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ACADEMIC LEADERSHIP: EMERGING PERSPECTIVES

Sarika C. Saju

Associate Professor

RIE, NCERT, Shyamla Hills, Bhopal

ABSTRACT:

Academic leadership assumes critical importance in the shaping and determination of the direction of education system in the modern times when education as a process and an institution is undergoing rapid changes. Academic leaders are finding themselves at the crucial transition point with the huge responsibility of being effective in facilitating deep learning and emerging as catalysts with the capacity to effect positive change and transform the vision of education into reality. Consensus is emerging on the important dimensions of academic leadership which include curiosity, credibility, collegiality, capabilities, character and confidence. The definition of academic leadership also encompasses the operational abilities to manage teams and organizations and personal qualities like integrity, honesty, diligence and devotion to the goals of education.

KEY WORDS: Collegiality, Integrity, Deep Learning, Capability, Credibility and Curiosity.

INTRODUCTION:

Over the years, with the constantly-increasing and intensifying modernization, both the concept and practice of education have undergone tremendous changes. Education, as a social institution, had a very traditional framework and character in India which served to address the needs of the specific periods of the history. However, the traditional character of education had to undergo several major shifts to make it more relevant to the modern times which explain the rationale of the substantial changes that are visible in the institution of education. Consequently, the set of responsibilities of the leaders who shape and steer education system in India also witnessed extensive changes. One of the most visible changes in the education

domain in India is the replacement of the traditional education system with the West-rooted education system with numerous specializations. Unlike the traditional education system that was markedly simple, the modern education system is remarkable for its complexity and professional utility. The role and responsibility of academic leaders therefore, were bound to undergo transformation so that these continue to remain relevant in the rapidly-changing education scenario.

Rapid advancements in the education system and the responsibility set of teachers have cumulatively increased the pressure on the academic leaders who have the responsibility of coping with the developments ushering into the domain of education. There have been continuous reflections and discourses on the role of academic leaders, who determine both the direction and the pace of education system in the rapidly-changing sphere of education. These reflections have contributed to the solidification of thought on the role of academic leader as a catalyst with the capacity to effect positive change and transform the vision of education into reality of accomplishing the stated goals of education. Another feature of academic leadership has been its proficiency to foster deep learning at individual and organization levels.

Academic leadership assumes critical importance in education process because it has a direct and high impact on the quality of learning of students. For ensuring the delivery and quality of an academic field of study, teachers need to become inspiring individuals without necessarily using coercion or power. This implies that academic leaders should be able to accomplish high levels of authority – in terms of knowledge and skills – for being able to influence, motivate and inspire people to follow them. Traditional education had largely relied on individuals as teachers and smaller groups as learning circles; however, this model has transformed into a complex system in which large formal institutions have become agents and vehicles of education. Such complex and huge organizations make it necessary for academic leaders to develop orientation and skills to delegate and distribute works and get these tasks accomplished in inspiring quality.

In simple terms an academic leader, in the modern context, is a person who accomplishes high academic goals at personal and organization levels by managing change, building consensus and promoting collaboration for the advancement of education. The criteria for academic leadership change from one situation to another and from one role to another. For example, the parameters for academic leadership excellence change between contexts like school, colleges, supporting institutions etc. and these parameters will be different for the roles like school teachers, college teachers, administrators etc. Therefore, defining academic leadership in itself is

challenging as the nomenclature represents a complex set of abilities required for persons who manage the delivery and quality of an academic field of study.

Effective academic leaders should be able to effortlessly move between five operational academic roles as developer, monitor, deliverer, broker and innovator (Vilkinas & Cartan, 2001, 2006). Academic leaders should have the proficiency to develop effective systems of education practice and ensure that these systems are efficiently overseen. Continuous and efficient monitoring, as an operational role of academic leadership, has critical importance because of the necessity to maintain the constant delivery of high-quality education by the responsible institutions and agencies. Education system is a complex interrelationship of roles and agencies which are situation and context-specific. This requires that the academic leadership needs to possess the ability to synchronize the functioning of several agents and institutions into a coordinated action directed towards the accomplishment of the single objective of academic excellence. No less important is the ability of the academic leaders to innovate for identifying solutions to the fast-changing times. Ability to think "out of the box" should come naturally to academic leaders while approaching the challenges of education.

