

The Conceptualization and Investment of Leadership Development by Department Heads in Colleges of Agriculture at Land Grant Universities

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The complexity of leading, specifically leading an academic department, is daunting. Nationally, there has been an increase in open department head positions, but also a lack of faculty interest in making the move from faculty member to administrator. Skill level of chosen department heads in leadership varies, but the majority of academic administrators are not chosen because of their leadership knowledge, skills, or abilities. This generative study looked at the conceptualization of the phenomenon of “leadership development” by department heads in Colleges of Agriculture at Land-Grant Universities in order to gain an understanding of the experience of department heads in leadership development. Inductive and deductive analytic procedures led to four categorical themes: prior experience with leadership development, leadership training, leadership education, and leadership development. Sub-themes indicated the complexity of the main themes and offered a more focused view from the department heads.

Introduction

The complexity of leading, specifically an academic department, is daunting. Universities now “require leaders who thrive on the challenge of change; who foster environments of innovation; who encourage trust and learning; and who lead themselves, their constituents, and their units, departments, and universities successfully into the future” (Brown, 2001, p. 312). Not an easy task for even the most experienced and developed leader. The issue is most department heads are not chosen based on their leadership knowledge, skills, and abilities. Bass (1990) noted “technical and professional competence often tend to be valued over competence as a supervisor and a leader,” (p. 813) leading to ineffective leadership and inability to change and develop the organization. Strong department heads who understand the complexities of the job as well as the means of how to perform to high standards are needed to develop departments into strong visionary entities. While there have been many studies on leadership in higher education, few have focused

exclusively on the department head, and fewer still have focused on department heads’ conceptualization of previous leadership development.

In Agricultural Education, there is a national need and call for experienced leaders to assume the role of department head. The AGED National Research Agenda specifically points to the need for research in effective leadership education programming, improving the success of students, and enhancing the development of faculty in agricultural and life sciences (Osborne, n.d.). This study is significant because ineffective leadership, at a departmental level, leads to a breakdown of organizational progress. This is important because department heads are the first line of academic leadership who have daily access and interactions with faculty, staff, and students. The findings of this research can be utilized by those who seek to understand the phenomenon of leadership at the departmental level, those who select department heads, those who develop or have developed academic leadership development programs, those considering a department head position,

and those who interact with department heads on a daily basis.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptualization of leadership development is a trying task for most leaders especially if they have had no formal education or training in the area of leadership. Differentiating between training, education, and development, Brungardt (1996) set a framework for this conceptualization. Although many use the terms leadership development, education, and training synonymously, there is actually a specific delineation, which takes development in a broad sense down to training to specific learned leadership skills. The term leadership development is an all-encompassing concept. This holistic view of leadership begins at an early age and continues throughout adulthood and includes leadership education as well as leadership training. Brungardt stated that leadership development “includes learning activities that are both formal and structured as well as those that are informal and unstructured (from childhood development, education, and adult life experiences to participating in formal programming design to enhance leadership capabilities)” (p. 83). Leadership development is the combination of experience, education, and training in the growth of a leader. Leadership education “includes those learning activities and educational environments that are intended to enhance and foster leadership abilities” (Brungardt, p. 83). Leadership education occurs in a more prescribed and controlled environment. In this environment, a leader is charged with understanding her leadership within the context of an organization in a collective manner. Leadership training is defined as specific learning activities designed to increase leadership knowledge, skills, and abilities in a particular task or job (Brungardt). This training is narrow in scope and includes most leadership development workshops that are task specific. Leadership education and training are important parts of the development of a leader that can be influenced by participation in programming. “A number of studies have shown direct training in the techniques of leadership can improve trainees’ leadership and effectiveness in groups” (Bass, 1990, p. 839).

The formation of a leadership development program for academic leaders must take into account the past experiences of the leader and then take those experiences a step further. Conger’s (1992) framework for leadership development includes those activities that promote personal growth, feedback, conceptualized understanding and awareness, and skill building. “Leadership training and education need to be designed around what will be required when trainees and students take on leadership responsibilities” (Bass, 1990, p. 855). This principle is the same for leadership programs based contextually in higher education academic leadership. As for academic leader development, the “best leadership development blends job experience, educational initiatives, guided practical experience, and targeted performance feedback into a systemic process for ongoing leadership development” (McDaniel, 2002, p. 81).

