Challenges in Higher Education Leadership: From Theory to Practice

PreDoctoral Leadership Development Institute
PLDI 503 Group Project
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Outline of the Presentation

1. Introduction
2. Utilizing Strategic Communication
3. Overcoming Cultural Clashes
4. Techniques for Leading Change
5. Experiential Takeaways and Lessons for the Future
UTILIZING STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION
Understanding the Goals of Communication

Questions Leaders Need to Address

- What is the core purpose?
- How to design the meeting dynamics?
- Which metrics to use for evaluation?

Options:
- Information
- Decision-making
- Negotiation
- Discussion
- Planning
- Combination
Notes from the Field

Strategic Leadership communication is a process that involves the negotiation of—rather than the transmission of—meaning.

Example: a mentor, a leader with immense accreditation knowledge and experience heads a committee that is preparing her department for accreditation. In spite of her expertise on accreditation issues, my mentor provides opportunities for committee members to provide their input in meetings, allowing participants to develop goals, discuss issues, engage with each other and negotiate objectives instead of just imposing simply her authority and expertise.
Leaders need to understand their targeted audience

Who are they? Faculty/Staff/Students? Tenured/NTT/PTL?

What gives them incentives to contribute?

How to reward based on performance?

Persuasion and compromise are important to work with different audiences. Having information about the audiences can help achieve goals in leadership.

Inclusion of people’s voice will lead to a more widely accepted outcome.
For faculty members, *process* is often more important than content.

**Example:** a mentor (who serves as both faculty and administrator) chairs a committee preparing for the school’s upcoming accreditation process. The mentor utilizes committee meetings as a platform to **get the input of other members** (select faculty) and ensures that committee **deliberations and recommendations are shared with the faculty-at-large**. In this way, the school's faculty **feel that they have been included in the process** because the culture among faculty demonstrates that they value inclusive processes, collegiality, and independent decision-making.
Leaders need to navigate practical communication

- How to build interpersonal relationships?
- How to manage people who prove difficult to work with?
- How to work with different types of people in one team?

Multicultural, educational, and generational gaps need to be understood and bridged when navigating practical communication in academia
Practical Communication in Leadership

- In any work environment, communication between colleagues affects interpersonal relationships, productivity, cooperation, and career advancement.

- Given the length of time colleagues in academia may work together, it is particularly important to know the best ways to communicate in difficult situations and with different personality types.

- Slowing the process of communicating a final decision is a form of effective persuasion. Academic leadership is inefficient time wise because of plethora of topics to cover. However, this can be used to the advantage of a leader to ensure everyone is heard during the process.

- It is important to always end meetings asking what are the next steps. Recapitulate, discuss what was agreed and disagreed, send an email stating the points to cover in the future, and schedule a follow up.
Managing Workplace Conflict

Certain behaviors from colleagues may place a leader in a difficult position. In academia, a leader may need to critique a friend or peer for certain actions.

Managing conflict through strategic communication:

- If a colleague has been reported to be engaging in conflict, you may want to understand their perspective, “Let’s talk. I know there are two sides to every story, and I want to hear yours.”

- When having a conversation, be clear that you are initiating your leadership role, “I am putting on my department chair hat right now.” This way, you and the colleague can separate your professional relationship from your personal relationship.

- Ensure that people feel part of the process; feeling excluded can be the main source of discontent. For people to reach an agreement, processes may at times be more important than outcomes.
OVERCOMING CULTURAL CLASHES
Organizational Culture

“[Culture] denotes an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men [sic] communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life”

(Geertz, 1973, as cited in Ruben et al., 2017, p. 89).

“[Culture is] a pattern of shared basic assumptions learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, which has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems.”

(Schein, 2015, as cited in Ruben et al., 2017, p. 89)
Organizational Culture

• The cultures of organizations develop and evolve over time
  – Higher education institutions are incredibly complex organizations
  – Divisions in departments, disciplines, and organizational cultures
• Culture is an essential element to leadership, such that it is “the very fabric of organization” (Ruben et al., 2017, p. 68)
  – Colleges and universities embody characteristics, including values and assumptions, sub-cultures, traditions, histories, etc.
Notes from the Field

1. The changing nature of work: being a leader of a diversified group (e.g., NTTs, part-time lecturers, etc.)
   a. Different employment arrangements can pose challenges for leaders given the cultural differences that exist between these groups.
   b. Such differences were revealed when meetings were attended by different types of groups (e.g., tenured/tenure-track professors and part-time lecturers)

2. Differences in leadership among staff and faculty
   a. Leaders may interact differently based upon whether they are meeting with staff or faculty.

