

About academic leadership

A lot of books have been written about leadership. I have not read many of them. I write this in order to understand my own experience as an academic leader and manager in an ICT company. What does it mean to lead? In my opinion a good definition is: *leadership is activity whose goal is that people will give their best*. How can the leader strive to achieve this state? My experience could be compressed into four principles, most of which probably have been expressed by many other people as well. They are: (1) Help, but do not disturb, (2) create trust, (3) encourage and (4) respect the freedom of research and education and the academic autonomy.

First principle is a quote from Professor Jorma Panula, who has trained all great Finnish conductors of an orchestra. I have used a less friendly formulation myself: "Do not cause damage". In an academic organization the implication is that one should not raise any goal or theory of an ideal community above the people you are leading. It is better listen to people and invent with them how to reach the goal. Any theory is inaccurate. When it hits the reality, you will either have to force your decisions or back off. Both cause damage to your organization and to yourself as a leader. Another implication is that you should not create visions and strategies on your own or concentrate on making lots of decisions. It is more important that everybody partakes in creating the vision and identifying the means and ways of achieving it as well as implementing the strategy. The leader has succeeded when he/she does not need to adjust the process or make lots of decisions all the time. Do not meddle in details but focus on clarity of goals, that the process works and that people give their best. Delegate everything you can.

When the leaders of a University ignore this principle, the result is insecurity about the future, waste of time on finding detours, internal conflicts and activities being carried out in spite of the leader. One reason why leaders ignore this advice is arrogance: since I am a top person, I know best.

Creating trust requires you to keep your promises and avoid giving promises that you possibly cannot keep or may end up breaking. Trust requires clear messaging, as if proving a theorem. This is because your listeners are able to analyze. Trust requires that you do not shy away or are not afraid of criticism. Remember that people with a critical thinking who are not afraid to speak their mind are the ones that stand between you and a catastrophe. Too much harmony will sooner or later lead to taking a wrong path and significant damage will follow. There are impressive examples of this in Finnish industry. Trust requires that you do not envy your peers but rather concentrate on improving your own act. Trust requires that you execute changes rapidly, you decide who stays and who leaves, you stand behind the ones that you want to keep 100% and tell clearly to the ones that need to seek employment elsewhere. Encourage them to a new career move and give them time to adjust.

Encouragement requires you to avoid delivering prohibitions and limitations. Instead, concentrate on constructive feedback and advocating successful practices. It is good to measure and evaluate performance continuously and give feedback every day. Appreciate the role of every person as an employee and as a human and try to identify and articulate the challenges that he or she has.

Autonomy and the freedom of research and education are the factors that differentiate a University from an enterprise. At the same time, this is a constraint that you as a leader must take into account because people's motivation is tightly bound to this principle. A University is a network of independent actors, not

an organization whose result is measured on a single bottom line and that, therefore, can be strictly managed. Autonomy does not sit between the ears of any boss or float around in committees. Autonomy is impersonated in a researcher (professor or similar) who has been accepted to be competent in his or her area of science. A leader can and should try to persuade these researchers to work towards common goals but the leader cannot command them to comply unless the law or the very existence of the University demands otherwise. The other side of the coin is that under external necessity or compulsion, require compliance clearly. Externally motivated necessities usually relate to things that do not call for creativity so you better get over it as quickly as possible and cause minimal disturbance.

And finally, if you feel inadequate in your role, expect that this is a normal state for any leader. If you feel that you have learned it all and you know best, it is time to step aside because probably you have become blind to ideas and thoughts of other people.

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