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore how department heads in Colleges of Agriculture at Land-Grant universities perceive, conceptualize, and have experienced leadership development. Pfeffer (1977) stated if a researcher wanted to understand the behavior of leaders, she must “begin by attempting to find out what they are thinking about the situation in which they would be a leader” (p. 106). This study focused on the insights of department heads regarding their lived experiences of leadership and leadership development in academic departments. This study “investigate[d] a phenomenon [academic leadership] to get at the nature of reality with regard to that phenomenon” (Patton, 2002, p. 215). This study was guided by the research question: what investments have department heads in Colleges of Agriculture at Land-Grant institutions had in academic leadership development.

Procedures

Research scholars and practitioners have stated that the methodology chosen should fit the research questions and the purpose of the study presented (Babbie, 2004; Creswell, 2005; Patton, 2002). Because of the purpose and

research questions of this study, a basic research type of qualitative methodology was the methodological type that was most fitting for this research study. Qualitative studies are utilized not for generalization but for “deepening understanding” (Patton, p. 10). Also, qualitative methodology is most useful in the exploratory phases of a construct (Conger, 1998). Because empirical research has yet to capture the information sought by this generative study, qualitative methodology allowed the researcher to inductively conduct research in a naturalistic manner so that themes would be emergent.

The population of this study consists of current and former department heads in colleges of agriculture at land-grant institutions in the United States. It was determined that a purposive snowball sampling technique would allow the researcher access to specific department heads who offered the greatest variety in years of experience, department type, and department size. The sample for this study consisted of ten current or former department heads in colleges of agriculture at land-grant institutions in the United States. Two of the ten department heads were women, but to ensure anonymity, all were referred to as “he” in this document. Six of the department heads led technical science departments, while four led social science departments. Two of the ten department heads in the sample were former department heads. One had retired and the other went back to being a professor after he chose to step down from his position. Three of the department heads supervised over 50 faculty, four department heads supervised 20 to 30 faculty, two department heads supervised 10 to 15 faculty, and one department head supervised less than ten faculty. Student numbers in the departments ranged from 50 to over 900.

In qualitative research, the researcher is the instrument. Because of this, a researcher must address her philosophy in her methodology. For this study, the researcher has adhered to the stance of empathic neutrality as a guiding principle to the research philosophy. The primary method of data collection utilized by the researcher was interviews. A semi-structured interview protocol was utilized. This protocol was developed by the researcher and the first set of questions was peer and expert reviewed in Fall 2006. Following Patton’s (2002) concept of “emergent design flexibility” (p. 40), the

protocol was field tested using two department heads in colleges of agriculture at land-grant institutions and an associate dean at the same type of institution for subject triangulation purposes. The revised questions were peer and expert developed further in Spring 2007 and field-tested with another department head in the college of agriculture at a land-grant institution. The interview protocol consists of a pool of fifteen questions, and was approved by the Institutional Review Board.

Interviews, observations, and document analysis were the three methods for this study. Because the researcher focused on the perceptions of department heads in colleges of agriculture at land-grant institutions, interviews were the primary method utilized. The audio files of the interviews were transcribed by the researcher immediately following the interview period. This transcription process is both a measure of validity and an instrument of analysis. Observations were also transcribed from fieldnotes immediately following the interview. In addition, department heads provided some of the documents that were analyzed. Other documents came from university websites or training material that the human resource departments supplied the researcher. Utilizing different types of data for analysis is a measure of triangulation. Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) note that the “aggregation of data from different sources will unproblematically add up to produce a more complete picture” (p. 199).

Data analysis, as described by Lincoln and Guba (1985) was conducted with the first step being the unitizing of data. Unitization of data refers to the process of teasing out information from interview transcripts, observation field notes, and documents analyzed. These units which consist of no less than a phrase and no more than two sentences must stand alone and still capture a complete thought, statement, or idea. For this study, there were a total of 356 data units. These codes or categories must be defined. The definition should be used to “justify the inclusion of each card” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 347) to increase the internal consistency of the data analysis process. Imperative to this process is multiple sortings of the data units so that new codes and categories emerge. The researcher categorized the over three-hundred data units into forty-six different

categories. A fellow researcher also sorted the data units to confirm findings and to add to the rigor and credibility of the study. Forty–seven different categories emerged from the second categorization. Comparing the categorization and coding revealed similarities. This triangulation of analysis, in which “two or more persons independently analyze the same qualitative data and compare their findings” (Patton, 2002, p. 560) adds to the reliability of data analysis (). The process then turned to integrating categories and delimiting the constructs (Lincoln & Guba). The researcher then organized these tentative codes and categories into more tangible themes and constructs.

