Shared team leadership for an online program
Liderazgo de equipo compartido de un programa online

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Abstract:

Leadership for online programs to date has mirrored the leadership style of traditional academic programs, however in the rapidly changing environment of online education, thorough solutions to issues need to be arrived at in a more rapid manner than traditional academic models currently allow. A newer model of leadership, shared team leadership, can help online education achieve those goals. This model can also increase the chances of program success by providing multiple perspectives on issues that allow the program to be more effectively managed. Additionally, it empowers organisational leadership to rapidly respond as external demands change. This article will provide an example of a shared team leadership for a set of online programs that make them some of the most successful at a large institution with a major presence in U.S. online education. This model of online shared team leadership will be assessed, its pros and cons examined, and a brief summary of the impact it has had on the programs that it oversees will be provided.

Keywords: online program leadership, shared team leadership, online education.

Resumen:

Hasta la fecha, el liderazgo de los programas online ha imitado el estilo de liderazgo de los programas académicos tradicionales. Sin embargo, dado el entorno de rápida evolución que presenta la educación online, es necesario encontrar soluciones integrales a los problemas más rápidamente de lo que permiten

actualmente los modelos académicos tradicionales. Un modelo de liderazgo más reciente, el liderazgo de equipo compartido, puede contribuir a alcanzar dicho objetivo en la educación online. Este modelo también puede aumentar las probabilidades de éxito del programa, ya que ofrece múltiples perspectivas de las cuestiones, lo que permite una gestión más eficaz del programa. También dota de recursos al liderazgo organizacional para responder rápidamente a medida que van cambiando las exigencias externas. En este artículo se muestra un ejemplo de un liderazgo de equipo compartido para un conjunto de programas online, circunstancia que los ha convertido en unos de los más exitosos de una importante institución con gran presencia en el ámbito de la educación online de EE. UU. Se evaluará dicho modelo de liderazgo de equipo compartido online, se examinarán sus ventajas y desventajas, y se hará un breve resumen de los efectos que ha tenido en los programas basados en él.

Descriptores: liderazgo de programa *online*, liderazgo de equipo compartido, educación *online*.

1. Introduction

Online education has been an innovation that has propelled modern education forward. Much of that innovation has come from initiatives from faculty and instructional designers. While those grassroots efforts have allowed for great creativity and best practices for teaching and learning at the course level, that has not always translated into overall program success. Part of the reason for this stagnation of progress is that traditional academic leadership models favour supporting the status quo, as opposed to the use of innovative and creative solutions to the challenges of teaching and learning in a virtual environment (e.g., synchronous online meetings). This maintenance of the status quo has also reduced response time vis-à-vis a rapidly changing environment (e.g., regulatory change, new technology, etc.). Shared team leadership provides a model that allows for and supports the progress of creativity and innovation, so that online education can adapt and respond in a thorough manner to modern challenges.

In this article, I will examine shared team leadership as a solution to three major problems faced by online education. I will then briefly explore traditional leadership as a comparison point. The article will then highlight the comparative advantage of shared team leadership to address the problems. Overall, shared team leadership can have both direct and indirect effects on program management. For example, a direct effect might be a case where a faculty member or student has a sensitive issue that they do not feel comfortable discussing with one team leader. With the shared team leadership model, they have the option to talk to a different

team leader about the issue. In a traditional hierarchy, the issue might never be brought up to the unit leader if the faculty or student is uncomfortable talking with that person. This lack of communication can have serious organisational ramifications. Shared leadership can also have indirect effects by creating a culture where individuals feel empowered to take responsibility. Again, continuing with the sensitive issue example, the team members may resolve the issue long before it becomes an issue for the organisation. Further examples of the shared team leadership model will be provided in order to highlight how the model works and document its impact on the organisation.

