**Leading in Context: A Model for Leaders in Continuing Education.**

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**Abstract**

Leaders are usually chosen for their expertise and not necessarily for their leadership skills. Accountable for many tasks they may not have encountered previously in a professional setting, leaders in continuing education often find *themselves* in need of continuing education in order to be effective leaders.

Research has demonstrated that leaders need to account for the different contexts in which they find themselves. Continuing education offers a diversity of contexts from non-certificated community assistance to postgraduate awards. Leaders in continuing education therefore need to understand how to adapt the model of contextual leadership to any of these contexts.

This paper uses recent research into contextual leadership to draw a parallel between the model and the situation of leaders in continuing education.  It argues that leaders in continuing education need to understand how to adjust their approach to leadership as the setting evolves.  The argument is consistent with the findings that purposive preparation is crucial for leaders to develop the diversity of skills required and the flexibility to adapt to changing circumstances.

Because continuing education is essential to community development, these research findings carry implications which extend beyond institutional walls.

*H.Lancaster, for CAUCE 2007.*

**Introduction**

Leadership in academic settings is something of a paradox. The model is one of first among equals, the leader both delicately poised between promoting the strengths of colleagues, yet being ultimately responsible for shaping the department's future (Tucker, 6). Normally selected for their expertise, with the expectation that their academic reputation and particular specialism will enhance the profile of the organisation, leaders find themselves required instead to demonstrate a sometimes unfamiliar group of skills, as they manage their institutional responsibilities. The impracticality of this situation is compounded by the fact that many leaders in academic settings "believe that they are not given sufficient power or authority to carry out the responsibilities of the position" (6). With little opportunity to adjust the level of authority available to them, leaders are challenged to build a future for their organisation whilst concurrently developing a skill set suited to the administrative and leadership responsibilities before them.

This paper emerges from research into leadership in higher education, specifically in the setting of music institutions which are increasingly moving into the larger university environment. On the one hand, they are challenged by constantly evolving artistic forms with no predictable future. At the same time, they are required to meet the expectations of the larger organisation, the university parent. Through experience and additional research in the field of distance education, I was in a position to note parallels between the conservatorium context and that of distance education. Each of these environments is situated primarily in the tertiary education sector, but caters to a much broader clientele across a range of ages and needs. Both face an unpredictable future, yet employ highly

skilled creative experts across a diversity of specialist disciplines, most of which are undergoing constant change. In cases where the conservatorium offers distance education or lifelong learning programs, the degree of overlap is even higher. Most particularly, each setting responds to a broad overall vision which enables all members to develop new ideas. While the data here were revealed through interviews with leaders in higher music education, there are obvious synergies with the situation of leaders in the continuing education setting.

**Leadership in the academic setting**

Weil asserts that "we cannot afford to underestimate the leadership and management challenges facing those who head our colleges and universities" (26). As organisations of professionals, universities emphasise negotiation, persuasion, facilitation and willing agreement among members. In this context, "leaders are expected to articulate the group's activities to others and to alert [the group] to external opportunities and threats" (Middlehurst 52). As Middlehurst is careful to point out, in the academic environment authority has to be accorded by the community, leadership here being "defined by the ability to convince and persuade others to act on the basis of greater knowledge or competence, reasoned argument and fairness" (75). Similarly, Ramsden confirms that academic leadership "motivates people intrinsically by improving expectations, […] the primary existing motivator of academics. It stimulates and encourages imaginative thinking, so long as it is backed up by credibility" (2003: 33). Thus, the appointment is made on expertise and credibility, but the role relies on much more. Leaders in these settings need to be facilitators, to manage their organisations (often including their

finances) in such a way as to allow the expertise of subordinates to shine, and at the same time imagine potential futures.

Although "leadership cannot be reduced to an exact method", the credibility of a leader's vision "springs from the fact that it is in harmony with the aspirations of academic staff" (Ramsden, 1998: 83). The elements of credibility and vision are particularly relevant to organisations specialising in distance education because of their tendency to select a high profile distance educator as leader.

