**The Development and Implementation of a System based model to Improve Academic Leadership**
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*Introduction:* The demands for skilled workers for the ‘knowledge economy’ have challenged the notion of the university as an elite institution. Increasingly, universities have become regarded as engines of the economy (Bolden et. al., 2012). These changes are evident in Sweden, where full-time students at universities and colleges have more than doubled in the last 20 years, from 130 000 to over 300 000 (Jusek, 2011). Despite these rapid changes the old ideal for academic leadership as a community of scholars prevails. Is that functional? In our study undertaken at one of the country’s leading medical institutions the answer to that question is: not quite.

In 2012 a team at Medical Management Centre at Karolinska Institutet (KI) started “Development of leadership, team and individual resources” at KI. The project was induced by a survey of the psychosocial work environment; indicating problems with sleep disturbances (40% had trouble recovering) and harassment (15 % had observed this in the workplace). The indexes for work satisfaction and work motivation were high (Sandahl, 2012).

Despite employees demonstrating high work motivation, breakthrough research was comparably lower to other international elite institutions (KI, Strategi 2018) and KI did not excel more than other Swedish universities in educational quality as assessed by the National Agency for Renewal in Higher Education.

Successful academic environments, conducting breakthrough research and education pushing the frontiers of human knowledge, are characterised by a high degree of autonomy, flexibility, social integration, cooperation and employee security. This assumes the existence of leadership that can both identify the most central research and education issues and developmental trends, and simultaneously contribute to good spirit and job satisfaction (Hollingsworth, 2003).

Hemlin, Allwood, and Martin (2008) describe creative research environments, as having a positive group- and organisational climate, to which leadership is important. Roxå and Mårtensson (2011) describe successful research and education being performed in academic microcultures characterized by a high degree of internal trust, supportive collegial engagement and shared sense of purpose.

How would an open climate contribute to breakthrough research and education? An interesting reason is put forward by Argyris (1991). He argues that highly skilled professionals who rarely experience failure don´t know how to learn from setbacks. Instead they become defensive, screen out criticism, and put the “blame” on anyone but themselves to avoid feelings of embarrassment, vulnerability or incompetence. In short, their ability to learn shuts down precisely at the moment they need it the most.

A number of studies show that organizations that generate the best creative results are those where management systematically supports creative processes (Dahlén, 2008).

Leadership positions in Swedish academia are assigned according to the principal “the first among equals”. Leader positions can be seen as a relay; you fill the position for some years and then you go back to your previous engagement, often as a research group leader. Thus as a Head of a department you might be the head of many other previous department heads. This can infer problems. The question of power can be unclear: to where do the realms of the Head of Department stretch? Historic knowledge and stability can be provided by the
Head of Administrations, and financial might stems from many different sources: from education, from publishing, from outside stakeholders for research funding etc.

Research question: How would developing leadership skills for the management team and not singularly for the individual Department Head, affect academic leadership? Can academic leadership gain from more clearly defining role, goal and context?

Leadership has been viewed as a potential obstacle to creativity, and the creative act as an individualistic undertaking (Vessey et al., 2014). However this notion might be on its way out since a number of studies indicate that leadership is often beneficial to creativity, and may even be critical to creative performances (Heinze et al., 2009). Little work has been done though, examining the effects on leadership on highly creative people in fields requiring creativity such as academia. What has been done indicate strategic planning as a positive effect of leadership in these settings (Vessey et al., 2014).

Thus building on the university’s vision to provide an environment where creative research and education can flourish, this project focused on a system based method emphasising role, goal and context. With the intention to achieve a containing structure where "management becomes a defence of the individual researcher’s autonomy and self-determination” (Ernö-Kjölhede et al., 2001).

The development program used in this project is based on Systems Theory and has been used in many different types of organisations (Sundlin & Sundlin, 2012), raising the question whether there are least common denominators of leadership; necessary, (but maybe not sufficient) conditions for leadership skills?

Method: Management teams from four institutions volunteered in a program consisting of four seminars, all observed by a researcher and followed by a questionnaire to the participants. A baseline group development questionnaire, GDQ (Wheelan, 2005), was distributed, as well as a follow up after the third seminar.

The first seminar establishes a common lay of the ground by clarifying role, goal and context and what it implies to take a functional role in different settings. The second: on the development and dynamic of groups. Central theories on stages of group development are presented as well as the team’s results on the baseline GDQ. The third seminar: focusing on functional communication and forums for information transfer. Between the third and the forth meeting, the teams do a second GDQ, to measure if there have been any changes. At the forth seminar these findings are discussed, and previously raised and unanswered questions explored. (At this point, Aug. 28, no team has done the whole program).

Results: The first round of GDQ showed teams simultaneously being in group stages 1 and 3-4, with few in stage two. Basically that implied that the groups were not entering the phase called opposition and conflict - a phase where you start in earnest to explore the space and boundaries of your role (Wheelan, 2005). Whether that has happened in the second measure to early to say (results will come this fall).

After each seminar the team members answered questionnaires. On a 6-point likert scale the results were on average 5.0 on usefulness, satisfaction and learning from the program.

One or two researchers observed all the seminars using developmental evaluation: the intervention is emerging in real time and using evaluation data to adapt the intervention to what emerges (Patton, 2011). So far an inductive content analysis (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004) show gratefulness for the clarifications of role, goal and context, for getting to know the team members better, honing communications skills and getting tools facilitating more efficient meetings.

Discussion: There were in some groups a hesitation and resistance against implementing and even discussing structures. This unease was expressed differently in each of the four
cases, raising the question if there are common denominators in academic leadership; some might thrive on clarity, some on chaos, maybe it is a question both of leadership skills and where you are positioned in the social strata? Hopefully this can be more thoroughly discussed in Copenhagen.

References: