Trust, the Visibility/Invisibity Leadership Paradox, and a Model for Reflective Negative Capability in the Academic Management of English Higher Education (0358)

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Abstract

Hierarchical institutional management is still dominant in English higher education, to the neglect of invisibilised forms of (neo-)collegial distributed leadership. In a marketised, stratified higher education system, new public management approaches have focused on visible 'command and control' management, overlooking relatively invisible spaces in which emergent collective academic leadership occurs, sometimes spontaneously. Self-reflexive 'negative capability' is amongst the more 'invisible' leadership approaches that enable staff to cope with contested agendas within the supercomplexity of higher education environments. From data collected on trust and leadership (2004-15) from university staff in semi-structured interviews (n=18), surveys (n=140 and a focus group (n=6), recent findings are discussed. These indicated that, paradoxically, 'less is sometimes more' regarding leadership visibility. 'Negative capability' is newly modelled with reference to self-reflexivity, resisting the 'false necessity' of deterministic solutions and fostering trust in responding to ambiguity. This is needed for leaders to reconfigure responses within turbulent higher education environments.

Introduction

It can be argued that overt forms of hierarchical top-down institutional management emphasising economic rationalism, performance to target and social control are still dominant in English higher education. For too long, institutional practices of leadership and management have tended to emphasise, mostly, visible, positive, authority-dominated approaches, with entrepreneurial and action-focused characteristics. A significant literature on managerialism and new public management has identified and critiqued this trend for decades now (Clarke and Newman, 1997; Deem, 1998; Deem and Brehony, 2005; Lea, 2011; McNay, 2005), with differential models of collective leadership (Bolden, Petrov and Gosling, 2008) and collegiality (Elton, 2008; Tapper and Palfreyman, 2000; Bacon, 2014) variously embraced, often as dichotomous alternatives (Tight, 2014). Given the imperatives of managing large mass higher education institutions, Lea observed in 2011 that "...the managerial template ... has become the normative model for the organization of the university", in which a "discourse of quantification" based on "performativity indexing and accountability" prevails (Lea, 2011: 816; 835). This 'template' can be linked to the economic rationalism of industrial models of corporatisation, which arguably are ill-suited to the charitable status of public sector higher education institutions as knowledge-producing academic organisations whose higher purposes are, in principle, to foster public as well as private good (Marginson, 2011). Lea identifies in this 'managerial template' the potential for a decline in critical academic oversight of the functions of corporate university management and an increase in moral risk:

"Putting one's trust in corporate management, banking, and various financial managers, in circumstances of inadequate oversight and near total deregulation, has proven once again that

needless exposition to conditions of moral hazard has repaid us with unethical behaviour in which a few have enriched themselves at the expense of the common good."

(Lea, 2011: 835-6).

Yet Tight (2014) is amongst those who argue for the need to avoid potentially problematic over-simplifications inherent in dichotomous views of managerialism and collegiality, while Lea (2011), and others, acknowledge that those "of the administrative/ managerial class with greater moral fibre will of course do what is appropriate". Nevertheless, Lea cautions that "we cannot rely on this scenario", proposing that hitherto dominant models of managerialism should be subordinate to academic leadership. Bacon (2014) is amongst those who elaborate on this kind of critique, emphasising the need for new approaches to collective academic leadership in higher education and arguing for a form of structural 'neo-collegiality' that recognises some of the new public management reforms as necessary, while calling for "the restoration of broader, more collegial decision-making processes to create a professional, efficient and appropriately 21st century management approach" (2014:1).

**Collegial spaces: collective academic leadership**

This paper argues that the emphasis on managerialism as an arguably necessary approach to the management of large-scale higher education institutions has tended to overlook the relatively invisible collegial spaces in which emergent individual and collective academic leadership in English higher education already occurs, sometimes spontaneously, amongst the larger body of academic staff, regardless of status. This recognises that the vast body of academic staffing is populated by highly intelligent, articulate, capable people who may have very little official 'voice' in management (Bacon, 2014; Parr, 2013), yet continue, mainly quietly, and for the most part effectively, to lead the students, teaching sessions, research fields, subject groups, project teams, academic and enterprising initiatives that make up the greater proportion of work in higher education institutions, in what is one of the highest performing systems in the world (Hazelcorn, 2015). The shared common purposes held by this wider group of academic staff, both larger than and often also including academic managers, form a relatively 'invisible' collective form of stoic leadership, distributed extensively amongst staff, that continues to sustain and motivate higher education institutions, often without recognition or formal authority (Hickman and Sorenson, 2014).

Negative capability and 'invisible' leadership

The paper argues that the complex attribute of self-reflexive 'negative capability' may be amongst the key attributes of 'invisible' neo-collegial distributed academic leadership that enable staff to cope with multiple contested agendas involved in managing the supercomplexity of higher education environments (Barnett, 2000). *Negative capability is defined here as an enduringly steadfast reflective capacity to resist the 'false necessity' of performative 'quick fixes', building long-term trust in coping proactively with ambiguity and change* (Simpson and French, 2006). *The complex attribute of negative capability promotes more subtle ways of thinking about the motivations of academic leadership and management than zero-sum conceptions of managerialism and collegiality, while resisting* the 'false necessity' of deterministic solutions, as Unger puts it:

"Negative capability – the power to act non-formulaically, in defiance of what rules and routines would predict, a power that may be inspired and strengthened, or discouraged and weakened ... the [mind's] power of recursive infinity and non-formulaic initiative..."

