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The myths and mysteries of leadership in higher education

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journals.sagepub.com/home/cne**Leo Goedegebuure**

Abstract

In his seminal work “How Colleges Work” Bob (Robert) Birnbaum poses the ultimate question on the paradox of universities and colleges in the US. How comes, he asks, is it that they are amongst the largest industries in the country with an unparalleled reputation for diversity and quality, but are also regarded as poorly managed. In this paper I explore the evidence for a relationship between leadership, management and performance, or not.

Keywords

leadership, management, performance paradox

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Introduction

In his seminal work “How Colleges Work” Bob (Robert) Birnbaum poses the ultimate question on the paradox of universities and colleges in the US. How comes, he asks, is it that they are amongst the largest industries in the country with an unparalleled reputation for diversity and quality, but are also regarded as poorly managed. From this he derives three contrarian propositions. The first is that the success of the system has come about *despite* bad management, and if management could be improved the system would perform at an even higher level. The second is that in fact performance and management are not closely related, so that improvement in management practices would not yield any significant performance increases. The third is that US colleges and universities are so successful *because* they are poorly managed, implying that improvement in management practices might actually lead to diminishing effectiveness and performance (Birnbaum, 1988, pp. 3–4).

Thirty years later the relationship between leadership, management and institutional performance still bedevils the higher education community. There are the believers who argue that *of course* leadership and management matters. They find support in the existence of

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hundreds of higher education leadership and management programs, including 277 masters and PhD programs, 78 executive higher education management/leadership programs, and some 40 programs specially developed for developing countries (van der Wende, 2019). There are the critics for whom the notion of managerialism is antithetical to the hallowed idea of “the” academy. Often linked to neo-liberal ideology and New Public Management, it is considered to have invaded our institutions, giving rise to a new cadre of professional managers (Deem et al., 2007; but see also Shepherd, 2017 for a balanced analysis). And then there are the cynics, asking to “show me the money”: where’s the proof that indeed a relationship exists between leadership, management and performance?

In this paper I will follow this third line of argument by exploring the evidence for a relationship between leadership, management and performance, or not. I do this having been at the helm of an Institute that has promoted the virtues of management and leadership in our sector for the better part of 10 years. From this experience I believe that a hard look at what I call the myths and mysteries of higher education leadership is warranted. I will start this exploration by first looking at the general evidence on the effectiveness of management and leadership development, i.e. across all industries. I will then focus in on the specifics of management and leadership in our tertiary sector and see what evidence there is in support of a positive relationship between leadership, management and institutional performance. I will finish with a brief case study taken from our own journey on what I consider to be an effective program whilst remaining critical of both believers and critics.

The effectiveness of management and leadership development programs: A first assessment

Across the globe leadership and management development programs are big business. Recent estimates suggest close to \$356 billion is spend on these types of programs (Beer et al., 2016). Yet, the outcomes in terms of improved organizational performance are at best contested and at worst unproven. This is best illustrated by the 2018 State of Leadership Development Report by Harvard Business School Publishing (HBSP). In its executive summary it states:

As with our 2016 State of Leadership Development report (. . .), we uncovered some surprising—and valuable—findings. Perhaps chief among them is that organizations that view L&D as critical to business success are continuing to deliver top performance compared with their peers, on crucial metrics such as revenue growth, market position, and future growth. Yet at the same time, survey responses from line-of-business leaders suggest that many L&D organizations are falling short in their ability to exert a measurable impact on business performance and to equip them with the knowledge and skills they need to excel in their role. (HBSP, 2018, p. 2)

So: for a small group it actually works and pays off, but for a much larger group the return on investment is much more debatable. This conclusion is reinforced by the literature that looks at the effectiveness of management and leadership programs. As Packard and Jones (2015, p. 155) note: “In spite of a growing number of published reports, much remains to be learned about the effectiveness of leadership development programs.” A conclusion that is remarkably similar to one reached by Collins in 2002 (p. 1) when she states: “In essence, many companies naively assume that leadership development efforts improve organizational efforts.”

According to Beer et al. (2016) the lack of discernable impact of these types of programs is due to the fact that many are designed on the principle that an organization is an

“aggregation of individuals” rather than as “systems of interacting elements”. Without a focus on organizational complexity, interconnectedness and an understanding of organizational dynamics, impact of development programs is short lived because participants cannot sustain their learnings and fall back into old behavior and paradigms. Equally important, they argue, is the active support by the senior executive in embracing change and “walking the talk”. In a simple but catchy analogy, they argue that seeds can only germinate if they are planted in fertile soil.

