RUNNING UNIVERSITIES IN CHALLENGING TIMES
EWART WOOLDRIDGE REFLECTS ON COPING WITH CHANGE

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Ewart Wooldridge CBE, chief executive of the Leadership Foundation reflects on the issues emerging from ‘Coping with Change’, a recent conference of the Leadership Foundation’s PVC/DVC Network.

“Getting staff to go the extra mile for you means that you have to get two things working in tandem: seeking their alignment with what the organisation is trying to achieve and engaging with them effectively.”

This PVC/DVC Network event had been planned well in advance of the current international finance crisis because its main purpose was to respond to the already known pressures over the next 5-10 years of:

1. Increased competition, in the UK and internationally;
2. The consequent need for HEIs to seek much clearer differentiation and distinctiveness;
3. High pay, pension and utility costs;
4. The prospect of demographic downturn in the 18-24 age range from 2010-20;
5. The potential gradual reduction in the growth in international students for HEIs as alternatives become available for them closer to home;
6. Prospect of a reduction in the proportion of public funding.

Suggested actions identified at the event included:

1. Start a fresh process of scenario planning now;
2. Challenge assumptions in existing strategic plans;
3. Learn from lessons from other sectors;
4. Engage middle levels of leadership and management;
5. Engage in conversation generally across the institution.

There are so many theories of change management around that it is impossible to offer one recipe for dealing with current challenges. However, if you can only choose one I would opt for John Kotter’s eight steps for transforming organisations:

1. Establish a sense of urgency.
2. Form a powerful ‘guiding coalition’ at all levels of those who will champion and lead the change.
3. Create a compelling vision.
4. Communicate the vision again and again… and again.
5. Empower and delegate to others to act on the vision.
6. Plan for and create short term wins and sensible milestone achievements.
7. Consolidate these improvements as change is implemented.
8. Embed new arrangements by making connections between new behaviours and successes.

What Kotter is trying to fix is the tendency of organisations to have a grand vision and analysis of the need for change, and then failing to turn it into action – something that universities can so often excel at! His approach is to establish momentum and to create a culture where change actually happens. Good leadership is about turning a vision into action, not just articulating it well.

One key outcome of the autumn PVC/DVC Network event will be the creation of a new PVC/DVC Learning Network specifically focused on the issues of running universities in challenging times. 18 PVCs immediately signed up after the network meeting and it will involve a combination of an e-relationship (with a research based briefing service from the Leadership Foundation) and occasional face-to-face meetings. Issues already tabled include:

1. Income diversification in recession;
2. International recruitment versus internationalisation;
3. Reviewing the academic portfolio;
4. Improving business processes.

If any PVC or DVC would like to join the learning network (which is open to all Leadership Foundation members), please contact:

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When I was asked to write about ‘leadership’ or ‘governance’, or about a book I had found relevant to my working life, I found my thoughts turning to the subject of organisational culture.

There are vast numbers of books on organisational structure, empowerment and strategy, as well as the indispensable ‘how to be a good manager in ten minutes’. Yet there are few about the most important and difficult management issue - the creation and sustenance of an appropriate organisational culture.

As I earned money during student vacations in furniture factories, steel works and offices, I witnessed the way in which contrasting cultures in otherwise similar organisations delivered very different outcomes. I never fully understood why they were so different; but I could see that the right culture is a critical factor in delivering positive outcomes for everyone.

When I arrived at Liverpool John Moores University, it was immediately clear that I needed to invest in developing the newly-appointed senior leadership team, and in particular to inculcate a spirit of corporate teamwork the like of which I had never experienced in higher education before. I had the good fortune to encounter Senn Delaney, a UK-based American company specialising in the practical development of organisational culture. We hired them to work with the whole leadership team including me, and the late John Clayton was the inspiring facilitator who made it all work. John enhanced the work and life understanding of everyone at LJMU who took part; many colleagues found the experience profoundly life-changing.

Over just a few weeks, I saw the leadership team not only being transformed, but enjoying the process. Comfortingly, the process reinforced the broad leadership approaches I had already adopted instinctively, but also added critical components that I had not considered, and helped systemise and organise them in my mind.

The book that describes this transformational approach is Winning Teams - Winning Cultures by Larry Senn and Jim Hart. Without personal experience of the Senn Delaney process, I suspect I might have found the reading hard going. But the critical components of the approach are not difficult - just the determination and dedication to work always within the desired culture. As the book says: “Every organisation has a definable culture; the only question is, does it shape you, or do you shape it?”