3. How “shared” political ideology guides the organization in new directions or in undertaking new initiatives.
Leading as an Organizational Ethnographer

**Ethnography**: A methodology that seeks to describe the culture and lived experience of members of a specific cultural group.

– “The essential core [...] aims to understand another way of life from the native point of view” (Spradley, 1979, p. 2)

How does one engage in organizational ethnography?

– Observations in formal meetings, lunchroom or chance encounters in the hallway, arrival times, etc.
Leading as an Organizational Ethnographer

• Example of formal meeting with senior Rutgers faculty members.
  – Committee members were informal in their approach to the meeting, which manifested itself in their body language.
  – “In some universities you ask for permission. In others you ask for forgiveness. At Rutgers, you ask for neither.”
  – What does the level of informality between faculty members say about Rutgers culture?
Organizational Climate

“Climate is an expression of the underlying culture”
(Ruben et al., 2017, p. 71)

“The feeling that is conveyed in a group by the physical layout and the way in which members of the organization interact with each other, with customers, or with other outsiders”
(Schein, 2015; Schneider, 1990; Tagiuri & Litwin, 1968, as cited in Ruben et al., 2017, p.72).
Notes from the Field

Leaders are:

○ Credible
  ■ Example - “Consistently acknowledged the effort and time commitment of the faculty and thanked them for it.”

○ Capable
  ■ Example - “Possessing the knowledge, skills, and abilities consistent with good leadership can enhance your credibility.”
Notes from the Field

Leaders are:

○ Transparent
  ■ Example - “To recognize time involved in committee service a ranking system was proposed and developed by the faculty.”

○ Interactive
  ■ Example - “Post election discussion and reflection was encouraged and supported.”
Alignment between goals and people
- Collaboration
- Contribution

Respect is demonstrated through:
- Fairness
  - Example - “Bringing together multiple stakeholders and letting them raise their concerns, opinions, and suggestions.”
- Acknowledgment
  - Example - “Administrative assistants were acknowledged by name multiple times for their help and support.”
Academic and Administrative Cultures

Academic and administrative groups represent two of the largest and most important groups within higher education.

"Each culture tends to be distinctive because of each group’s composition of members, differences in the roles and responsibilities held by the members, training, reward structures, and professional background.”

(Ruben et al., 2017)
Academic and Administrative Cultures

*Differences between these two cultures may be evident in one or more of the following areas:*

1. **Perceptions of their obligations to the organization**
   a. Employee or agent/steward of the organization?

2. **Responsibilities and work activities**
   a. Differences in how the two groups support the organization (i.e., support, teaching, research)

3. **What is and is not acceptable behavior**
   a. Showing up late or missing deadlines may be perceived as normal among many academics; such behavior may not be tolerated among administrators.

4. **Language preferences and uses**
   a. Certain language and terminology needs to be used to be consistent with each group’s norms

5. **Work patterns and styles**
   a. Academics are trained to work around the clock and often having seven day work weeks

6. **Employment arrangements**
   a. Tenure vs. non-tenure and flexible work arrangements (Ruben et al., 2017)
1. **Perceptions of their obligations to the organization**
   a. Establishing and communicating expectations across these differing stakeholders was essential when constructing groups comprised of both administrators and faculty.

1. **Work patterns and styles**
   a. While waiting until deadlines, and often missing deadlines, is common among academics, it is significantly less common among administrative cultures. My mentor noted the challenges this can present when others perceive missed deadlines as disrespectful and irresponsible.

1. **Responsibilities and work activities**
   a. Generally, academics are evaluated based upon their research, teaching, and service to the university. It was observed that when academics engage in service, it’s often treated as an inconvenience. This becomes more problematic when collaborating with administrators who engage in these tasks as their job, rather than “service.”
TECHNIQUES FOR LEADING CHANGE
Techniques for Leading Change

Figure 6.1 Leadership: Working at the Intersection of What Matters to Others, p. 91
Techniques for Leading Change

- How can leaders adjust to change?
- How can leaders and followers co-create change?
- How can leaders respond to change and crises?
Transition in Leadership Within a Unit

• “Solicit and carefully consider feedback from members of your team and from those to whom you report.”
• “Structure time and methods for reflecting on your performance and success in achieving the purposes and aims of all.” (Ruben et al., 2017, p. 92)

Notes from the Field

• Steps Taken:
  – Ongoing climate survey
  – Review anonymous survey results as a team
  – Encourage in-person and anonymous communication
  – Be cognizant of increasing/decreasing rapport
Transition in Leadership Within a Unit

