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Socrates, Barefoot Leadership and Trust in English Higher Education in an Age of Austerity

Abstract

This paper reports research findings on leadership and trust in English higher education during a time of uncertainty, significant increases in student fees and cuts in government funding. Respondents reported that leaders needed to be 'border controllers' of institutions, engendering 'trust capital' through openness, competence, benevolence and good communication. A Socratic ideal of 'barefoot' pedagogic leadership in higher education is proposed, signifying renewed requirements for leadership integrity combined with philosophical depth, authenticity and 'moral re-arming'. Rising evidence of global scepticism and distrust in authorities was echoed in local views that 'followers' expected leaders to be accountable, demonstrating expertise, restraint and humility, combined with skill in delegation, frugality and entrepreneurialism. University experts, managers and academics responded to questionnaires (n=16), surveys (n=121) and focus groups (n=6), saying that higher education leaders need to resist the 'false necessity' of deterministic managerial solutions in building collegiality and staff trust to cope proactively with change.

Introduction

Socrates must have irritated the shoemakers of his day. He was reputedly a barefoot philosopher who dressed simply in a plain tunic, as humorously depicted by Ameipsias and Aristophanes, rival comic poets in Ancient Greece (Anton and Preus, 1971). Yet ironically Socratic philosophy provided an extraordinarily intelligent, sophisticated understanding of civilised thought as one of the key founding influences in western culture, inspiring more than two thousand years of scholarly debate, from Plato and Aristotle onwards (*ibid.*). Socrates' frugality of dress and manner belied the depth of his philosophical contributions. So it goes, at times, in the interplay between appearance and reality. Sometimes leaders who are metaphorically 'barefoot' in simplicity and humility of external behaviours may reveal unexpected richness and depth in the communication of complex, highly nuanced, sophisticated understandings of their purposes and aims. The altruistic roles of 'barefoot women managers' as described by Nanavaty (2000) in the context of local rural women's information and communications technology development in India also informs the understanding of ethical positioning encompassed by the term 'barefoot leadership'.

At a time of austerity in higher education in England, leaders who demonstrate restraint, resonating with the prevailing zeitgeist of frugality, do not endorse large pay-rises for executive managers, nor indulge in an egotistical 'greed-is-good' culture, but instead embrace simplicity, economy, collegiality and trust in communicating within their institutions. In the current era, such leaders are likely to gain higher levels of staff support and respect than those who ignore such concerns. Socratic simplicity of 'barefoot' pedagogic leadership alongside a depth of scholarship and personal integrity in relational intelligence seems to be valued by many staff at a range of levels.

This paper reports research findings on leadership and trust in English higher education in the recession, at a time of significant increases in student fees and severe cuts in government funding. The capacity of leaders to generate trust involves positive willingness to act with faith and confidence in others despite uncertainties of future outcome, vulnerability and risk (Dirks and Ferrin, 2001; Grudzewski, Hejduk, Sankowska and Wańtuchowicz, 2008; Jameson and Andrews, 2008; Kouzes and Posner, 1993; Mayer, Davis and Schoorman, 1995; Zand, 1997). Values-oriented leadership promoting integrity, honesty, high standards of moral conduct and emotional intelligence is increasing in importance, despite an escalation in monitoring and external accountability of and by leadership and institutions. Ironically, despite increased scrutiny and supposed openness and transparency in the public sector, including within higher education, suspicion is increasing (O'Neill, 2002). Grudzewski *et al.*, (2008), Elton (2008) and O'Neill (*ibid.*) are amongst those who have emphasised the essential role of trust in all aspects of organisational operations. To generate trust, it is argued that the metaphor of 'barefoot' leadership may now be helpful.

Methodology

A literature review, the identification of theoretical perspectives and emerging themes were complemented by semi-structured interviews (n=16) with professorial experts on higher education. Interview data from university experts, managers and academics were informed by questionnaires, online surveys (n=121) and a focus group (n=6). Interviews were conducted in 2011-12, lasted between 25-90 minutes and were recorded in digital audio and/or note form. Participants represented different kinds of institutions, including 'elite' pre-1992 and 'mass' post-1992 higher education institutions with different subject disciplines and geographical situations. Qualitative analysis of interview findings brought together views from senior and middle managers and lecturing staff in a critical theory action research approach developed from many years research into leadership. The researchers collected together emerging themes and discussed these, triangulating them with themes from the literature review, online survey responses and forum notes.

