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Why Do *I* Need Leadership Training?

Changes inside and outside of universities are resulting in new demands being placed on university leaders. To be able to lead under such circumstances, it is clear that you need to understand how these demands affect you, your colleagues, and your university. And as a leader you need support. One way to support leaders in their difficult roles is through leadership training programmes. A specific example of a leadership training programme is the U4 Academic Leadership programme. How do the participants in this international leadership development programme perceive and respond to it? And what are the benefits of such a programme? Through a leadership training programme, participants can learn about strategically important issues, meet colleagues, get a better understanding of their leadership circumstances, and increase their networks.

Uppsala University

Uppsala University is the Nordic region's oldest university – founded in 1477 – and is ranked among the top 100 universities in the world. The University has more than 40,000 students. Its nearly 5,000 researchers and teachers conduct world-leading research and offer a seemingly endless number of courses.

Continual skills development for leaders is vital for creating world-leading research and high quality education. To emphasise the importance of development for leaders and groups, Uppsala University offers a wide range of training initiatives for teachers, researchers and leaders. Recently, a new careers centre has been created to support and coach researchers.

1. Introduction

The pressures occurring in universities, in part due to a fast changing environment, have increasingly focused attention on the importance of leadership. The role of leadership is a key issue for universities and leading and managing academics is challenging. Whether it's a matter of heading up a research team, managing a department or shaping an entire institution, effective leadership is often required. At a time of great changes in universities, the quality of university leadership is an issue of key importance.

Prior to a leadership promotion, most employees in academia have worked for many years to become specialized in their field of research. They often have advanced knowledge in their own field of expertise but sometimes very little experience leading or managing others. They are often very driven and know very well how much their own careers depend on what they do, and in this they draw upon their own expertise and past actions. Leadership, on the other hand, is less about one's own expertise and career and more about responsibility for other individuals; it's about communicating and moving groups and the organisation towards certain ways of acting. These experts need to shift from a position of focus on their own tasks to coordinating the efforts of many. This often means learning how to frame problems that are more overarching and organisationally complex. It might also mean coping with new kinds of stresses and discovering new ways to derive satisfaction from their work. This could be more difficult than they anticipate and they do need support in transitioning into this role, and for the changes that occur as they move up the management career ladder.

One way to provide support is to offer leadership training. This article aims to discuss answers to the questions that some of these academics might ask such as "Why do I need leadership training?"

I do so by first discussing leadership and the different perspectives on leadership. As leadership is always dependent on the circumstances, we also need to understand the academic context and the huge changes that many universities currently have to deal with. As a practical example of leadership training, this article focuses on a specific programme: the U4 Academic Leadership programme. How do participants in an international leadership development programme perceive this particular leadership programme? And what are the benefits of such a programme?

2. Leadership

For some time, there has been a lot of discussion around the demanding role of university leaders as stewards of highly complex and almost unmanageable organisations. As universities become increasingly complex, operating in a more and more dynamic environment with increasing uncertainty, many observers have argued that the demands on university leaders at different levels are rising. In addition, with increased demands for accountability, efficiency and transparency in universities, the activities of reporting, analysing, measuring, monitoring and evaluating have become key concerns at various levels within universities. Furthermore, the competition among universities, combined with technological, financial, social and political changes, have placed new demands on university leaders. In response, university organisational structures have become more complex with greater specialisation of functions, increased professionalisation of roles, and the addition of more layers of management. All together, these changes are generating escalating demands on university leaders (for a more thorough discussion about this, see Engwall and Eriksson Lindvall 2012).

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Leadership is often spoken of as a concrete phenomenon but it remains difficult to define. John Kotter (1990), a well-known leading theorist in the field of leadership, argues that leadership and management are separate but complementary systems of action. Leadership is required to effect or cope with change, while management is needed to handle complexity within and around the organisation. In real life, the terms management and leadership are often used synonymously. In this article – for practical reasons - I use the term leadership to include aspects

of both "leadership" and "management" when referring to formally ap-
pointed academic leaders in the university system. In a university cont-
ext leaders also need to manage and those processes of leadership and
management are most often inseparable.

Leadership — produces change and movement	Management — produces order and consistency
1. Establishes direction · Creates a vision · Clarifies the big picture · Sets strategies	1. Planning and budgeting · Establishes agendas · Sets timetable · Allocates resources
2. Aligns people · Communicates goals · Seeks commitment · Builds teams, coalitions and alliances	2. Organising and staffing · Provides structure · Establishes positions · Establishes rules and procedures
3. Motivates and inspires · Energizes · Empowers subordinates and colleagues · Satisfies unmet needs	3. Controlling and problem solving · Develops incentives · Generates creative solutions · Takes corrective action

Figure 1   *Leadership and management (source: Northouse 2007 in
which he draws on Kotter 1990)*

Popular conceptions cast leadership in different lights, each one high-
lighting a separate facet of the subject. Leadership is often linked to the
authority of the position and taking charge, which legitimates the exer-
cise of influence over others. Furthermore, leadership entails taking the
initiative for action, through initiating projects, ideas or developments.
This is also linked to achievements and to successful outcomes. Expec-
tations and experiences of leadership, and the prevailing circumstan-
ces, colour both individual and collective perceptions and practices.
Different features of leadership are more or less relevant for different
organisations and at different times. Leadership is never the same in
every organisation and at all times.

