

Chapter 15

Academic Leadership Skills: Managing Teams and Conflict Management

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ABSTRACT

Academic leadership shares many features with any other kind of leadership, but at the same time, it is unique due to the specific features of academia and the way in which the system functions. Academia and the university setting consist of members among whom many have the same academic status and comparable levels of achievement. Although there is universal recognition of the relevance of leadership, not enough attention has been focused on ways in which academic leadership could be enhanced. In particular, the question of how someone's individual style of academic leadership is related to their capability to manage teams and conflicts remains unanswered. This chapter outlines academic leadership skills that have been observed from the perspective of the European academic context and looks at major ways in which teams are managed and conflicts are resolved, particularly in academic settings. Different strategies of conflict management are presented, and rationale for the employment of focused training courses and the sharing of experiences among leaders are provided.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education systems have been undergoing many changes for more than twenty years. The need for change in higher education has been recognized worldwide and regardless of the fact that educational systems differ considerably both within Europe and from continent to continent, many similar challenges have been identified (Vukasovic et al., 2012). Universities live and perform today in a new social (and economic) context (Sursock & Smidt, 2010). Societal changes have been both rapid and intense, including geopolitical turnovers. Technological development, especially in the field of information technology, has happened in a way that no one could have predicted it a few decades ago. Humankind has been faced with a tremendous expansion of information together with the explosion of digitalization. All of these changes have led to an overall effect of globalization, frequently overshadowed by economic crisis. In

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turn, this new context has required more profound and intense changes within academia (Rumbley, Helms, McGill Peterson, & Altbach, 2014). University autonomy and academic freedom, as well as university accountability became crucial for future development and sustainability of universities. At the same time, it has been observed the governmental tendency to interfere and to be more involved in university life via different mechanisms such as funding, national rankings, or stimulating institutional merging processes (Bennetot Pruvot, & Estermann, 2017). Only appropriate academic leadership, skillful and well prepared, could address all the challenges in changed political and societal contexts in Europe and worldwide. In principle, today, university governance must adapt to a very complex and demanding environment with very different expectations than it was a decade or two ago.

The number of higher education institutions has increased significantly across the world and at the same time, the number of students is still growing. The mass education movement has presented universities and other types of higher education institutions with a new agenda. At the same time, the role of research has been intensified, and researchers and academic staff have been facing new demands for good quality research. Even though many countries have coped with economic crisis, particularly in the first decade of this century, overall research funding has increased on one hand, while on the other, more and more demands have been placed on the recipients of funding (Altbach, 2004). The process of internationalization has been another big area of change. Internationalization has intensified and many universities put special effort into defining their strategic planning in order to enhance their international visibility.

In this new scenario of academic institutions, many new questions have emerged, directing university leaders to act differently than their predecessors. Are universities ready for all those changes? Who is responsible to set up a new agenda for universities? Do universities have sufficient human resources to develop and implement all those changes? The question was also whether the existing academic staff could respond to new requirements? Who should be the agents of change?

Regardless of the fact that many higher education institutions are faced with a decision: to choose between *change management* and *change leadership* – they have to choose an approach that might lead to institutional development and appropriate institutional adjustments to a new context. University leaders were inevitably placed in a new situation, the very demanding context of managing and governing higher education institutions.

Higher education institutions recognized their frequent need for *change management*. Although they were *managing change*, it became crucial for them to be led by leaders that were capable of change. In general, *Management* serves to organize and coordinate activities relevant to the achievement of defined objectives. Kotter (2012) defined *change management* as a set of basic tools or structures intended to keep a change effort under control with the goal of minimizing the destruction and negative impact of the change, while *change leadership* consists of driving forces, visions, and processes that fuel large-scale transformations. Such a leadership would assure faster performance and more efficiency in the implementation of large-scale changes, and it would be characterized by big visions and would be capable of empowering large groups of people (for more see Kelly, 2010).

Academic teamwork and conflict management are in the focus of this chapter due to their relevance for leadership positions. Leaders prepared adequately for a teamwork and conflict management are empowered and more efficient in their positions (for more see e.g. Black, 2015). Research pointed to importance of teamwork, addressing causes of conflict, effective management and personal skills to manage teamwork within specific academic context. Good academic leadership capable of supporting positive team dynamics and communication is a prerequisite for changed academic environment.

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