This paper puts forward a model for negative capability with reference to self-reflexivity (McKenzie, 2000). Drawing on extensive data collected in long-term research on trust and leadership (2004-15) amongst university staff in semi-structured interviews (n=18), surveys (n=140 and a focus group (n=6) (Jameson, 2012) successive findings from individual staff have indicated that, paradoxically, 'less is sometimes more' regarding leadership and management visibility (see *Figure 1*). Although 'strong' and 'visible' leadership in higher education management is frequently lauded in policy documents, it is argued here that quieter forms of relatively 'invisible' distributed leadership amongst the mass of academic staff may be, paradoxically, as much if not more effective in maintaining quality institutions than overt forms of corporate managerial authority.
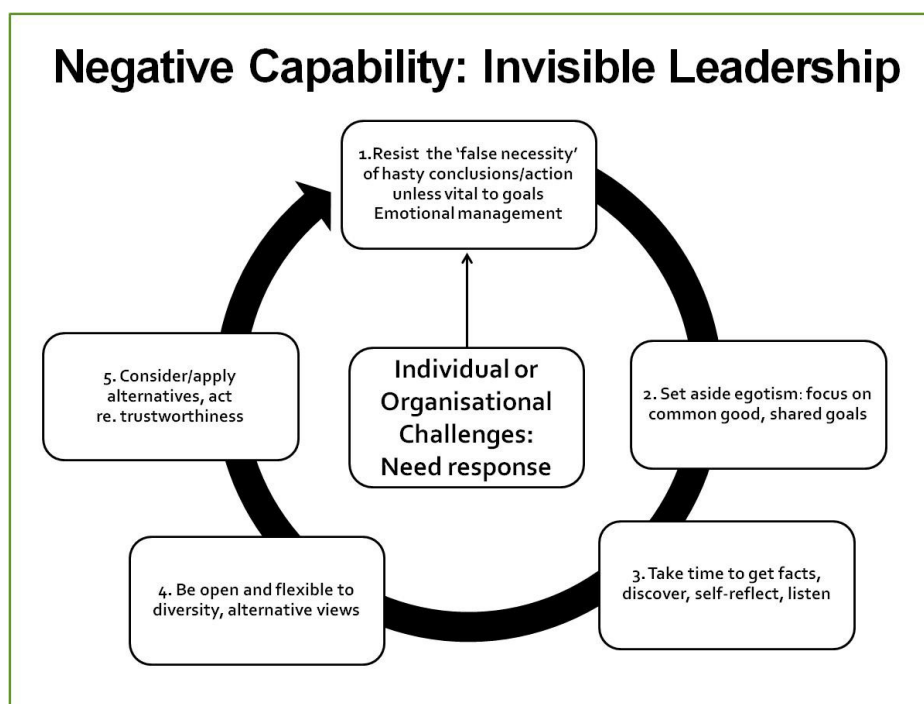
Figure 1: Self-Reflexive Negative Capability: Invisible Leadership in Higher Education

The proposed model (see *Figure 1*) demonstrates the stages involved in self-reflexive leadership responses to individual or organisational challenges. From (1) a resistance to the 'false necessity' of hasty conclusions/action, requiring emotional self-management, and (2) the ability to set aside egotism in focusing on the common good of shared goals, (3) time is taken to obtain facts, discover, self-reflect and listen, with (4) openness and flexibility regarding diversity of opinions, in order that (5) more considered solutions are achieved which result in continuously improved outcomes and action that fosters trustworthiness.

Conclusion: Visibility/Invisibility Paradox

'Negative capability' is a stoic capacity (Curren, 2008) that withstands difficulties and balances uncertainties, continuing quietly to serve the common purposes of higher education. It is a capability that resists an impetuous rush either to impose unnecessarily destructive changes or to resist new initiatives wholesale. This kind of stoicism is, arguably, needed for academic leaders at all levels to maintain their roles productively in shaping the purposes of

higher education despite multiple challenges and tensions. The attribute of 'negative capability', as a form of self-controlled restraint in managing uncertainty and responding to performative demands (Jameson, 2012; Simpson and French, 2006; Simpson, French and Harvey, 2002), may therefore be amongst the qualities that can enable institutions to thrive despite multiple ongoing policy and operational challenges, *including the need continuously to meet key performance indicators in response to globalisation, marketisation, privatisation, student fee increases and cuts in tuition. Drawing from extensive data collected in 2004-15, this paper concludes that a visibility/invisibility paradox may be in operation, whereby invisible forms of mass distributed academic leadership, acting in harmony with shared common purposes, are sometimes, paradoxically, more effective than overt institutional authority in achieving longer-term quality goals in higher education.*

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