Participative leadership in managing a faculty strategy

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Abstract
Contemporary discourse on the changed role of the Dean of an academic institution underscores the importance of aligning Faculty goals and objectives with the institution’s vision and mission. This article 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. The purpose is to share views and experiences in charting and directing the course of the Faculty in the absence of shared vision and mission at institutional level. The article will also recommend strategies for helping academic line managers at departmental level stay focused in an effort to contribute toward the realisation of a faculty’s vision and goals. The significance of strategic and participative leadership in ensuring faculty ownership of the developed faculty strategy cannot be overemphasised.

INTRODUCTION
In the words of Rosser, Johnsrud and Heck (2003, 2), Deans are academic leaders and, as such, ‘have the authority to chart where a college (faculty – my insertion) and its programmes are headed’. Contemporary discourse on the changed role of the dean, however, underscores the importance of aligning faculty goals and objectives with 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 that there would be endorsement by those whose responsibility it is to translate the institution’s mission and goals into operational strategies and actions. This, however, is not always the case. Irrespective of whether there is an agreed upon institutional vision and mission, the dean still has the responsibility to lead the
development, implementation and monitoring of the faculty strategy. This article focuses on the role of a newly appointed dean in managing a faculty strategy in the absence of an agreed upon institutional vision, mission and goals.

PARTICIPATIVE LEADERSHIP
McCrimmon (2006, 1) presents a compelling argument against participate leadership. He contends that ‘participative leadership is not possible because leadership involves one person persuading others to do something they would otherwise not do. Leadership is always unidirectional’. According to him, the problem arises when decision making is confused with leadership. In McCrimmon’s (2006, 1) view, decision making is about management, not leadership. He believes leadership is about ‘inspiring people to change direction’. Hence, according to him, there cannot be participative leadership, as no two people can inspire others to change direction at exactly the same point in time. It is not in the interest of this article to engage in scholarly debate about the meaning of leadership participative or otherwise, nor is it the author’s intention to partake in scholarly debate about distinctions between leadership and management. As a practitioner rather than a scholar of leadership and management, I will adopt the attitude as stated by Owens (1998, 217), who states that ‘educational leaders must – as all leaders – be able to manage’.

I will, nevertheless, concede that it is a fallacy to imagine that, within hierarchical organisational structures such as higher education institutions, the dean would ever be able to completely delegate his/her responsibilities as the person in charge of the faculty. As noted by Mohr and Dichter (2001, 3) ‘when it comes down to it, no matter how much decision making is shared, there have to be someone who is in charge – and we have to know who that is’. It is possible, however, to build a working relationship which values and encourages constructive engagement and dialogue in dealing with issues that require decisions about strategic direction. In the context of this article therefore, participative leadership refers not 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. Specifically, with regard to managing faculty strategy, participative leadership refers to the process of engagement between the Dean and Faculty line managers that is aimed at establishing the agreed upon Faculty vision, mission, and goals, as well as the strategies for implementation and monitoring of these. This process involves (a) getting to know the institution and the faculty, (b) creating space for constructive engagement, (c) analysing the context, (d) deciding on key strategic areas of intervention, and (e) helping the faculty stay focused.

GETTING TO KNOW THE INSTITUTION AND THE FACULTY
Charting a Faculty’s direction in the absence of agreed upon institutional direction is, and can be very difficult. Nevertheless, it is a job that must be done. This requires
that the Dean is very clear about the national higher education imperatives, the global context of higher education and the facts about the state of the institution and her/his faculty in particular, especially as these relate to:

- Graduation and throughput rates
- 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.

This information is invaluable in trying to get to know one’s context within a short space of time. In addition, minutes of meetings of governance structures such as senate, Faculty board, executive management and so on must be read and interpreted within the context of the institution.

**CREATING SPACE FOR CONSTRUCTIVE ENGAGEMENT**

The dean is the face of the faculty. He/she is the one who must set the tone 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 should be nothing more than that. The Dean would still need to engage all his/her line managers (academic and administrative staff) in order to inspire them to commit to his/her vision. Translating the vision and mission into faculty strategy is, after all, the responsibility of the Faculty through its line managers. Space must be created for constructive engagement with the faculty academic and administrative line managers.