Findings/Conclusions

It can be concluded that department heads in this sample expressed a need for continued development at the department head administrative level. During the conversations, all department heads interviewed expressed, at one time or another, a frustration and uncertainty with and in their job. Several cited the lack of leadership preparation as an influencing factor in this frustration and uncertainty. All ten of the department heads expressed the need for leadership development for department heads: formal and/or informal.

School of Hard Knocks

Six of the 10 department heads surveyed stated that they had no leadership training or development before they became department head. A department head with less than a year of experience laughed when he stated that he “did not go to department head school.” It can be concluded that learning as you go is how many department heads receive leadership training. But this lack of training and development from the start seemed to be an issue for another department head. He mentioned twice during the interview that he felt as if his training came from the “school of hard knocks.” This conclusion is supported by Kuhl (2006) who found that “less than twenty–five percent of department chairs received professional development in connection with their chair duties” (p. 6). However, this sample has received more training than department heads surveyed from 1990–2000. Gmelch

(2000) found that only three percent of over two thousand academic leaders had experienced any type of leadership preparation. The difference between that population and this population is the active step that the National Association of State Universities and Land–Grant Colleges has taken in developing leadership programming.

It's Your Entrance Exam

Seven of the ten department heads interviewed conveyed that they believed that being a faculty member was their leadership preparation before becoming department head. One department head stated that “you need to understand the various steps in the academic life” before you can become a department head. It can be concluded that the majority of the department heads in this sample see completing tenure as a faculty member as training for an academic leadership position. Another department head stated that he does “feel like I’ve been kind of preparing for it all my life through my experiences as assistant, associate, and full professor.”

It is also important to note that it is the department heads with less than five years of experience who avow that this preparation is adequate preparation for becoming an academic leader. One department head stated that he “had that preparation experiencing all the trials and tribulations and challenges that faculty members have.” Wolverson, Ackerman, & Holt (2005) came to a similar conclusion when they studied academic leadership at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. They found that academic leaders new to their position believed that “if you are good at being a faculty member, then you are bound to be good at being a department chair” (Wolverson et al., p. 229).

Conversely, department heads who have been leading for at least five years had a different perspective on the role that being a faculty member plays in developing as a leader. A department head with over five years of experience conveyed that he believed that being a faculty member was an important part of preparation for the position of department head, but that being a faculty member was not enough to make you a successful department head. Being a faculty member is “kind of like your entrance exam. It doesn’t mean you’ll be good at [being a department head]. It doesn’t mean that you’ll get the job. It does mean that they’ll

now look at you.” This finding resonates with the finding by Kuhl (2006) regarding the disconnect between how academic leaders are chosen and their actual leadership preparation and how this is an issue in higher education. Wolverton et al. also found that more experienced department chairs believed that true leadership development was needed in order to become a more effective academic leader. This conclusion implies the need for leadership development before and during the tenure of a department head.

Leadership Training

Brungardt (1996) defines leadership training as the “learning activities for a specific leadership role or job” (p. 83). The department heads in this study were asked to discuss any formalized leadership development in which they had taken part. From this question, two sub-categories emerged: national leadership programs and on-campus training opportunities. Both types of leadership development programs were described by the participants but because of content, like specified tasks addressed, and the information participants received from the program, fit most appropriately in the leadership training section, not leadership development.

National programs.

It can be concluded that two programs identified by the participants played a role in the leadership training of the department heads. Two different, formalized leadership programs were mentioned by the participants of the study. Four of the 10 participants were fellows in the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC) sponsored Experiment Station Committee on Organization and Policy (ESCOP)/ Academic Programs Committee on Organization and Policy (ACOP) leadership development program (now named LEAD 21). The other national leadership development program mentioned by a participant of this study was the Harvard Academic Managers Development Program. The department head with over 20 years of experience was chosen to attend this program after he had been a department head for over 12 years.

