

LEADING AND MANAGING UNIVERSITIES
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I. Introduction

Today, on the eve of my retirement after forty years' employment in universities, I would reflect on the nature of the vice-chancellor's job and, in particular, on how incumbents can exercise leadership within their universities.

When I applied for the vice-chancellorship of Queen's in 1996-97, the further particulars for the post also suggested that it had three functions, but they were somewhat different from those specified by Clark Kerr, namely:

- Chief Executive Officer, "accountable for the management and organisation of the university";
- Chief Academic Officer, "responsible for providing clear academic leadership to the university"; and
- Chief Ambassador, responsible for representing "the university successfully and with distinction locally, nationally and internationally."

This is the traditional and, in many ways, an excellent summary of the nature of the post. But, in my opinion, it has one major shortcoming: it fails to distinguish between management and leadership.

II. Management versus Leadership

I believe there is an important difference between these two concepts. Stephen Covey, who has made a fortune out of his books revealing the habits of successful people, put it well when he said: "Management works in the system, leadership works on the system". In other words, management is the ability to cope with complexity, to devise structures and systems that produce order and harmony. Leadership is the ability to cope with change, to establish a new direction, and to get institutions and individuals to move in that direction.

A vice-chancellor's job involves both management and leadership, but the latter is more important than the former. A vice-chancellor does not successfully run a university primarily by crunching the numbers, redrawing organisational charts, and applying the latest business school concepts and techniques. The key function of a vice-chancellor is to lead the university: to harness the social forces within it, to shape and guide its values, to build a management team, and to inspire it and others working in the university to take initiatives around a shared vision and a strategy to implement it. In short, a vice-chancellor should be an enabler rather than a controller.

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The job, in Warren Bennis' phrase, is "to set the target that beckons" – a stretch target that drives the organisation forward by forcing innovation through deliberately creating a misfit between its ambitions and its current resources – and, having set it, to motivate people to hit it.

III. Leadership and Change

Leadership, as I have defined it, is inextricably linked to change: to describe a person who merely administers the status quo without changing it as a leader would be a contradiction in terms.

Here I want to draw upon my experience at Queen's – and also at London Business School, where I was Principal, and the University of Warwick, where I was Chairman of Warwick Business School – to talk about the process of leading change in an academic institution.

Let me suggest that – in my humble experience – to lead successful and sustainable change you need to do three things:

- create a sense of urgency
- develop an appropriate vision and strategy
- create a supporting infrastructure

3.1 Leading change: Creating a sense of urgency

To begin with the obvious, universities are:

- pluralistic institutions with multiple, ambiguous and conflicting goals;
- professional institutions that are primarily run by the profession (i.e. the academics) often in its own interests rather than those of the clients; and
- collegial institutions in which the vice-chancellor is less a CEO who can manage by diktat and decree and more a managing partner in a professional firm who has to manage by negotiation and persuasion

Change is extremely difficult to bring about in an institution with these characteristics. In my experience, a prerequisite for change is some pressure – often a threat from outside the institution – which convinces its members that change is necessary. At the University of Warwick, the main pressure for change was a report from the then University Grants Committee which commented unfavourably upon the performance of the Warwick Business School. At London Business School, it was financial performance in combination with being ranked second.

3.2 Leading change: Developing a vision and a strategy

I believe that the chief task of a vice-chancellor, or the head of any organisation, is, in Warren Bennis' phrase, "to set the target that beckons". I also believe that this target has to be formulated in such a way that it can be stated briefly in a mission statement, documents, speeches and elsewhere. People will march for a phrase; they will not march for a paragraph and, even less, for a page.

The target for the Warwick Business School was to be “best in class”, the best business school which was an integral part of a university and which taught both undergraduates and postgraduates. At London Business School the target was to be a “top international business school, the best in Europe”. At Queen’s, the objective was to restore its self respect, to make it once again one of the leading civic universities of the United Kingdom.

