

Leadership Themes in Higher Education Restructuring

Kamarudin and Starr

Deakin University

Abstract. Leading higher education restructuring is challenging. It involves various degrees of engagement, decision making and strategic alliances to achieve success. Factors such as the fundamental characteristics and practices of higher education, and external factors need to be taken into account. This paper presents the preliminary findings of a case study on organizational restructuring at a higher education institution in Australia. The study focuses on leadership themes appearing during the restructuring. Data for the study were derived from interviews with parties involved - leaders, academic and administrative staff. Analysis of the interviews found three main leadership themes occurring throughout the change process. This study concludes that leadership is a critical factor in organizational change in universities.

Keywords: Change, Management, Higher Education.

1. Introduction

The current context of higher education is dynamic with various demands for change. Among catalysts for change are competition, market orientation, globalisation and technological developments. Leading change in higher education as in other major institutions is not an easy task. Higher education institutions as an entity are unique, unlike business organisations. A university has distinctive fundamental characteristics and practices including diverse and ambitious objectives and semi-autonomous organisational structures in the form of faculties, departments and research centres for excellence. According to Fullan (2005), effective leaders are crucial because change without strong leadership will not happen. Leaders must consult and communicate widely when making decisions about the strategic directions of the institution. Aspects such as partnership and collaborations, financial resources, teaching and learning, business mission and vision as well as issues on IT development need to be effectively and strategically planned and managed (Middlehurst, 1999). Within this context it is important to note that many view the phenomenon of leadership as consisting of more than just the individual leader. Rather, leadership is shared amongst many people throughout the organisation (Fairholm, 2004; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004). This paper documents the leadership themes that emerged from interviews with staff from all levels of the organisation who reflected on the processes and outcomes of a major change – a restructuring involving the amalgamation of two separate faculties (Arts and Education) into one larger faculty. The amalgamation occurred in an Australian university in 2007.

This restructuring was the result of a top down decision from the Vice Chancellor's office after discussion with senior executives of the university. After the announcement by the Vice Chancellor, a restructuring committee was formed to oversee the merger. The committee consisted of people from several parties such as the human resources division, representatives from both the faculties and led by a representative from the Vice Chancellor's office. The committee was given six months to lead and implement the amalgamation. Throughout this process, various issues were handled by the committee such as redundancy, devising the faculty's new organizational structure and budgetary issues.

This paper reports on the findings of a case study research with the main purpose being to look into the phenomenon of leadership during the organisational restructuring process. It relates to the social processes such as decision making, team work, leadership activities as well as the policy context at meso,

macro and micro levels. Studies involving social concepts such as leadership, team work and organizational behaviours should be seen as processes involving multiple levels of perspectives and dimensions and thus cannot be measured in static time (Conger, 1998). It is therefore vital for this research to pay adequate attention and acknowledgment the structural, social, and power issues within this case study. In addition, it was important to realise the richness and significance of individual experience in the theory-building research process (Turnbull, 2002). The research takes context into account as ‘a crucial and integral element of in analysis’ (Temple, Edwards, & Alexander, 2006, p. 2).

A case study is defined as ‘a research strategy which focuses on understanding the dynamics present within single settings’ (Eisenhardt, 1989, p. 534). The strength of case study is the ability to allow the researcher to retain the holistic characteristics of real-life events and undertake thorough investigation into a phenomenon in its particular context (Yin, 2009). A case study focuses on an entity in itself and allows in-depth examination (Gibbert & Ruigrok, 2010). Case study researchers often probe deeply and intensively to analyse the subject of the study. As illustrated by Skinner (extract from Woodside, 2010, p. 2) “... instead of studying a thousand rats for one hour each, or a hundred rats for ten hours each, the investigator is likely to study one rat for a thousand hours.” The result of such analysis reveals insights that contain typical characteristics of events adaptable in other context. Case studies are multi-perspectival which implies that the researcher gathers data from various actors and relevant groups of actors for a comprehensive view of the research phenomenon (Tellis, 1997).

Thirty individuals were interviewed. Theoretical sampling assured that data was grounded to the study and represented views of important individuals involved who are well versed with the context and issues related to the study. The transcripts of interviews were provided to the interviewees to ensure its validity.

