

Leadership in Place

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Since 1994, I've been studying the worklife of faculty members in academic departments. Probably to no one else's surprise but my own, I've discovered that faculty work is filled with paradoxes. I've wondered how those who pine for academic community can find it so difficult to engage in genuine collaboration with members of their own department. I've puzzled over how often faculty members appear content to let others worry about assuring academic quality in curricular matters, even while arguing that the responsibility for making curricular decisions is one of the most cherished values in academe. It's occurred to me that these paradoxes have a common theme. Faculty culture, especially in large institutions, has become so specialized, so atomized, that faculty members feel responsible only for the quality of their own teaching and research, leaving to others the responsibility for the curriculum and for the academic program as a whole. This retreat into academic specialization and away from what Bill Massy calls quality work—that is, work that is done to enhance academic quality on behalf of the common good—has to my mind been one of the major reasons why legislatures and governing boards have become so skeptical about the value of what faculty do. To be blunt, it's a failure of faculty leadership. Faculty don't see themselves as leaders anymore, unless they aspire to a leadership position such as dean or department chair. Many chairs, in fact, cringe at the thought of having to "lead" their peers. And so the academic culture has devolved into two groups: true academics who focus virtually all of their intellectual energy on their teaching and research agendas, considering service to the institution as largely volunteer work, and administrators who are left with the responsibility of running the place. The notion of an academic collegium with truly shared governance has become laughingly quaint. Ironically, one of the unintended consequences of an emphasis on individual faculty achievement is a weakened faculty collective. I can't imagine a more politically vulnerable faculty body than one in which people have only a weak identification with the institution, or only a tacit sense of shared purpose.

I'd like to suggest that it's time we turned this around and stopped dividing the academy into faculty and administrators. It's time we all realized that real academic leadership has to come from within—from academic professionals who do not necessarily aspire to formal administrative positions but want instead to exert a positive influence on their campuses. I suspect that the readers of this publication will identify with what I'm talking about. Most of you probably don't want to be the designated bureaucrat, but neither do you want to leave your academic calling behind to be a dean or provost. What

you do want is to feel as if you've been able to help create a setting in which departmental faculty are able to come together and deal with important problems.

This sort of leadership is what I've come to call leadership in place. It's a form of leadership that deliberately avoids any trappings of hierarchy and privilege, indeed any sort of formal authority at all. Instead it's a type of lateral leadership that promotes collaboration and joint exploration of issues, with decisions that are built on solid, evidence-based deliberation.

This is vastly different from the conventional view, a sort of leadership-as-manipulation view, which assumes that leadership is a matter of getting followers to do what you want them to do. Even recent leadership scholars mostly take this position as well. The list includes many of those who write about the transformative leader; Howard Gardner, the famous psychologist of multiple intelligences fame, who has written about the virtues of cognitive leadership; and Warren "Why Leaders Can't Lead" Bennis. Very few seem to subscribe fully to the notion of leader as facilitator of problem solving in difficult situations. An important exception to this group is Ronald Heifetz. In a remarkable book called *Leadership without Easy Answers* (1994), Heifetz suggests that the most critical challenge to leadership occurs when problem definitions are not clear cut and technical solutions are not available. Such situations require what Heifetz calls adaptive work, which requires that those who take on leadership roles to create an opportunity for learning through dialogue.

"Learning" is a key term in adaptive work. Because there are no easy answers in adaptive work, no simple and singular solutions, achieving agreement upon a course of action means first that participants must recognize that their existing perspectives won't lead them to a resolution, and second that they must suspend assumptions, entertain fresh questions, and try on the perspectives of others. The result of this process is what adult learning theorist Jack Mezirow calls transformative learning. He suggests that in order for adults to engage in deep learning they must first experience a disorienting dilemma in which they realize that their current knowledge perspectives won't solve the problem-that it isn't a matter of applying technical solutions more expertly, but rather one of framing problematic situations themselves differently.

It's not difficult to come up with examples of departmental problems which require adaptive work. The list includes such matters as defining curricular learning goals, negotiating budgets, evaluating faculty performance, and dealing with enrollment and retention issues. None of these problems is clear cut, and none lend themselves to routine, technical solutions. But here's the rub: Because working through these problems is difficult and time-consuming, faculty are often tempted to let others-you, the chair-decide, reserving the right to second-guess the decision later. How often have you been asked by the faculty in your department, after a long and perhaps arduous discussion, to draft a

set of goals, propose a budget, come up with a system to assess faculty performance, or develop a plan to increase enrollment in the major, for the faculty as a whole to review? Adaptive work forces people into a zone of discomfort, one they ordinarily would rather not be in. Thus, the leadership challenge is to manage the discomfort so that it is just enough to stimulate reflection and creative thinking without being so severe that it generates anxiety and a desire to escape the situation altogether.

And here's where the leadership-in-place idea comes in. Imagine for a moment how differently we would think about leadership if we were to focus squarely on leadership for adaptive work. First and most obviously, we would cease thinking about academic leadership in the usual knee-jerk kinds of ways, namely as a process of transforming the institution by getting the faculty to go along with a set of administratively driven initiatives (the sort of leadership-as-manipulation approach I referred to earlier). Second, we would begin to view academic leadership as a responsibility shared by all faculty members. Adaptive work, by definition, requires that all participants engage in problem solving, and that the role of leader not be limited to the person with formal authority. Department members must be willing to take on leadership roles, and give them up, as the problem situation dictates. Third, we would begin to take seriously the art of leading an academic department: the art of problem framing, the art of stimulating energy for adaptive work, the art of negotiating conflict, and the art of building consensus. All of this suggests that an effective department chair will help set the context for adaptive work in the department, and thus promote leadership in place, by doing the following:

- Framing clearly the issues facing the department, without either attempting to define exactly what the problems are or proposing precisely what should be done about them.
- Encouraging departmental faculty to express their views on the issues and ensuring that their perspectives are represented and understood.
- Inviting debate in the form of what I've called constructive contention, recognizing that conflict is normal and a sign of healthy engagement.
- Acknowledging evolving leadership roles among the faculty as individuals step up to integrate perspectives and offer new ones.
- Giving voice to emerging perspectives as the collective sense of the faculty.

I've recently joined the faculty of Antioch University's Ph.D. Program in Leadership and Change (www.phd.antioch.edu). Antioch is an institution that takes as its motto a quote from founder Horace Mann, who said, "Be ashamed to die until you have won some victory for humanity." Themes of emancipation and social justice permeate both the Antioch culture and its curricula. As I've begun to work with the leadership and change program I've come to understand how critically important it is to

develop perspectives on leadership which adhere to these values. While it may be going a bit far to suggest that college faculty need emancipatory leadership, faculty members have certainly had enough of the leadership-as-manipulation variety. Perhaps they-and you-are ready for leadership in place.

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