

Jill Jameson

University of Greenwich, UK

Obliquity Leadership: Successful Circuiting the Dean's Disease in Higher Education (0260)

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Abstract

Complex challenges to UK higher education leadership and management are accelerating as multiple institutional demands shadow the imposition of governmental fee policies. Market-based entrepreneurial initiatives, performance management, league table and quality imperatives are driving increasingly instrumentalist curricula, pitched against competition from private providers. As longer-term survival strategies are intermittently debated in higher education silos, Humboldtian collegial scholarship may, predictably, slip into obsolescence at corporate levels. Pressured to adopt micro-managerial solutions for which openness and accountability are uncomfortable, incautious senior managers risk drifting into the chiaroscuro practices of 'the Dean's Disease', a disorder characterised by expediently value-free, arrogant power-driven management behaviours ferociously controlling and intolerant of criticism. This paper considers research findings from data in focus groups, interviews and surveys on leadership, trust, complexity and organisational cultures to argue that values-based principles of obliquity leadership may successfully circuit the organisational dysfunction that occurs in a minority of distrustful higher education environments.

Introduction

Emily Dickinson's poem '*Tell all the Truth but tell it slant*' (Franklin, 1998) suggests that humans cope more successfully with a circuitous, gradual disclosure of powerful truths than with straightforward approaches that are too overwhelming in their impact to be borne directly, since, as T.S. Eliot wrote in *Burnt Norton* (1935), 'Human kind cannot bear very much reality.' (Eliot, 1943). Realities are particularly difficult to take when they involve strident critique of sensitive, complex subjects, such as challenging the leadership and management practices of higher education institutions. John Kay, writing from the wholly different discipline of economics, observes the following regarding the effectiveness of indirect, subtle approaches in dealing with highly complex situations such as those found in higher education:

"Obliquity describes the process of achieving complex objectives indirectly. /In general, oblique approaches recognise that complex objectives tend to be imprecisely defined and contain many elements that are not necessarily or obviously compatible with each other,

and that we learn about the nature of the objectives and the means of achieving them during a process of experiment and discovery.” (Kay, 2002)

Speaking straight about necessarily hard truths to power in the supercomplex (Barnett, 2003) environment of higher education may be especially problematic when those in authority are not only sensitive to critique but are also afflicted with an unusual syndrome in academia known as ‘the Dean’s disease’ (Bedeian, 2002). This is an affliction in which powerfully arrogant senior academic managers, carrying out their roles with relative unaccountability and a sense of inalienable entitlement, surround themselves with flattering sycophants and become unwilling to tolerate any alternative perspectives. When the work of such managers needs to be improved, it becomes almost impossible to articulate this with the simple aim of being heard straightforwardly. Such individuals may also possess characteristics that lean towards the destructive narcissism (DM) described by Lubit (2002), which he characterises as a ‘common and significant problem in organisations’ that is highly detrimental. As Van Dijke et al. (2010) argue, infringements of procedural justice practised by leaders with high levels of professional power are more destructive to organisations than those of leaders operating at low-power levels. Such violations of power in by exploitative managers can lead to a severe lost of trust at the organisational level amongst staff and students within higher education environments.

Discussion

This paper considers selected research findings from higher education trust and leadership research, focusing on a minority of reportedly dysfunctional low-trust situations. This comes at a time in which complex challenges to UK higher education leadership and management are accelerating as multiple institutional demands are being placed on higher education institutions (HEIs) following the imposition of 2010-12 changes in governmental fee policies. Increasingly, market-based entrepreneurial initiatives, performance management, league table and quality drivers in an elite-mass stratified system are being accompanied by instrumentalist curricula which chafe in competition for student numbers against the profit motives of private providers.

As longer-term HEI survival strategies are intermittently debated in higher education silos, Humboldtian understandings of collegial scholarship as ‘Wissenschaft’ (the idealistic German concept of a free, noble pursuit of scientific scholarly inquiry for its own sake) may slip into obsolescence at both institutional management and corporate governance levels (Elton, 2007, 2008; McNay, 2005, 2007). Both managers and governors are increasingly and perhaps necessarily obsessed with meeting pragmatic, utilitarian demands of cutting-edge industry-focused entrepreneurialism and the development of research selectivity in a highly competitive global marketised HE system (Brown and Carasso, 2013).

Pressured to adopt micro-managerial solutions for which openness and accountability are uncomfortable, incautious senior managers risk drifting into the chiaroscuro practices of 'the Dean's Disease'. As analysed by Bedeian (2002), this encompasses a set of expediently value-free, arrogant power-driven management behaviours that are ferociously controlling and intolerant of subordinates' criticism yet highly attuned to flatter and beguile top management in the race to accumulate personal power. One survey respondent, a lecturer, observed of this kind of senior manager:

"I am appalled by the extremely unprofessional behaviours and the manner in which power is used for personal gain or the gain of personal favourites." (Survey respondent #2).

This paper considers selected research findings from focus groups (n=5 x 6 participants), interviews (n=20) and surveys (n=114) on leadership, trust, complexity theory and organisational cultures to argue that values-based application of obliquity leadership may carefully and subtly circuit the organisational dysfunction that can occur when an affliction like 'the Dean's Disease' infects interpersonal relationships in distrustful higher education environments. The potential for such dysfunctionality has become acute in some vulnerable institutions, as a complex mix of government policies on student fees, the management of analytics, increased external accountability, marketisation and industrial and economic responsiveness have together destabilised selected HE environments. New public management and neo-managerialist practices have pervaded such HEIs to form emerging audit cultures dominated by performative accountability, in which manipulative behaviours by unscrupulous managers seed a destructive legacy (Bedeian, 2002; Deem and Brehony, 2005; Tomasini and Vassilev, 2010). As one survey respondent put it:

"[It is] not possible to operate in an environment where trust is not in place. I work on the basis of trust and would wish this to always be my starting point. Once this breaks down there can be serious consequences for an organisation." (Survey respondent #8).

At this time, therefore, there is, arguably, a likelihood that power-hungry, ostensibly gifted individuals invisibly afflicted with 'the Dean's Disease' may rise to prominence, flattering their way to the top with magnetic charm and ease. In an environment characterised by multiple uncertainties regarding the future of higher education in the UK, obliquity leadership principles are, arguably, useful to indirectly but skilfully circumvent the toxic effect of such leaders, while also allowing space for creative agentic invention. The manner in which obliquity leadership may operate to further the well-being of employees is frequently at middle management or subordinate levels, practised in despite of higher management: Survey respondent #2, a lecturer, noted that s/he was "able to learn to be personally effective in spite of untrustworthy leadership" at the top, while respondent #8, a head of school, noted that "I don't trust them but

it doesn't stop me doing the best for my teams and respondent #104, a lecturer, said that "Trust is an issue. "Staff do not trust those above..." but since his/her "direct manager is brilliant", that enabled the staff to develop a more positive environment in which to work.

The capability of values-based obliquity leadership to generate trust and cautious optimism for the future, in despite of destructively toxic managers, uncertainty and rapid change, is a key survival attribute in a minority of low-trust situations at an extremely challenging time for higher education (Bedeian, 2002; Dirks & Ferrin, 2001; Grudzewski, Hejduk, Sankowska & Wańtuchowicz, 2008; Jameson & Andrews, 2008; Mayer, Davis & Schoorman, 1995; O'Neill, 2002; Zand, 1997). This paper argues that obliquity leadership is an appropriately subtle response in these destructive situations, enabling staff, particularly those at middle and subordinate institutional levels, creatively to survive intact through a difficult period, in the realisation of Dickenson's wise approach that "success in circuit lies."

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