2. Findings

Three leadership themes emerge during the amalgamation process - the style of leadership used to execute the amalgamation within a tight timeline, the alienating consequences of the change process and issues concerning a leadership vacuum. These are reported separately below:

2.1. You call it collective leadership, we call it autocratic

Members of the Restructuring Committee as well as several Senior University Executives believed that the style of leadership exercised during the amalgamation took into account the interest of all parties involved. One Senior Executive recalled discussions about the amalgamation being held at the Senior Executives level and hence believed that it came as no surprise (Interview 12). Another Senior Faculty leader believed that although the Vice Chancellor had the last say, decisions been already taken prior to announcements at the top management level (Interview 10). Members of the Restructuring Committee unanimously echoed this opinion and pointed to the existence of a Restructuring Committee as a means of being seen to get feedback from various parties involved even though a decision had already been taken. Various meetings were held to engage the faculty members on the amalgamation yet few suggestions from these meeting were seen to have been taken into account (Interview 9, Interview 12). In addition, one member provided documents as proof of the correspondence and feedback throughout the amalgamation process which demonstrated the futility of a consultation exercise (Interview 9). She recalled the tedious task of having various meetings, reading all feedback and discussions of cases but knowing it was in vein. She further stated that to be seen to be just and to fulfil various demands was not an easy task due to constraints of the amalgamation itself – for example, having to meet exacting timelines (Interview 9). Nevertheless, she recalled that all faculty members who were severely affected by the amalgamation process (due to the duplication of roles and the inevitable requirement to displace staff) were duly contacted and decisions were explained.

Despite this, however, most administrative and academic staff felt that what was happening was an example of autocratic leadership. Some administrative staff felt that consultation meetings often turned out to be briefing sessions. One respondent said:

- Everyone from the unit was invited to state our case but the feeling was not very good because the human resources lady and the representative from the Vice Chancellor, they just came to do a deed and they were just going to do it. (Interview 3)

Interview 5 further stated, “*We felt that we weren’t being consulted. We felt that we were being told ‘this is what is going to happen’.* It was not a matter to be discussed, rather it’s something that we were being told.” In the other interviews, phrases such as, “*we had it coming*” and “*it was a done deal*” were apparent. Many felt that meetings were merely a formality designed to mask a ‘false’ consultation from the top management. As remarked by one Senior Administrator:

- I am sure they had decided [to amalgamate prior to consultation]. You know - that person goes there and X goes there. But I went for one job but they gave me another job. I suspect strongly elsewhere they had another person whom they wanted. She’s very good. I think they had already decided. I am sure they had. I am sure there were lots of decisions made behind the scene. We all felt that the decisions were all already made. Even though there is a process we all felt that decisions were more or less already made. (Interview 3)

Another administrator expressed the same view:

- But we just got the impression; afterwards, the unanimous impression by everyone was that it was going to go ahead in any case. So, we felt that [the Vice Chancellor] had to have these meetings to say that s/he had consulted with the staff and it was going to go ahead anyway. This is how we felt. They were probably going through the motions. They probably had to have a meeting or two and they had those, but our concerns were still there after the meeting anyway. (Interview 11)

In this aspect, faculty members felt that meetings were aimed at conveying the decisions and instructions from the top. The lack of opportunities for the members to contest the amalgamation decision strengthened their views. Therefore, even though meetings were held with the faculty members, the responses at the end of the meetings were unsatisfactory. Interview 13 commented:

- We just felt that the whole new structure, it was decided for us and not by us. And a few points of opinion were raised but we knew it was what we call a ‘fait accompli’. ... Regardless of what we felt or what we said the decision of the amalgamation was going to go ahead anyway (Interview 13).

2.2. The irony of leadership: Autocratic leadership breeds unity

Throughout the interviews it was interesting to note that although autocratic leadership predominated, it actually resulted in members getting closer to one another. The word ‘we’ echoed throughout the interviews signalling the unity of those affected by the amalgamation. The resultant unity of faculty members that came about through autocratic leadership was apparent in many comments. For example:

- On another level, I think it actually brought us closer together. You know, to be honest, we were all fighting for the same thing. We might have been feeling that we were losing our identity. With the previous faculty we had our identity. All of a sudden we were going to be little fish in a big pond. We were only going to be one quarter of it. On another level we might have felt that we were going to get lost. But in an actual fact, it made us closer because we were fighting for the same thing (Interview 6).

The togetherness of the administrative members resulted in a joint struggle for their cause, which was to resist change and oppose the amalgamation. Administrative units and leaders started to plan strategies to underline the importance of their departments. Interview 5 stated:

- I just remembered that the general staff had a couple of crisis meetings. We organized them among ourselves. We knew the restructuring was happening. We weren’t kept fully informed. So we formed two or three meetings where we talked and went through the issues and strategies for dealing with the proposed change, within the other admin units within our faculty (Interview 5).

When further probed on the strategies, Interview 5 went on to state: “*We wrote letters of concern to the Dean and we became quite careful and began tabulating what we were doing to provide data on our work*”.