It is important that early in his/her tenure the Faculty feel secure, that, as a new leader, the Dean is committed to taking the reigns of the Faculty. Ideally a strategy development workshop should be scheduled to take place no later than three months after a new Dean assumes the position. The workshop should be held off campus in order to ensure that all participants are focused on the work at hand. The morning of the 1st day should focus on clarifying the expected outcomes of the workshop as well as the participants’ expectations. Limits need to be set with regard to the nature of 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 programme. Failure to include staff expectations at all would undoubtedly sabotage the workshop even before it began.

Clarifying the expectations of both the dean and the participants is an attempt to find common ground on which the remainder of the workshop would be based.
In doing this the Dean is able to minimise disequilibrium that could result from ill defined expectations between the Dean and the rest of the workshop participants.

ANALYSING THE CONTEXT

In the words of Kegan (cited in Phipps 2004, 6) ‘in this new environment of constant change, successful leaders lead by providing context in which all interested parties, the leader included, can together create a vision, mission, or purpose they can collectively uphold’. An analysis of the current situation in higher education should 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, 87) on universities, and in particular, universities of technology and their Faculties of health sciences within the context of this article.

The Dean 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 academic line managers 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.

Deconstructing the context therefore could involve, a brief exposition on the rapidly changing higher education environment that is increasingly becoming characterised by the demands for quality and accountability for large amount of public funds that governments, globally, continue to pour into the system without any real discernible returns in social and economic development (Askling and Stensaker 2002; Hendry and Dean 2002; Yielder and Codling 2004), transformation and equity (Department of Education 2001).

The Dean’s role is to facilitate the integration of the dialogue and analysis of the context in the light of the increasing demands for discernible returns on government investment on public higher education and the need for higher education to contribute to national imperatives. An analysis of the Faculty’s factual data, such as student participation, staff profile, student success with regard to graduation rates and throughput rates in comparison to institutional and national norms, provides the Faculty with factual data by which to assess the Faculty’s contribution to national imperatives within a competitive global environment.

For a health sciences faculty for instance, critical analysis of the current state of human resources in health nationally and internationally is imperative in ensuring relevance in any developed faculty strategy. In particular, a health sciences strategy in South Africa must take into account the continuing problem of health personnel shortages, and the changing disease profile which is, exacerbated by the HIV/AIDS
pandemic and its escalating toll on the lives of South Africans. Of greater importance is that a faculty of health sciences functions within the higher education policy framework. In South Africa, the National Plan for Higher Education (Department of Education 2001) as well as other higher education policies provides the context in which all higher education institutions must function. Critical discourse on these and other issues 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 and Stensaker 2002, 121). The realisation that something needs to be done should create ‘the necessary legitimacy for a broad organisational (Faculty in this case) response’ (Askling and Stensaker 2002, 121), and a receptive audience for the leader’s vision of 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 and 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 Dean to accept that, by the end of the workshop, modifications to his/her vision will occur. The aim after all, is to develop a Faculty strategy, not an individual strategy. Success, however, rests on the ability of the Dean 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 perspectives on the direction the Faculty should take.

A final statement of intent should emerge from the collective views of what ought to be. The Minister of Education (Department of Education 2001, 17) makes it clear that ‘the fundamental principles and framework outlined in the national plan are not open for consultation’. Any faculty strategy therefore, should be underpinned by a commitment to contribute to national imperatives for the higher education sector. The output from the strategy development workshop should be a list of key strategic areas for the Faculty, including indicators and time frames to which all Faculty line managers would have agreed on. The Faculty line managers have the responsibility to obtain acceptance of the Faculty strategic plan at departmental level. At this level, staff must also be allowed space to discuss the plan and make their contributions known before the Faculty strategy is finalised. 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 lobby for the resources that would be required during the 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 in place to ensure that the plan does not remain just that: a plan. The author has found the following strategies 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 resource allocation
- Conducting periodic review and monitoring of implementation processes
- Monitoring individual performance in alignment with faculty strategic goals.

