Leadership and Organisational Culture: Can the CEO and Senior Executive Teams in Bureaucratic Organisations Influence Organisational Culture?

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Introduction

The pressure on higher education to embrace a change agenda to cope with an increasingly complex operating environment has been growing over recent years (Hanna, 2003; Pick, 2003). Hanna (2003) writes that “higher education institutions must change – and, indeed, are changing – to meet future needs,” (p. 26) and that they will need to address a number of strategic challenges as they “transform themselves to meet the demands of an increasingly complex and dynamic environment.” (p. 26) These changes may require embracing different ways of operating, forging new and different partnerships to attract funds and undertake research, and streamlining processes to cope with the increased monitoring and reporting requirements (Drew, 2006; Hanna, 2003; Ramsden, 1998; Shattock, 2003; Stiles, 2004).

Moreover, melding a potentially age-polarised, diverse workforce with its differentiated mix of approaches, experience and styles in the current period of age-related attrition is a daunting mandate which only culturally sensitive leaders will navigate effectively. Much that has been written about leadership concentrates on the leader. This paper addresses the notion of the leader and organisational culture. It asks, firstly, why the link between leadership and organisational culture is important and, secondly, whether chief executive officers and executive leadership team members can affect organisational culture. Some comments derived as part of a larger research study described by Drew, in press, and Drew, Ehrich & Hansford (2008) provide a snapshot of the reflections of one leader on leadership and organisational culture issues. The reflections are of interest as, at the time, the leader, a South-East Asian national, was transitioning from a South-East Asian university to an Australian university. Drew (in press) and Drew, Ehrich & Hansford (2008) describe the methodology for the research program in which the comments, confirmed with the participant as an accurate record, were derived. This paper submits from literature and practice a set of principles as a Culture Investment Portfolio for effecting sustainable, enabling organisational culture in universities.

The Literature on Leadership and Culture

The blend of traditional and contemporary influences and a rapidly changing operating environment make universities interesting contemporary sites from which to examine notions of executive leadership and organisational culture. It is acknowledged that to effect any significant shift in organisational culture is problematic. Firstly, organisational culture is not fixed but is malleable and in that sense is an elusive concept. Secondly, the possible remoteness of the chief executive officer and the executive may be said to militate against their ability to influence organisational culture, yet the notion of remoteness, where it exists, is worth inspecting if organisations deign to develop leaders capable of drawing people together with strategic vision and operational effectiveness. It has been found that the behaviours of leaders do affect subjects. This has been noted in studying the principal-teacher relationship in schools (Singh & Manser, 2007; Varrati & Smith, 2008). Also, it has been noted that, irrespective of standards that might be inscribed in codes or mission statements, culture develops
A climate of complexity and overlapping change, experienced in universities over the past decade (Shattock, 2003; Stiles, 2004), requires executive leadership that does not set itself up in isolation from the rest of the organisation. According to Barnett (2004) and others, effective leadership relies as much on “human qualities and dispositions” as upon skills and knowledge (p. 247), and, moreover, that “human qualities and dispositions” are critical to the notion of the leader “in relationship” with others. Barnett (2004) sees such an emphasis on the leader “in relationship” as vital to leading within an “unknown future” (p. 247). He suggests that this need has not received sufficient attention as a significant curricular and pedagogical question in higher education. What, then, does culturally sensitive management and leadership look like? Some tentative propositions are submitted. Firstly, it is when people of the organisation care about the type of behavioural patterning which forms around them. This notion of care for people was echoed by the leader reported in this study. The leader, having recently transitioned from a South-East Asian university to an Australian university, suggested that effective leadership comprised three key, linked parts, each part having cultural implications in terms of engendering mutual trust including trustworthiness to follow through on commitments made.

Firstly, trust; secondly, sincerity; thirdly, action. Unless you have people’s trust, people are not going to come to you with issues and items which need resolution…You must put yourself in the other person’s situation.

