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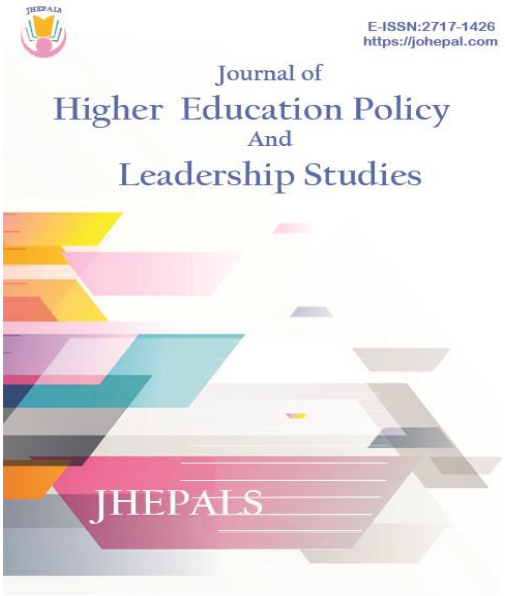
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Supporting Remote Faculty: Theoretical and Practical Implications for Higher Education Leaders



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Supporting Remote Faculty: Theoretical and Practical Implications for Higher Education Leaders

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Abstract

Courses in higher education have been taught online for decades by remote faculty; however, research on how leaders can best support these faculty is minimal. Many administrators and leaders work primarily on-campus, but they often lead both traditional and remote faculty. The challenges for remote faculty are not always the same as those faced by on-campus colleagues. For instance, remote work has challenges related to geography, relationships, and accessibility. Two leadership theories can help leaders in this particular context; transformational leadership, especially the concept of individual consideration, and Whole Person Leadership. The authors of this paper suggest three overarching strategies or areas of focus: establishing effective communication, building a foundation of trust, and utilizing a HR specialist who understands the needs of remote employees. Future research should study the perceptions of leaders regarding remote or hybrid faculty support and provide insights from the perspective of the administrator, while another study could address the perceptions of remote faculty who work for an on-campus administrator.

Keywords: Remote Faculty; Higher Education; Transformational Leadership; Whole Person Leadership; Support

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Introduction

Organizational landscapes have always been privy to change. A brief look at history showcases how eras like the Industrial Revolution and the Internet boom revolutionized where and how work was done. More recently, industries experienced a paradigm shift due to the COVID-19 pandemic which literally sent thousands of workers home overnight - some for short periods of time and others for much longer. In fact, even five years later, many still work from home - a trend becoming a 'new normal.' This increase in remote workers has impacted just about every industry, including higher education institutions (HEI). It is important to note that many college courses were held online prior to 2020, but that number has grown exponentially over the years - and thus the number of remote faculty has also increased. Despite the growth and training of learning management systems to help faculty learn new pedagogy, one area that has not been studied as extensively is the leadership of said faculty. How faculty teach students has changed, but how supervisors lead remote faculty has not necessarily caught up. Therefore, this paper will address ways in which higher education (HE) leaders can better support remote faculty.

Problem Space

To keep up with changing trends, HEIs are hiring more remote faculty (Colby, 2023), yet most institutions still use leadership models for administrative positions primarily on-campus. Administrators, supervisors, deans, and directors are being called upon to lead a constituency composed of both on-campus and remote faculty members. While certain leadership approaches might work across the hybrid board, a willingness to make purposeful adjustments to account for differences between on-campus and remote work can take leadership to the next level of effectiveness. Higher education leaders can recognize and embrace the ways on-campus and remote faculty are affected differently by geography, relational dynamics or the absence of these, as well as ways in which personal and professional lines are drawn and blurred. The authors of this paper are not suggesting that the challenges for remote faculty are greater or require more of university leadership; rather, they may differ from those faced by on-campus colleagues. Even when the goals are collective, it is both unfair and unrealistic to assume any leader can take one, singular approach to support and celebrate individual contributions when leading a hybrid workforce.

Context

It is helpful to establish context surrounding the broad field of education, one in which the social sciences and HE are an important subfield. The authors of this paper are focusing on what it means to be a remote faculty member, and what it takes to lead this population. Many variables affect remote faculty including geography, relationships, and accessibility. These will be defined and described with a lens for the unique needs, challenges, and opportunities for remote faculty and the ways in which administrators can better serve this growing arm of the academic workforce.

