Leadership and Strategic Planning in the Community College

Judith K. Berry

Abstract: Characteristics of executive leadership (EL) in community colleges, the complexities of the campus environment, and a new leadership assimilation process are presented in this manuscript to understanding ways in which leaders can manage diverse situations on a community college campus. The community college that employs effective leaders will thrust their institution to the forefront, as an educational center of change.

Introduction

A substantial retirement of executive leadership on community college campuses is driving the importance of outlining new leader assimilation processes. A review of the literature written during the first decade of the 21st century about community college presidents reflected the importance of focusing on the leadership practices of individuals who occupy this position because of impending retirements. There is ample literature that documents the skills, knowledge, and behavior used by a president to manage a community college. For aspiring community college presidents, this information may assist them in preparing to succeed outgoing presidents. In 2010, executive leaders on community colleges are retiring with many having served over thirty years. There is a gap in the literature about new leader assimilation processes that can help ease the transition for the new leader and also the employee. This manuscript focuses on the practices of leaders in such positions as department chair, dean, vice president, and provost. It examines what workers expect of their leaders, synthesizes individual accountability, discusses the nuance of incivility on community college campuses, and analyses support systems that may benefit the new administrator as they step into the position where a veteran leader has recently retired.

The Characteristics of an Effective Leader

Practices of Exemplary Leadership

A significant contribution that leaders make to an organization is the development of workers as leaders (Ahn, Adamson, & Dornbusch, 2004; Kouzes & Posner, 2007). Leaders know how to adapt, change, prosper, and grow regardless of priorities (Eddy & VanDerLinden, 2006). Connors, Smith, and Hickman (2004) also acknowledged the importance of leadership development in terms of leadership accountability as a means for a company to achieve its strategic goals and objectives. These management consultants used the analogy of the excursion down the yellow brick road of Dorothy and her friends in the Wizard of Oz to explain the development of self-awareness to help articulate the notion that these travelers possessed the power within to get the results they wanted (p. 4). Self-awareness means that individuals must feel and act empowered to achieve desired results. In Dorothy’s case, she needed to travel the yellow brick road long enough to gain awareness that only she had the power to go home anytime by simply clicking her ruby slippers. The yellow brick road scenario is about a journey
that moves people from “ignorance to knowledge, from fear to courage, from paralysis to powerfulness, and from victimization to accountability” (p. 4). This comparison suggested that consistent leaders move from being victims of circumstances to being accountable for consequences and outcomes, which leads to individuals and organizations accomplishing shared goals.

Contrary, Kouzes and Posner (2007) inferred that often employees suffer from “management whiplash” (p. 4) because of the endless change in management priorities, which can promote inferior work performance. These inconsistent priorities provoke symptoms in employees that may lead to a lack of motivation, hot-temperedness, unclear communication, annoyance, and frustration. A disenfranchised employee feels disempowered and frequently does not contribute fully to the vitality of the organization. Whereas, empowered employees’ presence is felt throughout the organization. These scenarios suggest that management ought to engage in Kouzes and Posner’s (2007) Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership that include (a) Model the way; (b) Inspire a shared vision; (c) Challenge the process; (d) Enable others to act; and (e) Encourage the heart (p. 26). Leadership accomplishment, however, is not entirely based on the single aspect of the leader’s own doing. The expertise and talent of many individuals, teams, and the organization itself are needed to realize organizational mission. Employee expectations of the leader also play a vital role with the five practices to illustrate the effective characteristics of outstanding leadership. Over seventy-five thousand employees worldwide indicated that they are willing to follow leaders who are also honest, forward-looking, inspiring, and competent (p. 29).

Employee Expectations of Leaders

Honesty is a significant factor in the leader-constituent relationship (Kouzes & Posner, 2007, p. 32). Workers want to know that their leader is truthful, ethical, and principled. They are looking for leaders with integrity and character, which represents attributes tied to their own values and ethics. When followers do not know the set of values, ethics, and standards of the leader, there is no solid or authentic relationship that can be established and the company will tend to flounder in pursuing its mission. Forward-looking was also one of the most sought-after traits in a leader (p. 33). Employees stressed the importance of knowing ahead of time what the organization would “look like, feel like, and be like” (p. 34) when it arrives at its destination. Employees also look to leaders to be inspiring and have a get-up-and-go attitude toward their aspirations. They are also more accepting and comfortable when leaders are competent. Employees are more apt to follow leaders who have positive track records of getting things done. Individuals scrutinize leaders’ relevant experience to evaluate their sound judgment (Plinske & Packard, 2010). People in EL positions are expected to demonstrate more competence in strategic planning and policymaking and less in core technology operations. Work experience is about active involvement in “situational, functional, and industry events and activities, and the accumulation of knowledge and skill derived from participation” (Kouzes, & Posner, 2007, p. 36).

