

Why would a clever person want to work at a university? Leadership and creativity in higher education (0187)

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Abstract

There are increasing pressures in the business world to recruit and retain creative and clever individuals due to their value to the organisation. In universities, these are often academics who focus on high impact, innovative and interdisciplinary research. Yet, instead of feeling supported, many of these academics face structural, epistemological and socio-cultural challenges. A recent business management book, *Clever: Leading your smartest, most creative people*, Goffee and Jones (2009) raise the importance of making organisations more valuable to clever people. This paper reviews the role of creativity in higher education and draws on multiple disciplinary conceptions of creativity to discuss challenges and how creativity and creative individuals can be supported in higher education. Three leadership styles based on the various conceptions and understandings of creativity are proposed and further research is discussed.

Introduction

Universities are seen as model organisations for the knowledge age, where innovation and creativity are valued and promoted. However, even within academia there is debate about what creativity is, how it is similar and different from intelligence and innovation, and can it be, or how is it, fostered and led. Leadership is always challenging, and in creative settings, it can be quite daunting. Below various definitions and conceptions of creativity and research on leading creative organisations from several conceptual and disciplinary perspectives are explored.

Creativity has been variously defined as a characteristic of a person, a process, or an outcome (Amabile, 1988). Creativity has been summarised as “any act, idea, or product that changes an existing domain into the new one. And the definition of a creative person is: someone whose thoughts or actions change a domain or establish a new one” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997, p. 28), and as “the production of novel and useful ideas in any domain” (Amabile et al. 1996, p. 1155). Much of the literature on creativity combines the ideas of originality (or innovation) and usefulness (or value) as the defining features of creativity (Boden, 1994; Mayer, 1999). Creativity is also characterized as an escape from self-imposed constraints (Ackoff & Vergara, 1981); as three parts consisting of expertise, the ability to think flexibly and imaginatively, and motivation (Amabile, 1998); and involving a culture, a person, and a field of experts (Jackson & Shaw, 2006).

However, creativity has been approached from various disciplinary and conceptual perspectives. Jackson (2006) advocates looking at creativity from multiple standpoints, including contextual, perceptual, practical, and conceptual. In psychology, creativity has shifted from a being synonymous with genius to a broader conceptualisation of characteristics of creative people rather than measuring creativity. Management and business literature have concentrated on the importance of creativity in individuals, teams, and organisations. Much of the creativity research focuses on the association between creative climates and innovative outputs (Nyström, 1990). In the field of education, creativity literature has followed the direction of psychology, moving from early views of creativity in education focused on exceptional creativity and individual,

qualities and traits (Stein, 1987; 1984) to more recent work that looks at the kinds of creative work done (Policastro & Gardner, 1999). Some researchers promote creative teaching, which takes a practitioner-focused stance, while others advocate teaching for creativity, a more student-centred approach (Craft, 2003). These differing conceptions of creativity as something to be taught, nurtured, or managed are discussed below.

Leadership and Creativity

In the management literature, there are discussions of both personal and product-based creative leadership. This stems from differences on promoting creative performance, e.g. the products, ideas, and so forth produced at the individual level versus organisational innovation, e.g. successful implementation of these products at the organizational level (Oldham & Cummings, 1996). These two approaches, leadership of creativity and leadership for creativity, reflect issues in higher education about supporting creative individuals and their ideas or promoting creative teams, often with a focus on the research-based outputs.

Leadership of creativity

Leadership and management of creativity focus on leading creative individuals. This leadership approach concentrates on the identity of creative individuals. Creativity is at heart of identity (Dineen, 2006; Oliver et al., 2006). This conception of creativity often assumes that creative individuals are best left alone and interfered with as little as possible. Creative people are thought to be intrinsically motivated (Amabile, 1988) and self-regulated (Jackson & Sinclair, 2006). In higher education, this conception relates to academic leaders and how they manage faculty in their creative research and teaching efforts, and how they promote an environment that encourages creativity in students learning. A common default for this style of leadership is to give creative individuals as much freedom and space as possible, but as Goffee and Jones (2009) note, this leaves individuals with very little connection or loyalty with their institution.

Leadership for creativity

A similar, yet different, approach is taken with the idea of leadership for creativity, which focuses on systems and organisations rather than individuals. This idea is based more on teamwork and fostering a creative environment. Much of this research notes how the modern assessment culture inhibits creativity (Fryer, 2006; Smith-Bingham, 2006). “Creativity in science, as in the arts, cannot be organized. It arises spontaneously from individual talent. Well-run laboratories can foster it, but hierarchical organization, inflexible bureaucratic rules, and mountains of futile paperwork can kill it” (Perutz, 2003). The creative team leader is seen as a facilitator. In higher education, this conception relates to how academic leaders structure and organise the university to promote individuals and groups in their creative endeavours.

Creative leadership

There is a third, more inclusive approach: creative leadership; Sternberg, et al. (2003) propose three types—leadership that accepts existing ways of doing things (conceptualised as replication, redefinition, forward incrementation, and advance forward incrementation); leadership that challenges existing ways of doing things (ideas of redirection, reconstruction/redirection, and reinitiation); and leadership that synthesizes different ways of doing things (known as synthesis). Creative leadership also known as transformational (versus transactional) leadership (Bass & Avolio, 1990; 1994); emotionally intelligent leadership (Goleman, 1998); and charismatic

leadership (Conger & Kanugo, 1998). Creative leadership can also be seen as a means to sustain creative efforts of team members (Rickards & Moger, 2000).

Creative leadership embraces the importance of both personal and organizational factors in managing creativity and takes an “interactionist” approach to understanding creativity (Amabile, 1987). Supportive leadership has been positively linked to creativity and controlling leadership has been negatively linked (Oldham & Cummings). This view concentrates on the role of the leader to enact new change and focus on creativity. As the knowledge economy continues to grow, there is increasing complexity in universities. “Complexity requires us to change our epistemological stance towards creativity and change” (Tosey, 2006, p. 40). This change may provide the ‘conditions for emergence’ that challenge traditional linear ways of leading and following (Tosey), and re-creating the university as a centre that supports creative individuals, is the home of creative teams, and the engine of creative enterprise.

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