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Remote Faculty & HE Leadership

Higher Education

Higher education institutions stem from a long history which was founded on the premise of establishing knowledge and grew to include the arms of research and mission-minded engagement within society (Chankseliani & McCowan, 2021). Global trends, the move to more technology, and virtual collaboration has influenced HEI programming and therefore, hiring. Institutional success is directly impacted by the effectiveness of their faculty (Khan et al., 2019) and it should be noted that teaching in person does not equate to effective online teaching. Remote faculty play a significant role in overall HEI productivity and are rapidly increasing in number, making the work of leading remote faculty apropos in the current education landscape. Remote learning options have opened the availability and attainability of degree options and HEIs have the potential for even more impact on societal development (Chankseliani & McCowan, 2021). It is an exciting time for HEIs and an important time to consider the inner workings that make excellent remote education opportunities possible, one being the support of remote faculty who have a direct impact on students who will contribute to societal development.

Remote Faculty

There is a growing need for remote faculty in HE (Colby, 2023), and it must be understood that there are considerations that affect not only the institution but each individual worker. Rather than attempt to grasp backward at outdated approaches, institutions embracing a culture of improvement are best situated to provide benefits for faculty, including those who work remotely (Heitz et al., 2020). Remote learning is not a new phenomenon. Instead, it dates back hundreds of years to a parcel method, moving then to radio, next to television, and finally to the internet when in 1989 the first online program emerged on the education scene (Kentnor, 2015). More significant growth occurred after 2020 (Salama & Hinton, 2023), especially following the COVID-19 shut downs that forever changed the HE landscape (Heitz et al., 2020). Wood (2016) called for HEIs to put careful consideration into the advantages, as well as the challenges, faced by remote faculty. The willingness and ability to offer online education can position HEIs as players in the current, competitive market (Salama & Hinton, 2023) and this requires hiring, training, and supporting remote faculty regardless of location, in light of a need for professional relationships, and in spite of challenges associated with accessibility.

Three main challenges remote faculty face are related to geography, relationships, and accessibility. Virtual, or remote teams, involve members who are "geographically distributed, requiring them to work together through electronic means with minimal face-to-face interaction" (Malhotra et al., 2007, p. 60). Some teams are spread across several global time zones which impacts asynchronous meeting opportunities (Mell et al., 2021); however, this allows for temporal flexibility (Choudhury et al., 2021). In addition, despite the drastic shifts in online learning and working, the need for and benefits of healthy workplace relationships remains the same. So, while the need for healthy workplace relationships is not new, the ways in which these relationships are formed and maintained changes in the online environment. No longer can leaders rely on department meetings or cafeteria lunches to interact with subordinates; instead, more intentionality and the use of mediated channels is required. Failure to do so may result in remote workers feeling isolated (Chen, 2024), lonely (Montañez, 2024), and unsupported (Aggarwal, 2022). Lastly, even though

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access to technology has become rather commonplace in society, there remain other aspects of the HE landscape inaccessible to remote faculty. Atop this list are basic amenities often found on campus like access to HR personnel, IT technicians, cafeterias, and health centers. In many circumstances remote faculty lack access to health insurance plans, retirement programs, and leave opportunities. In some instances, on-campus employees have more or better choices in health insurance plans due to their geographic proximity to the campus. Moreover, many retirement programs, like pensions, are state-funded, therefore earnings, vestments, and payouts are location-dependent. And finally, leave opportunities like maternity/paternity, or those taken for bereavement, are often determined by both a combination of state and federal government laws and policies. These aforementioned HR scenarios are difficult enough to deduce in-state, however they become even more convoluted when state lines are crossed (Wright, 2023). And while HEIs have always had a mandate to stay up to date on the laws and policies of the state where the campus is located, now, with the influx of remote faculty, knowing the intricacies of all state rules in which an employee resides is paramount (Wright, 2023). These examples showcase a bit of what Lee (2023) called an "economic and social change," not just a new working mode (p. 1). And while leaders are not expected to research and understand all of the HR policies and jargon influencing employees, they are encouraged to recognize that differences in accessibility to campus and employment resources and benefits - some big and some small - are constantly at play. Overall, ensuring equity in professional development, support, and engagement for all faculty is crucial.

