

Academic Leadership — Getting Emotional

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On the University of Turku's blog in January 2017, Dean Markus Granlund wrote on what good management and leadership in universities is. He concluded the article with his most important message to university leaders: be yourself. What, however, if the environment prevents you from behaving in the way you would like to? What if you need to put all your efforts into managing your own feelings to fulfil the expectations and requirements of your job? What if you are asked to do things that are very much against your own thinking? When your role demands conflict with your own values, and you need to display emotions which do not match your true feelings, you might experience emotional labour that can have serious consequences on both the personal and organisational levels (Grandey 2000). Let's take a slightly unconventional view, and look at academic leadership from the perspective of emotions.

What are emotions?

Emotions have been investigated across disciplines for decades, and perhaps because of this multi-disciplinarity, scholars have found it difficult to agree on a single, overarching definition of the concept (e.g. Mulligan & Scherer 2012). Here, emotions are understood as mental states of (action) readiness that arise from the cognitive appraisals of events and the social interaction of thoughts. Emotions have a phenomenological nature: they are accompanied by physiological processes and are often expressed physically (Bagozzi, Gobinath & Nyer 1999). They are reactions to stimuli and lead to behaviour (Nummenmaa 2010). Emotions can be classified as positive (e.g. happiness, pride, relief, love), negative (e.g. anger, fright, anxiety, guilt, shame, sadness, envy, jealousy, disgust) and mixed (e.g. hope, compassion, gratitude) (Lazarus 1993). All types of emotions can have either positive and negative consequences depending on various contingency factors.

Although similar, basic emotions can be considered to be universal (e.g. Laros & Steenkamp 2005), the norms for experiencing and displaying emotions vary among different cultures (Eid & Diener 2001). The universality of emotions has been challenged, especially by social scientists who argue that emotions are socially constructed processes and that culturally different models of self in relation

to others make it possible to observe cultural differences in relation to emotions (Boiger & Mesquita 2012). Therefore, emotions and all forms of emotion regulation can be understood only, and should be studied, in connection with their cultural context (Mesquita & Albert 2007; Mesquita & Delvaux 2013).

Emotions can vary due not only to their cultural embeddedness but also to the history of interactions and future projections of where they might lead (Boiger & Mesquita 2012). Employees in diverse cultural contexts adjust their emotions to the needs and expectations of others at work, just as they do at home; therefore, it is essential that companies operating internationally take this into account when introducing universal rules across their organisation (Mesquita & Delvaux 2013).

Emotions in organisations

Emotions have been of scholarly interest for decades in a number of disciplines, especially in psychology but also in medical science, the social sciences and linguistics. Interest in emotion research emerged late among management scholars, mostly during the past 15 years (Ashkanasy & Humphrey 2011). Emotions in the workplace have often been studied with affective events theory (AET) (Ashkanasy & Daus 2002), which links together workplaces, work-related events, emotions and employee behaviour. AET can be applied to organisations on five levels of analysis: within-person, between persons, interpersonal interactions, group and organisation-wide (Ashkanasy 2003). Studies on how to manage emotions at work have concentrated on improving emotional intelligence and controlling the level of emotional labour. Unfortunately, much of the research is inconsistent and scattered, mostly due to inadequate definitions of core concepts and researchers' failure to recognise the role of context in emotions (Gooty et al. 2009).

Scholars, however, do agree on a few issues. For example, emotions are considered to be contagious. Observing others' emotional reactions might cause the observer to experience similar emotions (Nummenmaa 2010). Thus, whether we like it or not, both positive and negative emotions spread efficiently in organisations. Managers' task then is to steer emotions so that they support positive identity-building in the organisation (Raitis et al., forthcoming).

At the same time, we know that employees also tend to model themselves and their emotions based on top managers (Ashkanasy & Daus 2002); consequently, managers set the mood and atmosphere of the organisation. In other words, managers are the key actors in helping employees cope with work-related stress. Some types of stress have positive impacts, and others negative (Lazarus 1993), but it is fair to say that the academic world has undergone such turmoil during the past decade that negative emotions are dominant, and the unfavourable consequences of stress are visible.

Universities as a platform for emotions

Although politicians sometimes argue differently, universities are not similar to other types of organisations. Work in universities centres on the creation and dissemination of new knowledge—activities not common in other types of knowledge-intensive organisations (cf. Alvesson 2001). Additionally, faculty members are strongly driven by intrinsic motives. Academics typically see universities as independent organisations that have commonly accepted aims and in which actions are based on trust (Välikangas 2012). This classical ideal has been challenged by the introduction of management practices, which are perceived to conflict with the fundamental values of universities, such as collegiality, academic freedom and scholarship (Bolden et al. 2014). Also, the cultural memory of universities has been ignored (Nyman 2017). This has led to increasing role ambiguity and conflict among university employees, had impacts on faculty job satisfaction (Schulz 2013) and increased emotional labour (Ogbonna & Harris 2004).

The experienced tension between different aspects of academic life gives rise to stress and dysfunction (Bolden et al. 2014) and is the source of a number of emotions. All members of academic communities need to regulate their emotions, especially negative ones, to maintain the balance needed for personal well-being (Kokkonen 2010). However, such forced emotion regulation (behaviour to increase, maintain or decrease emotion) (Gross 1999) might lead to negative consequences, such as emotion exhaustion (Hochschild 1983). A key mechanism linking emotion regulation to workplace outcomes is emotional dissonance, which results from a mismatch between publicly displayed and subjectively experienced emotions (Cote et al. 2008). In this respect, one group in the academic community under considerable emotional pressure is deans and other academic leaders, such as department heads.

