

Briefing Notes:
Challenges of Collaborative Leadership in Universities

Universities are facing tremendous challenges (Grafton, 2011), yet are filled with expertise that should be valuable to the working through of these challenges. However, all too often the dynamics between administration and faculty and across the increasingly specialized departments result in the whole being less than the sum of the parts. The locus of both challenges and new opportunities are on the boundaries: between academic and administration, between the University and departments, between departments and centers/institutes, between the ivory tower and community. Just as the many disciplines and practices in higher education are experiencing significant changes (new tools, social media, inter- and trans-disciplinary opportunities, new science of learning) so too are the organizational and leadership models in flux. The historic “loose coupling” across these boundaries must give way to effective collaboration (Gilmore, Hirschhorn, and Kelly, 1999).

In this Briefing Note, we want to explore the following:

- The Barriers to Effective Collaboration
- Faculty’s Insights on Effective and Ineffective Work Groups
- Strategies for Increasing Effective Collaboration

The Barriers to Effective Collaboration

Fiscal challenges in higher education have increased significantly alongside the need for greater collaboration, creating significant tensions between investments in innovative programs and adequate funding of core disciplines. Furthermore, the rewards and career paths for the academic side of the house are still primarily individual, leading to a predictable under-investment in “collective goods.” Olsen (1971) notes that a rational, self-interested individual will spend his/her energy locally when they perceive that: on collective work his/her effort will make virtually no difference to success, is unnoticed and unrewarded by others, and they get the benefits of the collective good, if its successful.

For example, if a few colleagues volunteer to significantly transform the undergraduate experience, others who continue to advance their own interests will also get the benefits of a reinvigorated first year. For any given unit of time, amid increasing overload, the more narrow one’s focus, the more control one has over the outcome and benefits.

In addition, cross discipline/unit/level collaborations often have insufficient infrastructural support for the management and follow-through of the initiative. Yet the success of the institution depends on effective marshaling of the vast distributed knowledge within Universities. A.N. Whitehead (1967) notes “Duty arises from our potential control over the course of events. Where attainable knowledge could have changed the issue, ignorance has the guilt of vice.”

Other challenges in collaborative work are the following:

- Mistrust. Paranoiagenic beliefs that the administration knows, but is not telling
- Weak traditions of representation and authorization by the home unit
- Lack of advance thinking on critical issues and relevant analytic work to support a group
- Poor norms of group life: time boundaries, attendance, advocacy versus inquiry, selective attention (Schein, 1987)
- Defensive participation, to protect one’s unit’s interests

Faculty's Insights on Effective and Ineffective Work Groups

In the context of a University's strategic planning work, participants in advancing the major initiatives were invited at an early stage of the process to recall specific instances of effective and ineffective leadership and identify some lessons learned about overcoming some of these barriers.

Theme	Effective	Ineffective
Clarity of scope	Negotiated with the group versus "top down;" members signed up with the right mix of passion and knowledge. Clear case for the changes, sense of urgency thoughtful deadlines.	Not an insurmountable task or too broad; imposed or delegated without conversation. Parochialism; not able to link the focal issue to the right wider context.
Group attributes	Participatory leadership, skilled at tapping the "hybrid vigor" in the group, able to ignore traditional forms of hierarchy, e.g. full professor able to follow lead of first year faculty member with a good idea. Flexible to take up both leadership and followership.	Too big, allows for "free riding" or "social loafing;" people don't carry their weight; too unequal footing and prestige; too politically correct to confront one another when underperforming.
Representation aspects	Right constituencies involved; good two-way of listening to external groups, communicating back, keeping people involved.	Dogmatic opposition from a key player, not open to engaged learning or linking to other constituencies concerns. Missing stakeholders.
Incentives	Getting involved in "tending the commons" valued, noticed, rewarded. Willingness to create new incentives as part of the recommendations in the area.	No incentives, or disincentives in terms of less time to produce on what is valued officially; no formal or informal disapproval of not stepping up.
Overloading	Some relief from other assignments to focus. In crafting recommendations, courage to suggest dropping low value activities, courses, responsibilities, etc.	Too much of a culture of just "adding" not stopping low value activities, same people critical across too many initiatives so unable to focus on this work.
Competencies	Good enough skills at working effectively in teams and/or willingness to learn. Periodic reflection on "how are we doing" and making appropriate changes, skills at compromise.	Too many individual contributors, do not know how to tap "wisdom of crowds" willingness to think at the University level.
Infrastructure	Supported, clear on decision rights, access to administrative and knowledge support.	Weak support, need to beg or borrow from one's home unit; unclear project management support.
Power of the group	Empowered, clear on what is expected, who else has to be involved and how; authority with responsibility.	Leadership too controlling; lack of clarity of group's influence vis a vis other groups.

Strategies for Increasing Effective Collaboration

Too often it's the same people who step up to take on community leadership work. Some suggestions from CFAR's experience in higher education for increasing the pool (and more fairly sharing the burden) are the following.

The appetite for committee or group work is imperfectly correlated with leadership, creativity, intelligence, and influence. Therefore, create more modes of contributing, especially in light of new tools for asynchronous collaboration and social media (individual thinking, reactive contributions to drafts, surveys, focus groups, one-time interactive working conferences, task forces, etc.) Explicitly look for ways that faculty work with students—research work or action learning projects—might be aligned with the work on an initiative.