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. Knoess (2005) recommends an independent 3rd party facilitator for guiding and structuring the discussions surrounding the development of an operational strategy. This would ensure that the outcome is fair and representative of all points of view emanating from the discussion. Whether the process is led by an independent facilitator or by the Dean, it is important that the operational strategy discussion sessions establish cause and effect among identified objectives and measurable outcomes including ‘what needs to be in place in order to facilitate the attainment of identified objectives’ (Knoess 2005, 37). The complexity of cause and effect relationships in higher education demands that the process of mapping out objectives makes explicit statements with regard to the person responsible for ensuring that each objective is attained, strategies and or contributing factors, measurable indicators for success and timeframes for accomplishment (Knoess 2005, 37).

Without an operational plan in place, there is potential for the dean to micro-manage the departments. Citing the DIO International Research Team, Cassar (1999) differentiates between strategic and tactical leadership. According to him, whilst it is much easier for the staff to accept directive leadership in strategic decision making, directive leadership is at odds with tactical decision making. The reason for this is that tactical decision making requires task operational knowledge for successful execution of the job. Based on a study investigating the interaction between participation and favourable work-related attitudes among Maltese middle managers, Cassar (1999, 5) warned that ‘organisations that attempt to enhance participative schemes should adequately check their general management style and preparedness to allow “free working space” for task decisions to be taken by employees who have the knowledge and specific know how about the problem at hand’.

In the context of a Faculty, decision making at academic programme level is the responsibility of the academic heads of department. The heads of department are responsible for the performance within their departments. The Dean on the other
hand has the responsibility to hold them accountable to agreed upon performance indicators within clearly specified timeframes. Without an operational plan, the implementation of faculty strategy would be difficult, if not impossible to manage.

Building a core of strategy working groups

Whitten (2006, 24) in an article entitled ‘Sole Control’ argues that ‘sharing power almost always harms people, projects, and outcomes’. He further asserts that ‘leaders who assign people to share power – are either inexperienced, too soft to make tough decisions or are incompetent’ (Whitten 2006, 24). It is argued, however, that in the area of higher education, identifying and utilising available expertise among the staff in the faculty is a cornerstone of participative leadership. Senge (1990, 4) makes a poignant point in stating that ‘the organizations that will truly excel in the future will be organisations that discover how to tap people’s commitment and capacity to learn at all levels’.

Building and creating strategy working groups is essential for two reasons. Firstly, this acknowledges that the staff in the Faculty are professionals in their own capacity and therefore, possess the 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. The Faculty of Health Sciences at the Durban University of Technology has established the following strategy working groups (a) the teaching and learning working group, (c) the research development working group (c) the community engagement working group (d) the 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.

Supporting strategic interventions through resource allocation

The Dean’s role at operational level should mainly revolve around facilitating the work of academic departments. Helping departments access the resources they need in order to carry out the planned strategic interventions is the responsibility of the dean. In Borbidge’s (2006, 66) 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’. Supporting faculty 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, is critical in ensuring that a Faculty stays focused without anxiety and feelings of being overwhelmed.
The significance of aligning strategy with resource allocation cannot be overly emphasised. A study examining the impact of role conflict and ambiguity on academic Deans by Wolverton, Wolverton and Gmelch (1999, 88) found that ‘receiving assignments without the proper resources and materials to execute them’, was, as a source of conflict for deans, rivalled only by problematic interpersonal working relationships. This state of affairs is equally applicable to academic line managers. No matter how changed the role of the Dean might be, one thing remains constant. Effective promotion of the Faculty budget at institutional level is the key to achieving faculty goals. This, however, should not be achieved by holding a narrow parochial view of the place of the Faculty within the institution. The ultimate focus should be the contribution the faculty goals will make towards achieving institutional goals and/or national imperatives.