This strikes a note of personal authenticity resonating with a vast body of literature which describes the importance of supporting-encouraging styles in leadership for developing a positive culture. Rafferty and Neale (2004) undertook a Leximancer-based study of qualitative comments on a 360 degree survey, the Quality Leadership Profile (QLP), which is being used in education/knowledge organisations in Australia and New Zealand, tailored to such environments. The study revealed empirical evidence that it mattered to followers whether their leader was supportive and encouraging. The study found that reference to supportive leadership dominated overwhelmingly in respondents’ comments about leaders (Rafferty and Neale, 2004).

It has been suggested that while the chief executive officer and executive leadership team are not entirely responsible for organisational culture, they possess the strongest role and greatest potential influence to shape culture through their individual and collective approaches to organisational decision-making. The link becomes critical if we agree that organisational health does not depend only upon corporate skills and knowledge (epistemological considerations focused mostly on information and planning) but also upon more “ontological” factors to do with “way of being” (as noted in Barnett’s (2004) term, “human qualities and dispositions” (p. 247)). As the leader reported in this study claimed, a starting point of trust is a vital foundation bearing on culture for all organisational and leadership activity. It is ventured that considering organisational culture is vital in an environment where talented workers are seeking to place their efforts. Whitchurch (2006), examining changing identities in professional administrators and managers in higher education in the United Kingdom, observed that “multi-professionals,” as middle management professionals operating as project leaders “place as much, if not more, emphasis on the cultures of ..institutions as on management structures” (p. 168). The question is, can chief executive officers and executive teams in bureaucratic organisations such as contemporary universities influence organisational culture?
How and where in the organisation is organisational culture most readily adjusted?

There are mixed views on where in the organisation organisational culture is most readily adjusted, and in what artefacts culture is most revealed (Locke, 2007). While much time might be spent in universities formulating policies and codes to articulate expectations in terms of behaviour (Delahaye, 2000), many researchers and writers argue that the quality of interpersonal engagement as people interact over the planning and decision-making processes of an organisation is most informant to organisational culture (Bass, 1990; Conger & Kanungo, 1988; Locke, 2007; Schein, 1997; Wheatley, 2003). McCaffery (2004) proposes that leaders’ capacity to engage the commitment and abilities of staff depends upon an understanding of, and sensitivity to, organisational culture. Certainly there appears to be acceptance in the literature that sound organisational relationships and sound processes provide organic stability (Drew & Bensley, 2001; Lewis & Slade, 2000; Luzader, 2001; Pick, 2003). Hence it may be worth attempting to assess the perceived difference between the behaviours espoused in policies and codes of an organisation and those practised (Delahaye, 2000; Drew, 2006). Culture surveys and 360 feedback tools may be deployed to help make assessments on the extent to which people experience supportive and empowering behaviours, for example, or the lack of these, in their organisations (London, 2002). The transitioning university leader in the research study said that the most influential element for good in making the transition was “the very supportive environment” in which she worked.

Further evidence that the behaviours of executive leadership are formative to organisational culture comes from researchers Maurer, Mitchell and Barbeite (2002) who found that feedback processes were far more effective when organisational support and senior level imprimatur existed for the initiative. They found that individuals gaining feedback attempted development in response to feedback more readily where they perceived institutional support for their development existed (Maurer et al., 2002). There is evidence, in turn, that such support is well-placed as systematic developmental processes are shown to play a role in the continuous improvement of leaders. Factors of the Quality Leadership Profile (QLP) “360” feedback development instrument described by Drew (2006) and reported by Scott, Coates and Anderson (2008) as an example of research undertaken in Australia to identify key capabilities in the education/knowledge sector, show upward trending over time (Drew, 2006). The further continuation of that trend since that time suggests that leaders, through iterative use of a relevant “360” feedback survey, improve their leadership capabilities. According to Brookfield (1987), in fact, the ability to reflect upon and adjust one’s practice is the touchstone of leader effectiveness, with ramifications for building “critical mass” towards sound organisational culture.

