Critical Reflection of Leadership in Higher Education and my Professional Development Plan

Introduction

In Assignment 1, I used the Appreciative Inquiry model to evaluate the marketing strategy for our new degree because it focussed on “bringing together multiple stakeholder perspectives in a collaborative and non-hierarchical way”. In this assignment, I will outline what this “non-hierarchical way” means in a Higher Education (HE) leadership context by applying my understanding of Complexity Leadership Theory to three of my experiences of academic leadership. Before I do that, I will give a brief summary of the key points that comprise my understanding of “non-hierarchical” Complexity Leadership Theory.

Complexity Leadership Theory

Uhl-Bien, et al. (2007) write that organisations that produce knowledge such as universities are still using leadership models from the industrial age rather than from our current knowledge era. They explain that leadership models which rely on hierarchical relationships and structures are ill equipped to handle the complexity of knowledge production. Hedlund (1994, p. 82) characterises this organisational complexity as “temporary constellations of people and units”. Kerr & Jermier (1978) relate this directly to academic environments where they report that academics tend to value their autonomy more than being a member of a closely managed hierarchical system. They go on to suggest that this preference for autonomy requires a leadership style that builds networks that enable autonomous work to be meaningfully linked into an overall structure. This is echoed by Raelin (1995, p. 210) when he writes that the “management of autonomy is central to the management of the academic”. Uhl-Bien, et al. (2007, p. 299) characterise these networks of autonomy as complex adaptive systems (CAS) which are a basic unit of analysis in complexity science. CAS are neural like networks of interacting, interdependent agents who are bonded in a cooperative dynamic by common goal, outlook, need, etc...

Distributive Leadership

CAS requires a form of leadership which is adaptable and enabling. MacBeath, et al. (2004) identify the notion of distributive leadership, which encapsulates this idea of co-ordinating autonomy and supposed adaptability. However, as they point out, there is a wide and sometimes conflicting understanding of how leadership can be distributed. In their study, MacBeath, et al. (2004) observe six forms of distributive leadership which include; formal (devolution of budgetary powers), pragmatic (negotiated allocation of responsibilities for internal or external tasks), strategic (subcontracting services to external partners), incremental (gradual increase of responsibilities through committees), opportunistic (assumption of responsibilities outside of main role) and cultural (group leadership on a task-specific basis). Uhl-
Bien, et al.’s (2007, p. 299) Complexity Leadership Theory usefully narrows down these perceived elements of distributive leadership into three types:

1. leadership grounded in traditional, bureaucratic notions of hierarchy, alignment and control (i.e., administrative leadership),
2. leadership that structures and enables conditions such that CAS are able to optimally address creative problem solving, adaptability, and learning (referring to what we will call, enabling leadership); and
3. leadership as a generative dynamic that underlies emergent change activities (what we will call, adaptive leadership).

Hunt (1999) recognises that leadership in a CAS is also about context. He says that leadership is a social construct comprising relationships and interactions between agents and must be seen within a historical perspective. I find this interesting because it implies that there is nuanced difference between leadership and a leader. Within a complex system, whose complexity is defined by the sum of the interaction of its parts, not by its individual parts (Cilliers, 1998), it could be viewed as unrealistic that any one person or team could fully be in control of such an environment.

Administrative Leadership

Yet perhaps, it is what we expect of our academic leaders, especially our Heads of Department and Programme Leaders. Even if we consider our Senior Management Teams, which in Contemporary Arts consists of the Head of Department and three Principal Lecturers, the overall leadership in this model still points to central leaders (individuals hierarchically acting in concert with administrative responsibilities) rather than distributive enabling or generative leadership. In other words, where leadership is centralised to a team, it cannot truly be enabling or generative as required by complex adaptive systems because of the single context of leadership that the team generates. In complex adaptive systems where knowledge is generated by the interaction between the agents not necessarily by the agents themselves and where leadership is similarly interactive, centralised leadership tends to fall behind developments on the ground or it tries to dictate developments, in the process stifling the organic creative interactions of social networks. In assignment 1, I alluded to this situation where the creative work of our LTA (learning, teaching and assessment) strategies and our marketing/recruitment processes did not seem to generate “creativity and learning” where their “emergence form[ed] a previously unknown solution to a problem or create[d] a new, unanticipated outcome (i.e., adaptive change)” (Uhl-Bien, Marion, & Mckelvey, 2007, p. 303), resulting in seeming fragmentation.

My personal development

I would like to find out more about the university’s managerial procedures so that as a potential departmental/programme “leader” I could find ways of translating a more enabling and generative style of academic leadership into a form that would meet the requirements of institutional hierarchical management. I acknowledge that this would be no mean feat, as Middlehurst (1993) writes that this would require the
Institution’s central leadership to be in compliance with this strategy. In fact, being able to mediate institutional hierarchical management restrictions in a way that supports (protects) ‘enabling’ complex departmental environments is a quality that Bryman (2009) recognises that staff prize in their leaders.

Enabling Leadership

Although I have no departmental or programme leadership responsibilities, I am the academic lead for a community enterprise project that I am currently researching. In my experience, as a community researcher (and activist), I have found that communities (in a real world sense) are complex adaptive systems much like university settings. However, the main difference between the two is the lack of centralised hierarchy. Even though communities are hierarchical in their own terms, Yong-Yeol, et al. (2010) identify links, rather than nodes (implying overlap even in the points of intersection) that join hierarchical clusters together in dynamic overlaps, in so doing blurring any meaningful sense of centralised management. In her study, Morgan-Trimmer (2014, p. 458) describes how community members adopted the role of “network brokers” and through their largely informal networks were able to exert significant influence on the management of the official regeneration project in the community (itself an attempt at top down centralised management).

Utilising Network Brokers

As the academic lead in my current research project, I have worked closely with the “network brokers” in the communities with which I work. In order to work effectively with the communities, as a representative of the university (an inherently outside presence), I have had to adopt enabling leadership skills, where I have supported the community “network brokers” in taking active leadership of their network clusters within the context of a university partnership. I did this by making sure that the creative and interactive solutions that the communities had developed, aligned sufficiently with the university’s agenda in order to effect a sustainable partnership between the two social networks. This form of enabling could not have happened without my bringing together and educating both social networks about their drives and agendas so that meaningful link overlaps could be achieved. My strategic brokerage between (elements of the) university and the communities enabled the CAS (the communities and university) “to optimally address creative problem solving, adaptability” (Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007, p. 299).

My personal development

In the absence of a formal leadership role in my department, I would like to research whether the idea of the community “network broker” could be translated into an academic environment where despite its complexity, there still remains a tension between an enabling leadership style and an institutional hierarchical managerial style of leadership. Knight & Lightowler (2010) write about the challenges our “network brokers” otherwise known as Knowledge Exchange Professionals have in academic settings in terms of recognition, integration and career prospects.
Adaptive Leadership

As the academic lead for my community research project for both MMU and the University of Manchester, I have been able to stimulate change in both faculties of Education. Neither faculties of education were aware of the transformative potential of this research with supplementary schools (sometimes known as Saturday Schools, (Clennon, 2014)) before this work with the communities was aligned to their priorities. Now, alternative education and its pedagogy have sparked significant interest across both institutions, with academics from both institutions now beginning to work on this project alongside me. Uhl-Bien, et al. (2007) write that an important function of adaptive leadership is also to be able to stimulate the need for change and growth with a complex adaptive system.

My personal development

I would like to put together a research team from the academics, widening participation staff and communities that I am working with, where I would be able to develop my leadership skills using Complexity Leadership Theory.

1500 words
Programme Leadership: Assignment 2
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Works Cited