• “Recognize the importance of having a collaborative and supportive leadership team. Determine what strengths need to be represented on the team, where those exist, and how individuals who possess them can be engaged.” (Ruben et al., 2017, p. 92)

Notes from the Field:

• Steps Taken:
  – Encourage faculty and staff development
  – Full transparency about future changes and decision making
  – Create opportunities for a healthy, welcoming, team-oriented environment
Transition in Leadership Within a Unit

- Assess your personal skills and behavioral strengths and limitations. How can you leverage your strengths while striving to bolster your weaknesses?
- Prioritize your leadership responsibilities. Give careful consideration to the development of a framework for prioritizing and balancing. (Ruben et al., 2017, p. 92)

Notes from the Field
- Assign ownership of tasks or projects to skilled and motivated individuals
- Assess progress and status of team member’s work
- Encourage team members to collaborate and share ideas on individual projects
Engaging Followers in Leading Change

• “If leaders want others to be committed to solutions, they need to engage those individuals in naming and framing the problem. Consistent with the notion of cocreation, shared leader-follow engagement is quite essential to a mutual commitment, a sense of shared ownership, and ultimately a successful follow-through on desired outcomes.” (Ruben et al., 2017, p. 127)

Notes from the Field
- Provide a detailed explanation of the process of change and its potential impacts on the organization
- Use “we,” “us,” and “our” instead of “I,” “me,” or “mine”
- Continually emphasize collaboration and the work of the organization rather than the work of one individual
- Encourage team members to follow up with questions
Engaging Followers in Leading Change

- Communication dynamics create a history that shapes and guides future influence efforts.
- All leadership communication is intercultural.

Notes from the Field

- Remaining organized and following the meeting agenda can increase efficiency, as it sets precedent
- Setting specific discussion topics ahead of time will ensure that everyone is aware of what will be covered
- Topics of discussion and styles of discussion should be appropriate for the various cultures that will be present
Leadership During Times of Change

• “Crises impact various individuals and groups inside and outside the institution, and they often challenge the core values and principles that the organization esteems.”
• “The challenge for leaders is negotiating the complexities of the crisis itself, while also responding in a way that cultivates hope, trust, and safety for those whom one leads.” (Ruben et al., 2017, pp. 304-305)

Notes from the Field
- Acknowledge the existence of the potential crisis or problem
- Explain how the crisis may impact the organization in the short and long term
- Reiterate the core values and mission of the organization
- Not just focus on the organization’s reputation, but also take into account the feelings of the constituents
EXPERIENTIAL TAKEAWAYS & LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE
Communication

“Most fundamentally, we view leadership as the process of social influence—a process that involves both verbal and nonverbal communication.” (Ruben et al., 2017, p. 105)

“To lead is to communicate.” (Ruben et al., 2017, p. 122)

• Cross-cultural communication
• Leadership communication
• Social influence
Culture

“Organizational cultures are likely to shape the actions and behaviors of leaders as much as or more than leaders shape cultures.” (Ruben et al., 2017, p. 69)

• Become an ethnographer
• Acknowledge and be mindful of different cultures
• Predict and diffuse culture clashes
• Bring different cultures together
  – Communication
  – Coordination
  – Collaboration
• Facilitate the success of members from different cultures
Leading Through Change

“..hope and good intentions, in and of themselves, are not particularly effective strategies for change” (Ruben et al., 2017, p. 252)

“Organizations, like individuals, have habits, traditions, and histories—and as with individuals, all of these are powerful forces that reinforce past and present practice and impede efforts to stimulate progress and innovation.” (Ruben et al., 2017, p. 253)
Leadership at the Intersection

*Horizontal Approach to Leadership*

“Effective leadership requires generic knowledge and skills that transcend particular disciplines/technical areas or positions.” (Ruben et al., 2017, p. 138)

*Vertical Approach to Leadership*

“Effective leadership requires knowledge and skills specific to higher ed and to particular discipline/technical areas.” (Ruben et al., 2017, p. 136)
Lessons For the Future

• Personal leadership development is a continuous process of clarifying one’s philosophy as a leader, self-assessment, commitment, planning, and self-improvement. (Ruben et al., 2017).

• Self-awareness and self-assessment is key throughout the process of becoming a better leader.
  – “The way we see ourselves and the way we intend to behave are often inconsistent with how others may see us.” (Ruben et al., 2017, p. 275)
Questions?
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<td>Industrial Relations and Human Resource Management</td>
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<td>Neuroscience</td>
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<td>Sheryse Taylor</td>
<td>Toxicology</td>
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