Leading distance education brings new challenges to the already complex suite of expectations associated with academic leadership. An entirely new palette of possibilities exist in distance education, many of them as yet unformed, and leaders are constantly required to anticipate and meet the evolving environment.  Leaders often find themselves without a precedent, breaking new ground in pedagogy, practice, and technology. With higher education they share new trends in access, affordability and globalisation, but they are also challenged to redefine the role of the organisation, and find new ways of sharing educational wealth across a wider population. As proponents of lifelong learning, their work naturally extends into the community, and must therefore respond to a variety of needs and expectations. Because of the diverse nature of the organisation, the leader must rely heavily on the expertise of the faculty, and work with them to extend the territory. Leaders in distance education organisations tread a delicate balance between heroic leadership – leading from the front – and transformational leadership which advances the strengths of subordinates.

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With its emphasis on changing practice, distance education requires creative people to effect the ongoing evolution. Creative artists use their skills to explore reality, and they need flexibility rather than a routine hierarchical environment, with non-restrictive monitoring and collaboration (Scott 67-9). Collaboration between and among specialists plays an important role, as does risk-taking and freedom, and these factors have implications for the style of leadership appropriate to this new environment in education. Creative people require a high level of motivation: intrinsic motivation which motivates the individual to engage in activity primarily for its own sake, and extrinsic motivation which seeks to meet a specific goal (Collins and Amabile, 299).

Specialists in distance education tend to demonstrate intrinsic motivation in their own fields, but their extrinsic motivation needs to match the goals of the particular circumstance and time within their respective institutions. Hence, the challenge of working among and motivating "creatives" is a natural component of leadership in these organisations. "Managing creatives is counter-intuitive [because] […] creatives march to a different drummer [and] […] sometimes they're even hostile to the corporate culture" (Beir 501). As Beir explains, an hierarchical model of leadership is not entirely appropriate to leading creative workers. The leader needs to clearly articulate a vision, but should trust in and enable the highly skilled members to create ways to fulfil the overall goal: "Creative people have a very deep need to have their ideas heard and respected" (503). Ehrle and Bennett corroborate these claims, asserting that "authoritarian or directive approaches are unlikely to be effective. A team leader approach emphasizing

and yielding shared influence is far more likely to facilitate creativity and innovation"
(196).

There are three elements to an integrative style of leadership: facilitating the generation
of ideas, giving indirect support to maximise the autonomy of those carrying out the ideas,
and promoting the ideas across the organisation as a whole (Mumford et al, 23). Each of
these elements is focused on the leader as facilitator, ensuring that followers contribute to
and drive the process of realising the overall vision. Implicit in achieving this outcome is
the leader's ability to recognise and assess creativity, and motivate and coordinate the
input of others. Mumford describes one scenario in which the leader recognises the
importance of participation, and helps the group to formulate a shared vision. He notes
that, for creative people, the nature of the vision should be novel but work-focused (713).

Leaders decide the extent of collective conviction through their own perception of the
organisation's potential, and by their interactions with various stakeholders, within and
outside the institution. "If [leaders] think they operate in a vacuum, they're wrong!"
(I:45). Being able to envisage possible futures for the organisation is not restricted to the
individual. "No leader has a monopoly on vision, and if that vision can't be shared and
endorsed, and collectively owned and built on, then it's probably not a vision for an
institution" (Ritterman). Facilitating a corporate vision builds consensus, unlocks
potential, gives courage and helps people to see ways of achieving their goals (Lancaster).
Beyond the challenge of establishing a shared purpose, the test of retaining a connection
between vision and the administrative functions of management may be a source of

tension for which leaders are unprepared. Caust suggests that leadership practices and organisational structure should be supportive of "the creativity integral to the vision of the organisation" (7).

It is the constant reference to the need for an overall vision that is the discernible element in the 'edge' which defines creatives. A good example relevant to this setting is the model of the orchestral conductor or theatre director. This model of leadership fits the need to unite the special skills of individuals in a mutually beneficial way to realise the conductor's (or director's) unique vision for a performance (Catron). Dunham and Freeman refer to the 'Principle of Unity and Multiplicity' - that of pulling together a cohesive whole while encouraging individual and idiosyncratic activity (108). A distance education organisation is a conglomeration of individual specialists of differing backgrounds who bring their unique talents together to realise a generic goal, making this a relevant principle. Like a symphony orchestra or theatre company, it requires both highly trained professionals and broad-based visionary leadership (Lancaster, 2006: 208).

