Perspectives and Thoughts on Leadership Development in Higher Education

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Leadership Development is an area that is lacking within institutions of Higher Education. With today's higher education landscape always changing it is now more important that there is quality leadership throughout these institutions. Gmelch (1991) wrote about a leadership crisis that is present throughout institutions of higher learning. Leadership in higher education is facing a difficult time because of the lack of quality administrative leaders (Morris, 2008). This leadership crisis applies to all institutions whether it is a two-year community college or a regional state institution, all institutions are facing a leadership shortage. As many “Baby Boomers” start to retire, many top leadership positions are becoming vacant. Many of these positions will need to be filled because of the strategic importance of operating the institutions. According to Gmelch (2004), academic leaders must declare that the time for amateur administration is over, and leaders must take a more proactive role in higher education. Strathe and Wilson (2006) wrote, “Significant changes in the past several decades have made the academic administrative role in our nation’s colleges and universities much less attractive than has previously been the case” (p. 5). There is a leadership deficit that is taking place in higher education, and leadership development can help with this issue.

The development of a leader takes time, dedication, and patience. Moreover, leaders do not develop overnight or in a vacuum setting (Morris 2008). This process usually takes several years for an individual to become a competent and capable leader. According to Gmelch, (2004) leadership development is an inner journey, and often is the most difficult part of professional growth.

Leadership is a meticulous process that takes several years to perfect, and is a skill not everyone develops. Sadly, many capable leaders choose not to pursue an administrative position within higher education because of the many challenges facing these institutions. Many past academic department chairs refuse to return to administrative duties because it is not worth the hardship they must submit themselves to on a regular basis (Morris, 2008). Unfortunately, there are many qualified staff and faculty members who have served in the past, who are unwilling to serve again because of the administrative challenges involved in being an administrative leader. Leadership development is needed to help prepare these individuals for the rigors of leading an academic institution. Without quality leaders in these important positions higher education may struggle in the upcoming years.

There are no special set of character traits such as intelligence, physical features or soci-economic background that enables someone to be a great leaders (Morris, 2008). Leadership is a skill that is learned through life experiences and watching fellow leaders. While many experts would agree that leadership is a skill that can be taught very few institutions take the time to train new leaders. Many institutions of higher education are more focused on managing the daily crises which occur on a regular basis. These issues are important however, many of these crises may be prevented by having people properly trained to handle these situations. Many usually lack the administrative experience to transition from a faculty member to a leadership position.
(Tucker, 1984). While managing a classroom and an institution may have similar attributes, most would argue they are vastly different. Learning the political, financial, and societal factors of an institution is a complicated process.

While leadership in higher education has received little attention, in recent years more research has emphasized the importance of good leadership within the academic environment. With the ever-changing higher education environment of the 21st century, attention has turned to how leaders create changes within followers and the organization that respond to and keep pace with change in the environment. Daft (2005) wrote that leaders need to strive to create learning organizations, in which each person is involved in solving problems so the organization can grow and change to meet ever-changing challenges. He also wrote, “rather than relying on hierarchical control, leaders build whole organizations as communities of shared purpose and direction” (p. 25). Higher Education is under increasing pressure as many institutions have to rely more heavily on tuition and alumni donations to meet their financial obligations.

Many faculty have been trained to teach, conduct research, and provide service, and typically they are promoted to department chair based on this criterion. This is usually their first leadership position in their professional career. On-the-job training and learning from other department chairs is the primary way department chairs learn their new positions (Strathe & Wilson, 2006). This training is very sporadic because many current department chairs do not have the time to train their colleagues in the position (Morris, 2008). This lack of training can be detrimental to a new department chair because they are unaware of the challenges that await them in their new leadership role.

The skills needed for leadership are no different in higher education than they are in business setting. Numerous businesses offer leadership training and development for their employees with the goal of ensuring the corporation is profitable for years to come. While most higher education institutions are not trying to make a profit they need to be financially stable in order to provide their educational services. This requires leaders that have the knowledge and background to make sound decisions. According to Ramsden (1998), academic leaders must be provided with the means and resources to have the faculty and support staff perform at an optimal level.

Many of the key issues facing future leaders in higher education can be resolved by identifying key issues and implementing some action steps to correct the leadership deficit.

Key Issues:

- Lack of Training - Many researchers such as Gmelch and Ramsden have written about the lack of training that happens for faculty and administrators. Training for current and future administrators is non-existent in most institutions. Countless administrators are literally thrown into a position with little or no training. This causes the person to become frustrated and not perform their duties well because they are struggling with the basic concepts of the position. The lack of training causes many administrators to return to the classroom rather than pursue a career as an academic administration.
Lack of financial resources - This pertains to funding training and mentoring opportunities. Most institutions do not have training centers to assist in leadership development. Funding is an important aspect to leadership development and resources such as books, videos, and conferences should be set aside for this.

Lack of top management involvement - Many administrators are unwilling or unable to assist Junior Administrators in learning their position. Many would argue most are unable because they have not been trained in basic management concepts. They feel inadequate to train anyone because they lack the basic skills in management and leadership. This lack of involvement starts a vicious cycle because the behavior does not change with new administrators.

Action Steps:

Planning - It is necessary to have a plan on how to train faculty and administrators. This involves having standard operating procedures as well as management guides. Having written materials available is considered necessary for new faculty/administrators to reference when they have a question.

Training - the majority of people want to do a respectable job and faculty/administrators is no exception, however training must be the cornerstone to the development of these positions. Filan and Seagren (2003) wrote in their study that academic leadership requires many different levels of training for a person to be an exemplary leader. The different levels allow a person to experience many different scenarios they will face when leading a department or an academic institution. Corporations have learned the importance of training and spend time and resources to train their managers. Higher Education must follow their example. Institutions should have training programs in place to better equip their employees.

Mentoring - Leaders are required to do many things well, and expected to do great things. There is no better way to learn than from people who held the position previously. Mentoring is like any other skill; it will need to be practiced in order to be mastered. Since many incoming department chairs are faculty members, they will usually have some experience mentoring and advising students, important skills that will be needed when working with staff and faculty in a mentoring role. Mentors can assist in the learning curve of a position, and be an encouragement to faculty/administrators during their first year.

The time to discover if someone is a good leader is not after they have assumed a leadership position. Not everyone is called to lead, and leadership positions should not be taken lightly. While there may be a leadership crisis in higher education it is vital the correct people are chosen for these key positions. Once they have been identified as potential leaders then the leadership development process can begin.

Leadership development is not a difficult concept to comprehend, it involves commitment, resources and planning to make it happen. Many times institutions fail to plan for their current leaders to either leave the institution or move into different positions. Leadership training in the
past has been reserved for the top level administrators in higher education. This needs to change in order for institutions to have good leadership transition when top administrators leave. Institutions must have workshops for middle management to address issues of stress management, budgeting, and evaluation of staff and faculty. Without implementing a comprehensive leadership development plan academic institutions will continue to struggle in developing quality leaders.

References


