Cultivation of Leadership in Higher Education Students

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INTRODUCTION

Cliché as it is to begin by stating that we are living in times of change, it is an undeniable truth. Gregory LeStage, president of the International Center for leaders and executive vice president of Kotter International observes: "Change has become the universal business context, the sea in which we all sink or swim" (LeStage, 2014, para. 5). Change is pervasive and rapid and it is likely that this will be the case for the foreseeable future (LeStage, 2014). It is therefore no longer enough to equip graduates with knowledge. To be successful in their future careers and in order to be enable them to make a positive contribution to society, graduates require the skills to both cope with, and drive change regardless of what position or level they will occupy within organizations. That is, graduates must emerge from their studies with the capability to engage in leadership activities.

Leadership as a desirable quality of graduates is certainly not a new direction in higher education. Leadership education for graduates has been implemented in many institutions in one form or another (Borgese, Deutsch, & Winkler, 2004). Whether or not leadership should be included as part of the higher education study experience is clearly not in question. Leadership development is a sought after and frequently mentioned outcome for higher education (Allen, Shankman, & Miguel, 2012; Shertzer & Shuh, 2004). An examination of strategic documents of universities further evidences that leadership as a highly desirable educational goal of higher education, for example:

To extend knowledge through innovative educational programs in which students and emerging scholars are mentored to realize their highest potential and assume roles of leadership, responsibility, and service to society (Washington State university.)

Given the environment of pervasive and rapid change, leadership as a graduate attribute is now not simply desirable, but a necessity. The central aim of the present chapter is to contribute to literature informing the development of leadership in graduates. In order to accomplish this aim, it is necessary to first to consider literature and articulate what effective leaders do. It is then established that leadership should be cultivated rather than taught, and cultivation of leadership ought to be embedded within the curriculum of programs rather than addressed as a distinct and separate activity. The key outcome of the discussion in the present chapter are guidelines for building leadership capacity in graduates.

What Is Leadership?

On first thought, one may be tempted to think that leadership is about getting people to do what one wants them to do. Such a view of leadership implies that leadership is about force and power. In reality, 'leadership' is much more subtle. It is more about influence than clout:

Leadership is not about brute force, raw power, or 'incentivization'…[in these cases] it is most unlikely that they [i.e. followers] will be truly influenced in the sense that they come to see the mission as their own…they are likely to reject the imposed mission…so take away the stick – or the carrot- and people are likely to stop marching or even march off in the opposite direction in order to assert independence… In contrast, if one can inspire people to want to travel in the given direction they will continue to act even in the absence of the leader…leadership centers on the process of influence. (Haslam, Reicher, & Platow, 2011, pp. xix-xx)

So according to Haslan, Reicher, and Platow (2011) leadership is about influence. In fact, it can be argued that without influence there is no leadership. Good leaders are inspiring. Good leaders achieve a vision by aligning people and empowering them rather than forcing or incentivizing.

Discussion of leadership also tends to bring to mind the more traditional idea of vertical leadership wherein the leadership role is attributed to particular individuals in the higher rungs of the organizational hierarchy. A more 'inclusive' view of leadership is ascribed to within the present chapter. Given that firstly, influence is central to leadership, and secondly that change is pervasive throughout society and organizations, it is necessary to view leadership as being enacted not only vertically through one individual, but also horizontally among all individuals in the group.

In literature, the horizontal manifestation of leadership is referred to by terms such as collaborative leadership, distributed leadership, shared leadership, collective leadership. Adopting Conger and Pearce's (2003) definition of shared leadership, leadership that is horizontal in nature can be understood as "a dynamic, interactive influence process among individuals in groups for which the objective is to lead one another to the achievement of group or organizational goals or both" (p. 1). It is interesting to note that Conger and Pearce (2003) conceptualize shared leadership as a 'process' rather than a static, defined or assigned role. Identifying leadership as a process implies development of leadership over time and captures the complex and responsive nature of leadership.

In contrast to the industrial era when top-down or vertical leadership served quite well the needs of static organizations, today's dynamic knowledge based world demands much more responsive collective approaches to leadership (Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009). The complexity and ill-defined problems characteristic of these changing times make it increasingly difficult for the individual leader found in top-down approaches to possess all the required expertise (Kocolowski, 2010). Optimally, the leadership approach itself must become more dynamic and responsive to challenges at the time. For this to happen, leadership must emerge from diverse thought and capabilities of various individuals. Such an approach is desirable, if not necessary, to organizational survival. Organizations are indeed seeing the value of a 'horizontal' element to leadership and are thus departing from the traditional top-heavy paradigm of leadership towards a more 'collective intelligence' model in which individuals from within all levels of an organization are empowered to engage in leadership behaviours (Houghten, Carnes, & Ellison, 2014). Predictably, leadership capability is rapidly becoming an attribute which employers are looking for in their potential employees, irrespective of the position to be occupied by the employee. From this perspective, it is clearly a necessity that leadership is an attribute of graduates emerging from higher education institutions. However, in order to be able to provide guidance on how leadership can be developed in students, it is necessary to articulate what characteristics we wish to develop in graduates.

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