2. Online education issues

There are many problems that face higher education in the United States. These include increased enrolments (increasing threefold in just a decade to over 1.5 million students; Bettinger & Loeb, 2017); higher failure rates (particularly for the least prepared students, Bettinger, Foz, Loeb, & Taylor, 2015); the related issues of increased student debt and loan default rates (Looney & Yannelis, 2018); changing legislation governing online education (e.g., U.S. Department of Education, 2016); along with many others. While these broader trends effect higher education in general, they also have specific impacts on online education, such as expectations of blending of modalities of content presentation and training of skills by students (Agarwal, 2019) and changing and splitting attitudes towards higher education (Alexander, 2017).

Organisations must prioritize their responses when facing multiple demands from external environments. The above list of issues are just a snippet of the many challenges that face online education today. In the next section, I will focus on three issues that are highly relevant to online education and are at the root of many of the more nuanced problems identified by researchers and institutions. Shared leadership can have a significant impact on these three issues: rapid change, growing need for thorough solutions and being ahead of the competition.

2.1. Issue 1: rapid change

Change is a given in the modern world; higher education is not immune. This is particularly true for online education, as the infrastructure is nowhere near as developed as that of traditional residential education. The modern traditional residential higher educational system has evolved over the centuries, whereas online education has only a few decades behind it. As a result, much of the early days of online higher education have been highly experimental and university programs are still changing their structures. This constant change has been exacerbated by evolving local university policies as well as federal government regulations. For example, in 2006 the United States Congress made federal funding for online education available, which then required a change to ensure that funding was fair within the State Authorization Reciprocity Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). It is likely that the most influential changes came

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from technology, where the rate of innovation is not constant and therefore hard to control. Among the many technological changes effecting online education are the transition from dial-up to broadband internet access as well as landlines to smartphones, and more recently the rise of artificial intelligence and virtual reality, to name just a few.

2.2. Issue 2: a growing need for thorough solutions

The corollary of rapid change is that there is also a need, more than ever, to arrive at answers to issues that are as thorough as possible. With rapid change comes the need to keep moving onto the next big thing rather than getting stuck dealing with the same issue repeatedly. Institutions that get bogged down may be left behind in the ever more competitive market for attracting students. «Thorough», in this instance, means coming to well-rounded solutions that do not need to be revisited. In other words, it means taking the time and energy necessary to arrive at a solution that addresses all perspectives (students, administration, educational, etc.) and avoids unintended consequences that may lead to spending more time on the issue at a later date. The classic example is creating a new form to make an administrator's job easier, but that form unfortunately ends up collecting redundant information from students. While it may resolve the initial problem for the administrator, it brings about the unintended consequence of creating more work for students and staff, which in turn may reduce enrolments, and eventually, the via-

bility of a program. Even small solutions such as creating a new form can have ramifications that affect many other issues or processes in the organisation down the line.

In addition to bringing about unintended consequences later on, if an issue is not thoroughly considered from multiple perspectives, it may only be partially resolved and therefore need to be revisited. This can hinder an organisation's ability to both resolve the next concern and, even more importantly, focus on vision, mission and strategy.

2.3. Issue 3: strategic planning

Online education has created a boom in revenue for many institutions, but there are caveats. An institution's success truly only exists to the extent that they have embraced the aforementioned change notion as well as integrated online education into their overall strategy (Rovai & Downey, 2010). However, those two planned advantages are characteristic of successful early adopters of online education, rather than among late adopters. The advantage stems from having a head start in innovation to integrate high quality education into their organisations. Those institutions that have not made a conscious effort towards being on par, quality-wise, with their competition via strategic planning, often find revenue generation is not as great as anticipated, because they have focused on adding programs rather than improving them (Rovai & Downey, 2010). Unless universities push the boundaries towards the future via strategic planning that includes

innovation and improvement, rather than simply adding programs, they often find online education to be cost ineffective, as the grassroots efforts by individual faculties and instructional designers do not have a large impact on the organisation. If leadership does not implement effective strategic planning, enrolments may stagnate, or worse, as the institution will fall behind the competition.

However, the three previously mentioned issues (rapid change, need for thorough solutions, and strategic planning), have all been addressed by many successful online institutions. In particular, there is a leadership solution that addresses all three issues and can give an institution's online programs a much better chance at success: shared team leadership.

