Chapter 9

Innovative Leadership: The Higher Educational Context

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ABSTRACT

Traditional leadership theories focused on the individual as the “leader” and noted specific skills and characteristics of a leader. It is important that conversations about leadership within higher education move well beyond a limited approach that focuses solely on an individual. Effective leadership must consider relationships and actions of the members, leader-member interactions, the nature of the task, abilities of the members, and change management. This chapter examines leadership theories and provides a definition of innovative leadership within the context of higher education. Additionally, contingency theory and distributed leadership are critically examined. However, the crux of the arguments emphasize that distributed leadership is akin to innovative leadership in higher education.

INTRODUCTION

To thrive amid complexity, higher educational institutions must “embrace organizational processes that prioritize collaboration, shared leadership, and local decision making” (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017, p. 4). In this vein, it is critical the discourse about leadership within the higher educational context spans beyond administrative lenses and instead includes all stakeholders of the institution in the leadership conversation. There are varying views about what effective leadership ought to look like and the literature highlights there are also varied definitions of leadership. “As scholars and educators ponder the most critical issues for cultivating
leadership learning in the 21st century, ensuring the effectiveness of leadership development initiatives must be at the forefront of the conversation” (Dugal, 2011, p. 83). Simply put, whilst there is no single definition of leadership, academics and researchers would not impugn the necessity of effective leadership development.

Latchem and Hanna (2001) offer a basic definition of leadership that underlines a significant point—leadership is about people not an individual: “Leadership is essentially about getting people excited about moving in a positive direction” (Latchem & Hanna, 2001, p. 54). It “continues to be a popular topic for quality professionals, organizational leaders, researchers, consultants, and a variety of commentators” (Latham, 2014, p. 11), and is one of the most multifaceted concepts within the higher educational landscape. “One thing that all leaders have in common is one or more followers. If no one is following, one cannot be leading” (Vroom & Jago, 2007, p. 17). However, we must remember that “one function of leadership is providing direction, and another is exercising influence” (Riley, 2013, p. 26). Vroom and Jago point out that “virtually all definitions of leadership share the view that leadership involves the process of influence” (p. 17).

Arguably, “inspirational motivation describes leader behavior which is based on an optimistic and enthusiastic way of communicating a vision to the followers. The job to be done should not be felt as an obligation but as a challenge” (Verlage, Rowold, & Schilling, 2012, p. 69). Nevertheless, positivity and eagerness alone cannot lead unskilled members to improved performance. “In an effort to provide insight to the study and understanding of the complex phenomenon of leadership, over the years, there have been developed or propounded various perspectives, approaches, models, and theories of leadership” (Peretomode, 2012, p. 14). According to Avolio, Walumbwa, and Weber (2009), leadership “is depicted in various models as dyadic, shared, relational, strategic, global, and a complex social dynamic” (pp. 422-423). This is because:

Leadership focuses not only on the leader, but also on followers, peers, supervisors, work setting/context, and culture, including a much broader array of individuals representing the entire spectrum of diversity, public, private, and not-for-profit organizations, and increasingly over the past 20 years, samples of populations from nations around the globe. (Avolio et al., 2009, p. 422)
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