**Leading in context**

Nonetheless, there is no one model on which to shape leadership in the distance education setting. Because leadership is an interaction between leader, follower, and situation (Burke, 79), it is important to consider the specific context in which the leader is placed. Leaders are variously limited by the size of the organisation (Thomas, 397), the hierarchical system (Osborn, Hunt and Jauch, 832), and the environment (Prioleau; Bishop). In distance education organisations, a further range of challenges unique to each

institution has the potential to impact on the leader's capacity to effectively lead the organisation into unknown territory: challenges such as the range and diversity of disciplines, geographic location and coverage, market forces and community needs. Even the weight of history may have some influence on organisations which have been in existence for a long time and find it difficult to change (Lancaster, 2007).

Leaders in higher education, and particularly in distance education, operate in a continuum of contexts. Each organisation is different from the next. Some organisational contexts transform over time, and these adjustments have implications for leaders who may need to modify their leadership style to suit the evolving situation. The individual context further complicates the situation for the leader by way of its distinctive mix of institutional history, practice and expectations. Context moulds the potential role of the leader through such elements as the duration of the appointment, and the power of the position to influence the institution. Yet – and this is particularly so in distance education – it is acknowledged that context is also flexible and constantly changing (Chaiklin and Lave, 5) as is often the institutional mission, and the leader's own vision, suggesting that leaders must seek to "hit a moving target" (Ehrle and Bennett, 197). They must balance context with organisational expectations, personal vision, and their capacity to make a difference within the organisation, and within the field. Thus, as distance education organisations constantly evolve in response to influences both pedagogical and technical, leaders face moving targets as they attempt to modify their vision and personal leadership style to fit the changing context.

Pawar and Eastman describe the relationship between context and leadership as two-way with each having the capacity to influence each other (103). This notion of the organisation as receptive to leader influence is highly relevant to distance education, especially because of the tendency to appoint leaders with profiles which will, by inference, bring particular qualities to the organisation. Some leaders have shaped organisations in their own form. For example, in this study of music institutions, those which offer distance education reflect very closely the profiles of their leaders. At the University of Southern Queensland, a program of piano pedagogy was established for regional teachers to access via intensive summer school mode supplemented by distance modules in hard copy. At the time, the leader was a pianist who had made many performance tours of regional areas in Queensland, and she understood the demographics and needs of the local teachers (Lorenz). In another example at Central Queensland Conservatorium of Music, Greg Whateley established a 'Virtual Conservatorium' founded on his entrepreneurial background and determination to grow the conservatorium and make it more financially viable (Whateley & Mienczakowski). Other leaders who did not see distance education as an effective option for music training instead established regional campuses to provide wider access (Hobcroft; Wales). Each context was individual, and each had distinctive consequences.

The data from this study demonstrate a strong belief that context is significant. Whilst all informants expressed concern about the impact of context on them, the experience of former leaders is evident in their conviction that context has a bearing on what might be achieved in an institution. For example:

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> Every leader […] needs first of all an understanding of where that institution is, where it's coming from, essentially where it's to go to, and vision is primarily where he or she is able to take it. Often what happens is actually a mutation of that, because the personality and constrictions of the organisation either conspire or allow it to happen. (Wales)

Because Wales led the Queensland Conservatorium of Music through a significant period of change, including developing the concept of a regional campus to provide greater access to conservatorium activities, his words have some synergy with the experience of leaders in the distance education setting. His focus on vision is important to the distance education environment, where the future is uncertain, and leaders need to envision a broad canvas on which the future might begin to reveal itself (Lancaster, 2006: 232).

For a leader to be able to convey a compelling vision for an attractive future is particularly useful in times of change, making this element very appropriate to the leader in distance education. Vision as 'nailing one's colours to the mast' is an important part of facilitative leadership because

> if you are going to motivate people then you have got to have a sense of not only going on a journey, [but] the journey can't just be aimless wandering […]. There's got to be a sense of purpose and intent to what you are doing and I think that is quite clear. I have nailed my colours to the mast very clearly. (Bodman Rae)

Although not all academic deans might agree, according to leaders in this study the principal difference between the collegiate style of leadership in higher education and leadership appropriate to creatives is the employment of an encompassing vision in the creative setting. In distance education, the broad vision is an essential canvas on which creative specialists are enabled to move forward. Thus the leader needs confidence to anticipate possible futures: "Cautious people are valuable but they're not the ones that

will enable you to get somewhere really" (Undercofler). Leading in a changing environment is about "building teams, building consensus, unlocking potential, giving courage, helping people to see ways of achieving the things they want to, encouraging people to feel that they can run with things themselves" (Ritterman). It is not about forcing direction, but rather enabling and focusing what is already there. "It's all about bringing things together rather than shooting stars all over the place" (I:34).