3. Shared team leadership

Shared team leadership is a relatively new leadership theory that has been adopted in many modern private sector and governmental organisations to help address the issues discussed previously, such as rapid change and thorough solutions (Morgeson, DeRue, & Karam, 2010; Sharma & Bajpai, 2014). Teams have obviously have been around for a long time, but the notion of putting them in charge of organisations has not. So, before we get into our higher education example, it will help to provide some context for understanding the specific mechanisms by examining the general principle more closely.

Shared team leadership (sometimes referred to by the more generic category of «team leadership» or just «shared leadership») is, at its core, an egalitarian, participative group of people who are empowered to make decisions for the organisation and decide democratically as a group[1]. In other words, it is a set of co-leaders who share power and are willing to go with the majority when their opinion is in the minority. It works best when the leadership team is diverse so that decisions are informed by many perspectives (Miles & Kivlighan, 2010).

3.1. Example: leadership philosophy

Let's now examine a specific example of an effective shared team leadership philosophy. The example provided is at the department level, although there are hints of the model at the university level, which forms part of the argument that this department could implement this model fully. At the Penn State University, the academic control of programs is at the department level. The university does set general rules for programs based on accreditation, graduate school policies, faculty senate, etc. Within these boundaries however, the department is free to operate based on what they see fit for the programs that they manage, with little direct influence from the university. Penn State is a large research university that has a tripartite mission of teaching, research, and service. Outreach has been part of that mission since 1855, starting with correspondence courses. The university was also an early adopter of online edu-

cation, starting in 1998. At that time, the decision was made to allow for academic control of online programs to fall to departments, rather than remaining at university level, so that programs would be able to create online equivalents of the same high quality as their in-residence programs. Many undergraduate and graduate programs are ranked among the best in the world year after year both in residence and online because of this decision to give academic control to departments.

The specific online team discussed here (one of many that exist across the university) oversees six degree programs (one graduate, four baccalaureate, and one associates degree). The department is located in the School of Labor and Employment relations, and these programs are among the largest at Penn State. These programs combined make up nearly a tenth of all online enrolments for the university. The success for these online programs can largely be attributed to the shared leadership enacted in this department.

The use of shared leadership occurred at a time when the in-residence versions of the programs (completely separate from the online degrees) were decreasing in size, and at one point were at risk of being cut from the college by the dean. Delving into online education, using a team leadership model to guide the new programs, resurrected the department. The department's broader academic field is a domain where shared team leadership is not only taught,

but practiced in the field. As such, the department head puts these ideas into practice within the department, so that faculty are modelling the best practices that they are teaching. The leader chosen for the programs was also chosen because of his style of leadership. It should be noted that while shared team leadership is the proximal cause for success, there are also some distal causes that helped the programs succeed. As that is beyond the scope of this essay, it will suffice to say that prior to these programs being offered to help the team draw experience and resources, there was a good online infrastructure at the university as a whole.

I will now examine the major components that make this shared team leadership model effective: people, style, and communication. I will then look at the pros and cons of this model to examine how team leadership may or may not suit all universities.

3.2. Example: people

The team does have a designated leader, the director of online programs, along with several co-leaders who serve in various roles in the department: professor of practice, administration, teaching professor, and staff. Several of the members have also been online students previously. Team members with a range of titles and experiences were deliberately chosen, so that whenever an issue arises, multiple perspectives are considered and the team can arrive at a holistic solution that identifies all aspects of the problem. Since the team has access

to multiple viewpoints, they are able to identify the various challenges of implementing solutions as they present themselves in various aspects of the university (such as administrative processes, student experience, technology, etc.). This range of perspectives also allows access to a larger knowledge-base of resources available to implement solutions. This is a critical benefit of shared leadership because not only is the university large with a long history, but its resources are located in many different organisational domains, such as university level, college level, department level, technology, faculty development, and others.

The team is distributed across the United States with half of the team residing at the university, all in the same building. The other half of the team is geographically dispersed across the nation. Several travel on university business as part of their job duties, so occasionally the team is dispersed across the globe, or at the very least working from ever-changing locations. This dispersion adds another layer to the multiplicity of perspectives. Being in different locations and having to adjust meeting times and deadlines to cater to time zone differences, the team is forced to think about timeline issues differently.