The key concepts we learned as a team are worth reflecting on and reading about further. They are:

- the “shadow of the leader”;
- culture and integrity;
- managing energy levels and moods;
- listening - “being here now”;
- aligning strategy, structure and culture;
- sustaining the culture;
- 360° appraisal against the values.

Of these, the most important in my view is the “shadow of the leader”. This is a simple idea, but the most personally demanding one. The leadership (and all members of the leadership) must deliver and demonstrate the required cultural behaviour consistently at all times. After all, if the leadership does not live the values of the organisation at all times, how can it expect others to?

The book puts it this way: “I would submit to you that it is unnatural for you to come in late and for your people to come in early. I think that it is unnatural for you to be dishonest and your people to be honest. I think that it is unnatural for you not to handle your finances well and then expect your people to handle theirs well. In all these simple things, I think that you have to set the standard.”

Or as the US author James Baldwin wrote: “Children have never been very good at listening to their elders, but they have never failed to imitate them’. Put more simply, it is a question of ‘do as you want others to do’, combined with ‘noblesse oblige’.

Finally, the need to check on effectiveness through 360° feedback is an effective and rewarding tool. As Robert Burns said: “O wad some power the giftie give us to see ousel’s as others see us”.

Revisiting this book brought back fond memories of the initial leadership development work that we undertook together at Liverpool John Moores University. It may be of interest to others.
Excellence Rewarded

Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) has won the prestigious UK Excellence Award 2008 organised by the British Quality Foundation (BQF), becoming the first university in Europe to be a full award winner under the EFQM Business Excellence framework.

LJMU received the award in recognition of the university’s outstanding performance and competitive business positioning. Vice-chancellor and chief executive Professor Michael Brown received the award on behalf of LJMU, which was presented by HRH The Princess Royal, the BQF’s patron, at a ceremony at the Hilton, Park Lane in London on October 14.

The university began an intensive programme to develop its leadership and management system using the EFQM Excellence Model in 2002. They took the courageous decision to apply the model to the whole university, but to do so in a way that was appropriate to the culture of the organisation.

"We don't talk about the Excellence Model in day-to-day activity but apply it very practically in ways relevant to what we are trying to achieve as a university – building excellence into our core business" says Paul Evans, LJMU's director of business excellence. Paul acknowledges that an element of LJMU’s success was supported by his own Leadership Foundation Fellowship project ‘Management by Processes and Fact’, awarded in 2005. “What many people outside of higher education don’t realise is that universities are very complicated businesses – using the Excellence Model has helped us to make sense of that complexity, and my Fellowship project made a contribution to that.”

There are many business award schemes, but few if any have the rigour of the UK Excellence Awards. The university prepared a 75-page application document that was assessed and later verified by a team of six assessors, who spent a week at the university interviewing upwards of 100 people in individual and focus group situations.

Professor Brown said: “We are delighted to have achieved a UK Excellence Award at our first submission attempt. Business excellence underpins everything that we do and that’s why LJMU has been able to evolve into an exciting, forward-thinking, and commercially-aware university operating at the heart of Liverpool.”

“This award is real encouragement to all our staff who have been brave enough to adopt a new way of running a university and been prepared to challenge the status quo.”

GuildHE and the education debate

Preparing for the GuildHE annual conference this November, we had anticipated that the different strands in the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) Debate on the Future of Higher Education would be well-rehearsed by the time we met. Instead, the director general for higher education provided us with a personal briefing, just as Debate responses appeared on the DIUS website.

We wanted to make sure that our own submission to the Debate was recognised. Our conference was a chance to review members’ key messages in the light of the significant changes in economic context. We were concerned about recent comments on ‘institutional mergers’, and remain seeking government confirmation of real commitment to institutional differentiation, parity of esteem and diversity of institution and delivery - to match a diverse student need.

From the wide range of contributions to the Debate we considered what we should be securing for the long term, while thinking about short and medium term actions which will drive toward those ends. GuildHE members have been taken by Christine King’s ideas about the funding of part-time education; we know that the burden of long-term debt is not one those from widening participation backgrounds are keen to take on, so the rethinking of student funding becomes a more urgent action.

Recent events have been an even stronger wake-up call regarding the global integration of our society, and the call for internationalisation is crucial – a hunter-gatherer attitude must be exchanged for mutual respect and sustainable trading. GuildHE members recognise it is time to adapt our global information society further and grow ideas that sustain an enriched world.

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