Conceptual Framework

Psychological research is iterative and conceptual foundations allow researchers to revisit phenomena to add clarity and establish areas for future research (Bringmann et al., 2022). The current authors suggest applying a conceptual framework, based primarily on the tenets of transformational leadership, and propose careful attention be paid to the merits of individual consideration as one aspect of this leadership approach. In conjunction, the Whole Person Leadership framework, a model that draws lines between effective leadership and individualized support, will be discussed. There is a need for ongoing research regarding leadership effectiveness, to include theoretical and practical implications, for HE administrators who are leading both on-campus and remote employees.

Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership describes a leader's behavior and was conceptualized by Bass (2008) along four dimensions including: "idealized influence, inspirational leadership, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration" (p. 581). Idealized influence involves the leader showing respect for their team, providing a vision, and acting as a role model (Bass, 2008). Idealized influence suggests that transformational leaders have followers who trust and respect them (McKee et al., 2008). Inspirational leadership is when followers are encouraged to achieve goals and objectives (Bass, 2008). This is done when the leader communicates a clear and precise plan of action. Intellectual stimulation describes leaders who are open to new ideas and challenging the status quo (Bass, 2008).

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Remote Faculty & HE Leadership

Individualized consideration (IC) is when leaders respect the ideas and contributions of each follower, encouraging them to obtain higher goals, and become future leaders (Bass, 2008).

Several studies have explored components of transformational leadership in relation to leading remote teams. For instance, Purvanova and Bono (2009) found transformational leadership to be effective in all types of teams, whether traditional or remote but those "leaders who increased their transformational leadership in virtual teams achieved the highest level of overall team performance" (p. 352). Additionally, transformational leaders must employ appropriate technology to overcome the communication barriers that prohibit organizational effectiveness in remote environments (Purvanova & Bono, 2009). Clouner (2018) studied the significance of transformational leadership for virtual team engagement. Mutha and Srivastava (2021) identified the influence of transformational leadership and trust between team members as key determinants of employee engagement in virtual settings.

Individual Consideration

Bass' concept of IC within transformational leadership can be applied to remote workers and virtual teams. IC emphasizes leaders' personalized attention to each team member, addressing unique needs, fostering development, and providing tailored feedback (Bass, 2008). In virtual environments, where physical separation can lead to disengagement, leaders who practice IC help bridge this gap by offering personalized communication, showing empathy, and recognizing individual contributions. When virtual leaders adopt this approach it may boost team cohesion, morale, and performance. In addition, by acknowledging personal circumstances, such as work-life balance struggles, leaders create a more supportive environment. Research also shows transformational leaders demonstrating IC enhances virtual team trust (Badrinarayanan, 2024), which is crucial for effective collaboration and innovation.

Whole Person Leadership

Another framework HE leaders should consider is the Whole Person Leadership approach. This concept takes a holistic approach in recognizing that employees bring more than just their academic and professional selves to work, here their personal lives - both the triumphs and challenges - also affect performance. Getting to know the whole person can help leaders cater their communication to their subordinates. In fact, "the missing element in most leadership development programs" is the strive to grow the whole person (Cashman, 2008, p. 6). While such a model may have served effectively decades ago, the need for Whole Person Leadership is paramount today due to the ubiquity of remote work. "The way we work and live has changed, and so have the drivers behind employee productivity, job satisfaction, and well-being. With the lines between home-self and work-self blurred, a more holistic approach is needed to thrive in this 'next normal'" (Wood, 2021, para. 2). Therefore, leaders should account for the varying dimensions of an employees' lives.

Individualized Support

Not surprisingly, the way leaders provide individualized support starts with truly getting to know the individual. Beginning with basic demographic data can help, however the true challenge is learning things that cannot be found on a resume or employment application

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like one's "personal experiences, values, aspirations, and professional roles. This approach promotes an inclusive and empathetic leadership style" (Brown, 2023, para. 2). When leaders know more about the individuals in their organization they are better able to offer individualized support. Examples of individualized support include professional resources like improved cyber security plans for employees' home networks (Heitz et al., 2020), as well as personal help through counseling services, which may be linked to improved job satisfaction (Katzmark, 2024). Regardless, leaders must delve deeper into the individualized needs and concerns of their team in order to offer the best support.