One simple example of this is that it imitates the student distribution in the online programs. In these programs, students have to work in online groups and submit work by particular deadlines, requiring them to coordinate across significant time zone differences. To take

that example further, the standard deadline for many online programs is midnight Eastern Standard Time on a Sunday. Even though many tutors are in the Eastern Time Zone and will therefore be sleeping for several hours after that deadline, a large portion of students live in other time zones. Such an artificial deadline can penalize working adult students who could theoretically have much more time to complete their assignments with a different deadline. As a result of the team's geographic dispersion perspective, the deadline in many classes was extended to 9 AM Eastern Standard Time on Monday to allow students to work more while also fitting with the instructors time schedules.

3.3. Example: style and consensus

The team is democratic, participatory, and shares power. In this case, «democratic» means that decisions are determined by majority rule; «participatory» means that everyone on the team contributes to each issue discussed, and «shared power» means that everyone is empowered to make the necessary immediate decisions. There is still a designated leader who generates most of the agenda for the team and serves as the main point of contact. That said, the majority of decisions are arrived at through consensus. This requires members to bend to the majority's will on occasion.

Consensus is usually reached through discussion, with all members contributing their perspectives and concerns. This is effective because

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the director of online programs does not establish his perspective until all others have had their say first. If members do not reach a consensus themselves, he attempts to help combine of ideas with input from the rest of the team. On the rare occasion where ideas cannot be combined to form a solution, he will put the remaining options to a vote after non-viable suggestions have been eliminated. The voting needs to be truly democratic so that everyone's ideas have equal weight. The director has, on occasion, had his idea overruled by the rest of the team and the majority decision was implemented. This works well because the leader trusts all of the co-leaders and that their perspectives as a whole are greater than his alone.

3.4. Example: communication

Practically speaking, communication is essential for shared team leadership to work, even more so than other leadership styles, and particularly in this situation with a geographically dispersed team. Communication builds trust between the individuals and builds the rapport necessary to support each other when needed. In this situation, this is achieved with weekly video meetings and daily emails, along with video chats and/or phone calls as needed when immediate concerns arise. Additionally, the team regularly and actively participates in larger department and university meetings, both in person and virtually, so that the team is integrated with all aspects of the institution and therefore remains knowledgeable. As this is a team with members at a distance, a conscious effort

has been made to connect with various aspects of the university, so that the online programs are included in the strategic goals for the institution. As you can see, rapid response to issues is built into the communication process thanks to the combination of weekly meetings and ad hoc comunications.

The content of the conversations also makes a big impact. As the team arrives at thorough solutions, they also have time in their weekly conversations to discuss future trends, as well as to develop strategic plans in relation to these. This is then built into the agenda as an item when time permits, for example «what should we be thinking about?»

4. Analysis

In the examples provided in this article, shared team leadership is credited with helping to resurrect a department that was on the verge of being eliminated. Results in other universities may not be this dramatic, but shared leadership has been found beneficial in many different circumstances (Morgeson, DeRue, & Karam, 2010; Sharma & Bajpai, 2014). It is not, however, a panacea. It will only work if the organisational culture truly adapt or embrace a more egalitarian, participative, communicative, and flexible leadership style that empowers all co-leaders to act on behalf of the organisation. There are many examples of organisations that have adopted «teams» in name only and have not found the same results (Hitt, 1992). University leaders can assess whether this

approach may be suitable for their organisation by assessing the pros and cons of this model. Several issues that have been faced by the university and this specific department are scaling innovations, redundancy in resources and complicated communication channels. Many of Penn State's issues stem from the size of the institution, which in total is 24 campuses and almost 100 thousand students.

5. Pros

The description of the use of shared leadership by a Penn State team shows that there are three main benefits of this model:

1. The team knows more than any one person, which allows for more thorough solutions that do not have to be revisited.

2. Empowering individuals and frequent communication lead to rapid response to issues as well as time freed up for strategic planning.