In turn, it is said, a culture-sensitive leader demonstrating other-awareness will attend to the human dimensions when applying new technological systems, for example. Trakman (2007) argues that leaders determine the type of culture that forms around use of organisational systems and governance practice. Trakman (2007) notes that when leaders take little cognizance of the human dimensions in myriad organisational operations they readily fall to “damage control” and poor governance practice when things go wrong, where thereafter “every transaction is scrutinised for irregularities” (p. 3). At the “macro” level, mandates for universities to contribute positively to their local and global communities might be said to depend on university executives’ ability to engage not only their organisational constituents but each other collectively for the benefit of society. For example, Ranasinghe (2008), Trakman (2007) and others argue that for university leaders to realise their potential to influence and improve society calls for strong, strategic leadership capable of “serv[ing] as agents of change” in their
organisations and as a collective (Trakman, 2007, p. 4). It is perhaps incumbent upon leaders of the academy to consider what it means to create or re-create the moral drivers in a way which will “make the world a better place” (Ranasinghe, 2008, p. 1). Ranasinghe (2008) suggests, of the current milieu, “it could very easily be the best times because we finally have technological resources sufficient to provide a good life for the entire population of the earth. Sadly, the tremendous powers at our disposal are presently used only to alienate human beings from themselves, each other, and their natural environment.” (p. 1). Ranasinghe (2008) asks: Do we want to question if, how and why “vulgar pragmatism has ... penetrated the academy itself”; in fact do we want our universities to be distinguishable from other “insatiable institutions” (p. 1)?

As acknowledged, in large organisations, with highly distributed leadership and unevenly applied commitment to reflective practice, for example, there may be no single definable organisational culture but different cultures operating at once. As suggested, however, to deny the potential for the chief executive officer and executive leadership team to influence the culture of their organisations and, by extension, the good of society, is to see those roles as mechanistic rather than the strategically co-operative and beneficial roles that they might be. From a review of the relevant literature, the following set of principles is offered as a Culture Investment Portfolio for building sustainable, positive, organisational culture. These principles then are described briefly in turn.

Reframing the Concept of Change

It may be necessary in organisations to reframe the concept of change. It is said, effective leaders work with change rather than “manage” or “fear” change (Wheatley, 2003). They acknowledge the “supercomplexity” of constant ambiguity and evolutionary change yet they take positive action (Barnett, 2004, pp. 249-50). Mindsets that may be critical to the organisation moving forward are said to lie in this domain. It is claimed that, most of all, organisations need people with adaptive performance competencies to help them handle change and stress and to learn new ways of operating (Hesketh & Considine, 1998). According to Schein (2003), sometimes critical “top-down” insight is required to diagnose “old cultures” to see the need for improved practice in certain areas and “to start a change process towards their acceptance” (p. 444). Such transition ideally entails bringing forward the best from former times and other cultures to inform new practices and technologies (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler & Tipton, 1991).

Acknowledging Competing Interests and Uniting People in Vision

Much is written about the importance of an organisation having strategic vision, values and goals that are clear and meaningful (Hanna, 2003; Oliver, 2001). Less appears to be written about whose role it is to generate, articulate and unite people of the organisation in vision and values, but it is clear that rhetoric about vision and values is not compelling unless people see vision and values modelled “from the top” of the organisation. As Latham (2003) suggests, cynicism tends to arise when super-ordinate goals are viewed as nothing more than empty slogans. There are arguments that the chief executive officer (CEO) and executive leadership team are best placed to exert influence on strategy and values; however, in universities in particular, this may be a highly complex remit. Universities are an eclectic...
however, in universities in particular, this may be a highly complex remit. Universities are an eclectic mix of freedom and accountability, innovation and traditionalism, collegiality and competition, scholarship and commercial enterprise, and other dualities. Challenges associated with competing interests and ideologies might well be anticipated for all levels of leadership in these environments, yet successful enterprises work to discernible themes, and part of creating a positive culture is to rally people around those themes with passion.