Discussion

The authors of the current paper have over 40 combined years of experience, as both remote faculty members as well as leaders of remote faculty. The objective of this paper is to share strategies and implications for HE administrators who find themselves leading a fully remote or hybrid team of faculty. Most leadership development studies focus on, or even assume, the population being led will benefit from in-person opportunities but this is no longer the reality for a growing percentage of the HEI workforce.

A conceptual framework was considered regarding ways to support HE administrators who have remote faculty under their purview. Transformational leadership takes into account ways to individualize the leadership approach with consideration for the needs of each employee, but this requires a set of proactive strategies. Such an approach would inevitably become overwhelming without establishing a clear plan (McKee et al., 2008). The authors of the current paper suggest three areas of focus: establishing effective communication, building a foundation of trust, and utilizing a HR specialist who understands the needs of remote employees and their HEI administrator(s). With these strategies, leaders of remote faculty will truly be taking the whole person approach into account to address the before-mentioned challenges associated with geography, relationships, and accessibility.

Strategies

Based on the contextual and conceptual elements described in this paper, three strategies for administrators leading fully remote or hybrid faculty will be described. The first strategy is centered on communication, which might seem obvious, yet is often overlooked regarding the nuances associated with communicating from a distance. Building an understanding of trust is considered a best practice for effective leadership, yet ways to promote trust among remote faculty is worth highlighting. Finally, the investment in employing a remote worker HR Specialist can pay dividends regarding faculty wellbeing. The following sections provide rationale for each strategy followed by practical applications.

Communication

As more organizations move to virtual formats, communication becomes increasingly essential to function effectively, especially in the early development of virtual teams (Gazor, 2012). One study by Wong and Berntzen (2019) warned leaders to be aware of how their communication translates in distributed contexts because "electronic dependence may reduce the quality of the relationship between leaders and followers" (p. 387). This can be especially challenging in virtual teams with asynchronous communication convoluted by

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time zone challenges (McLeod, 2013). As such, virtual team leaders and workers must learn how to "read" and "hear" body language through media that does not reveal nonverbal behaviors (Hambley et al., 2007). In addition, leaders must communicate clearly and vary their communication modes based on what is most effective for the current team (Newman et al., 2020). Overall, research indicates that the quantity and quality of communication between virtual team leaders and their members is important to "building, gaining, and maintaining trust" (Maduka et al., 2018, p. 701).

Practical Application

Some practical ways to improve communication in virtual teams include trying different meeting modalities to foster inclusion and being aware of communication preferences. For example, leaders should ensure the meeting modality does not isolate virtual team members if not all team members are remote. Many universities operate in a hybrid space and therefore it would be ideal to take turns wherein some meetings are done fully online and some are hybrid. This helps ensure that those online do not feel isolated from those who are in person. Leaders should also create a communication preference spreadsheet for remote employees to know how and when to reach out to their geographically dispersed employees. With so many variables, it is important to know when and how to best communicate with team members.

Trust

Building and maintaining trust in an online team is essential. Teams with high levels of trust in their leaders "are more proactive, more focused on task output, have a more optimistic spirit, initiate more frequent interactions, and provide more substantive, productive feedback" (Ford et al., 2017, p. 7). For virtual teams, technology is the hardware of creating trust, and the actions or inactions of the members is what helps build and sustain trust (Ford et al., 2017). Moreover, when virtual teams have high levels of trust in their leader, they perceive communication from their leader as more positive regardless of how effective the leader is with communication tools (Newman et al., 2020). In addition, using Whole Person Leadership can help leaders build and maintain trust because it fosters a more inclusive and respectful culture where each person is valued for their unique contributions (Brown, 2023). Therefore, it is essential to build and sustain trust in virtual teams to ensure optimal productivity and positive relationships.

