

PARTICIPATIVE LEADERSHIP IN DEVELOPING FACULTY STRATEGY

Nomthandazo S Gwele
Faculty of Health Sciences
Durban University of Technology
P O Box 1334
DURBAN 4000

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary discourse on the changed role of the dean underscores the importance of aligning faculty goals and objectives with the institution's vision and mission. This paper focuses on the dean as an academic leader, charged with the responsibility of shaping the character of the faculty within a results driven context, with limited discretion and/or resources. This presentation will share:

- One dean's experiences in charting and directing the course of the faculty in the absence of shared vision and mission at institutional level
- The significance of strategic and participative leadership in ensuring faculty ownership of the developed Faculty Strategy
- Strategies for helping the Faculty stay focused in their efforts to contribute toward the realization of the faculty's vision and goals.

INTRODUCTION

In the words of Rosser, Johnsrud and Heck (2003), deans are academic leaders and as such, "have the authority to chart where a college (faculty- my insertion) and its programs are headed" (p. 2). Contemporary discourse on the changed role of the dean, however, underscores the importance of aligning faculty goals and objectives to the institution's vision and mission. This discourse is premised on the assumption that when one takes on the job of a dean, the institution's mission, vision and goals will be in place, and that these will have been fully explained at all levels of the institution and endorsed by those whose responsibility it is to translate the institution's mission and goals into operational strategies and actions. This, however, was not the case when the new Dean of the Faculty of Health Sciences arrived at Durban University of Technology (DUT) in July 2004.

REQUISITES FOR DEVELOPING FACULTY STRATEGY

Charting the Faculty's direction in the absence of an agreed upon institutional direction requires that the dean is very clear about the national higher education imperatives, the facts about the state of the institution and the faculty in particular, especially as these relate to:

- ◆ Graduation and throughput rates (institutional and faculty level)
- ◆ Participation rates (gender, race and qualification levels)
- ◆ Staff profile (gender, race, rank and qualifications)

- ◆ Research participation and productivity
- ◆ Staffing profiles within departments
- ◆ Faculty academic departments' affordability data

Having arrived at DUT during the winter three-week vacation, the new dean spent this time familiarizing herself with the Institution and in particular with the above mentioned information. In addition, minutes of the meetings of the governance structures such senate, faculty board, executive management etc. had to be read and interpreted within the context of the institution.

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It is a fallacy to imagine that, within hierarchical organisational structures such as higher education institutions, there ever will be complete delegation of one's responsibilities as the person in charge of the faculty. It is possible, however, to build a working relationship that values and encourages constructive engagement, and dialogue in dealing with issues that require decisions about strategic direction because 'when it comes down to it, no matter how much decision making is shared, there does have to be someone who is in charge- and we have to know who that is" (Mohr & Dichter, 2001, p. 3). In the context of this paper participative leadership does not refer to a particular leadership style, but rather, to an engaged working relationship between the dean and those with whom he/she has line management responsibility.

Creating Space for Constructive Engagement

The dean is the face of the faculty. He/she is the one who must set the pulse of the faculty and its direction. Developing faculty strategy is the first step towards fulfilling this responsibility. When one is asked to present a vision for the job that one is applying for, one usually hopes that the appointment would be made on the basis of that vision. That vision should provide the dean with a starting point, a symbol of what he/she believes in, but nothing more than that. The dean therefore would still need to engage all his/her line managers (academic and administrative) in order to inspire them to commit to this vision. Translating the vision of the faculty into strategy is after all, the responsibility of the faculty through its line managers.

It is important that the faculty feel secure, fairly early, that, as a new leader, the dean is committed to taking over the reigns of the faculty. A 2-3 day strategy development

workshop with clearly defined expected outcomes would help create space for constructive engagement with the faculty. Ideally the workshop should take place no later than three months of the new dean's assuming the position.

The proposed strategy development workshop should be held off campus in order to ensure that all participants are focused on the work at hand. Such a strategy development workshop would serve to minimize ambiguity and give meaning and direction to the work of the faculty in the face of the uncertainty caused by arrival of a new dean and the vacuum created by the lack of agreed upon institutional mission and goals.

The goal is to assist the faculty achieve some measure of shared meaning. Success, however, rests on the ability of the leader to engage with the participants in a real sense. Real engagement is slow; it takes into account the need for all participants to reflect on what is being said by others and the need to examine other people's points of view against their own meaning perspectives on the direction the faculty should take.

Clarifying Workshop Expected Outcomes

The morning of the 1st day should focus on clarifying expected outcomes of the workshop as well as participants' expectations. Limits need to be set with regard to the nature of the participants' expectations that would be considered. Care should be taken not to lose the focus of the workshop. Only those expected outcomes that have the potential to add value to the process of developing a faculty strategy should be considered for inclusion in the workshop program. Failure to include staff expectations at all would undoubtedly sabotage the workshop even before it began.

Providing Context

Clarifying expectations should be followed by an analysis of the current situation in higher education. The aim is to help the academic line managers recognise the influence of the environment, including "changes in the larger system of higher education, demographics, regional and global economics and technology" (Phipps, 2004, p. 87) on universities, and in particular faculties of health sciences within the context of this paper.

The leader has a responsibility to contextualise the vision he/she intends to invite his/her line managers to commit to. Askling and Stensaker (2002) warned that it might be more important for leaders to interpret, translate and relate extrinsic pressure to change to the

internal condition than to try and offer solutions to the staff. A point of view that states upfront, "this is not about me", but about the institution and the need to respond to internal and external demands on higher education creates an opportunity for the staff to engage with current issues in higher education and begin to consciously confront the implications of the context for the direction the faculty might choose to take.

