This is Part II of a two-part series exploring the concept of leading through a strengths-oriented collaboration. In Part I, Henck and Hulme provided the context for a collaborative leadership model, beginning with self-awareness and self-management. Part II addresses the practical realities of building an academic team by examining a strengths-oriented approach to developing trust within a team.

OVERVIEW

Today, higher education faces an unprecedented range of internal and external pressures for change. Colleges face the difficult task of reordering within their organizations in response to everything from an unrelenting demand for expanded technological resources and expertise to public and legislative pressure for access, accountability, and affordability. “The array of challenges that higher education faces today is virtually unparalleled when compared to virtually any other point in U.S. history” (Kezar and Eckel, 2002, p. 435).

Transformation in higher education is often erroneously viewed as a function of top-level administrators who project an inspiring vision to transform the institution. In reality, sustainable academic change efforts within a college or university depend primarily on the adoption of new initiatives at the academic department level (Bennett and Figuli, 1990; Lucas, 2000).

Faculty members at most institutions deeply value their autonomy. While following curricular requirements that align with standards of academic rigor, faculty are empowered to essentially create each class and learning environment based on their own preferences, expertise, and interests. Their scholarship agendas arise primarily from their own personal interests and curiosity. As the need for organizational change arises, faculty members are not always well equipped to function on collaborative teams to address the external and internal demands in a coherent and unified manner. A department’s inability to react swiftly and effectively to changing demands often leaves it on the outside of decisions affecting the academic life of the institution. “When effective teams exist, it is much easier for the chair to lead change effectively and to deal with the resistance that change inevitably triggers” (Lucas, 2000, p. 34).

DEVELOPING TRUST

Trust is an essential element of a high-functioning team in any realm. Yet, the reality is that faculty members do not inherently trust academic administrators. In fact, it is not uncommon to hear that a person has gone to the “dark side” when moving from faculty to administration. The adversarial relationship that
often exists, rooted in years of institutional history, stands as an essential barrier to attaining trust. Three elements of a chair’s leadership responsibilities are essential to establishing trust within a department: effective communication, motivating evaluations, and strategic facilitation of change. Embracing a strengths-oriented approach to team development can advance trust-building efforts.

**Effective communication**
A common mistake in communication is the belief that one person interprets the spoken words of another exactly as intended by the speaker. People’s strengths and experiences have a dramatic effect on the values that guide their actions and shape their perspectives when listening. For example, a person who possesses the strength of responsibility, as identified by the Clifton Strengths Finder instrument, will hear a department chair’s instruction to complete a report by a certain date as a clearly defined deadline that is not to be violated. A timely response is a matter of personal integrity. However, a person with the strength of adaptability views time from a more fluid perspective; this person is driven by the demands of the moment. Therefore, a request for a completed report by a specific date may be viewed as a request to attend to the matter when it reaches the level of critical need. Effective chairs realize that they must be concerned not only about what is said, but also about what is actually heard. Understanding faculty members’ strengths and experiences can provide essential insight into their communication styles.

**Motivating evaluations**
Trust is built when an individual perceives that another person is attempting to believe the best about the individual. Academic leaders experience positive faculty relationships when they have favorable expectations for performance. Developing a deep awareness of the unique strengths and passions faculty members bring to their work can greatly enhance a chair’s or dean’s ability to gain the trust of their faculty.

Chairs are the conduits of meaningful feedback to faculty. A great deal of our existing evaluation system is embedded in a weakness mentality. Chairs spend the majority of their personnel efforts working with faculty members on areas of individual improvement. The key to motivation lies in connecting a person’s strengths and passions with the demands of his or her position. As Ryan and Deci (2002) suggest, motivation is driven by a person’s sense of competence. Chairs can break through the existing personnel pattern, which focuses on weaknesses, and instead encourage the development of strengths in the pursuit of excellence. This will not only motivate their faculty teams but also instill a high degree of trust.
Strategic facilitation of change

Although change is inevitable, faculty members often feel powerless to effect university-wide change. This sense of victimization creates an overpowering resistance to those changes that are initiated outside the department. By contrast, inherent in leadership responsibilities is that chairs are asked to move their departments in positive and innovative directions. Ron Heifetz describes this responsibility of leaders when he writes: “To lead is to live dangerously because when leadership counts, when you lead people through difficult change, you challenge what people hold dear—their daily habits, tools, loyalties, and ways of thinking—with nothing more to offer perhaps than a possibility” (Heifetz and Linsky, 2002, p. 2).

As academic chairs face the challenge of inspiring thoughtful change, their success is enhanced by a strengths perspective; individuals’ strengths energize them for vastly different elements of the change process. For example, faculty members who have the strength of strategic analysis are energized by creating the plans for change. They can effortlessly see the most effective strategy for change and intuitively develop secondary plans if obstacles arise. These individuals are best positioned to be involved in the first stages of creating the plans for change. They are not necessarily motivated by the management of change. On the other hand, people with the strength of discipline might resist an initial effort to change their existing routine; however, they are essential to the internalization and routinatization of the change initiative. They are adept at creating systems that will support the change long after the initial creators have become bored and moved on to other projects. Therefore, by utilizing faculty members’ strengths at appropriate times in the change process, a greater degree of participation in the change effort is ensured. Chairs can gain valuable insights into individual faculty members’ approaches to change by becoming knowledgeable about their strengths. This knowledge could prove to be the difference between facilitating a successful change initiative and merely managing the turmoil around the resistance to change.

CONCLUSION

Trust is essential to developing an effective academic department. Although trust is hard to achieve based on historic mistrust and distancing between faculty and administrators, it is worthwhile for department chairs to attempt to achieve trust as a critical aspect of team functioning. Strengths-oriented academic teams provide a new approach to an old dilemma.

REFERENCES


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