As can be seen, the faculty members clung together and worked closely to weather the difficulties they were facing. Everyone in their respective teams understood the huge task of arguing against the amalgamation. The faculty members saw that being united was crucial for their survival. Interview 6 and Interview 2 mentioned that team members often worked closely and had discussions to build an effective case to present to the restructuring committee. One member stated that they had to work long hours and work together to understand the new knowledge that needed to be learned as a result of the organisational changes (Interview 11). Interestingly too, the difficult times did not diminish the integrity of faculty members by the amalgamation. Interview 5 commented:

- It would have been very easy for me to be cynical about working here because general staff were being very badly treated. But I think, that overall the staff have been very gracious. They still come to work with a lot of dignity despite all the difficulties. And I think they have done a terrific job when dealing with very difficult change and they have made the most of it and they continue. And I still don't think those from above really understand how difficult it was. And I think fundamentally people come to work to do the best that they can, work within their units and just have peace and quiet. You know – a sense of collegiality and when that's rocked, it really shakes your foundation and your work ethics (Interview 5).

When probed whether the university executive realised the importance of the role played by the general staff, one administrator stated, *"I don't think they did and I don't think they do but it seems to me most people general staff understand that and they still come to work and do their best (Interview 7)."*

2.3. In times of crisis have no fear, a leader will appear

In this study, two individuals were often referred to as 'a good leader'. Both emergent leaders were frequently praised for their leadership qualities. Their names were mentioned and referred to by fellow colleagues as leaders who helped to lead the faculty members in times of uncertainties and chaos. It is interesting to note that both emerged after shouldering the responsibilities to represent the plight, cries and concerns of the faculty members. However, the manner in which each individual fought for the workers' plight differs in many ways.

The first emergent leader decided to offer herself to be on the restructuring committee. She felt that the organisation needed someone who understood the concerns of other workers as well as being capable - not only well-versed in the day to day management of the organisation, but most importantly who could persevere throughout the long change process. In this aspect, the Senior Administrator felt that by being a member of the restructuring committee would enable her to consciously and continuously monitor the change process as well as relay the concerns of the other workers. She further mentioned that, *"I knew I was doing the right thing. So, I just continued. Staff was thankful I was that person. I don't know whether I would do a better job than X but I felt that I had a vision of what might be in the future and X would be tainted because she was leaving. (Interview 9).* When probed about who voted for her, she mentioned that she was voted by the general staff. This confirms the support and endorsement she had from her fellow colleagues. Among the things she did she continuously shared information with the general staff. She stated: *"I continually consulted with them throughout the process. There were people who were going to lose their positions and I sat with them one-on-one and shared with them what I could do at the time"* (Interview 9). These acts helped to keep the faculty informed of important information as phases of the amalgamation unfolded. It also helped affected members to plan and decide on their future strategies.

In contrast, the second emergent leader led the faculty members from outside the restructuring committee. This 'natural leader', as few of her friends referred to her, initiated meetings, contacted the union for support and advice, and relentlessly wrote feedback emails to inform the Restructuring Committee about the concerns and cases of members in the faculty. Interview 4 praised this emergent leader and commented:

- It's about ... having a more strategic fighter. My boss has a strong union background. She's a very strategic woman. It didn't always work but she always put on a good fight. It's weird. You look for [formal] leadership and instead you look for natural leadership - people that may not in the leadership pay roll but people who had the skills. (Interview 4)

Another faculty member commended the leadership of the second emergent leader as well as her efforts to help the affected members. Interview 18 commented:

- She was a middle manager. She was terrific. She organized meetings. She organized meetings with an open invitation. It was very inclusive. She gave us opportunities to debrief. She was also in touch with the unions and officials and brought them along during meetings. There were quite a few meetings organised by the general staff and this middle manager facilitated. She was terrific. She was very supportive. She made it from her own compassion. She contacted specific people that she knew would feel isolated and whose job might be in jeopardy. Yeah! She was terrific. (Interview 18)

When this 'natural' leader was asked what motivated her, she mentioned the feeling of sympathy towards her fellow colleagues. She simply stated, *"There are good people in my office, my staff. I don't want to desert them. I couldn't leave them in such a mess."* (Interview 6)

3. Conclusion

Leadership during organizational restructuring is crucial. Leaders are often left with the difficult task of leading and managing conflicts in the process of implementing change. As illustrated in the paper, different people possess different views of the leadership. Those who are closer to the top management and have more information view the change leadership as being collective and democratic. On the other hand, those who are distant to the executive leadership felt that these leaders were being autocratic. Interestingly, the study found that autocratic leadership unites the people. The majority of the staff believed that it is important for them to come together to strive for the same cause against the negative effects of the repressive amalgamation process. In this aspect, emergent leaders were seen to have assisted in leading the faculty members to survive the amalgamation.

4. References

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