Leading creative people is about sketching the galaxy in which stars might shine. One case study (in Lancaster, 2006: 178ff) describes a leader as a facilitator who "listens very carefully to other people about how to do things, she has an open mind" (Bakker), and reveals her overall vision which changed the direction of the organisation. Although delegating leadership throughout the institutional framework, another acknowledges that he "was the only person in the institution who actually had a *spectrum* of the whole thing" (Horsbrugh). Others describe the same type of big picture approach in different ways: "You have to be founded in some kind of basic view of everything that guides you, everyday decisions" (Johansson), and "I think that where I've been relatively successful is that I have a very big view of things. I don't get bogged down in minutiae (I:29).

It would seem that in the contemporary higher education environment where many leaders have less power than was the case twenty years ago, vision may be the most important part of what they may bring to the institution. If nothing else, "we've got flexibility certainly in the way we choose to develop whatever areas we choose to develop" said one leader who has no input into budget levels and conforms to "a

leadership role which is directed by somebody who's leading you" (I:32). This leader understands the value of extending a vision for the institution, despite economic limitations. With no capacity to change the financial situation, the focus is instead on strategic direction. By applying vision to the choices about direction in which their work will lead, the leader has empowered the institution with some control over its destiny. Here, vision emerges in the "flexibility" to "figure out how best to" achieve the overall goals (I:32).

Whatever these broad goals, they have potential ramifications beyond institutional walls. A distance education organisation is potentially part of the community infrastructure, and its work carries implications for future generations. The extent to which this potential might develop relies on each organisation's perception of its place within the community, and each leader's interpretation of this positioning. Understanding the organisation's possible role within the community may prove significant in the realisation of the potential – and perhaps even survival - of an organisation. "Maybe one's at most risk of potential extinction if the institution is too inward-looking" (Ritterman). Thus, the relationship with the community also contributes to the context in which the institution – and the leader - works.

**Preparing for leadership**

Throughout this study, leaders expressed their desire for professional development appropriate to their specific setting, and the issue of leader succession was often raised. It is surprising that, with so much at stake for institutions, there is very little planning for

leadership development or succession in the Australian higher education sector. Some leaders described what might better be termed a 'dogsbody' model, in which one is meant to learn from proximity to the leader rather than from actual involvement in decision making (Lancaster, 2004). In respect of the standard senior management programs offered by some universities for middle management positions like those in the music institution, there was a general acknowledgement that "one size doesn't fit all" and that individual coaching or mentoring might be more appropriate to better match the particular needs of each individual leader.

The reality is that all respondents to this study admitted having taken up the position without preparation and 70% did not consider this satisfactory: "It's not the way I would do it next time" said one who claimed doing it was the only way to learn (C:3). Most favoured some form of induction, either by deputising or training. Lamenting on his own experience, one respondent said "I would have enjoyed something more than a letter of appointment and a duty statement" (C:9). This reflects the 10% of Australian music institutions which reported no induction process at all. The other 90% confirmed the availability of a variety of professional development for leaders: structured programs in 15% of the parent universities, with no orientation to the specific needs of the conservatorium leader. Reflecting a frequent comment, one respondent said: "What works well in the rest of the university doesn't necessarily work in music" (C:5).

If leaders are to respond to different organisational needs at different times, it would seem that appropriate professional development is important in preparing them for the

challenges they may face in any given context. It is apparent that, whilst the distance education environment shares some family resemblances with higher education generally, there are notable differences which have particular relevance to the style of leadership appropriate. Because there is no one model of leadership which might be expected to work in every setting, contextual leadership would appear most adaptable across the range of distance education settings. Consequently, leaders need to acquire the understanding necessary to adjust leadership style to each evolving context.

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*H.Lancaster, for CAUCE 2007.*