It is said that at the individual level, the factual aspects of people’s values and theories are seldom conclusive (Rein, 1983) and it is often in specific concrete cases that people determine their ideological position by balancing the perceived positive and negative consequences that a policy or issue will have on their “multiple valued ends” (Weiss, 1983, p. 233). In a sector valuing academic autonomy, ideals for individual researchers, for example, may vie with those of the faculty and management, and the tendency for faculty members to be more oriented to their disciplines than to their organisations is well-acknowledged (Bellah et al., 1991). Forging a sense of united vision out of potentially “incompatible positions” (Barnett, 2004, p. 249) is unlikely to occur unless the CEO and executive leadership team consistently affirm and articulate their unifying themes and key messages. For the culture-building leader, this may involve ensuring that technological and other systems in support of key themes are being applied in ways which consider the human impact dimensions involved (Shattock, 2003). It may be acknowledged that the success of any strategic initiative depends on how people work and interact with each other around the key themes and processes (Bass & Avolio, 1994).

Acknowledging the Interdependency of “People” and “Processes”

Many writers including Locke (2007) observe of organisational processes, restructures and mergers, that the human factor should be high on the agenda if the initiatives are to be successful. Wheatley (2003) implies that Newtonian “reductionism” to treat an organisation as a machine by diagnosing a problem and a singular cause is not sufficient, given the interplay of myriad factors bearing on issues. It is suggested that those factors relate largely to the “people” and “process” interface. Parry and Proctor-Thomson (2003) remind that organisational culture inevitably is a function of interpersonal relationships and of systems and procedures, and that each has a different impact on the effectiveness of leadership. Studies of Avolio, Bass and Jung (1999), also, suggested that organisational culture consists of interpersonal relations and organisational systems, and that the effective leader continually questions methods used to problem solve. The interviewed leader reported in this paper commented favourably on a senior leadership program to which she had been nominated which brought together senior people from different parts of the organisation. The leader reported: “This gave me a great chance to go into my role knowing who the key people were and where they were from. I discovered that people had similar issues to mine. Talking on the same wave length with people in other senior roles was very helpful.” The leader also reported that the frank, open discussions with senior executives who had given their time to the program had had positive impact. The comment resonated with the earlier reported comment about a trustful environment being the critical first base of amenable organisational culture, in the leader’s view.

It is said that every human group sooner or later develops rules and norms for how they will operate (Schein, 1997). This leader found that observing other leaders as fellow participants helped to gather a sense of the tacit rules and norms that existed in the university. This suggests that there is a level of comfort in knowing the “ground rules”, and that a self-fulfilling prophecy of sorts applies wherein those
“rules” and patterns form culture. It is beyond the scope of the culture-building CEO and executive leadership team to ensure that all of the relationships of “people” and “process” are productive. However, Maurer et al. (2002) have shown that a whole-of-organisation approach to development expectations, endorsed from the top, stands the best chance of being influential. In other words, the “walk” is more powerful than the “talk” in terms of building desired culture as it is through the actions of people, rather than words, knowledge or even process validity, that the river of culture cuts its course.

Attending to Both “Knowing” and “Being” (Epistemological and Ontological Balance)

It might be agreed that one’s knowledge and one’s behaviour are separate considerations worthy of attention by leaders. Ever-changing contexts call upon ever-changing knowledge bases and skill sets. It might be accepted that knowledge is too malleable to serve as a point of absolute reliance and that a broader view that takes account of how one acts is required (Barnett, 2004; Wheatley, 2003). If the lifeblood or organisations is its people (Drew & Bensley, 2001; Wheatley, 2003), the way one acts (the notion of “being”) becomes as important as what one knows (the notion of “knowing”). For example, the capacity for disagreements around sacrosanct knowledge bases tends to divide (Rein, 1983), while attending to “being” as much as “knowing” may invoke more collaborative ways of addressing conceptual difference to leverage (in fact) difference to create new knowledge, make unexpected connections and pursue collaboration and innovation. Again, the most effective messages to foster amenable ways of “being” – behavioural change, for example, which would promote a connected rather than disaggregated workforce – are said to be those which derive from senior imprimatur (Latham, 2003; Meadows, 1999). It might be agreed that traction for desired organisational culture is inevitably personal, and while to some extent it is bound around systems in bureaucratic organisations, it is experienced largely through interpersonal behaviour. Deploying a climate survey or “360 degree” feedback survey to gather others’ perceptions tends to build stronger, more robust cultures via increasing individual self-awareness (Drew, 2006; Lepsinger & Lucia, 1997; London, 2002). Scott, Coates and Anderson (2008) posit that 360 surveys which measure capabilities relevant to university leadership have value in these settings.