Although 50 percent of the department heads in this study attended leadership preparation programs, it is concluded that it is

the perceptions shared by the department heads in this study detail the programs as not development, as discussed by Brungardt (1996), as much as majority leadership training with a little education. These two programs do not include all of the components required for academic leadership development, as defined by McDaniel (2002). McDaniel stated that a quality academic leadership development program which will develop academics into better leaders must “blend job experience, educational initiatives, guided practical experience, and targeted performance feedback into a systemic process for ongoing leadership development” (p. 81). These two programs show elements of McDaniel’s paradigm, but according to responses fall short in ongoing leadership development experiences. Once the program is over, the aided monitoring of the leader’s development ends. ACOP/ESCOP did not follow-up with the participants to evaluate the program or evaluate the participants’ leadership development. Brungardt (1996), McDaniel (2002), and Day (2001) all ascertain that leadership development is an ongoing process.

On-campus training.

Waiting to train department heads until after they have accepted their academic leadership role is a trend in this sample. A department head with over 20 of experience stated that “now they’re taking [training] a little more seriously. I know they are here at [his university]. They are trying to meet with the department heads and run them through the ropes.” Another department head explained “the way you got most of that [training] was on the job with an occasional seminar.” While waiting until a leader has been given the opportunity to lead is not an ideal form of leadership development (Brungardt, 1996), this suggests some progress in the understanding by colleges and universities that some form of leadership training should be provided to academic leaders.

It can also be concluded that the five land-grant institutions from which the sample was derived are taking steps to train their department heads. All 10 department heads in this study mentioned activities at their home institution that were geared towards the training of department heads. One department head mentioned the “executive briefings that [the

dean] is pretty insistent on us going to.” Another department head stated “they’re [administration] pretty insistent on us going. I mean they kind of do a head count.”

It can also be concluded that training for department heads at these selected institutions tends to be task specific. Seminar titles include managing stress, overseeing legal issues, and managing the tenure and promotion process. While these trainings may be helping to build some specific leadership skills needed by department heads, they are not developing the leader in a holistic manner (Conger, 1992). These programs do take into account the position of Day (2000). He emphasizes the need for leadership training to include the organizational environment (academic department) in the enhancing of the leader. All leadership knowledge, skills, and abilities should be rooted in the organizational and community environment. By using real examples from department heads, leadership training programs can integrate content with application.

Leadership Education

Although the leadership education for the department heads in this sample did not come from a formalized leadership theory course, it can be concluded that they all have learned leadership from different areas in their professional career. Brungardt (1996) defined leadership education to include “those learning activities and educational environments that are intended to enhance and foster leadership abilities” (p. 83). As the department heads told of their experiences with leadership development, deductive coding was used for the theme of leadership education and inductive coding split the leadership education theme into three sub-categories: observing and osmosis, leaders are readers, and learn by doing.

Observing and osmosis.

It can be concluded that learning by watching other department heads is a mechanism of leadership education for department heads in this study. One department head stated “we all pick things up by observing and osmosis when we’re in the academic setting. I’ve had several department heads and I’ve watched others.” Another department head echoed that thought when he stated “I’ve been under enough leadership to know what’s good

leadership and what’s bad leadership [laughs] and I’ve had both.” According to Brungardt (1996), observing good leadership practices and bad leadership practices is not enough to be classified as leadership education. Simple observations of leaders is not enough to add to the leadership education of the department head. Bennis and Goldsmith (2003) concur with this conclusion but also state that a leader can learn some from looking at other leaders when the internalization and application of that information turns the exercise into leadership education. One department head stated he “learned from the reflection of good examples and bad examples of leaders.” Reflection must occur in order for a department head to understand and appreciate a good leader from the bad leader. It is the reflection and application of the observation and osmosis that makes this activity leadership education. The implications for developers of leadership programs for this finding would be to include observation and osmosis coupled with reflection about other leaders in the leadership program.

Leaders are readers.

For one department head, the dean acted as the local Barnes and Noble. This department head admitted “I don’t always like them [books] but they’re usually leadership books, and that’s a good thing.” It can be concluded that books play a role in the leadership education of the department heads in this sample. Thirty percent of the department heads interviewed mentioned books as an important source of information regarding leadership while they were department heads. A department head with one to two years of experience stated that he has “got a bunch of books by my bed that [he] periodically leafs through.” Some books were given to the department heads by deans or provosts as part of a leadership education program, but other department heads sought books written by department heads in their own disciplines. One department head specifically mentions the writings of John Maxwell. The department head stated that he could “follow Maxwell’s principles and use them to develop into a leader.” Reading, reflecting, and then applying the leadership concepts that were gained from reading the leadership books are ways of developing as a leader (Conger, 1992). It can be concluded that reading is a way for department

heads to gain leadership education. The implications of this finding are for those who provide department heads with the reading material to themselves analyze the theoretical leadership backing of the book.