Discussion

Respondents reported that in an age of austerity and declining trust, leaders needed to engender 'trust capital' for the longer-term through openness, authenticity, competence, benevolence and

good communication. Participants said that leaders need to be both innovative and cautious, to demonstrate confidence but also humility, to be strong on values but also pragmatic, entrepreneurial good delegators. Findings indicated that long term 'trust capital' was inspired by openness and good communication. Expert higher education respondents said that leaders need to act as proficient 'border controllers', protecting institutions against the damaging excesses of external policy changes. Leaders needed to resist the 'false necessity' of deterministic solutions and should instead build staff trust to cope proactively with ambiguity and change. This capability was required for academic leaders to maintain their roles in shaping the enduring purposes of higher education during a recession, both in England and in the wider international environment. The metaphor of 'barefoot' leadership was proposed as a model to capture these converging opinions on effective pedagogic higher education leadership, linked to Socratic philosophical ideals and to altruistic support for and empathy with those suffering poverty in the recession.

Current English government policy changes include sharp increases in student fees, cuts to government higher education funding, increasing external accountability and rising levels of privatisation, marketisation, and competition for elite academic, industrial and economic success. These policy drivers continue radically to change the environment in which universities operate, an environment in which leadership is already significantly affected by prevailing discourses relating to new public management and managerialism (Brown, 2010, 2011; Callender, 2010; Deem and Brehony, 2005; Elton, 2008; Goodall, 2010).

Evidence from the analysis of research responses indicated that uncertainty and some erosion of trust was occurring in English higher education in the recession. The research team gauged that higher education institutions were evolving generally towards increasingly hierarchical, bureaucratic, competitive and enterprising organisational cultures (McNay, 2005) in an increasingly stratified post-Browne, post-CSR, post-White Paper student market-led environment, given the context of funding cuts, competition and increases in student fees. A recurrent theme emerging from interviews and respondent notes was the importance of clarity and strong leadership of higher education mission and values, linked to university leaders' roles in enabling students and staff to feel proud of their institution and its purposes. Respondents reported that higher education leaders needed to act as visionary, protective 'border controllers' of university environments during the uncertainties facing higher education, filtering out negative pressure on organisational cultures from the wider environment.

Leaders also visibly needed to demonstrate 'moral re-armament', a renewed assertion of integrity and ethical behaviours that could provide an exemplar to society. A number of respondents noted that powerful values-based authentic strategic leadership was required for the higher education sector creatively to engage with multiple challenges of change, retrenchment and stringency at a time of major cuts in government funding and growing distrust in authority figures. Vice-chancellors needed to lead through vision, relational intelligence and integrity, while proposals for change to

institutions needed to be realistic, do-able and to fit with the core values and purposes of the organisation, which might or might not align with those of the government.

Respondents reported that trust was vital for the effective governance, leadership and management of higher education. Its links to leadership values and productive organisational cultures needed to be promoted, as did trust-building behaviours such as openness, integrity, effective delegation and protection of staff. The fundamental purposes of higher education as a 'public and personal good' (Bone and McNay, 2007; Marginson, 2011) needed to be reasserted. New opportunities and challenges required entrepreneurial, collegial leadership to grow innovative capacity. Risk-averse, top-down, policy-driven bureaucratic and managerial approaches were seen as suffocatingly restrictive, eroding trust. Opportunities for proactive innovative responses included effective delegation to foster high trust at the 'small business' level of departments and units: respondents thought learning technologies and social media offered many opportunities for new kinds of growth.

The concept of 'barefoot' leadership in higher education is therefore proposed, signifying a new requirement for leadership simplicity, authenticity and 'moral re-armament' when scepticism and distrust in authorities is on the rise in England. In a challenging era of massive cuts, repeated government and media scandals and a general cynicism about leadership and trust in public life, such issues are increasingly important regarding the extent to which academic leadership in universities is trusted, or not, to perform freely. In the recession, with public sector spending and student numbers undergoing major change, uncertainties about the future may lead to an erosion of trust in the values, collegiality and civic role of universities. The model of barefoot Socratic leadership challenges the requirement for performative managerial cultures that lessen self-organising egalitarian potentials for excellent scholarship. This paper argues that intelligent, authentic academic leadership should be trusted to fulfil the higher purposes of universities.

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