The fertile soil argument resurfaces in the 2018 HBSP report referred to above. One of its conclusions is that the younger generation—our millennials—are particularly skeptical of leadership development programs. Yet, along the lines that every cloud has a silver lining, the report also notes that “L&D teams have a golden opportunity—if they can tap into millennials’ energy and creativity to design innovative programs that meet learners’ needs as well as the organization’s needs” (HBSP, 2018, p. 2).

These notions of appropriate, innovative design, learner centrality and sensitivity to organizational complexities and realities are resonating with the outcomes of a recent meta-analysis on leadership development programs. Lacerenza et al. (2017) analyzed 335 samples of leadership programs and found them more effective than generally assumed:

(. . .) results suggest that leadership training programs can lead to a 25% increase in learning, 28% increase in leadership behaviors performed on-the-job (i.e. transfer), 20% increase in overall job performance, 8% increase in subordinate outcomes, and a 25% increase in organizational outcomes . . . The results also suggest that the extent to which a program is effective is related to various design, delivery, and implementation elements (see Lacerenza et al., 2017, p. 1704, Table 8 for details)

Management and leadership programs in higher education: Reflections of effectiveness

As has been the case across the variety of sectors discussed in the previous section, there is a dearth of evidence on the effectiveness of management and leadership programs in higher education.¹ The most comprehensive analyses have been done by Tourish in his 2012 Stimulus Paper for the Leadership Foundation in the UK and by Dopson et al. in their 2016 research report on the impact of leadership and leadership development, also for the Leadership Foundation.

Tourish in general laments the lack of evidence on the relationship between leadership/management development and institutional performance, noting that whilst it is high on the policy agenda of both government and higher education leaders there is little clarity on what leadership means in the context of higher education and even less on how to measure its impact. He notes the seminal work done by Burgoyne and colleagues in 2009 of which the relevant conclusions in his view are:

- While two-thirds of responding HEIs made some attempt to evaluate their investment in leadership development, most of it was informal (for example, securing participant feedback on the quality of training sessions). The absence of systematic evaluations suggests that leadership development may be insufficiently integrated with other strategies within the HEIs concerned.

- Most respondents (78%) believed that their investment was good value for money. However, follow-up interviews found widespread uncertainty over whether, and to what extent, this was actually the case (Tourish, 2012, pp. 5–6).

He then proposes an ambitious framework that allows for a better articulation of what leadership in higher education entails and how it can be measured. For the details, see Tourish (2012, p. 9)—a results-based leadership development framework.

Whilst Tourish ends his paper on an optimistic note that the adoption of this framework may result in better contextualized leadership and ultimately improved institutional performance, the follow up work by Dopson et al. is sobering in this respect.

Having undertaken a comprehensive literature review they conclude that as regards leadership development approaches and models the literature “appears small scale, fragmented and often theoretically weak, with many different models, approaches and methods co-existing with little clear pattern of consensus formation” (Dopson et al., 2016, p. 42). They find this conclusion problematic given the vast investments across the sector in these activities and the (potential) importance of leadership in the higher education sector. To avoid fragmentation and localized activities they then propose the concept of a national research program for the UK on leadership developments and its impact and provide some suggestions for the nature of a leadership development program, constructed around “counter-programmatic dimensions” with a “finely balanced “binocular focus” on participants’ personal experiences, motivations and expectations, with a contextual emphasis on desired organisational outcomes and their evolution over time” (Dopson et al., 2016, p. 42).

This latter suggestion to some extent resonates with the recommendations from the HBSP report and the focus on millennials, combining context and complexity with the personal side of participants in leadership development programs. However, it does not really include the “walking the talk” part through the explicit and sustained support of the institutional leadership.

The final section of the paper will focus on how at the LH Martin Institute we have tried to incorporate the key messages put forward so far in a comprehensive program for emerging leaders and managers in our sector.

Management and leadership development at the coal face: The Emerging Leaders and Managers Program (eLAMP)

For those not familiar with the Australian context, the LH Martin Institute (LHMI) in 2007 was established at the University of Melbourne as a national centre with a remit to improve leadership and management across the tertiary education. The Australian Commonwealth Government provided a generous grant for the Institute to develop a suite of leadership and management programs tailored to and contextualized for the tertiary sector. The Institute started operating in 2008 and over the years has developed a suite of award (Graduate Certificates and a Master in Tertiary Education Management as well as a PhD program) and non-award programs (Executive education programs targeted at a variety of audiences). The launch of the Institute was accompanied by the establishment of an inaugural Board, consisting of key stakeholder bodies across the sector. This included the Association for Tertiary Education Management (ATEM), the sector’s preeminent professional body in Australasia for tertiary education administrators and managers.