The visions outlined for Warwick Business School, London Business School, and Queen’s – like all good visions – were stretch targets. But there have to be some “quick wins” to make people march. Ultimately, however, more fundamental changes need to be introduced if the rhetoric is to become a reality. Initially, the most fundamental of these at Queen’s was the introduction of an Academic Plan that invested £25 million to facilitate the closure of four departments, the early retirement of about 15% of the academic staff, and their replacement by new staff. Nearly 40% of Queen’s academic staff have been hired since July 1998, greatly improving its position in the academic labour market. As a result, Queen’s over the past six years has moved from being in the top forty of over 100 universities in the United Kingdom to achieve its goal of becoming a top-twenty university for both teaching and research.

3.3 Leading change: Creating a supporting infrastructure

A supportive infrastructure is composed of four key elements: the managerial team; systems of decision making; systems for communicating; and systems for appraising and rewarding staff.

Managerial Team

If the Vice-chancellor is going to spend most of his time leading, then he needs to recruit others to do the managing. He needs to put together a group of managers who have sufficient coherence to work together as a team, and sufficient competence and power to manage the change. And having appointed these people, he must delegate as much of the problem solving, committee chairing and other work to them as possible.

Systems of Decision Making

If you are going to lead change successfully, then you need a decision-making structure that can respond rapidly to internal and external initiatives and pressures. In my experience, this invariably means making the decision making structures less hierarchal and complex. You need to delayer, decentralise, and devolve.

Systems for Communicating

Many change initiatives fail because the vision and the strategy are not adequately communicated to the staff whose commitment and support are crucial to their success. Normal methods of communication – internal newspapers, meetings with deans and heads of school – are important, but I am a strong believer that the “informal” – management-by-walking-about – are the most important. As John le Carré has observed, “a desk is a dangerous place from which to view the world”.

- Vice-chancellors need to get out and about both inside and outside the university.
- They need an abundance of interactive energy: an endless ability to be with, talk to, and have exchanges with colleagues.

- Hence they need to regularly visit schools and departments, hold lunches and informal meetings with small groups of senior staff, new recruits and other natural groupings; and use their official residence to entertain not just the great and the good but as many people as possible within the university and a wide social and political spectrum outside it.

Systems for Appraising and Rewarding Staff

You cannot manage by “exhortation”. You need to change behaviour – and, ultimately, attitudes and values – so that they support, rather than undermine, the vision and the strategy. Having appraised individuals and units, you need to motivate them by recognising and rewarding achievement not only by thanks, praise and status but also by money. Hence you need to allocate resources – which will always be scarce – to units and to individuals on a performance-related basis.

IV. Conclusion

Let me conclude by making three general points: about process, cultural change, and the vice-chancellor’s job.

Process vs. Substance

In describing the changes which occurred at Queen’s Warwick, and London, I am not suggesting that anything that was done was particularly original. In many respects, we were catching up with changes that had already taken place elsewhere. The significance for others of what we were doing lies more in the process than the substance of change. The three institutions I have described were not short of creativity – the ability to think up new things – but of innovation – the ability to do new things. They had lots of new ideas lying around unused, not because their merits were unrecognised, but because too few people were prepared to take the responsibility for converting them from words into actions. Vice-chancellors need to create an environment in which more people are prepared to take on this sort of responsibility. As Ralph Nader, the American consumer champion has pointed out, “the functions of leadership is to produce more leaders, not more followers”.

Cultural Change

Making change work takes several years because successful change is sustainable change. Changes do not become sustainable until they are anchored in the culture – the core values – of the institution, and this does not occur until the changes have been demonstrated to work and to be superior to the old approaches and methods. Cultural change comes at the end, not the beginning, of transformation processes.

Vice-Chancellor’s Job

A vice-chancellor will not be able to create successful and sustainable change, however, unless he sees himself as a leader rather than a manager. He must organise the university and himself in such a way that he has time to perform the leadership functions, such as development and communication, that are central to his role and that he is better placed than anyone else to undertake.

Finally, if a vice-chancellor wants to create successful and sustainable change, then he should not stay in the job for too long because nothing fails like success.