The Way Forward for Leaders and Followers

The crucial elements of personal and organizational accountability should be woven into the heart, soul, and character of the individual. This fusion means that developing leaders are ready to own and influence their destiny. They are powered by a commitment and hard work to help their organizations and institutions succeed. Accepting personal accountability helps them to rise above negative circumstances to get the job done. Connors, et al. (2004) coined accepting
personal accountability as residing *Above The Line*® that is, the willingness for developing leaders to stay in the frame of mind of being answerable and responsible for carrying out the necessary steps to complete projects and daily tasks on time and at quality levels. *Above The Line*® thinking is separated by a thin line, which distinguishes positive steps to succeed from excuses or grand stories created to justify failed attempts at completing projects and participating cooperatively. *Below The Line*® thinking is when developing leaders and followers languish in a vicious circle of victimization. They wallow in self-pity where they blame others for their failures for not finishing projects (pp. 10-11). To maintain *Above The Line*® thinking an attitude adjustment may be required of leaders and others. They must adopt a See It, Own It, Solve It, Do It® attitude (p. 13). Namely, *Above The Line*® thinking influences the success and commitment of many individual and team accomplishments that create a winning combination after much give and take on the part of leaders and followers as they rework and make adjustments to project components.

Social changes associated with developing effective leaders alter how contemporary organizations are managed. Gone are the days when corporate cultures promoted a command and control model that neglected individual choice and personal responsibility. Workers in the year 2010 want to work for organizations where they feel empowered to get results by emphasizing the “here is what I am going to do, what do you think” (Connors, et al., 2004, p. 31) model rather than approaching their work only after being told what to do. In this type of environment, employees who operate *Above The Line*® are willing to always ask, “What else can we do to rise above our circumstances and get the results we want” (p. 129)? Leaders and employees also must feel empowered by the concept of accountability, not trapped by it. Self-reflection and coaching others require persistence, tolerance, a support system, and proper follow-up. It is important for leaders to try out different ways (Vroom, & Jago, 2007; Connors, et al., 2004) to get employees focused on essential components that help move their organizations forward, after clearly defining the results they need to achieve. The next step is to always measure progress. When “progress is measured, progress improves” (p. 191). Expect from employees that they report regularly and thoroughly, analyze their activities in an effort to determine what more they can do to get results, and stand and deliver when it is time to report.

**Encouraging Civility as a Community College Leader**

**Unacceptable Behavior in the Community College Culture**

Despite preparation of leaders who manage community college campuses, they must handle conflict when civility breaks down. Incivility is described by Elsner and Boggs (2005) as rancorous and hostile behavior toward others. This kind of behavior has increased on college campuses and has led to unacceptable personal conduct and hate crimes including anti-authority philosophy, students who are continuously late for class and employees who are perpetually late for meetings and appointments; to more serious abuses such as student to student-, student to faculty-, faculty to faculty- assaults and murders, colleague to colleague deliberate destruction of careers. Basic courtesy, politeness, and high-quality manners often associated with being a good neighbor and, are also the proper etiquette extended to service workers in the community, have eroded. As a result, community college leaders must address unexpected and sometimes unprecedented incivility because of such erosion. Longtime veterans who have been engaged with community colleges over a significant period of time have been eyewitnesses to disfavored handling of students, disorderly conduct on the part of students, mean-spirited behavior among
Reasons for Incivility on Community College Campuses