Learn by doing.

It can be concluded that learning by doing was thought of as the best way to educate oneself as a department head for this sample. All 10 of the participants in this study said they felt like they learned how to be a good academic leader by doing the job. A department head with three to four years of experience stated that he “learned [academic] leadership by doing it for twenty years as associate head.” This is consistent with the findings of McDaniel (2002), who states that the application of leadership education in the context of one’s surroundings is imperative for leadership growth. According to Bass (1990), it is the blending of job experience with leadership education that yields the most successful leaders. It can be concluded that learning by doing was a mechanism for this sample to learn leadership, but according to leadership development theorists, it is not the best way to develop a holistic and effective leader. Leadership development should begin before the person takes the leadership position (Brungardt, 1996).

Leadership Development

It can be concluded that formalized, holistic leadership development has not occurred for a lot of the department heads in this sample. Leadership development is the combination of experience, education, and training in the growth of a leader (Brungardt, 1996). Day (2000) and Conger (1992) add the contextual application to the development. Only 20 percent of the department heads interviewed spoke about experiences that can be categorized as leadership development. One department head spoke of the influence of the FFA organization on his ability to develop into a leader. This program focused on training and education, and the department head was able to grow from these experiences. The other department head who has experienced leadership development cited a professional organization as the catalyst of his leadership development. “There’s a national department heads’ organization in [discipline] that is run by our professional society.” This organization

provided training, education, and support for department heads.” It also provided support for the significant others of the department head. “It is important to note that these two examples came from the former department heads interviewed. It can be concluded that while department heads are beginning to receive more leadership training and education, formalized and guided leadership development for this sample is lacking.

Recommendations/Implications

Academic departments are the building block of higher education’s academic structure (Rosovsky, 1990). Because of this, it is imperative that the leaders of this building block be effective in their leading. In order for academic leaders to be successful, they must understand the complex phenomenon of leadership. As one department head in this study noted, “you don’t take anyone off the street and put them in there and have them make decisions that affect 70 people’s lives.” Since a department head is charged with leading and managing faculty, staff, and students, it becomes even more imperative that the he or she be aware of and understand the importance of leadership development. Many of the frustrations expressed by this sample of department heads stem from the lack of leadership training, education, and development. Another department head noted it was because of his lack of leadership training, education, and development that he “put in 80 hour weeks for many years and 60 hour weeks when he wasn’t doing 80 hour weeks.” It is this generative study that begins to deepen the understanding of leadership as seen by department heads in Colleges of Agriculture at Land-Grant universities. From the findings of his study, empirical research can be developed to gain a broader perspective of leadership at the department head level.

There are also recommendations for further study. Specifically looking at the conceptualization and experience of department heads within agricultural education could begin to give the discipline insight into the position in order for interested faculty to pursue leadership development activities that would lend themselves to life as a department head. Current leadership programs such as Lead 21, University

of Nebraska's Newly-appointed Administrators workshop, and University of Washington's ADVANCE workshop, may or may not be the key to increasing leadership development in department heads. The conclusions of this study show, and the conceptual framework would attest leadership development does not solely occur in an educational setting. Developing opportunities for those interested in learning more about a department head position is paramount.

It is also recommended this study be extended with department heads in other colleges at land-grant universities to compare findings. It is also recommended this study be extended with department heads in colleges of agriculture at other types of institutions to explore the similarities and differences between the types of institutions. Another recommendation is the findings be translated into a quantitative survey that could be given to all department heads in colleges of agriculture in order to take this generative study and make the findings more generalizable.

This study has implications for the discipline of agricultural education. As most agricultural education departments now offer at least one leadership course, should leadership educators be at the forefront of developing leadership programs for academic department heads in the college? Also, as part of the National AGED Research Agenda, agricultural educators have vowed to research leadership education programs as well as study how we can improve faculty (Osborne, n.d.) The results of this study may cover both action items. This study also has implications for administrators in colleges of agriculture. By looking at the findings, deans and associate deans can identify the leadership training, education, and development they would like to see in their department heads. Those who serve on department head search and screening committees can also benefit from this research. Understanding the complexities of leadership as a phenomenon in higher education might add to their selection criterion for department heads and for educational seminars.

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