LHMI and ATEM partnered in the design and development of the Emerging Leaders and Managers Program (eLAMP), which was launched in 2012, following a 12-month scoping

project which included participation of and representation by the Commonwealth Department of Education, Universities Australia, and TAFE Directors Australia as the peak bodies for the sector, to work out how to best provide relevant and engaging leadership and management development programs for those who work in tertiary education management. LHMI provided the funding to develop the program out of its Commonwealth grant, with a view to giving something back to the sector for the support it had received since its establishment. Underpinning this was the perspective from both organisations that eLAMP could be a vehicle to create a base level competency to affirm the professional status of tertiary education management. A status that is at the heart of what both ATEM and LHMI are trying to achieve. Since its launch eLAMP has seen a strong uptake across the sector with over 3000 staff having engaged with it, in part or completely, as is elaborated on later. Seen from that perspective, eLAMP has been a massive success and ATEM as well as LHMI continue to present it as such.

The overarching program aims of eLAMP are to enable participants to:

- gain a grasp of the breadth and depth of the tertiary education landscape in Australia and in the global context;
- develop an understanding of the complex internal and external drivers influencing the tertiary sector and learn how to respond appropriately to these drivers;
- gain insight into the different roles and styles leaders and managers need to adopt to be successful in their roles and develop flexibility across these styles and roles; and grasp the nuances of policy and learn how it aligns with strategic intention and how it influences the development of organisational culture (Brown and Davis, 2015).

A central design feature of the program is the incorporation of a *critical reflective practice* approach in both its structure and facilitation practices (Thompson and Thompson, 2008). Critical reflective practice should not be seen as an alternative to theory-driven understanding and conceptualisations. Rather, it tries to combine theoretical insights with practical realities. As Thompson and Pascal (2012, p. 314) argue:

Reflective practice offers a perspective more firmly rooted in the realities of practice, in which the 'high ground' of the professional knowledge base offers helpful insights, but not simple or direct lines of action for dealing with the 'swampy lowlands of practice' (Schön, 1983). Professional practice is not a technical process of applying (scientifically derived) solutions to practice problems. More realistically, it is a matter of wrestling with the complexities of both theory and practice, using professional artistry to move forward as effectively as possible.

Our experiences so far with eLAMP support this mix of theory and practice. It forces participants to take a step back from their day-to-day work and thinking and discussing what they are doing and why, informed by a series of theoretical and conceptual perspectives that many find challenging but also rewarding and insightful.

eLAMP consist of four online modules, each of the modules takes 8–10 weeks of around 3–4 hours study per week:

Module 1: Managing and Developing Yourself is divided into four sections: developing critical reflective practice; intra-personal intelligence; leading the self; and developing your personal career plan.

Module 2: Managing and Developing Others is divided into four sections: transitioning into a manager role; inter-personal intelligence; managing relationships in the workplace; and, developing others.

Module 3: Managing and Developing the Business has three components; situating Tertiary Education management; thinking and working strategically, and, sustaining Tertiary Education institutions.

Module 4: Understanding the Tertiary Education Landscape is the most theoretical of the eLAMP modules. It has two main components; the history and evolution of Australian tertiary education; and policy processes and outcomes, which covers the increasing importance of management and the marketplace, institutional governance, funding, internationalisation, institutional and sector diversity, and globalisation and the knowledge economy.

The four modules can be completed within a 12-month period. Following the successful completion of the four modules, participants can opt for formal recognition of completion, which involves completing a bridging program (public cohort) or capstone assignment (guided cohort) to gain 25 credit points advanced standing towards an LHMI Master or Graduate Certificate program (i.e. 50% of the program). This is delivered by LHMI at cost-recovery basis to participants. The rationale for this was to create a low-cost entry pathway into the LHMI award programs.

eLAMP as a program has evolved from its inception as a “MOOC-like” program to a blended program where e-learning is supported by a cadre of accredited facilitators that in its most developed form has taken on the form of “guided and sponsored cohorts” (referred to as Guided Cohort hereafter) delivered to individual institutions or partnering institutions in a particular locality such as Perth or Canberra. In terms of outcomes, the Guided Cohort modality is far superior to the Public Program, which suffers from the generic MOOC problems of low completion and a quick tapering off of individual participants’ interests. Hence, LHMI’s emphasis is on the further promotion of the Guided Cohort modality as the preferred leadership and management development strategy.