Elsner and Boggs (2005) argued that American community colleges are deeply-rooted within the global society they serve and may subconsciously emulate these social patterns and behavior. The context displayed in social media and the press routinely attacks the personal integrity and character of individuals just because it can without any type of retribution. Declining resources have been also examined as one reason for the increase of incivility. During the budget cycle at community colleges each year, departments attempt to secure more resources for their areas out of the minuscule amount of funds available for allocation. This type of degradation is an assault on the character (O’Banion, 2009) of many colleagues in opposing departments and the humiliation that is experienced is long-lasting. Blame game thinking takes over as *Below The Line®* (Connors, et al., 2004, p. 11) attitudes of colleagues perpetuate the manipulation and false justification of “freedom of expression and thought” (Elsner & Boggs, 2005, p. 4), which is part of a covenant cherished by institutions of higher learning. Finger pointing and confusion are rampant to keep colleagues off-balanced. These off-balanced colleagues then answer the call themselves with *Below The Line®* thinking; that is, they fall victim to opposing colleagues. They call out accusations of one-sidedness, inequity, wrongness, and favoritism as a way to prove that the budget allocation decisions had to do with bias practices. Both sides resist moving to cooperation and collaboration as a means to get what they really want. They are unaware that they individually hold the necessary attitude within to get to a favorable solution where compromise is palatable. Eventually, there is a critical mass of unhappy people on campus, which leads to employees at all levels losing their credibility and, becoming ineffective (Pope & Miller, 2005).

Human Resources that Help New and Veteran Leaders to Prepare for and Resolve Sensitive Situations

Vaughn (2000), O’Banion (2009), and Elsner and Boggs (2005) made the case that the position of a community college EL is comparatively risky. The high-stakes status of such a position has thrust numerous leaders into becoming cautious in their approach to leadership since they fear that making a mistake will result in humiliation or job termination. According to Vaughn (2000), he noted that many executive leaders do not provide the leadership they are capable of providing because they fear failure (p. 81). What processes can be used to help them be successful?

New Leader Assimilation: Help New Hires Beat the Odds

A process developed at General Electric to help new leaders assimilate in the culture includes the following steps (Sartain & Finney, 2003, p. 98): (a) Convene a meeting with that person’s new team members during the first week. With the leader in the room, give all the team members the chance to introduce themselves; (b) Then, with the leader out of the room, the team should answer these questions: What do we want the new leader to know about us? What do we
expect of this new person? What are the burning issues in our department? What are our concerns about the new leader? What does the new leader need to know about us as a team? What do we do well? Where do we need improvement? What do we want to know about the new leader? What are the major obstacles the new leader will face? Put the answers on a flip chart – but make sure they are anonymous so that the leader can not connect the comments to specific team members; (c) Reconvene the team with the leader to review items on the flip chart. Give the new hire a chance to ask questions about the comments and explore the ways in which he or she can take quick action on some of the issues. This helps the new leader plan an agenda for the first few months that is based on employee collaboration.

Retired Executive Leadership: An Untapped Resource

Counsel and support from executive leaders who have handled circumstances comparable to those that existing executive leaders are facing would assist in resolving problems more quickly and effectively. Vaughn (2000, p. 78) suggested that a pool of experienced, successful community college leaders could serve as a national example on how to use mature leadership. The new kind of leadership provided by retired community college presidents (p. 79) could be expanded to a broader group of retired executive leadership including deans, vice presidents, provosts, chief financial officers, and chief operating officers. These executive leaders may be willing to work supportively and mutually with the current community college EL because they are free to think more profoundly than was likely while they were in their leadership role. In other words, they would be able to express themselves “freely but not recklessly” (p. 81) while serving as a principal partner or coach to the current leader.

Leadership From the Heart

Kouzes and Posner (2007) advanced the notion that “loving to lead” (p. 351) has much to do with the sustainability and success of an organizational leader as does his/her formal credentials, knowledge, and technical skill set. This notion suggests that relying solely on the matching of leadership characteristics with a traditional leadership checklist is not enough to support and uphold the entire philosophy of what makes an effective leader. When the going gets tough, the effective leader relies on his/her heartfelt strength to lead the way and to stay the course in the midst of extreme pressure and difficulty. The leader has no problem surrendering to the security of this kind of passion because it reawakens the enthusiasm within to help continue to move forward. As a result, this kind of leader is able to get up day after day and put in long hours at work just for the love of it. The researchers concluded that “staying in love with leading, with the people who do the work, with what the leader’s organization produces, and with those who honor the organization by using its products and services is an affair of the heart” (p. 351), which is an authentic mark of an effective, successful leader.

Summary

Apprehension sets in when a new administrator replaces a long-term leader. The new leader and the existing employees may be at odds with each other, which may lead to an unproductive environment. The study of leadership characteristics, an analysis of the complexities of a community college campus and the development of new employee assimilation processes may assist with a smoother transition.
References


Judith K. Berry, dean of the division of Business, Media & Information Technologies, Lansing Community College, MC 2000, PO Box 40010, Lansing, MI 48901, berryj4@lcc.edu. Doctoral student at Walden University, College of Education, Community College Leadership specialization.

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