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Leadership Development in Academics: What Can Be Learned from Industry?

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I recently found myself sitting in the office of the Dean at a small east-coast, liberal arts college talking about my research on narrative use by leaders and the classes I teach in management and leadership theory. The Dean mentioned in an off-hand way that he could have benefited from attending one of my classes. He went on to say that he had been promoted to Dean from the Faculty and felt totally unprepared for the management and leadership responsibilities of Deanship.

I relayed this off-hand comment to a colleague at this college. My colleague confirmed that, indeed, the Dean did seem somewhat adrift when he was first promoted. But he had grown into his own as a dynamic manager and leader of the College. It seems his growth was not gained through intentional, structured, formal preparation and development, but through hard work and hard won on-the-job experience.

This got me to thinking about management and leadership in academia. Is there a need for management and leadership development? The lack of management and leadership development is an all too familiar problem in industry. But does it also exist in academia?

Although it must be acknowledged that there are significant cultural differences between academia and industry, and any analogy drawn must be drawn carefully, I suspect a prominent researcher at the Harvard Business School, with a particular interest in the development of new managers in industry, Linda Hill, might suggest that a similar problem could exist in academia. “Becoming a manager [in industry] requires a profound psychological adjustment – a transformation of professional identity,” Dr. Hill notes. Why wouldn’t it be the same in academia? In industry, often strong individual contributors are promoted into management as a reward for their individual contributions but with little support in developing management skills. The key is that individual contributors who have been promoted to management often must unlearn deeply held attitudes and habits. The qualifications for success as an individual

contributor differ significantly from the qualifications for success as a manager. Many new managers must try on attitudes and habits they have never tried or even thought about before. They must move from concentration on one task to concentrating on coordinating many tasks. New managers must move from a focus on being responsible for only their own performance and shift to a focus on being responsible for the performance of others. But most managers underestimate how much effort this transition will take. And most organizations offer their managers minimal support in making this transition. Becoming a manager is a “lengthy, difficult process of learning and change, driven mostly by personal experience,” concludes Dr. Hill.

Is this all that different from academia? In academia, often strong individual faculty members are promoted into chairs and deanships as a reward for their teaching and scholarship but with little support in developing management and leadership skills. The key is that faculty members who have been promoted to leadership positions must unlearn deeply held attitudes and habits. The qualifications for success as an individual faculty member differ significantly from those for a chair or dean. New chairs and deans must try on attitudes and habits they have never tried or even thought about before. They must move from concentrating on one primary task, their own teaching and scholarship, to concentrating on coordinating many tasks. New chairs and deans must move from a focus on being responsible for only their own classroom performance and research and shift to being responsible for the performance of all faculty members within their respective departments. But most chairs and deans underestimate how much effort this transition will take. And most colleges and universities offer their new chairs and deans minimal support in making this transition.

So ... what can we learn from the transition to management in industry that might help new chairs and deans in academia? Dr. Hill argues that this process of becoming a manager and leader is largely done through learning from experience rather than explicit training. “New

managers can only appreciate their role and identity through action, not contemplation,” suggests Dr. Hill. New managers need to tackle real problems and realize real consequences to learn how to be a manager. There are four transformational tasks that new managers need to accomplish: learn what it really means to be a manager; develop interpersonal judgment; gain self-knowledge; and cope with stress and emotion. These transformational tasks can be accomplished by doing, observing, and interacting. Although perhaps not amenable to classroom management training, these transformational tasks can be structured and addressed through stretch assignments, mentoring, and leadership coaching.

In industry new managers often fail as managers because of faulty expectations they have about being a manager. Presumably in academics this might be the case as well, as new chairs and deans may not even perceive their new role as one of management. The faulty expectations about management found among new managers in industry include: managers wield significant authority (they really don't); authority flows from the manager's position (it really doesn't); managers must control their direct reports (they really can't); managers must focus on forging good individual relationships (they really can't as managers); and managers must ensure that things run smoothly (things often don't).

Is there anything a college or university can learn from industry that might help accelerate or facilitate the process of new chairs and deans evolving into their new role?

