

Managing Neck Deep: A Sleeves up Approach to Academic Leadership

Presentation Team:

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Introduction

This paper focuses on the development and use of a leadership model within the School of Health, Wellness, and Public Safety (HWPS) at Central New Mexico Community College (CNM) as seen from the perspective of both faculty and administrators. The purpose of this paper and subsequent presentation is to share a "sleeves up, hands-on" approach to academic leadership. Many leadership models in higher education provide a top-down organizational chart to support student success. We propose a bottom-up approach which allows leaders to go “neck deep” into the struggles faced by students. By taking steps to integrate community and student feedback in a way that promotes student enrollment, retention and success, your leadership team may be inspired by a results-oriented bottom line.

Organizational Analysis

With an enrollment of 30,000 students, CNM is the largest postsecondary institution in New Mexico. The college has six campuses located in the Albuquerque metro area. The college is comprised of six academic schools which include: (a) Applied Technologies (b) Business and Information Technology, (c) Communications, Humanities, and Social Sciences, (d) Adult and General Education, (e) Health, Wellness, and Public Safety, and (f) Math, Science, and Engineering. HWPS has an enrollment of 5,000 students. Instruction is provided by 350 part-time faculty and 50 full-time faculty. There are 20 programs of instruction and many full-time faculty dually serve as program directors, clinical coordinators, or level coordinators. The leadership team consists of a dean, two associate deans, and three faculty chairs.

Leadership as a Relationship

Leadership is dependent on relationships. Successful leadership is a function of how well people work and play together. James Kouzes and Barry Posner describe five fundamental practices of exemplary leaders which include: (a) model the way, (b) inspire a shared vision, (c)

challenge the process, (d) enable others to act, and (e) encourage the heart (Kouzes and Posner, 2009).

Modeling the way is earning the right and the respect to lead through direct individual involvement and action. Most people follow because they believe in the person, not the plan. Leaders can model the way by finding their voice, by clarifying personal values, and setting the example by aligning actions with shared values.

Inspiring a shared vision is knowing your constituents and speaking their language. Leaders do not command commitment; they only inspire it through their own personal enthusiasm. Leaders must understand followers and have their needs foremost in their minds. This is often demonstrated by envisioning the future by imagining exciting opportunities and enabling possibilities. Visions become reality by enlisting others to share common aspirations.

Challenging the process is demonstrated by leading out. Leaders are often early adopters of innovation. The primary contributions of capable leaders are recognizing good ideas, supporting them, and challenging the system to accept them. By searching for opportunities and seeking innovation, organizations can find ways to change, grow, and improve. It is important to experiment and take risks by constantly generating small wins and learning from mistakes. Being in a leadership roles requires the courage to not be afraid to fail.

Enabling others to act requires collaboration and a sense of trust. Leaders make it possible for others to do their work through teamwork, trust, and empowerment. A collaborative leadership modal requires the development of human capital and strengthening others by sharing power and discretion. By developing others, constituents become leaders; which in turn promotes cooperative goals and compounds the building of trust.

Valuing others for their contribution towards organizational goals is the process of encouraging the heart. Leaders show appreciation for the work that is done and celebrate

performance. Contributions towards organizational success can be recognized by showing appreciation for individual excellence, celebrating values, and by creating a spirit of community.

Survey Methods

Preparation for this paper and presentation included a survey of HWPS faculty regarding the approach to academic leadership in our school. The participants in survey included faculty chairs, program directors, clinical coordinators, level coordinators, full-time faculty, and part-time faculty. The survey was conducted online using SurveyMonkey and consisted of thirteen questions. Open-ended responses to each question were grouped by like response and natural trends emerged from the data.

Top-Down Leadership – The Balcony Approach

Leadership occurs at several levels within CNM. There are hierarchical layers of leadership within CNM to include the: (a) Governing Board, (b) President, and (c) Executive Team. Additional levels of leadership exist within CNM to include leadership within Academic Affairs, Student Services, Administrative Services, Planning and Budget, the six academic schools, and specific academic programs.