**Periodic review and monitoring of the implementation processes**

It is logical that ‘any organization must periodically review implementation process, assess progress, and make decisions concerning corrective action’ (Alashloo, Castka and Sharp 2005, 134). Without built in systems for monitoring strategy implementation, it is unlikely that any faculty will achieve its goals. From the outset 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.

Phipps (2004) highlights the significance of facilitation, planning, problem solving and decision making in developing shared leadership systems. These tools are essential for the monitoring and reviewing of the implementation processes. 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 the progress toward identified objectives and determine strategies for corrective action. This requires the acknowledgement and acceptance that ‘an organization that is involved in continuous improvement and learning requires a major investment of time, training and assessment … (and that) feedback is critical for sustained development’ (Phipps 2004, 79).

**Monitoring individual performance**

Based on an extensive review of literature, Carl and Kapp (2004, 18) concluded that ‘although performance appraisal has the intention to empower people, they often experience it negatively’. Similarly, Ndambakuwa and Mafunda (2006, 117) noted that performance appraisal systems have been associated with a number of ‘mixed fortunes in terms of successes and failures’. Perhaps more telling is the observation by Edwards and Williams (1998, 14) that ‘although there seems to be some consensus concerning the validity of and importance of scheduling performance appraisals,
individuals involved in the process usually experience some degree of trepidation, anxiety, or conflict regarding the overall objectives and method of implementation’.

Without a doubt, performance appraisal is the most contested aspect of any dean’s job, especially within a unionised higher education environment. According to Simmons (2002) those writing from the employee relations perspective claim that performance appraisal might be nothing more than a surreptitious means of rendering trade unions ineffectual as individual employees begin to negotiate their pay increases and other employee benefits such as promotion with their line managers based on their performance evaluations. Nevertheless, Simmons (2002, 97) argues, and rightly so, that ‘notwithstanding the significant body of opinion critical of performance appraisal, the practice is not going to disappear’. Significantly, however, is the observation that ‘those who put forward trenchant criticism of appraisal are less forthcoming as to how key decisions on performance would be made in its absence’ (Simmons 2002, 97).

Several authors (Carl and Kapp 2004; Ndambakuwa and Mafunda 2006; Simmons 2002) have indicated that, their criticism it is not so much aimed at the nature of performance appraisal as a system of monitoring individual employee contributions toward attainment of institutional goals, but rather at how the system is developed, implemented and managed. Central to these authors’ arguments is the need for any performance appraisal system in higher education to recognise that ‘scholarship differs dramatically across disciplines’ (Carl and Kapp 2004, 19); that positive feedback, individualised focus and emphasis on development and focus on corrective measures are all essential for effective performance appraisal systems (Carl and Kapp 2004; Ndambakuwa and Mafunda 2006; Simmons, 2002). More than anything else, Simmons (2002) argues that the legitimacy of the process to those whose performance is appraised is the key to success and that such legitimacy is a function of the degree to which those appraised believe that they were involved in the determination of criteria used for assessing their performance. Perceived degree of control over evaluation criteria as a significant factor in performance appraisal was noted by Scholtes (cited in Phipps (2004, 96) in arguing that evaluating an individual ‘who has little control over the results he [sic] achieves is a waste of time’. To a certain extent this is true.

It is argued however, that the Dean has the responsibility to drive the institution’s academic project within the faculty through the academic line managers and thus must have a measure of control in achieving results. Individual performance, however, has to be measured against mutually agreed upon indicators of Faculty performance as explicitly stated in the Faculty strategic plan. Similarly, the academic line managers are responsible for the performance of the staff within their departments. Where no formal agreements have been made with the institution’s labour unions, it is important that performance appraisal focuses only on individual staff development toward optimum performance. Emphasis must be on identifying and suggesting alternative strategies for corrective action and improvement toward achieving agreed upon
Faculty goals rather than linking it with summative decisions regarding people’s employment status.

**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 and national health human resources, as well as contemporary discourse in higher education, and 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.

**REFERENCES**