Welcoming Divergent Views

How often do higher education organisations espouse diversity yet operate in ways which reify established ways of thinking and being? Of all sectors, universities whose business is knowledge are well-placed to host rich dialogue on issues, welcoming insights from different cultural backgrounds in order to mine high quality debate and well-considered options. In individual environments it is worthwhile asking whether this occurs. The quality of debate, for example, should be free from political interference and should cut across the boundaries of hierarchy, knowledge and experience to elicit multiple perspectives (Nichol, 2003). Sadly, “much of what we call bureaucracy, in the bad sense of the word, stems from misunderstanding across these kinds of boundaries.” (Schein, 1997, p. 500) Welcoming divergent views is said to be a critical tenet of university life, and linked inevitably with this tenet are preparedness to take considered risks, support innovation and demonstrate flexibility (Parry & Proctor-Thomson, 2003).

In terms of organisations welcoming divergent views, risk-taking, innovation and flexibility, it is noted that the leader reported in this paper recommended that university management provide more opportunity for their leaders to gain “a fuller perspective of worldwide situations” in their roles. Welcoming divergent views might be implied here, as the leader added: “Some haven’t worked
overseas before and the international dimension prompts people to think globally.” The leader added: “It is about changing the whole culture of the university so that people see the bigger picture. A change of mindset or way of thinking is required in many cases”. This reminds that no organisation is inured from falling to insularity. The approach enjoins an expanded view of the world – a much larger world than the world of “self” – in order to be “fully functioning” or “individuated” or “authentically oneself” (Bischof, 1970, p. 95). The evocation is that leaders connected to global networks, mindful of cultural diversity and prepared to harness divergent opinion, are capable of bringing a richer, more global frame of reference to the organisation’s operation (Drew & Bensley, 2001). While this, too, helps spell positive organisational culture, it is acknowledged that positive and constructive attributes take time to build, and that senior imprimatur for any change or development process lends authenticity and provides the strongest assurance of success (Maurer et al., 2002). Locke (2007) agrees that in organisational development and change processes, senior leaders and managers take the most significant role in directing and redirecting the stream of interactions which form organisational culture. Allied to the principle of welcoming divergent views is the principle of engendering positive emotions in the workplace creating a positive culture of engagement. A number of researchers and theorists suggest a strong link between the creation of a positive work climate and the wellbeing and productivity of members.

Pursuing a Positive Climate

Building a positive climate is closely related to the overall notion of building a positive, amenable organisational culture. According to Wheatley (2003), there is great value in building some predictability in positive patterns of operation (Wheatley, 2003), including, importantly, how the organisation manages perceived crises. Schein (2003) argues the benefits of incrementally establishing a “common set of assumptions…forged by clear and consistent messages as the group encounters and survives its own crises” (Schein, 2003, p. 438). Fredrickson (2003) reports that when people feel good, their thinking becomes more creative, integrative, flexible and open to information” (p. 333). Again, “stability” or sustainability in the longer-term is reconceived to imply how the leader operates, which might be understood as practicing capacity for personal stability within instability; and creating positive environments which help people develop their intrinsic capabilities to meet extrinsic challenge.