Leadership can be defined in many ways. One definition of leadership is the creating of conditions to reinforce or change rules. The former dean of HWPS expressed to his role in providing what he called “institutional alignment.” This concept required that the institution’s values, vision, and mission as expressed from the top-down are then understood and applied from the bottom-up. Not all institutional direction comes from the top-down, in fact, many changes are ultimately driven from the bottom-up in response to the needs of students as expressed by faculty, staff, and administrators who have direct contact with students in their daily roles.

Based on faculty experience, 70% of our faculty described the overall academic leadership model within HWPS as “top-down.” When asked, do you feel like you play a role in the decision-making processes of our school, faculty responded: (a) always – 0%, (b) sometimes – 35%, (c) occasionally – 20%, and (d) never – 45%.

Common Top-Down Issues – Getting Neck Deep

The previous academic administration within the school of HWPS was perceived as being elitist by the faculty, which caused a rift between faculty and administration. When faculty were asked why they thought the predominate leadership model within our school was top-down, faculty the overwhelming trend that emerged from the data was that faculty input was sought out, nor not taken into consideration when decisions were being made. One respondent remarked, “This is a top down organization. Decisions are made at the top and problems are handled at the student - teacher level. I do not feel I have input.” Faculty have voiced their frustration with a top-down academic leadership model. The current academic leadership within the School of HWPS is taking steps to be more inclusive of faculty input in the decision-making process.

Engaging Faculty – A Sleeves up Approach

When asked what academic leadership can do to better engage the faculty of our school in the decision-making processes of our school, the survey data revealed two primary recommendations which focused on increased communication and increased follow through on behalf of administration. One faculty commented, “Leadership often asks for comments or recommendations, but they do not complete the circle by implementing the ideas or explaining why they are not implementing them.” This comment also indicates the need for administration to close the loop on communication with faculty and the decision-making process.

Benefits of a Shared Leadership Model

Survey respondents articulated the benefits of using a shared leadership model would be developing a common vision, increased buy-in for policies, and shared ownership of processes. One faculty felt that use of a shared leadership would increase faculty and administration morale, value and professionalism. Another faculty suggested that ownership for processes should occur for all of the stakeholders. When the responsibility is shared, it decreases the amount of work for which any individual is responsible for, while improving overall buy-in.

Value of Student Feedback

When asked, does student feedback impact the decision-making processes of our school, faculty responded: (a) very frequently – 11%, (b) frequently – 32%, (c) occasionally – 42%, (d) rarely – 5%, and (e) very rarely – 11%.

Faculty were asked to consider the value of using student feedback for the purpose of promoting enrollment, retention, and success. Several faculty indicated that students are very knowledgeable when it comes to their education. Survey respondents felt that students are our clients, customers, and products. There was a fear that if we do not serve students, they will not be successful in our programs. By actively listening to students it was thought that we might enhance retention, graduation, and perhaps even future success in the workforce.

Value of Advisory Feedback

When asked, does advisory committee feedback impact the decision-making processes of our school, faculty responded: (a) very frequently – 6%, (b) frequently – 39%, (c) occasionally – 44%, (d) rarely – 0%, and (e) very rarely – 11%.

When asked about listening to advisory committee feedback for the purpose of promoting enrollment, retention, and success, the majority of faculty indicated that advisory committees are

our community partners and they influence the hiring of our graduates. It was thought that we have a responsibility as a community college to hear the concerns and needs of our communities of interest.

Next Steps - Our Approach to Academic Leadership

After discussing the results of the faculty survey, our leadership team believes that: (a) decisions that impact the classroom be made “closer to the classroom,” (b) efforts should be made to increase faculty engagement in global academic affairs decisions, and (c) improved cross-school communication and collaboration would be beneficial. We were pleased to hear that many faculty felt the leadership within HWPS were good listeners and accessible. We will need to continue to build on our successes, overcome our challenges, rely on the strength of each other, and realize our potential. Use of any leadership model has its share of pros and cons, and the decision to adopt an upside down organizational chart is no different. The success or failure of our proposed model rests on our ability to nurture and provide for its continued care and growth.