing New Leaders

Companies renowned for the depth and breadth of their managerial talent have taken the research on management development to heart and have made the radical move from a sink-or-swim “selection of the fittest” to a “development of the fittest” approach, as McCall (1998) puts it. In short, these companies view management development as a joint responsibility of the new manager and the organization. They understand it to be a strategic endeavor to leverage the learning that individuals can gain from their day-to-day work and to provide managers (or future managers) with a portfolio of learning opportunities and resources through deliberate and careful career planning and considerable online informal coaching and frequent off-line formal performance reviews.

But perhaps most importantly, these companies have cultivated an organizational culture of learning founded on the belief that the strategic management of talent is a competitive advantage. They invest in leadership development by:

- devoting time and attention to talent management,
- doing research on what people need to learn and how they learn it,
- integrating “business” and “human” strategies,
- managing trade-offs between current performance and learning and development, and
- proactively providing learning opportunities and resources—providing individuals with the tools they need to capitalize on their on-the-job learning experiences.

The role of CEOs and senior managers in these organizations is critical. They see themselves as coaches and architects of an organizational culture that allows people to capitalize on their unique talents. Leadership development consumes a considerable amount of the chief executive’s time in professional service firms in particular. The CEOs clearly partner with their colleagues in helping them become self-directed learners and leaders.

Implications for Higher Education

Organizational change will be required to build the leadership talent necessary for world class institutions of higher learning. Organizational change, especially cultural change, is not easy—particularly as the political dynamics in higher education institutions are becoming ever more challenging. Academics will continue to need, first and foremost, top-notch professional competencies. But those competencies will need to be augmented with the conceptual and human competencies associated with leadership. These include, among other things, how to coach and develop talent, build and lead a diverse team, exercise influence without formal authority, negotiate and manage conflict with multiple stakeholders, and envision and implement change.

In light of these desirable leadership qualities, higher education leaders should review their selection and promotion processes. For example, are we paying attention to the character and emotional intelligence of those we choose to recruit and reward? The leader’s mind set includes at least three core beliefs: (1) the institution is more important than

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any single individual, including himself or herself; (2) the leader's job is to help others succeed; and (3) first and foremost in making decisions, the organization's future and sustainability must be considered. The citizenship and collegiality criteria in most of our promotion processes do not address adequately how individual candidates conceive of their duties and obligations to their institutions. Instead of encouraging junior faculty to focus solely on their research, they should be helped to understand how their career is likely to progress and what they will need to do to prepare for the future. They should be forewarned of the growing mismatch between the competencies they need earlier in their careers and the competencies they will need to progress. Junior faculty would benefit from mentoring and periodic coaching early in their career—yet who in our institutions is currently prepared to coach them on the leadership aspects of their work?

When individuals are moved into formal leadership positions, are they being provided with the necessary support? We know from research what aspects of their new positions they are most likely to find difficult. To cope with their new reality, many academic leaders need assistance understanding their new responsibilities and accountabilities. Many honestly do not know what they should be doing; few are going to admit their ignorance. Individuals need help with the fundamentals, such as how to (1) develop an agenda to serve as a screen for making judgments about the urgent and important, (2) cultivate and utilize their network, (3) leverage themselves by developing their people and building a team, and (4) work smarter by engaging in opportunistic behavior.

Conclusion

There is a crisis in leadership in many sectors of society today, and higher education is not immune to these concerns. We need to build communities of leader-scholars, willing and able to learn and tackle together the challenges of contemporary academic life. Unquestionably, the hierarchical model of presidents, provosts, and deans managing and driving change down through what have become very complex organizations has become infeasible (if it ever really was feasible). To sustain success, effective leaders at all levels will need to mobilize their colleagues to fulfill the institution's mission. Unfortunately, the next generation of leaders cannot be created overnight. Indeed, the most critical and difficult step in developing leaders is to foster a culture conducive to learning to lead. Only those organizations that are quite deliberate in identifying and investing in the next generation of leadership talent will be able to achieve and sustain success.

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