Collins and Porras (2003) report research findings which suggest that the greatest organisations are not built on good ideas but by a disposition where leaders primarily and persistently created an environment that was conducive to great products. (p. 383) Similarly, Schein (1997) suggests that “leaders may not have the answer but they provide temporary stability and emotional reassurance while the answer is being worked out [and that] if the world is increasingly changing, such anxiety might be perpetual, requiring learning leaders to assume a perpetual supportive role” (p. 375). The benefits of a positive work climate include, typically, high levels of trust, autonomy and resource supply (Scott & Bruce, 1994), as well as innovative, risk-taking cultures (Parry & Proctor-Thomson, 2003). As noted, leaders who demonstrated the paradoxical combination of persistence of will (“strength, toughness, purpose”) and humility (“generosity and nurture”) were found to effect positive work climates capable of producing transformation and sustained outstanding success (Collins 2001b, p. 68). Singh and Manser (2007) report from research within schools that teachers in schools were affected positively and were more satisfied in their roles in schools where principals demonstrated emotionally intelligent interpersonal behaviours. The research showed that teachers want to be led by principals who are
“confident in their leadership role, who send out clear unambiguous messages, who maintain self-control, who are adaptable and flexible and who face the future with optimism” (p. 1). A common finding in these studies and observations is that a positive, amenable culture promotes the well-being of members and contributes to higher levels of performance.

The desire to be engaged in worthwhile effort and accomplishment is acknowledged by Scott Peck (1990) who asserts that the human “capacity for transformation” is “the most essential characteristic of human nature.” (p. 178). Transformation connotes forward movement and action. This returns us to the theme that positive climates are action-taking climates, best modelled from the top of the organisation. Indeed, an enemy of positive culture is lack of action resulting in stasis. The leader interviewed and reported in this paper implied that values (or “way of being”) and skills/knowledge must work together; for example, one might be strong in one’s disciplinary knowledge and a caring and involved team leader but there must be personal resolution to see matters through. The leader observed scope for greater commitment to follow-through, for example, as a culture-building value: “One needs to blend sincerity with organisational skills, as one can genuinely mean to do something but if they [sic] cannot organise themselves it won’t get done, despite..sincerity…Good leaders are seen to have the ways and means to accomplish what they set out to do”.

It is hypothesised that, irrespective of the context for leadership, leadership effectiveness turns on blending self-discipline (Collins 2001 a,b), self-direction and self-organisation (Scott, Coates & Anderson, 2008) and enabling human qualities and dispositions (Barnett, 2004). This kind of leadership is contagious and engaging, inviting capable others into its spaces of strength, invigoration and sustainable success. The notion is one of “connectedness” where “[l]eaders are viewed as those people who build and nurture connections with others” (Drew, Ehrich & Hansford, 2008, p. 13). Moreover, it is documented that leaders who take an outward-looking, holistic approach are more likely to be happy and effective in their work roles and enjoy a more balanced, strategic vision of how success is reached (Kofodimos, 1993). A range of commentators correlate a readiness to communicate effectively interpersonally, respecting and drawing from a wide range of perspectives, with a healthy, positive organisational culture (Carlopio, Andrewartha & Armstrong, 2001; Lepsinger & Lucia, 1997; Parry (1996). In the following example, one CEO and executive leadership team have a significant role to play by promoting workplace initiatives and behaviours promoting “wellness”.

In one government department in Australia, Agency staff are rewarded and acknowledged by the senior executive team for best practice contributions to projects on the quality of staff safety, wellness and other enabling factors (Meadows, 1999). The Agency leaders believe that a rigorous, outcome-oriented culture is one which attends to ensuring a healthy, conducive environment for staff given the impact of environmental factors on productivity and strategic and operational effectiveness. For the Agency, environmental wellness necessarily involves fostering productive relationships between people, as espoused by Mackay (1994) and Schein (1997) who suggest that leadership involves actively listening to people across hierarchical and sub-cultural boundaries.

Combining a Listening/Learning Disposition with Personal Persistence

Some interesting insights are revealed from research to suggest the potent combination of a listening/learning disposition and strong professional will on the part of the CEO as highly informant to creating a culture of success. Yung (1959) notes the “listening” and learning components of genuine
engagement, and he correlates personal authenticity with humility and the capacity to be honest with oneself. Jung (1959) proposes that recognition of the “shadow,” which he describes as our unconscious and sometimes conflicting “other,” “leads to the modesty we need in order to acknowledge imperfection.” (p. 301) One might correlate self-focused, learning-resistant patterns with enervation and loss for the self, and other-focused, empowering and learning patterns with vigour and gain. Hope of engaging others would appear to lie squarely with the latter.

