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Leadership Development

The Power of Self-Directed Leadership Development in an Era of Disruptive Change

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With enrollment growth outpacing resources on many campuses, shrinking enrollment on others, and the surging popularity of viable alternatives to the traditional campus experience, higher education is at a crossroads. This reality is reflected in a recent survey conducted by Maguire Associates and reported on in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. According to the survey responded to by 350 campus presidents and chancellors from public and private four-year institutions, 54 percent disagreed when asked if higher education 10 years from now will be similar to the way it is today. Further, two-thirds of those surveyed felt the pace of change is lagging behind, and in a dramatic shift from tradition, favor massive or moderate disruption over evolutionary change. As a result, the pressure is on leaders to develop more innovative solutions to challenges such as enrollment and graduation rates and to find creative and alternative sources of revenue.

A changing landscape

Historically, higher education has faced challenges and experimented with incremental change. Today, with less expensive, alternative educational opportunities, such as Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs), mobile connectivity and high-quality streaming video, knowledge transfer is no longer tied to a physical location. With the existence of traditional brick-and-mortar institutions threatened and state funding for public institutions continuing to shrink, effective leaders must challenge their own assumptions in order to address today's challenges.

For newly appointed leaders this environment can be particularly daunting. With leadership promotions typically based on prior achievements, many fall back on past successes when facing an urgent need to innovate and develop strategies that address critical challenges. Gretchen Bataille, former president of the University of North Texas, argues that "past successes can be a pathway to the future, but every environment is different and requires its own analysis." Failing to take the time to assess the new environment can result in serious consequences. Case in point, a transactional change agent president succeeds a relationship-oriented leader. By accepting a

partnership for MOOCs without faculty buy-in, a faculty resolution to examine the campus shared governance structure becomes an overwhelming distraction to addressing enrollment growth. Although it was the right strategy, the approach was ill-fated. In this game-changing environment, campus and system leaders, whether new or seasoned, simply can't afford to rely on past successes.

Self-directed leadership

Self-directed leadership development is one key to uncovering fresh ideas that are aligned with today's needs. By embracing this approach, leaders enhance their ability to innovate and make the quick course decisions necessary for their institutions to survive and thrive.

Oxford Dictionaries define the term "self-directed" as "the ability to organize oneself." Although strong organizational skills are important, when it comes to understanding self-directed leadership, this definition falls short. In truth, several key characteristics distinguish the self-directed leader from all others. For starters, the self-directed leader takes an active approach to learning. In his book, *Andragogy in Action: Applying Modern Principles of Adult Learning*, Malcolm Knowles provides an insight into the importance of this leadership quality. "In its broadest meaning, 'self-directed learning' describes a process by which individuals take the initiative, with or without the assistance of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies and evaluating learning outcomes." (p. 301)

The self-directed leader is open to other points of view and seeks to understand rather than formulate a reactive response or opinion that relies on past successes that may not address today's challenges. Reflective and curious, the self-directed leader has the ability to take a step back, see the bigger picture, and assess opportunities and challenges with fresh eyes. Willing to question and address how key opportunities might be approached differently, this individual is able to make critical course changes that allow the institution to move forward with fresh ideas to systemic issues. Understanding that no one has all the answers, the self-directed leader readily assesses and develops necessary new skills independently or acquires them through others. For example, in an effort to create an additional revenue stream that also benefits the community, a university president and her team decide to launch a new conference and event planning business. Recognizing the need for additional skills outside the team's expertise, the leader consults an external expert in event management and uses this knowledge to develop the internal core competencies to launch the business.

Fostering self-directed leadership development

For today's colleges and universities, actively recruiting leaders who are self-directed and creative in their learning is an essential strategy. Equally important is fostering an environment that encourages the development of self-directed leaders.

For the newly hired leader, a proactive approach to learning about board and internal and external community expectations is critical to success. One way to accomplish this goal is to gather support by building strong strategic networks on campus, at the system level and externally. Leaders who lack core competencies in certain areas might additionally develop a personal advisory board to fill in the gaps necessary to address critical campus resource needs.

For instance, a leader with limited experience in biotechnology may initially seek out a CEO of a biotech company to gain more knowledge of the field, which can open the door to further exploration of creating a partnership with the company. Another leader might turn to a colleague who has been successful in launching a creative partnership to learn how to replicate such a relationship. With advice from well-respected informal leaders and historians of the campus or external community, a leader can formulate innovative ideas for addressing campus needs.

System heads as well as governing and advisory boards who invest time and energy on the front end can reduce problems downstream. Here are five action steps that foster a self-directed leadership environment:

- **Develop and utilize a comprehensive on-boarding process.** Provide essential and also more nuanced information, such as campus culture and sub-cultures, unwritten norms, shared governance roles, system culture, and board expectations.
- **Fully explain goals and expectations.** Assess to what degree the newly appointed leader has the skill sets that are aligned with tackling these goals. What professional development or external support will be required to ensure early wins and a successful first year?
- **Provide seed money to fund partnerships and professional development that encourages innovation and self-directed leadership development.** Consider leader resources, such as, AASCU's New President's Academy and/or multi-sector conferences on topics such as innovation or mindful leadership.
- **Offer information and background on community and local politics and expectations.** Allow the leader to assess and to be creative in developing partnerships to address campus and community needs.

Future survival

In a complex environment where the only constant is change, predicting the future is impossible. Yet, the very survival of today's colleges and universities relies on the ability to anticipate what lies beyond the horizon, create innovative solutions to complex problems, and adapt accordingly. Encouraging leaders to practice self-directed learning is a critical success factor. By fostering an environment that encourages a more strategic and innovative approach to leadership, colleges and universities can keep pace in an uncertain world and also have a greater chance of realizing their full potential.

References

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