To summarize leadership theories of importance for university leaders
is not an easy task. And sometimes it is also said that leadership is not
necessary in the academic context at all, as academic freedom is an ide-
al. The ideal of academic freedom highlights values such as critical re-
flection, autonomy, and democratic participation, where all academics
have a right to their say, regardless of their formal position. But still,
even though everyone has the right to have their say, resources must
be coordinated, laws have to be followed, and groups, departments and
institutions need to be led. And in any professional setting, leadership
can only be exercised effectively on the basis of legitimate authority
(which professors higher up on the career ladder often have more of)
and the willing compliance of members of the organisation with influen-
ce. It is about getting people to coordinate efforts so that things might
occur that otherwise would not occur, or to prevent things from hap-
pening that would otherwise happen.

Other aspects of academic organisations also need to be highlighted. One is the dual hierarchy of academic and administrative authority, where formal leadership roles might sometimes be challenged by more informal leadership founded on power bases such as specific knowledge, resources or networks. Another is the use of part-time leaders with time-limited roles, which at best provide a check on the concentration of power but can also cause stress as a result of role transitions, shortage of time, and vagueness in roles.

Leadership is a complex interaction between leaders, followers, and circumstances. As the result of leadership being dependent on the actual circumstances, no best way to lead can be identified. Everything is contingent, where people, resources, goals and other situational factors affect the possibility to lead (Yukl 2013). Since leadership can be viewed as relationships with the purpose of influencing individuals to strive to attain goals, it is clear that leadership can be executed both directly and indirectly, in formal roles or informal roles, because of the way in which other individuals respond to these roles.

Without influence, there is no leadership. Defining leadership as a process implies that leaders are affected by more or less willing followers. Groups are the context in which leadership takes place and this includes attention to common goals. To learn how to be a leader is primarily an on-the-job experience. Nevertheless, certain aspects of leadership can be trained and many leaders feel that formal training can play an important role in their development as leaders (Hill 2003).

» *Leadership is never the same in every organisation and at all times.* «

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3. Leadership training

Even though leadership development is a long-term process where both skills and behaviour have importance, it is debatable whether leadership can be effectively taught. A key underlying assumption in most of the work of leadership scholars is that leaders can learn, grow and change and that this learning and personal growth does enhance their effectiveness in leadership. Some natural talents can be beneficial to an individual's effectiveness in leadership, while other significant aspects of knowledge, skills, and abilities that make up an effective leader can be taught.

For those with assigned (formal) leadership roles, leadership training can fulfil critical functions. Hill (2003, p. 219) identified five critical functions that formal training can fulfil:

1. It acquaints the leaders with organisational policies, procedures and resources.

2. It provides valuable insights into organisational cultures and provides an understanding of what is valued.

3. It can be a forum where the participants can receive feedback.

4. It facilitates developmental relationships with peers and sometimes superiors.

5. It is a rite of passage, as it gives the participants a formal orientation in their roles.

Developing individual leaders is critically important to leadership development. Without individual preparation for the demands and challenges of leadership, many will find themselves in over their heads in difficult situations. In many organisations, there is an acute need to develop leadership in order to accelerate the leader development process. The kinds of challenges that universities are facing require a broad capacity for leadership. Given the complexity of many of these challenges, it is unlikely that any single leader will hold all of the answers. Successful adaptation to challenges is likely to require a broad-based participation in leadership; however, individuals need to be prepared to take on such responsibility (Day, Zaccaro & Halpin 2004).

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Becoming a leader is both an intellectual and emotional challenge and there are no crash courses in how to be an effective leader. However, many managers do benefit from management training courses. Let us move on to one example of such a course with the goal of improving leadership in academia: the U4 Academic Leadership programme.

4. Leadership training in practice – the U4 case

As leadership is contingent on the circumstances, we need to understand the academic context and the big changes that many universities are being required to handle. Can leadership training provide support to top-level managers in European universities and improve their leadership skills? If so, how? The case used to discuss this is the U4 Academic Leadership programme.

The European University Network (the U4 Network) was founded in 2008, and includes Ghent University (Belgium), the University of Göttingen

(Germany), the University of Groningen (the Netherlands), and Uppsala University (Sweden). These universities are comprehensive research universities with a similar profile, size, reputation, and a long-standing tradition in academic cooperation. The U4 Network stands for preferential, but not exclusive, cooperation in European and international projects, the development of joint initiatives in research and education, and the organisation and promotion of staff and student exchanges (www.U4network.eu).

The U4 Academic Leadership programme is a training course for top-level executives in each of the four cooperating universities. Three cycles of the leadership programme have been launched since 2012, with the most recent one ending in 2019.

The programme's aims are to:

- increase U4 cooperation with a focus on strategic leadership.

- create international leadership networks inside the U4 Network.

- develop and share knowledge, skills and experiences of international trends, problems and solutions within a trusted environment.

