

Strategic Leadership in Higher Education: Facilitating Collaborative Learning

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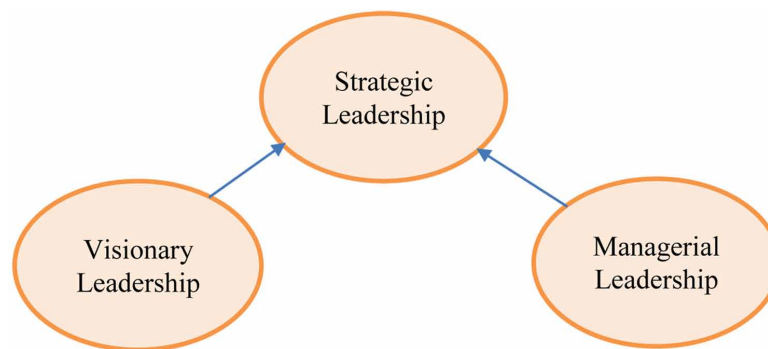
INTRODUCTION

Strategic leadership is a synergistic approach that incorporates the best elements of two well-known leadership approaches, namely, managerial and visionary leadership (see Figure 1). Managerial leaders are reactive and focus on conserving the existing order; they deal with the day-to-day activities and short-term financial health of the organization. Visionary leaders are proactive risk takers, innovators who develop new ideas and focus on long-term growth and survival (Rowe & Nejad, 2009). Strategic leaders follow a synergistic approach whose dual goals are short-term financial stability and long-term growth and viability. The first goal encourages budget constraints while the second requires outlay of monies for innovation, to enable the organization to keep up with changing environments. Strategic leadership, grounded in ethical behavior and value-based decisions, is able to balance the needs of both of these goals (Rowe & Nejad, 2009).

Strategic leadership steers an organization through dangerous waters toward opportunities and away from dangers; it guides the organization toward a clearly defined destination in the pursuit of its goals. Strategic leadership is about leading *of* the whole organization, rather than leading *in* it (Boal & Hooijberg, 2000).

Higher education is an arena that has been facing increasing difficulties in student retention. Steep increases in tuition costs have burdened students with huge debt (Archibald & Feldman, 2010, 2012; Reed & Cochrane, 2014). More troubling, students doubt whether a college degree prepares them for the future and the workplace – concerns shared by employers (Cai, 2013; Krueger & Dale, 2011; Rothwell

Figure 1. Strategic leadership as a synthesis of visionary and managerial leadership



DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-1049-9.ch108

& Kulkarni, 2015; Shapiro et al., 2014). Rothwell and Kulkarni (2015, p. 1) describe this concept of “value-added” in institutions of higher education as “the economic success of the college’s graduates, measured by the incomes graduates earn, the occupations in which they work, and their loan repayment rates.” According to Public Agenda (2011), a leading cause of college dropout was students’ inability to handle the combined demands of work and school. The combined load also may have contributed to students’ taking longer to graduate: the average completion time for a four-year degree was 55 months, with only 40 percent of students graduating within four years (Vedder *et al.*, 2010).

Students are worried about taking on debt to go to college; a Public Agenda survey given to college graduates and those without a degree found that 9 in 10 young adults believed that young people had to borrow too much money to go to college. (Public Agenda, 2011). Top recommendations to reduce the debt burden included offering more student aid options to part-time students, and providing childcare on site. However, the demand for more student aid and support services comes at a time when institutions of higher education are facing significant financial problems. After reaching a record high of \$89 billion in 2008, state funding was slashed dramatically and is anticipated to decline further in the future, with a *new normal* in which students and their families will be expected “to make increasingly greater financial sacrifices in order to complete a postsecondary education” and in which colleges will be forced to find a way to increase productivity and to absorb reductions in support while “increasing degree production without compromising quality” (SHEEO, 2014, p. 47).

Many believe that higher education has been going through a difficult time since the Great Recession of 2008. Institutions of higher education face significant pressures, including increased operating costs, uncertain or reduced revenues, the challenge of implementing new technologies, and increased global competition. The task environment of higher education has undergone significant change over the last few decades and it will continue to be more hostile and challenging in the future (Goldstein, Miller, & Courson, 2014). It seems that the internal workings of higher education are failing to meet current expectations and that changes are needed in order to meet those that will be demanded in the future. There is an urgent need to revisit and to reinvent strategic leadership in higher education and a sense that “those institutions that embrace the true spirit of their educational mission, engage students and communities, and find creative solutions to the challenges facing them will survive and thrive” (Goldstein, Miller, & Courson, 2014, p. 12).

In the scramble to pay tuition bills and accumulate credit hours, it is important to remember the mission of higher education. In his article, “A Well-rounded Education for a Flat World,” Richard Hersch states that “Content is necessary but not sufficient” (Hersch, 2009, p. 52). Students need to be taught the skills to apply their knowledge in the real world.

The kind of learning we need stimulates the imagination and teaches how to construct meaning and make disparate information coherent. It involves the ability to think critically and solve problems and to judge what is relevant, what is accurate, and what is right. Moreover, it requires what some disparagingly have called soft skills — skills like valuing and embracing diverse ideas and people, working cooperatively with others, tolerating ambiguity, and possessing the resilience to bounce back after setbacks. (Hersch, 2009, p. 52)

With collective teacher and administrator commitment, education can have a cumulative effect that goes beyond content; true learning then emerges from “a pervasive school culture that refuses to define education as the passive reception of knowledge and instead celebrates demanding, profoundly engaging, and authentic educational experiences” (Hersch, 2009, p. 52).

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