There is one organization, in industry, which has consistently shown a strong track record in developing management talent – General Electric. GE is often considered a breeding ground for exceptional senior leadership level talent. GE has developed a reputation for developing management and leadership talent and this is evident by the fact that a significant number of leaders that have gone through GE's leadership development program have ended up in senior leadership positions in other Fortune 500 companies. GE appears to develop much more

leadership talent than it needs or can use. This reputation for developing managers and leaders has grown to such an extent that shareholders respond more favorably when a company announces that it is hiring a senior leader who formerly worked for GE than when it announces the hiring of a senior leader from some other company. This may be due to GE's focus on leadership development, merit-based promotion system, developing high potentials, and cutting lose low performers.

GE's success in developing leaders has translated into long-term success for the company. GE has been an incredibly successful company over the long-term; it is the only company continuously listed on the Dow since its founding in 1896. Developing and measuring talent has always been a component of GE's business strategy. GE invests significant money, upwards of a billion dollars, in management and leadership development and this significantly contributes to GE's long-term success.

GE's corporate university at Crotonville, NY was the first corporate university in America. GE has identified five keys to successful development of management and leadership talent: imagination, clear thinking, inclusiveness, external focus, and domain expertise. The John F. Welch Leadership Center has the mission "to create, identify, and transfer organizational learning to enhance GE growth and competitiveness worldwide".

Initially, the emphasis at Crotonville was on engineering training and education. However, in the 1920s a management focus was added. A further piece, leadership, was also added in the 1950s. This later shift was driven by then CEO Ralph Cordiner. But the focus of GE's management development, under CEO Jack Welch, moved from Ivory Tower to practical workshops, from a training program to a workshop format. The focus of the management and leadership development program at GE is on the depth of the development experience. The

methodology used in the program includes case studies, reading, discussion, and simulations. The primary outcomes hoped for are cognitive understanding and skill development.

What can academics learn from Linda Hill and GE about management and leadership development of new and aspiring chairs and deans? In an overall academic environment where retention of your best faculty members may be crucial to the college or university's mission, fully developing the management and leadership potential of your chairs and deans may be an imperative. But as Dr. Hill points out management and leadership skill is not something that can be solely taught in a classroom. Rather a mixture of classroom instruction, stretch assignments, mentoring, leadership coaching, and learn-by-doing opportunities seem to have both theoretical and practical support.

What are academic institutions doing to support management and leadership development of its chairs and deans? Preliminary data from a series of informal, informational interviews indicate ... not much. Informal informational interviews were conducted with five colleagues in academia ranging across academic institutions: 1 from a small university, 1 from a medium-sized liberal arts college, 2 from a large private university, and 1 from a very large public university. The interviewees also ranged across disciplines: 2 were chairs of business departments, 1 was a former assistant dean, and 2 were faculty members (one in the business school and one in the school of communication).

None of the interviewees indicated that they were aware of any management or leadership development initiatives or support for program/department chairs or deans at their institutions.

Interestingly enough, there are at least four associations that provide support for leadership in academic settings: the American Council on Education, the Council for Advancement and Support of Education, the American Conference of Academic Deans, and the

American Academic Leadership Institute. Admittedly, these associations appear to focus on senior leadership, for example Presidents and CAOs, but not exclusively. And these associations appear to focus on fundraising as a primary responsibility, though again not exclusively.

There are also at least three national conferences that focus on some aspects of management and leadership in academic settings: the American Conference of Academic Deans, the National Conference of Academic Deans, and the Academic Chairperson's Conference. Additionally, many larger universities, especially larger, public universities, seem to have internal leadership development programs focused on faculty and the transition to administration.

There are national resources and many larger universities provide internal resources to support the transition from faculty to administration. Yet this small sample of interviews, ranging across institutional types and disciplines, indicates these resources don't seem to be getting into the hands of managers and leaders in academics. Given the challenges facing higher education today (see for a recent example, the University of Virginia), sound leadership within academics may be more important than ever.