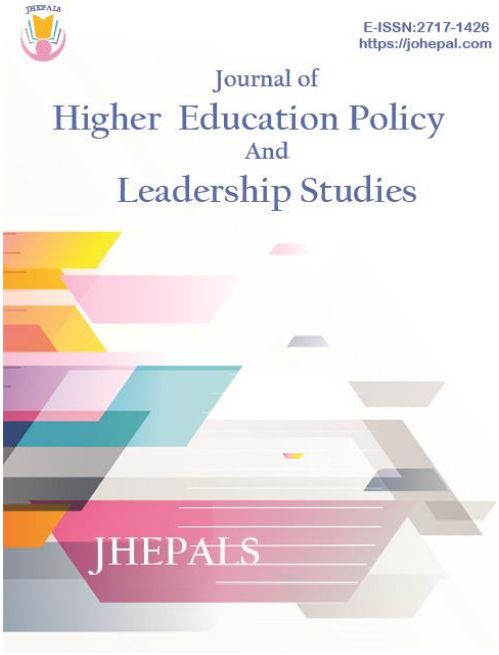
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Elements for Academic Leadership in a Virtual Space

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Abstract

Higher education is facing the need for its leaders to adapt to an ever-increasingly virtual landscape. More than ever before, this became evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, which began in 2020. Previously-utilized leadership strategies proved less than effective tools for managing virtual faculty teams, and new, creative methods of leading people working remotely across wide geographical areas were launched almost overnight. Some worked; some did not. The purpose of this work is to explore the best practices for academic leaders to mentor, motivate, and guide their teams in virtual environments. The themes of creating a culture of trust, team-building and collaboration, and communication emerged in the literature as traits of effective leaders. Here, we apply those traits to personal experiences between March 2020 and May 2021 to propose a model for leadership in a virtual space.

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Keywords: Virtual Leadership; Academic Leadership; Teacher Preparation; Higher Education

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Introduction

Higher education is facing the need for its leaders to adapt to the contemporary environment amidst dynamic times. Throughout their long histories, institutions of higher education have long been responsible for both anticipating and participating in transformation and transition (Flückiger, 2021). The current landscape of teacher education has become ever-increasingly virtual in nature. Factors that have contributed to this current state include an increase in students pursuing online learning, a need for additional, qualified faculty to meet this need, and current health concerns amidst the ebbs and flows of a global pandemic. Previously-utilized leadership strategies that were successful in face-to-face environments may be ineffective in managing virtual faculty teams. Though the goals of academic leaders should remain the same, the means by which to achieve them must be conducive to the virtual environment (Makina, 2016). Without strategies to carry out leadership goals, virtual faculty teams can become unproductive and feel isolated, which can lead to attrition (Alward & Phelps, 2019; Thaly & Sinha, 2013).

Ehlers (2020) distinguishes between digital leadership and leadership in the digital age, and most leadership approaches in today's higher education environments reflect leadership in the digital age more closely than digital leadership. However, Ehlers presents a model for digital leadership in the traditional and known higher education culture. It comprises two primary elements: digital transformation structures and commitment to digital transformation. Bridging the two elements are communication, participation, and trust, which characterize effective leaders and positive leadership regardless of the context (Ažderska & Jerman-Blažič, 2013; Ehlers, 2020; Mohr & Shelton, 2017).

A leader who builds a strong culture of trust, team-building and collaboration, and communication can counteract the absence of physical support and decrease change resistance and underperformance (Ažderska & Jerman-Blažič, 2013). More specifically, utilization of situationally-appropriate technologies, creation of a community with shared goals, and incorporation of collaboration opportunities are elements that can lead to a productive team atmosphere in a virtual space (Mohr & Shelton, 2017).

Background Literature

Given the complex structures of the current, virtual environments in higher education, more organizations are investigating means of leading in a virtual space. To identify practices of effective virtual leaders, Alward and Phelps (2019) explored competencies of educational leaders in online education. Their work identified the traits of building a sense of trust, maintaining communication, and collaboration.

Building Trust

A culture of trust is an attribute that maintains the integrity and efficiency of a virtual team and creates a positive view of the institution by its employees. Developing a sense of trust in an organization prevents change resistance and underperformance by team members. Building trust in a virtual space requires technology access that fits the specific academic setting, creating a sense of community with shared purpose and allowing for collaboration amidst institutional impediments (Hill et al., 2014). Furthermore, establishing trust in the work setting lends itself to an increase in organizational citizenship. Without a culture of

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trust, loyalty of employees and commitment to the needs of the institutional are jeopardized (Alward & Phelps, 2019).