Practical Application

There are several recommendations for building trust in virtual teams. Badrinarayanan (2024) identified five strategies for building trust in remote teams: promote open and transparent communication, follow through on commitments, provide constructive feedback, share credit with the team, and pay attention to employee wellbeing. To achieve these, leaders should schedule regular virtual meetings focused not only on work but also on team bonding, like informal check-ins or "lunch and learn" sessions, provide public praise of team members, and be supportive of employee's career development. In the virtual space, these strategies require intentionality.

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HR Specialist

A third strategy for implementing proactive, Whole-Person leadership is employing a HR Specialist educated on differences remote workers face as compared to their on-campus colleagues. As previously mentioned, the authors of this paper are not arguing that remote workers face more challenges, but simply that employment at their HEI may be different from their counterparts. For example, an employee of a California-based HEI who resides in Arizona is likely not privy to the same health insurance options or state-sponsored retirement package as their California colleague. Because of this, the Whole-Person approach to leadership may suggest re-working the contract offer for this employee in order to account for the difference.

Moreover, while all U.S. employees must conform to federal laws, application of state-based regulations is confusing when state lines between faculty members and HEIs are crossed. The U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) itself "administers and enforces more than 180 federal laws. These mandates and the regulations that implement them cover many workplace activities for about 150 million workers and 10 million workplaces" (U.S. Department of Labor, 2024, para. 1). That number is exacerbated when you consider the potential uniqueness of state-enforced mandates.

Practical Application

Therefore, our suggestion is to employ an HR specialist knowledgeable about these differences and assure they are part of the entire hiring process - from recruitment and onboarding to training and beyond. A second suggestion is to assure HEIs maintain and communicate clear travel policies to faculty and supervisors. Despite teaching courses online, the faculty role may still require presence on campus at events like commencement or faculty meetings. A clear policy outlining what events faculty are required to attend, and when, in addition to who is financially responsible is of great importance. And finally, a third recommendation is for HR departments to schedule informational meetings with remote faculty in mind. For example, HEIs scheduling events prior to the open enrollment window should consider meetings for on-campus faculty and separate meetings for remote faculty in order to provide greater time and attention to the areas of concern for each group.

Conclusion

This paper identified some of the challenges facing remote faculty at HEIs and the leaders who employ them. The presence of online courses, and the faculty who teach them, is likely a trend that is here to stay. Because of this we suggested several leadership frameworks to consider. And while the frameworks are not necessarily new or unique, the leadership strategies and practical applications that stem from them are much needed approaches for more effectively leading this growing demographic of the HE workforce.

Implications for HE Leaders

While the implications will be different for each HE leader, all are wise to consider some overarching take-aways based on the conceptual framework presented in this paper, as well as practical strategies tied to the research on transformational and whole person leadership. A first step for those in a leadership position who work with remote faculty groups is to re-

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examine personal and organizational processes through a leadership lens that is open to not only the needs of the group but those of each individual. This will require some proactive time and commitment but can pay dividends by building an inclusive and humanizing work environment. The ways in which hiring, onboarding, structuring of teams, and meeting together are approached can be reflective of a whole-person paradigm. Personal practices such as re-evaluation and reflection are paramount for a leader who is willing to express interest and give individualized attention to each employee.

Future Research

The current paper has theoretical as well as practical implications. Future research is necessary to advance the field of knowledge on transformational and whole-person leadership styles specific to leading remote faculty. A qualitative study on the perceptions of HE leaders regarding remote or hybrid faculty support and needs can provide insights from the perspective of the administrator. The same study with a focus on the perceptions of remote faculty who work for an on-campus administrator could prove informative regarding themes and implications. Using the conceptual framework suggested in this paper, researchers can design a quantitative study using a validated scale to assess the behaviors and attitudes of faculty or administrators affected by the challenges associated with the growing reality and necessity of remote faculty (Colby, 2023). The use of validated scales in research can provide empirical results that either support a hypothesis or point researchers in new directions. Whether the work continues in the line of conceptual discussions or research methodologies, there is room for ongoing findings with a shared goal of supporting leaders and faculty challenged by the absence of face-to-face interactions.

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Originality Note

The authors affirm that this research is our original contributions to the field.

Use of Generative AI/ AI-assisted Technologies Statement

The author(s) claimed that there is "No Use of Generative AI/ AI-assisted Technologies" in preparing this research.

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