3. The team can look at issues from all angles and the debate/discussion leads to thorough examination and solutions to issues.

6. Cons

There are however some potential pitfalls of team leadership that any shared team leadership model will need to consider:

1. It is critical to identify the right people for the team; those who are both flexible, participative, and competent in their domains.

2. The team must be supported by tools and technology that allow for rapid response and communication.

3. The team requires an overall organisational structure that will allow for empowered individuals to enact decisions.

Let's review why these potential pitfalls exist. Not all people are willing to give up their power, particularly those who were managers in traditional hierarchical management systems. While the amount of power held by the leader does not actually change in shared team leadership model, the rest of the team gains power that they may not be used to. This can cause the manager to perceive that their own power is reduced or threatened (Zhang, Zhong, & Ozer, 2018). However, power is not a zero-sum game. Rather than taking power away from the leader, this leadership style affords power to others. Therefore, the leadership team needs to be prepared to help team members adjust to their newly-afforded power.

Not all organisations are set up for this type of power sharing; if the infrastructure of the organisation won't allow co-leaders to act in the place of the designated leader, the rapid response time is lost, and the leader becomes bogged down with managerial duties rather than being able to focus on vision and strategy that results from time gained by allowing others to lead. Finally, the

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technology and tools that allow for rapid communication are critical for team success. For team leadership to be effective, each person must share their ideas with all other team members.. The technology can be as simple as using a designated meeting room to update each other on their individual projects, but if they are not in communication with each other, they cannot coordinate their efforts efficiently, which can lead to duplication of tasks, or worse, neglect of particular issues.

7. Conclusion

So how does an organisation create a shared team leadership model for their online programs? While the answer will depend on many aspects of an institution (e.g., size, general organisational philosophy, ability to change culture), there are a few general lessons to be learned from the example provided here: leader buy-in, knowledgeable and diverse teams, and institutional support.

First and foremost, the leader needs to truly believe in shared team leadership. The key to that belief is to put it into practice. If the leader says that they want shared team leadership but instead acts in an authoritarian manner, the rest of the team will not participate at the level needed for success as they will not be empowered to do what is necessary to alleviate the leader's many tasks. However, if the leader trusts the team to do what is needed and empowers them to do so both in team and individual decisions, much more will be accomplished.

Secondly, the team needs to be diverse and knowledgeable. Having members who serve in various functions at the university (faculty, various administrative and staff positions, potentially students) allows for issues to be examined from multiple perspectives, to provide holistic solutions. The problem with many current organisational «solutions» is that they solve the immediate issue for the administrator at hand, but do not consider the effect on other aspects of the university, which often creates more problems for the university, perpetuating a never-ending cycle of managing problems rather than truly being innovative. But for that to work, and for the previously aforementioned trust to occur, the team members must be experts in their particular fields. That way, when the team is coming to solutions, they can assess how their individual perspectives fit together to address the issues at hand.

Lastly, there needs to be institutional support for this model. Penn State has a long tradition of giving academic departments the autonomy to enact this type of leadership at the local level, because of a decentralized decision making process. This enables departments to approach their programs however best suits their field. Additionally, the University provides the resources necessary for the department to pursue the methods without a lot of operation restrictions, as along as the funds and tools are used appropriately. Trying to implement shared team leadership in a highly centralized bureaucratic organisation has a high risk of failure, as many localized decisions would be undermined,

therefore demotivating the team, as they would lose the power that this approach relies on. In sum, this is a good model of leadership for online education, but only if the conditions are right.

If properly applied, shared team leadership can be used to address several of the key issues that face modern online education. In particular, it can help with rapidity of response, thoroughness of response, and remaining competitive. It helps achieve these goals because it empowers people, frees up time for strategic planning, and encorporates multiple perspectives to arrive at holistic solutions. It can be applied at all levels of an organisation and works best if embedded in an organisational culture that is also egalitarian, participative, and diverse.

Note

[1] For a broader explanation of the general concepts and alternative models, please see Kolger Hill, 2019.

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