A fixed number of twenty participants follow the entire programme, which spans a four-semester period with one session each semester, comprising four sessions in total. Five people from both academic and administrative top-levels from each university are selected by the different universities' Vice-Chancellors, Chancellors or Boards, in order to maintain a "high profile" programme aimed at creating new networks and new skills in dealing with current leadership issues.

Each session (a three-day meeting) deals with a main theme and is hosted by one of the four universities. Examples of themes from the most recent cycle are:

- Developing Academic Talent - focusing on developing academic talent and aspects of internationalisation, diversity and leadership (hosted by the University of Groningen).

- Creating Transparency and Accountability in European universities - concentrating on issues relating to governance, transparency and accountability in a European context (hosted by Ghent University).

- Leading Top Quality Universities - dealing in particular with aspects of what makes a university: quality, culture and the effects of ranking (hosted by Uppsala University).

- Managing Change and Preparing for the future - addressing the questions of change management and the future of universities (hosted by the University of Göttingen).

The U4 Academic Leadership programme is coordinated by staff (who work regularly with leadership training and personnel development) from each of the four universities. The sessions are built on active

participation and blended learning, with expert speakers from the host university. An external facilitator is hired for all four sessions.

5. What's in it for me?

Every cycle of the programme has been evaluated and the quick answer to the question What's in it for me? according to the evaluations is obviously "A lot". Participants from each of the cycle give the programme extremely positive ratings and 100 percent of the participants (all together 60 participants) advocate for the programme being repeated and offered to colleagues. In the most recent cycle (ending in 2019), written comments from the participants were collected in a survey. Many of the participants highlighted specific insights from the programme such as the importance of understanding that other leaders where dealing with the same kinds of problems. As one participant put it:

I was touched by the „commonness" and similarity of our problems.

In this great group of colleagues, there are many situations, problems in their professional life that were similar to my experiences.

And another one:

I have learnt that most of my colleagues share experiences of leadership problems that are very similar to mine and that there are many quite simple but very useful methods out there to use in navigating as a leader.

Getting to know leadership colleagues within the university network was also mentioned several times when the participants explained why they are satisfied with the programme.

I appreciated the power of speaking up and sharing your story in a circle of trusted friends… And to get an expanded network.

University leaders at these top levels are often very busy. To participate in a programme like this must be worth the time it takes away from an already full schedule. And the participants do think it is worth their time and answered the question "What's in it for me" in the following ways (examples below):

It is an excellent programme for doing, learning and sharing.

And in another participant's words:

It is the most helpful workshop I have ever participated in.

One of the really strong points of the programme is that the participants get to know other university leaders:

It is a strong initiative to support the U4 network and an excellent tool to increase international cooperation, it is a booster for U4.

It is a unique programme since it includes participants from different universities in different countries. Provides an international perspective.

The programme in joint delivery by our institutions offers not only a framework to share experiences around similar problems/issues/joys (even!) :) but also enhances the power which lies in personal connections. It makes the U4 alive.

And it was also pointed out that leadership programmes might be an effective way for learning new skills. As one of the participants put it:

The programme increases the leadership qualities of the leaders strongly. Often, the leaders are scientists, not well trained for the job. They learn by trial and error, not to the benefit of the organisation. The training shortens the learning process and delivers better leaders.

To sum up, the U4 Academic Leadership programme has been well received, with generally very positive feedback and a unanimous (100 %) recommendation that it should be repeated. The group's diversity, content diversity, and trusted environment were greatly appreciated features of the programme. It is not possible to say anything about the long-term effects of the programme at this point, but we can conclude that the programme has a number of benefits:

1. It acquaints the leaders with the U4 Network.

2. It provides valuable insights into four European universities and provides an understanding of what is valued and knowledge in how to deal with issues of strategic importance for European universities.

3. It offers a forum in which the participants can openly discuss important issues and receive feedback. This is important to increasing role clarity.

4. It facilitates developmental relationships with peers and sometimes superiors.

5. It provides an international network.

6. Concluding remarks

Leadership development is a long-term process and profiting and learning from experience is most important. Sometimes a programme like the U4 Academic Leadership programme is the solution. I started out this article with the question some university leaders sometimes ask: Why do *I* need leadership training? This question can of course be answered in many different ways. Firstly, it is obvious that changes inside and outside of universities lead to new demands on university leaders. To be able to lead, you need to understand how these demands affect you, your colleagues and your university. Secondly, to lead in the academic context where people often value their autonomy and academic freedom can be more challenging than anticipated. To be able to take on the role as leader, you need to understand yourself as a leader and get support (through coaching, training or certain expertise) from the organisation. Thirdly, one way to support leaders is through leadership programmes. Through a leadership programme, you can gain knowledge about strategically important issues, meet colleagues, get a better understanding of your leadership situation, and increase your networks.

Together, we need to create contexts in universities in which people can learn and lead – arenas for dialogue, discussion and networking.

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Carin is one of the initiators of the pan-European leadership development programme for top executives in the U4 Network. The U4 Network consists of Gent University, the University of Groningen, the University of Göttingen, and Uppsala University. Together with colleagues at these four universities, she is one of the coordinators for this programme.