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Academic Leadership Journal

“Power Failure in Administrative Environments” — A Response

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The recent essay on “power failure” by Julius, Baldrige, and Pfeffer is provocative. It reminds us of the complexity of the administrative environment — the difficulty of getting academic initiatives accepted, the personal expense that promoting or resisting initiatives can exact, and the various struggles in the academy for appropriate recognition. The case studies used are recognizable to anyone with more than passing acquaintance with the academy. The authors’ analysis contains points that everyone in higher education can study with profit. The decision making strategies and management behaviors they offer for senior executives are sound and valuable — indeed, many of them are excellent.

However, like many other case studies, sometimes the detail overwhelms (as in the University of the Southland); at other times we aren’t told enough (as in Fairchild College). In any event, issues of detail can obscure the central issue — nicely identified in the title as one of power failure. I wish, though, that the authors had displayed greater sensitivity in how they used this central concept of power.

The authors are certainly not alone in this respect. Most of the academy uses “power” overwhelmingly, and exclusively, to convey the notion of control. This is the notion implicated when one speaks of power as the ability to implement one’s own agenda and to resist others implementing their agendas at my expense. This is the concept the authors overtly utilize, since they define power as “the potential ability to influence behavior, to change the course of events, to overcome resistance, to get people to do things they would not otherwise do....politics and influence are the processes, the actions, the behaviors through which this potential power is utilized and realized.”

But “power” also has other meanings. And at least one of these other meanings seems to me to be centrally important to academic leadership — be it by faculty or

administrators. This is the concept of power as receptive or relational rather than controlling. This is power understood as influencing others by first opening oneself to receiving their influence. This relational power is not simply a “process, action, or behavior” through which controlling power is “utilized and realized.” Relational power is itself an alternative kind of power— one that, I suggest, is key to the work of the academy.

Power in this second, relational, sense is neither hierarchical nor positional, as is controlling power. It does not involve the authority that deans, presidents or trustees can exercise by virtue of their standing in the institution. Rather, it involves the authority that others bestow upon the leader when he or she genuinely consults and freely communicates with them. It is the kind of power that is at work in healthy peer review among colleagues. And, I might add, relational power is also essential to successful teaching, for it involves successful learning about one’s students — learning that comes only from allowing them to teach each other and oneself. Finally, I believe, it is precisely the kind of power that the authors conclude is essential to the success of academic administrators.

Relational power is often not enough by itself, of course. Which of the two kinds of power to use is highly contextual. Senior administrators do, of course, have important positional power. But if we are to answer one of the core questions the authors pose at the beginning of the essay (why are some administrators more powerful — that is, more successful?), we must surely look closely at, name it for what it is, and use receptive and relational power — not controlling power.

When controlling power is sought (either to force a decision or its implementation), then failure in the power circuits can be anticipated. However, power failures can be converted into interruptions and power can be restored when the importance of relational power is recognized and accommodated — that is, when administrators recognize and accommodate the realities of decentralized academic decision-making.

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