Increase the range of ways that individuals might be “pulled in.” Most academics allocate their passion and effort mostly to their scholarship/teaching, then to their network of related scholars (who may be around the globe), then to their unit, their department, their school, and finally their University. Think about “*productively selfish ways*” that a talented individual can contribute energy and focus within the collective initiative that is also individually valuable—e.g. something related to their passion, something that adds relevant social capital, aligns with career goals, etc. Possible vehicles include: creating a white paper or benchmark notes on how an issue or challenge was taken up at an institution they know well, sharing some people in their network who would be good sources of intelligence and making a virtual introduction, critically reviewing work of the group at a midpoint, identifying relevant resources, attending a review session to critique it and suggest how best to engage others in the next steps, flagging some key external trends from their scholarship that are relevant to the topic at hand, etc.

Link collective work to making strategic investments and decisions more than to a “Strategic Plan” document. Strategic planning is too often undermined by abstractions, by “too good to be true” expressions of vision and mission, and by a wish to suppress all differences of interest and opinion in order to create a consensus document. Moreover, a strategic planning process is often built upon the formal organization design—there are the appropriate representatives from schools and departments. But increasingly, there are powerful actors in centers, institutes, and among rainmakers whose actions will have a great impact on the future of the University. In a strategic planning process the focus shifts subtly from *actions to be taken* to the *document itself*.

Often faculty members join these deliberations with high expectations. But as the planning process becomes increasingly focused on the document, they soon come to feel that it lacks vitality, that they are engaged in shadowboxing, that real decisions are being made elsewhere, and that they are not using their own time productively. Paradoxically, a process that starts in the hope of building trust

through inclusion and participation may actually reduce trust when the results do not live up to the sometimes unrealistic expectations (Edmundsen, 1999). And much scholarly research suggests that ultimately, behind and beyond structure, trust is the coin of the realm and is the only basis upon which meaningful planning can take place.

Create transparency about the decision process: who is involved and how, in what sequence, using what criteria. Because of the complexity of Universities, people have developed experience-based reasons to be cynical about the connection of effort to actual change. One of the greatest rewards is actual results. Conversely, failure—or even worse, limbo—leads to a “learned helplessness” (Seligman, 1992) where people reallocate their effort to smaller areas where they feel they can make a difference.

Attend to the staffing, rhythms, and the timing to create vital and vitalizing exchanges and a sense of felt stakes. Vital strategy conversations have the following features:

- They are issue-oriented.
- They have implications both for near term and long term action.
- They are informed by emerging strategic themes.
- They consider and work on the important institutional tensions; for example, to secure the eminence of our faculty do we tolerate a skewed distribution of faculty compensation?
- They focus on and help make explicit the “mental models” people have of a presenting situation.
- They ensure that the collection of data is based on hypotheses, that all research work is hypothesis driven.
- They create a climate of safety within which people feel free to express their interests.
- They are informed by a historical perspective, not in the sense of protecting traditions, but in the sense that any thoughtful group can learn from its history of past efforts.
- They make use of disinterested outsiders who can provoke and evaluate.
- They make use of multiple forums. Deliberations are stitched together across a “moveable feast” of conversations and dialogues.

Think both of networks of individuals and groups as sources of help.

Networks are more nimble, enabling individuals to contribute on their own time, which is particularly important as the different temporal rhythms of many of the cross-disciplinary groups are a major barrier (e.g. clinicians and researchers). Think of group members’ “ability to create energy in networks,” a trait that Cross (2009) has empirically shown to be one of the most powerful predictors of high performance.

References

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Resources for Effective Working Groups

Below are listed additional Briefing Notes from CFAR which are available on our web site (www.cfar.com under higher education/collaboration resources. They address in greater detail specific practices that can make a significant difference to the quality of collaborative work among faculty and administration.

Small 'L' Leadership Behaviors (6 pgs.)

Overviews practices that help groups harvest more of the assembled thinking and energy in context of meetings, strategic inquiry, organizational work, and consultation processes.

The Campaign Manager (5 pgs.)

This resource looks at an initiative as a 'campaign' and particularly looks at the project management and communications infrastructure to be successful. It also has a useful section (pg. 3) on "getting people to do things when no one reports to you."

Strategies for New Leaders to Engage Faculty and Committees in University Settings. (6 pgs.)

This resource is aimed at faculty to take up formal administrative roles but also has some useful advice for leaders of ad hoc working groups such as the Front Runner groups. It is organized around common dilemmas in University cultures and suggests tactics.

Leadership Strategies in Creating Engagement for a New Initiative. (5 pgs.)

This resource was developed for groups that have developed directional recommendations and want to engage key constituencies. However, they want to do it without going back to the very beginning and reopening all the good work that the group has done in crafting some preliminary recommendations. It covers some of the dilemmas of wider engagement that involved a complex mix of presenting the work to date, yet getting real consultation on refinement of some of the recommendations and the implementation challenges. It briefly looks at the typical mistakes, suggests some principles, and then lists some specific tactics and designs to create engagement (pgs. 3 – 5).

Issues and Methods to Increase Feedback in Teams (6 pgs.)

The felt experience of learning and improving as a group or working pair is a powerful reward. This note overviews some of the anxieties in the exchange of feedback and some practices for building this competence.

Networks and Creating Energy (2 pgs.)

This summarizes Rob Cross' finding about networks and energy and lists eight diagnostic questions for individuals to assess their competence in this area.

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