A key component of trust is visibility. In a virtual environment, visibly connecting with virtual teams and facilitating connections among team members is crucial in preventing misunderstandings (Bjorn & Ngwenyama, 2009). As such, innovative technology norms that allow for visibility should be established to promote engagement and connectivity. In addition to enhancing visibility, Hirschy's (2011) study of virtual team leadership connected communication via technology to maintaining trust.

Team Building and Collaboration

In efforts to build trust through appropriate communications technology, opportunities for collaboration and team building become attainable. Furthermore, proper tools that allow for collaboration will increase engagement and productivity. This effort to increase collaboration and team building requires an increased comfort with technology among virtual team members (Crisp & Jarvenpaa, 2013). In Alward and Phelps's (2019) study, participants noted the importance of robust and reliable technology in supporting collaboration. Effects to morale and productivity were linked as well. Fournier et al. (2020) elaborate on an inclusive mindset for leaders in decision-making. In a virtual setting, employing every opportunity to foster an atmosphere of collaboration requires facility with the technologies required to work within a team virtually.

Communication

As this reciprocal relationship between trust and communication exists, the virtual setting is more dependent on well-defined channels of communication than a non-virtual one (Peñarroja et al., 2013). According to Alward and Phelps's (2019) research, given the non-physical environment of virtual settings, interactions and cues are limited to deliberate and purposeful forms of communication. Whether synchronous or asynchronous, communication is used to signify presence, set expectations, and establish collaboration among leaders and employees. Therefore, effective communication styles specific to virtual environments must be used appropriately by leadership. A lack of effective communication between leaders and their employees can lead to disconnection and eventual attrition (Thaly & Sinha, 2013).

Leaders today are tasked with navigating an environment unlike previous generations in which the rules of engagement regarding communication are not clearly-defined. Explicit work hours and physical proximity are no longer natural parameters in virtual settings. Therefore, managing the virtual work-life cycle and monitoring progress via established communication practices become integral components to leadership. To that end, leveraging technology can provide a strong and dependable means of communication to connect and engage in a virtual space (Alward & Phelps, 2019; Hirschy, 2011). This, in turn, will lead to build trust, team building, and collaboration.

Purpose

Circumstances surrounding the spring 2020 school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic thrust educational leaders into a new and unanticipated space. Nearly--and in some cases

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literally--overnight, leaders faced the predicament of flipping the academic environment from face-to-face, on-ground, and in-person to virtual, online, and remote for an undetermined period of time. Of the many challenges presented was how to continue leading teams of individuals who were now working remotely and themselves determining how to provide support and services to students without the convenience of being in the same place at the same time.

Lessons learned during that period yielded a developing model of leading in a virtual space based on both literature and best practices through personal, leadership experiences.

Model for Leadership in Virtual Space

Myriad traits of high-quality leaders are discussed in the literature. Three emerged as critical during the 2020 school closures:

- Building trust (Alward & Phelps, 2019; Bjorn & Ngwenyama, 2009; Ehlers, 2020; Hill et al., 2014; Hirschy, 2011)
- Team-building and collaboration (Alward & Phelps, 2019; Crisp & Jarvenpaa, 2013; Ehlers, 2020; Fournier et al., 2020)
- Communication (Alward & Phelps, 2019; Ehlers, 2020; Hirschy, 2011; Peñarroja et al., 2013; Thaly & Sinha, 2013)

Each trait proved to yield best practices in leading unexpectedly virtual teams of faculty and staff while maximizing operational and human capacity and minimizing inefficiency, frustration, and burn-out.

Building Trust

To counteract the absence of physical support and decrease change resistance and underperformance, trust should be cultivated thoughtfully and carefully. Discussed below are strategies we propose to build trust.

Provide Role Clarity, Avoid Micromanagement, and Entrust Autonomy to Team Members

Discuss your role and followers' roles so that everyone has a clear understanding of who is responsible for what. Ambiguous expectations foster frustration, confusion, and resentment. Use techniques of leading and mentoring rather than managing and assigning. Provide direction for the work that needs to be done and allow followers the flexibility to determine the best courses of action. Physical absence does not necessarily mean that followers are absent from their work, so avoid making such assumptions.

Provide Essential Training and Establish Accountability Practices

Avoid faulting someone for not knowing what he/she does not know. Ensure that followers have adequate training in technical skills and adequate mentorship in soft skills for professional success in a virtual space. Clarify expectations of followers, and provide a clear accountability framework so that all are aware of expectations and implications. Consider the existing employee evaluation framework and what augmentations might be necessary for employees to fulfill expectations remotely.