In universities, academic leadership is tightly interwoven with formal institutional roles, although leadership also exists elsewhere in the organisation (Bolden et al. 2014). From this point of view, the key academic leader is the dean, whose task is especially challenging in a turbulent environment. Gallos (2002) described deans as classic middle managers with enormous responsibilities, insufficient resources and little positional power and authority. Unfortunately, this description continues to fit very well the current situation of shrinking governmental funding and strong authority invested in universities' top management. The dean is the messenger between top management and the faculty, often communicating bad news. At the same time, the dean must motivate the faculty and staff to achieve superior performance. Emotional dissonance in practice.

Being an academic leader requires not only managing activities but also dealing with people. This aspect of the work is crucial in organisations which have almost no other assets than human capital. However, those working in universities are not

easy to lead. They are clever, intelligent and creative—but sometimes also arrogant, complacent and easily offended. The Dean of Turku School of Economics Markus Granlund referred to exercising leadership in a university as ‘*herding cats*’ in his opening speech at the Top Management Forum in March 2017. The former Rector of the University of Tampere Jorma Sipilä used an even stronger metaphor describing his prior work as ‘*one hand on a champagne glass, the other one in deep shit*’ (Sipilä 2007, 188). Mission impossible, some would say. Some university professors, though, voluntarily accept the task, perhaps not fully understanding the related emotional pressures.

Emotion management in a university

It has been argued that universities survive in the current turbulent environment only through the renewal of processes and practices. This requires novel, dynamic leadership, in which academic leaders are proactive, well-networked change agents who support multidisciplinary activities (Ståhle & Åberg 2012). Leaders need to be prepared to react to sudden, unexpected events and to prioritise what is and is not worth action (Sipilä 2007). It also helps for leaders to understand that, to protect their own interests, it is not necessary that they are always involved in everything. A future academic leader is good at balancing, whether it is a question of autonomy vs. collegiality, individuality vs. collaboration or stability vs. change.

I further argue that a future academic leader needs to be emotionally intelligent. Here, emotional intelligence refers to the ability to monitor and discriminate among the feelings and emotions of oneself and others and to use this information to guide one’s thinking and actions (Salovey & Mayer 1990). Emotionally intelligent leaders are aware of their own emotions, are able to regulate them and have internal motivation, empathy and social skills (Greenockle 2010, Goleman 1995). These leaders use flexible empathy and sympathy to guarantee smooth social interactions (cf. Nummenmaa 2010).

Indeed, studies demonstrate that emotional intelligence is linked to effective leadership in higher education. For example, Parrish (2015) found that leaders with strong emotional intelligence are sensitive and responsive to others’ emotional needs and actions, and their empathy inspires and guides others to better manage themselves. In other words, efficient academic leaders are good at emotion regulation and controlling emotional dissonance, resulting in a positive role model for others. Such behaviour leads to increased emotional identification among employees, which, in turn, is associated with positive feelings about one’s membership, including pride, enthusiasm, and a sense of affiliation or belongingness with oth-

ers. Negative emotions, though, might lead to dis-identification or decreasing levels of identification (Raitis et al., forthcoming). Well-performing academic leaders seem to be able to benefit from the contagiousness of positive emotions.

Earlier research indicates that some individuals are better at reading and managing emotions than others (George 2000). None of us, though, is perfect. How then can academic leaders improve their emotional competence? The starting point is better self-awareness: when you understand yourself, you also better understand others' emotions and manage your own emotions (Offerman et al. 2004). These competences are especially important in team environments, such as research groups, where the importance of social skills is decisive. Given the calls for multidisciplinary research projects, the need for these capabilities can be expected to increase in the future.

Discussion

Reflecting on his previous work, Sipilä, the former rector of the University of Tampere, concluded:

“Management [in a university] is easy. Just promote 200 issues. And resist five. As long as you do it all proficiently.” (Sipilä 2007, 182)

Well then, what issues should be promoted in the future? Which should be resisted? A good start could be to support the core tasks of the university: research, education and impact. For example, Turku School of Economics has formulated its mission as follows:

“Our mission is to produce internationally high-quality intellectual contributions based on both theoretical and applied research, drawing on discipline-based and interdisciplinary scholarship. We aim to educate responsible future leaders for national and international businesses and the Finnish public sector.”

Clearly, these, along with the wellbeing of employees, are issues worth promoting. At the same time, academic leaders now and in the future need to fight against the different forms of stupidity that distract us from the mission of the university (Alvesson & Spicer 2016). These battles, though, might be frustrating and arouse negative emotions among faculty and staff. Therefore, we cannot expect leaders' need for emotional regulation to decrease—thus, being oneself is still not always possible.

Additionally, the turbulence in the academic world increases the need for employees to trust their academic leaders. The so-called post-truth era has created a

novel context for academic leadership as people trust not facts but their personal emotions, which they can feel to be real (de Jong 2017). Therefore, the interaction between academic leaders and faculty members cannot be based only on facts but also needs to include a component that is emotionally attractive. Ignoring negative emotions is not a wise strategy; it will only worsen the situation (Pearson 2017).

In addition to taking care of the wellbeing of the faculty and staff, future academic leaders need to take care of themselves. The best strategy naturally is to ensure experiences of positive emotions, so leaders should encourage enjoying personal achievements. It is easy to state that negative emotions should be avoided but difficult to do so. However, this advice should be taken seriously. In the worst case, long-term forced emotional regulation can lead to emotional hangover, a state in which past emotional experiences affect future behaviour (Tambini et al. 2017). Thus, being aware of and expressing one's emotions is not a weakness; it is a ventilator which should be used regularly. And being a bit selfish is not always a bad thing.

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