A sound academic leader is the one who can create healthy academic environment where students, teachers and researchers feel comfortable in the pursuit of education and excel at it. An academic practitioner or a teacher becomes a leader when s/he develops a suit of behaviors that makes him/her recognizably effective. For this, an academic leader should have the congeniality and tactfulness along with administrative acumen and competence. The academic leader should inspire students, teachers and researchers with moral uprightness and devotion to the art of learning and teaching. One characteristic of the leader that will make him/her stand out is the soundness in academics without which all other qualities become irrelevant. All qualities of an academic leader should have the underpinning of the single quality of academic excellence. Teacher as a leader should possess excellence in teaching and learning so that objectives of academics are achieved consistently. The teacher has to be an authority in the chosen discipline and also should have the necessary skills to transfer knowledge to students. Effective teaching is possible only when the practitioner possesses a comprehensive set of skills like communication, articulation, building healthy relationships with students etc. A teacher is expected to have these skills for becoming effective at teaching and thus become a model for others to emulate.

Leaders of academics should be courageous persons who are ready to embrace change, direct it and recognize that it has positive, negative, and unanticipated

consequences. In an academic context that is marked with fast changes, an academic leader is expected to possess the qualities of foresight, honesty, impartial attitude, clarity of thought, independence and readiness to respond effectively to the influences and pressures of the changing environment. While remaining aboveboard and meticulous, an academic leader is expected to have a clear vision of education, share that vision equally with all involved persons, work with cordiality with all of them and with the right intensity to convert all challenges into opportunities.

The success of an academic is directly related to his/her ability to establish credibility and trust as real leader of teaching which will require him/her to be easily accessible and available. S/he should possess non-judgmental attitude, be open to new ideas and changes and become an inspiring person with strong convictions. The field of education has become subject to countless influences and pressures. Therefore, it is necessary for the leader to have the tactfulness and efficiency to manage these mounting pressures to sustain the focus and intensity of education processes. While being honest and strict with rules and immune to external influences for maintaining independence, an academic leader is expected to have an unblemished moral character as an individual and as a scholar.

Dr. Tom Kennie (2010) proposes six key dimensions of academic leadership which are in fact six sets of composite qualities. The first of these six dimensions is *credibility* which encompasses personal, peer, organizational, political and positional considerations. The academic leader should be a person of high academic achievements enjoying positive support from the academic community. S/he should also be capable of building the reputation and be efficient in dealing with the political challenges related to education. Secondly, an academic leader is expected to demonstrate and sustain high levels of *curiosity*. Academic leaders need to continuously engage in deep learning and inspire others to follow the suit. The intellectual curiosity which will naturally encourage the beholder to take up challenges and solve these with outstanding creativity is the hallmark of an academic leader.

Thirdly, an academic leader is expected to have *collegiality* which is required for facilitating open sharing of ideas, recognition and respect for others' ideas and contributions. In other words, collegiality of the academic leader fosters team spirit, solidarity and high levels of motivation and energy. Effective academic leaders do not limit stakeholders' involvement to just the minimum level of feedback. They involve everyone in the entire process of planning, implementation and reviews as peers in implementation, collaborative evaluators and joint owners of innovations. Fourthly, an academic leader is expected to possess a wide range of *capabilities* which

help him/her respond to the situations with the required efficiency. An academic leader thus becomes successful in mapping the opportunities, making well-conceived plans and translating these plans into coherent actions. The academic leader will need these skills to deliver high levels of output by their team by defining outcomes, setting standards, regular review of performance and so on. While striving to connect with the other players in academics, an academic leader should also ensure positive reinforcement of success through the celebration of individual and group achievements.

Fifthly, an academic leader needs to have the *character* or a broad spectrum of personal qualities that forms basis of his/her identity as a person who is committed to the science of knowledge. The central one of the many qualities that an academic leader needs to have is integrity which is often expressed as the constant endeavour to maintain high ethical standards. An academic leader should have the thirst for respect to be achieved with distinctive academic contributions. Finally, *confidence* as an easily-noticeable quality should make an academic leader stand out. Academic leaders need to possess a degree of inner intellectual strength and confidence for taking forward and develop their ideas. Confidence allows the academic leader to be more comfortable in the company of others who approach their work in a very different way.

Academic leadership needs to become truer and more relevant by rising to the level of transformational leadership for making the entire gamut of learning and teaching processes more productive and enriching. The field of academics is beset with several stiff challenges making it difficult for practitioners to maintain high degree of morale and professionalism. In such scenario, academic leaders need to provide unburned vision and thus provide motivation for achieving the targeted academic goals. In transformational leadership, that is required for academics, the relationship between the academic leader and the follower is beyond a simple give-and-take one because both leader and the follower reach at same level of motivation to foster deep learning at individual and organization levels. Academic leadership thus is not just of the leader, but it is an interaction among all people involved in the academic processes – leaders and followers who inexorably influence each other positively - in a given situation for the achievement of goals of learning and teaching.

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