A body of research carried out in the United States studied organisations which yielded repeated “bottom line” success and made certain observations about the CEOs of those organisations which had shifted from “good to great” (Collins, 2001a,b). Collins (2001b) identified United States companies which had shifted from “good performance to great performance – and [had] sustained it” (pp. 67, 75). He was able to identify common variables which distinguished those organisations which were able to both make and sustain a shift and those who appeared to have the ingredients to succeed but had failed to do so. In a potent, somewhat paradoxical reading of leadership, Collins’ (2001a) research revealed that a particular culture generating from the highest level of the organisation had a profound effect upon the organisation. He found that these “Level 5 leaders” shared similar attributes of “humility” and “fierce resolve” in addition to the leadership capabilities which he articulated under the taxonomy: “Level 1: Highly Capable Individual;” “Level 2: Contributing Team Member;” “Level 3: Competent Manager” and “Level 4: Effective Leader” (Collins, 2001a, p. 20). Collins’ (2001a) rigorous criteria for his research study of chief executive officers insisted that companies in the study must have recorded sustained triple bottom-line success. It is reported, these characters were described uniquely as demonstrating humility – “a study in duality: modest and wilful, humble and fearless” (p. 22). Arnold (2005), discussing Collins’ findings, emphasises that Collins was interested in sustained greatness. Without taking away from the importance of leadership as a shared activity, the revelation of the findings suggests, in fact, that the leaders of these outstandingly performing organisations worked not solely but in partnership to build an empowering climate geared for the high performance and success of all.

That, in the research data, the absence of Level 5 leadership showed up consistently across the comparison companies demonstrates the empirical, rather than ideological, nature of the findings on the “Level 5” leadership concept. Moreover, the exacting standards of the leaders and organisations studied belie easy dismissal of the “Level 5” culture as “soft”. Simply, in those organisations, expectations were clear, and emphasis was placed on recruiting and supporting the right people in a “culture of discipline” (Collins, 2001b, p. 68). The leader in transition reported in this paper spoke in favour of rigorous cultures. The leader commented: “I value someone who is sincere in the way that they approach a matter. For myself, I go out of the way to complete whatever task I start, even if it ‘kills me’: I close the loop”. Further in support of a rigorous culture, the leader added: “Leaders provide guided thinking. They don’t solve problems for people but they engage people in solving problems; they ask them to come with a possible resolution in mind. That way others feel part of the solution”.

A “culture of discipline”, for Collins (2001a,b), entailed genuine communication, asking the difficult questions, making the hard decisions, and taking action to support and recognise the organisation’s people. When Collins (2001a) makes a distinction between “ruthless” and “rigorous” cultures, he attributes the word “rigorous” to the “Good to Great” cultures observed in the research (p. 52). It is not surprising that “Good to Great” organisations were observed as communicative workplaces with a penchant for intense dialogue. Collins (2001a) reports that “phrases like ‘loud debate,’ ‘heated
discussions’ and ‘healthy conflict’ peppered the articles and interview transcripts from all the companies” (p. 77). Collins’ (2001a,b) findings reframe humility and strong professional will as a potent, fertile agent for engaging productively with others in a way that positions the organisation for success.

Influencing via Personal Credibility rather than by Coercion

It is argued that leadership is a transaction founded on personal/professional credibility where others are motivated to follow and partner with the leader to achieve, rather than being dependent upon coercion to win support. Peck (1990) argues the self-defeating nature of using force or threat of force to achieve ends, and argues that, rather, under a service style of leadership others are inspired by example and voluntarily embrace the cause as worthy. The suggestion is that this type of leader is not motivated by personal aggrandisement, nor by a need to wield power for selfish ends but, rather, works with others to accomplish goals. Eric Hoffer (1992) alludes to the poverty of spirit which may lie behind an individual’s wielding coercive power. He ponders “why our sense of power is the more vivid when we break a man’s [sic] spirit than when we win his heart” (p. 248). Peck (1990) comments that coercive tactics will do more to create rather than ameliorate havoc and he contends that for all its apparent success, coercive power displays meagre genuine influence. Bolman and Deal (2003) suggest that hoarding power produces a powerless organisation where people stripped of power “fight back,” while, on the other hand, “giving power liberates energy for more productive use”(p. 341). The set of principles as a Culture Investment Portfolio drawn from the literature concludes that empowerment, fuelled by trust, does most to foster effective engagement in leadership (Habermas, 1979) and stands out as an ethical imperative for organisations (Kanungo, 1992; Nielsen, 1983). For example, Franklin (1975) reports the critical role of a high degree of trust among members to team success, while Bass, Valenzi, Farrow and Solomon (1975) observed that more participative leadership cultures in organisations were those described by staff as more trusting.