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Academic Leadership in a Virtual Space

Use Proactive Approaches and Create Community

Anticipate challenges and strive to stave off issues. Knowing one's followers enables a leader to anticipate each follower's strengths and areas for growth. Rather than a reactive stance or disposition, proactive leaders see these challenges as opportunities and utilize them for productive change (Flückiger, 2021). A proactive leader works to leverage those strengths against the challenges a new environment creates. Such an approach provides opportunities for collaboration where a leader may create a support system that uses one follower's strengths to address another's areas for growth.

Team-Building and Collaboration

Often, faculty feel frustrated and isolated in the virtual space. Incorporating collaborative opportunities leads to a productive team atmosphere. Discussed below are strategies we propose to foster team-building and collaboration.

Incorporate Collaboration Opportunities

Related to the sense of community discussed previously, create opportunities for varied collaborative experiences. Leverage the dynamics of partner, small group, and program-level collaborations to keep people connected and engaged as comparable as possible to in-person hallway and office interactions.

Enhance Visibility of Virtual Members

While visibility of team members is important, visibility in virtual spaces becomes critical to connectedness. Seize opportunities to highlight team members and their accomplishments. Communication strategies like those discussed below can be used as visibility measures. Spotlight a team member for a recent accomplishment or simply to profile him/her, especially with non-academic details others may not know about this person. Maximize the use of multimedia so that the visibility medium is not simply text. Use video or audio through platforms like Flipgrid and Vialogues to capture short vignettes of the spotlight's subject.

Move Beyond Telephone and Text

Myriad free tools exist today to deliver content in engaging formats. Typically, faculty are encouraged to utilize these tools in courses for content delivery and student interaction, but replicating that in routine department operations can engage faculty in otherwise mundane tasks and demonstrate to them that you, as the leader, "practice what you preach" and are committed to using creative and innovative tools with faculty as you expect them to do with students.

Communication

Virtual spaces do not often have ready access to colleagues and leaders that are intrinsic to face-to-face environments. Without clearly-defined communication channels and expectations, trust cannot be cultivated, and without trust, there cannot be open communication. Discussed below are strategies we proposed to foster constructive communication.

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Vary Communication Technologies

Avoid static communications by varying the formats and/or technologies used. Consider the current ubiquity of daily email listserv messages. How many recipients take time to read them? If they do not, why? Reasons could include the impersonality of a text-based message with thousands of recipients, the repetition of daily announcements, the irrelevance of some announcements to the entire audience, and the automatic "junking" by some email clients based on the infrequency with which the user reads the messages. Maximize the communication tools available today. Even if the preferred communication medium is email, messages could include multimedia elements so add some visual and auditory appeal for recipients.

Provide Weekly Contact in Different Forms

In keeping with varying communication technologies, vary communication formats. Weekly communication is critical as it provides followers with a connection to the organization in lieu of the physical presence to which they were accustomed. Informal hallway chats or check-ins no longer exist exactly as they once did. Create alternatives to those experiences. Consider alternating live and written communications on a biweekly basis. Alternate a live gathering via videoconference one week with a written communication the following week. Be creative with vocabulary, and consider calling the live gathering a huddle, chat, or something other than meeting, and treat the written communication like a newsletter so that it stands out from general written messages, likely email messages. Avoid the static email approach to the written communication, and include items unrelated to the business at hand such as a spotlight that highlights an event or person, either in the organization or elsewhere. Thought-provoking or humorous quotes and anecdotes are also elements to consider that will engage the recipient and, again, break the expected monotony of email messages.

Meet for a Purpose

Regardless of context, ensure that followers' time is requested purposefully. Meet when a need exists; avoid meeting simply to meet. Purposeful meetings are those that invite only the individuals needed to engage in meaningful discussion. Consider who needs to be involved in a meeting, and include those individuals. Targeted invitations show respect for followers' time and dedication to focused dialog.

Conclusion

Discussed herein are what we know, what we have learned, and how we proceed. We have unpacked trust, collaboration, and communication as they relate to expectations and operations of academic leaders in virtual environments.

These key topics were not foreign to the literature prior to 2020, but the COVID-19 pandemic forced these to be considered in unexpected contexts under unprecedented circumstances. During this time, much was learned through experimentation, discovery, and trial-and-error. Those lessons should contribute valuable insight to the reformation of traditional operational models. That is not to say that traditional models lack merit; it is simply suggesting that experiences in 2020 and well into 2021 yielded new approaches to work that had become routine. What worked well should be retained, and tradition should

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not be the reason we return to the "same old" approaches. Just because something *was* does not mean it *should be*.

Leaders should be nimble. Leadership should be dynamic, fluid, and responsive to needs as they arise. One lesson learned from pandemic experiences is that adaptability is crucial and could be demanded of you when least expected.

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