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Leading without authority: the challenge of cross faculty leadership roles

Abstract

Over recent years, many higher education institutions have introduced new 'distributed' leadership models frequently based on themes and programmes rather than on academic departments with the hope of being more flexible and efficient in an increasingly competitive and international market. These models have led to an increase in cross-disciplinary and cross-faculty middle leadership roles in universities. However, many of the people who take on these roles may not have any perceived authority (through formal line management responsibilities or budget holding). How do they influence and lead staff in these situations? And what are the problems and challenges of 'distributing' leadership in this way? The purpose of this article is to explore these issues by drawing on data from a recent Leadership Foundation funded study exploring the role of Associate Deans in UK Universities which included 15 semi structured interviews with Associate Deans from 5 institutions and a national survey (n=172).

Introduction

Over recent years, a number of interrelated factors have forced higher education institutions to review and reimagine what are often perceived as outdated organisational management structures (Blaschke et al. 2014). One solution is to implement new 'distributed leadership' models - frequently based on themes and programmes rather than on academic departments -with the hope of being more flexible and efficient in an increasingly competitive and international market (Holt et al. 2014). These models have led to an increase in cross-disciplinary and cross-faculty middle leadership roles in universities (Preston and Floyd 2016). However, many of the people who take on these roles may not have any perceived authority (through formal line management responsibilities or budget holding). How do they influence and lead staff in these situations? And what are the problems and challenges of "distributing" leadership in this way? Although the practice of distributing leadership is widespread across the sector, there is a surprising paucity of evidence-based literature exploring the experiences and impact of such approaches. The purpose of this article is to address

this gap by drawing on data from a recent Leadership Foundation funded study exploring the role of Associate Deans in UK Universities. The research question addressed here is:

- What are the challenges of leading academic staff in a cross-faculty leadership role?

Theoretical Underpinnings

Distributed Leadership

The concept of distributed leadership has emerged as a response to the traditional 'heroic' or 'great man' theory of leadership which espouses that institutions can be led and transformed through the actions and behaviours of one person (Northouse 2013). As an alternative model, distributed leadership views leadership as a process which can, and should, be shared and dispersed throughout the organisation. Consequently, institutional leadership is seen more as 'the property of the collective rather than the individual' (Bolden et al. 2009, p. 259). Distributed leadership views leadership as something that all staff are involved in not just those in senior positions of authority, the term being used to 'describe the type of leadership that is used in organizations that purposefully empower teams and individuals to make important decisions' (Owens and Valesky 2011, p. 214).

Beyond the notion of viewing distributed leadership simply as the delegation of decision rights, adjacent work in organisation studies and linguistics suggests that leadership is discursive and that language and communication plays an important and powerful role in the leadership process across all levels of an organisation (Whittle et al. 2015; Wodak et al. 2011). The argument put forward by these authors is that in order to understand organisational leadership processes, it is necessary to explore leadership discourse, communication, and relational stances, and that leadership involves influence and meaning management distributed among several actors rather than necessarily just residing with one person in an appointed senior role (Fairhurst 2008; Fairhurst 2009). It is these ideas that frame this paper.

Methods

We used an exploratory, sequential mixed methods design (Creswell 2014) where qualitative data are gathered and analysed first, before quantitative data are collected from a larger sample size. In stage 1 we undertook semi-structured interviews with 15 Associate Deans five different institutions using purposive sampling (Bryman 2012) to identify appropriate participants. Then, in stage 2 we undertook a survey of Associate Deans

using an online questionnaire (Survey Monkey) which was based on themes and issues emanating from the interviews. An invitation and link to the survey was sent out via email to 472 Associate Deans across the UK (England, Scotland and Wales only). In total 172 Associate Deans completed the survey giving a response rate of 36%, although not all of these respondents answered every question.

The research was conducted following ethical guidelines set out by the British Educational Research Association (BERA 2011): before data collection began we applied for and gained full ethical approval and drew up detailed information sheets and consent forms; in order to ensure anonymity for respondents, pseudonyms have been used throughout.

Findings and Discussion

The results from this study show that while 38% of Associate Deans studied are working mainly within their faculty, the majority (60%) are working in a joint faculty/University role and are involved with what they perceive as strategic rather than operational activities. These findings reflect the growing move in University management structures towards more thematic and project management activities being 'distributed' across institutions, in this case via the role of Associate Dean. In addition, interview data suggest that the role is often explicitly linked to an espoused policy shift towards 'distributed leadership' models within institutions. However, the findings point to the fact that distributing leadership in practice is far harder than it might look in theory due to the size and complexity of the institutions and the perceived authority that people in such positions feel they have.

One of the ways that some of the Associate Deans practiced leadership without any perceived formal authority was through discursive leadership strategies (Fairhurst 2008; Fairhurst 2009; Wodak et al. 2011) which included negotiation, persuasion, relationship building, and as one said, 'charm and common sense'. Here, we can see how important the role of language and communication are to distributed leadership processes in universities in order to 'get people on board' and for change to be initiated from within rather than from the top, as has been shown in research into business organisations (Whittle et al. 2015; Wodak et al. 2011). These findings have clear implications for the development needs of people who take on such roles, as well as for the focus and content of traditional institutional leadership development programmes which are often based on outmoded top down training models, instead of drawing on more relational approaches to management development (Preston and Floyd 2016).

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