In terms of credible leadership capable of influencing others, Barnett (2004) refers to characteristics such as “carefulness, thoughtfulness, humility, criticality, receptiveness, resilience, courage and stillness” (p. 259). Similarly, for Sinclair (1998), critical characteristics are those of credible influence – “strength, toughness, purpose and, more rarely, generosity and nurture” (p. 1). An example of credible leadership influence comes from the government Agency in Queensland, Australia, referred to earlier in this paper, where a mission was embarked upon to increase sustainability. The relevant agency’s engagement with sustainability attracted the interest of university researchers who found, on studying the Agency’s processes and outcomes, that emerging themes gravitated around notions of credible leadership: congruence – “walking the talk”; aspiration – linking sustainability with high order social change; and system intervention – acting on leverage points to influence measurable systemic change (Haigh, Hall-Thompson & Griffiths, 2005). The researchers identified that the influence of the CEO was critical in the success of the mission. They attest that “the goals articulated by the CEO tend to penetrate the entire organisation more effectively than any other statement of expectation” (Meadows, 1999, pp. 16-17).

The eight principles of the Culture Investment Portfolio and the argument that CEO may be influential in affecting organisational culture converge on this question of empowerment. The question presents itself for organisations: Will the organisation be a disempowered place where workers exercise their roles
with little or no sense of “ownership”, passion or reward, or will it be an empowered workforce focusing on development, improvement and achievement? If positive culture creation is considered by the executive to be important, then critical mass on desired principles may develop as the relevant culture-building behaviours are accorded priority in overt and covert ways, building goodwill.

Conclusion

The literature examined in the paper notes that the executive leader’s primary contribution is to build a positive culture of participation and engagement. Eight principles were identified as a suggested model of sustainable, sound organisational culture, making possible a quality of engagement that empowers individuals around vision and goals. It was implied that organisational culture will build; that it will form either capriciously, or consciously through reinforcing desired values and equipping the people who will work with those values to achieve goals. Some evidence was presented to suggest that the CEO and executive leadership team are best placed to influence organisational culture, and that such influence may be for better or worse based on the actions, decision-making and interactions that they model and endorse.

The discussion noted Collins’ (2001a,b) reported findings on Level 5 Leaders that a rigorous culture with capability for outstanding achievement does not occur by accident nor by coercion but, in large part, through patterns which formed as positive behaviours and values were reified within the organisation. It is acknowledged that the nature of highly politicised environments may reduce the capacity of CEOs to act independently, and that this potentially diminishes the influence that they are able to exert on organisational culture. Nevertheless, it has been suggested that CEOs and executive teams may choose to build for quality and rigor. They may elect to work differently to ameliorate entrenched hierarchical divides, engender constructive dialogue and catalyse change. The very act of consultation, seeking feedback and connection, may invoke new conversations and may set in place new frameworks for engagement from which the whole organisation stands to benefit.

The model is offered for executives in bureaucratic organisations such as universities who aspire to greater heights of collective accomplishment. The final word goes to the leader reported in this paper: “It is what goes into the effort behind leadership that makes the difference”. This paper has sought to invoke thought on what “lies behind” successful leadership and successful organisational culture, to explore the covert, subtle but powerful nature of practice within organisations. It suggests that when executives of organisations such as universities use the authority of their roles to forge strong, sound organisational culture, all members may be inspired to greater productivity and sharing of success, and the workplace and community may well be the richer.

References


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