From September 2012, eLAMP has been relied upon to provide cost effective, accessible and relevant professional development for aspiring and current tertiary education managers at a time when the tertiary education sector is facing increasing external pressures for change. These pressures include funding model changes, increasing competition and commercialisation, larger and more diverse student cohorts with increasing expectations for value and quality, growing government scrutiny and rapid changes in technology. In short, it is argued that the current environment in which tertiary education managers work is so complex that the combination of skills, knowledge and judgements required to lead and manage effectively demands substantial professional training and development, and due recognition of accredited practitioners as professionals.

To assist participant’s progress through eLAMP, facilitators are utilised in all modalities of eLAMP with differing levels of involvement. eLAMP facilitators are accredited by LHMI; accreditation is achieved by the candidate completing the full on-line program, bridging program and the accreditation webinar. This is charged on a cost-recovery basis; reaccreditation is required every three years and involves attending the accreditation webinar.

The guided eLAMP program is relatively complex in its design and modalities as it is dependent on the client institution’s requirements. Institutions can opt for the full four module program or they can select only certain modules within the full program. In addition, institutions can use LHMI facilitators or in-house LHMI accredited facilitators (saving the institution travel and accommodation costs).

For the guided eLAMP program, the facilitator will provide online moderation during the 8 week study period per module and will facilitate the face-to-face workshop at the conclusion of each module. Some institutions also include a mid-module catch up with the facilitator. LHMI provides ongoing administration for the public program including enrolling participants, trouble shooting, organizing facilitators and issuing of certificates.

Reflection and discussion

Reflecting on Birnbaum's three propositions introduced at the start of this paper, the first conclusion unfortunately has to be that the jury still is out on the verdict. Reviewing a serious body of literature, including meta-analyses, international comparative review studies, and some serious industry studies, it would be fair to conclude that certainly with respect to higher education, there is scant evidence that leadership development programs are instrumental to improved institutional performance. Primarily this is the result of the lack of serious evaluative data on these programs. What is available mostly relates to self-reporting by participants and this is known to contain significant biases.

In addition to the lack of robust evaluative data, we need to accept the fact that apart from the obvious time-lags associated with the possible impact of leadership and management programs, we are dealing with a particular sector when it comes to higher education. We know that we are a multi-product industry, engaged in teaching, research and engagement, which makes it fairly hard to come up with solid measures of success or effectiveness. The vast majority of our indicators are at best indirect and the limitations of the rankings that are so pervasive in parts of our sector are well known.

In short, it would take an enormous amount of faith to argue with eyes wide open that the more we involve our staff, at all levels—and I will return to this shortly—in leadership and management programs, the better our institutions perform. We know for a fact that higher education is based on co-construction and requires serious efforts from students as well as staff. We know that research takes place in very different environments in terms of disciplines as well as institutions, and that there are vast differences between blue skies, strategic and applied research and the associated individual researchers attributes, let alone culture and climate. And the same is true for the engagement dimension. So any measurement of performance impact is far from simple.

Yet, the analysis presented in this paper also quite explicitly highlights that there are certain elements of management and leadership development programs that significantly increase their chances for success. In a very summary form, these refer to group-based learning rather than individual, different learning modalities, a combination of theoretical and practical orientation, approaching organisations as complex systems and analyzing the inter-relatedness of its constituents parts, a prolonged exposure to training rather than a one-off one, and senior leadership in the organisation practically showing support for these programs through “walking the talk”.

The LHMI eLAMP program has been constructed around these principles. Participants are very positive about the experience and we can observe them moving into positions of greater import. But we are as guilty as most organisations in our sector in not having established an explicit evaluation framework to assess the impact of the program over time in relation to institutional performance. Anecdotal evidence suggests that from a personal learner's perspective the outcomes are greater resilience, empathy and an understanding of the complexities of our institutions and the environments in which they operate. And there is little doubt that in the cases where our Guided Cohorts had the explicit support and involvement of the senior executive, including the Vice-Chancellor, it contributed to a very fertile learning environment.

But all of the above is circumstantial evidence. If we are serious about management and leadership development programs, we better start being serious about evaluating their impact. Something for which our sector has been found wanting. Obviously, it is not alone in this as the analysis in this paper has shown. That, however, does not exempt us from the responsibility to demonstrate to both participants and the organizations that employ and support them, the value of engaging in management and leadership development programs. In this, we still have a way to go...

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Note

1. Note that this is not the case for evaluation studies on the effectiveness and impact of student leadership programs where there have been many studies done. For a recent overview, see Reyes et al. (2019).

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