An analysis of the faculty's factual data, such as student participation by race and gender, staff profile, and student success with regard to graduation rates and throughput rates in comparison to institutional and national norms would give the faculty factual data upon which to assess the faculty's contribution to national imperatives within a competitive global environment.

Such a critical discourse should allow the participants space to make meaning of the context within which they are expected to work and help evoke a "common feeling that something has to be done" (Askling & Stensaker 2002: p. 121). The realization that something needs to be done should create "the necessary legitimacy for a broad organizational (faculty in this case) response" (Askling & Stensaker 2002: 121), and a receptive audience for the leader's vision as to what the direction of that response should be.

Deciding on Key Strategic Areas of Intervention for the Faculty

Guided by the context, the dean's vision and mission the participative process of developing the faculty strategic plan needs conscious and critical engagement by all participants. All points of view, including the dean's vision and mission must be subjected to questioning and validation by others. It is critical at this stage for the leader to accept, that by the end of the workshop, modifications to the 'original' vision will occur. The aim after all, is to develop a faculty strategy, not an individual strategy.

The final statement of intent should emerge from the collective views of what ought to be. The remainder of the workshop should be spent identifying key strategic areas of intervention for the faculty, including indicators and time frames to which at least all academic line managers would have agreed, as they were participants in its development. The academic line managers have the responsibility to obtain acceptance of the Faculty Strategic Plan at departmental level. Legitimacy and acceptance at institutional level, however, can only be achieved once the faculty strategic plan is approved by the faculty

Board. This is essential in order for the dean to be able to lobby for the resources that would be required during operational stage of the planned strategy.

HELPING THE FACULTY STAY FOCUSED

It is not uncommon for all the hard work achieved through participative dialogue in developing a faculty's strategic plan to be "lost on the shelves". Strategies need to be put into place to ensure that the plan does not remain just that - a plan.

The following strategies are invaluable in enhancing the faculty's ability to direct its energies toward agreed upon goals and objectives; these include:

- Developing an operational plan
- Building a core of strategy working groups
- Supporting strategic interventions through prioritised resource allocation
- Conducting periodic review and monitoring of implementation processes.

Developing an Operational Plan

Developing a short-term operational plan provides a set of objectives that the faculty can focus on within an academic year. Without an operational plan there is potential for the leader to micro-manage the department. Decision making at academic program level remains the responsibility of the academic line managers. The academic line managers are responsible for the performance within their department. The dean on the other hand has the responsibility of holding them accountable to agreed upon performance indicators within clearly specified timeframes. Without an operational plan, implementation of faculty strategy would be difficult if not impossible to manage.

Building and Creating Strategy Working Groups

Identifying and utilizing available expertise among one's constituencies is a cornerstone of participative leadership. Senge (1990) makes a poignant point in stating that "the organizations that will truly excel in the future will be organizations that discover how to tap people's commitment and capacity to learn at all levels" (p. 4). Building and creating strategy working groups is essential for two things. Firstly, this acknowledges that the staff in the faculty are professionals in their own capacity and therefore, do have knowledge and competence to contribute effectively to academic leadership and management of the

faculty. Secondly, this sends a clear message that collective commitment to faculty success is recognised and acknowledged.

The strategy working groups should be built around the identified faculty strategic imperatives and should be led by individuals with particular strengths that could be used for strengthening faculty performance, rather than the performance of individual departments. Following the initial 2004 strategy development workshop, the Faculty of Health Sciences has had two annual strategy review and planning workshops. Over the years, the Dean has realised the need to extend responsibility and therefore delegate some of the key functional areas such as teaching and learning, research, community engagement, infrastructural planning and governmental linkages. Strategy working groups, each with clearly defined terms of reference have now been established: (a) Teaching and learning working group, (b) Research development working group (c) Community engagement working group (d) Infrastructure and infrastructural support working group and the (e) Governmental linkages group. Each working group is led by an individual with strategic and tactical knowledge of the tasks involved in the terms of reference of the particular working group. The Dean continues to be responsible for monitoring and supporting interventions aimed at transformation and equity.

Supporting Strategic Interventions through Resource Allocation

The dean's role at operational level should revolve mainly around helping the academic departments access the resources they need in order to carry out the planned strategic interventions. In Borbidge's (2006) words "Employees cannot complete any project without management support and resources. ... Leaders make sure that when they want something done by the workforce, the means to accomplish it are in place" (p. 66). Supporting academic line managers, whether through constantly negotiating for resources on their behalf, or just protecting their 'working space' so that they can function without undue pressure, which could easily lead to anxiety and feelings of being overwhelmed, is critical in ensuring that the Faculty stays focused.

The ultimate focus should be the contribution the Faculty goals will make towards achieving Institutional goals. Effective promotion of the faculty budget at institutional level is the key to achieving faculty goals. This, however, should not be achieved on a narrow parochial view of the place of the faculty within the institution. Prioritization therefore is central to resource allocation and support for departmental interventions.

Conducting Periodic Review and Monitoring of the Implementation Processes

Staff must be made aware from the outset that participation in decision making carries with it, a significant measure of accountability. Building an accountability system based on information sharing and self-evaluation ensures collective accountability for faculty successes and failures. Without built-in systems for monitoring strategy implementation, it is unlikely that any faculty will achieve its goals.

Timelines for progress review should be set well ahead of time, preferably during the development of the operational plan. Faculty academic line managers must meet at scheduled periods during the course of the academic year to review progress toward identified objectives and determine strategies for corrective action.

CONCLUSION

Ideally, when a dean assumes his/her position as a dean, there will be a clearly defined institutional mission, vision and goals. We do not live in an ideal world. Guided by national imperatives for higher education as well as contemporary discourse in higher education, through an honest and transparent process of engagement with academic line managers, it should be possible for the dean to chart the direction of the faculty, with or without institutional direction. This is the true meaning of participative leadership in practice.

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