Talent Development for Academics: working with uniqueness through heart and mind fusion benefits the individual as much as the organization

Dr. Magdalena Bak-Maier
Organizational Development Consultant and Executive Coach

Introduction

Academics are notoriously difficult to engage in staff development activities. This is in part due to their busy roles with a focus on research papers and teaching, lack of clarity about how staff development can enhance their careers and performance, and perhaps a degree of skepticism that their nontechnical colleagues have relevant things to teach them or ‘get it’. Most of the staff development colleagues I have spoken with over the years would confess to any of these, all of them or a mixture.

I have been a scientist before transitioning into organizational development ten years ago so I can pass the last hurdle. Given my technical background and experience at world-class research and academic institutions in USA and UK, my transition into this career began by working with academic staff as their mentor, coach, trainer, and facilitator on issues ranging in personal productivity and leadership. And as my leadership developed over the years as author, consultant, entrepreneur and coach, I have increasingly been able to gain the credibility and respect of most senior academics to be able to serve as their personal advisor or strategy, leadership and organizational development issues. A role I both enjoy and find stimulating.

Over the last four years I have developed and direct a specific academic leadership programme designed to help accelerate the careers of top scientists at Imperial. I initially proposed this project to our then Rector Sir Keith O’Nions as a smart tactical action to expand our existing talent capacity more widely and realize more of the latent potential within Imperial academic staff. I was convinced that like in all other organisations, many staff were capable of far more if they were effectively engaged, mentored and given the right tools to succeed. To sponsor the project, I approached our Deputy Rector, Stephen Richardson with whom I had worked previously as consultant when he was a head of department and later head of engineering faculty.

Academic Development Centre (ADC) vision:

A new approach to academic development that delivers clear tangible improvements in academic performance and fosters a vibrant, ambitious, accountable, collaborative culture where staff can realise their career ambitions.

ADC has three objectives:

1. Provide tailored development support for academic community that empowers them to realise their academic ambitions
2. Pioneer new methods and models for staff development and learning, knowledge sharing and organisational culture
3. Demonstrate the value of this approach through specific results for participants and the institution

To date, the ADC has managed to achieve all three aims and commends tremendous respect, support and engagement from academic staff across all ranks.

The key principles of the ADC have and remain as follows:

- All academics are creative artists with potential for world class scholarship, education and research that will transform their discipline and the world. This principle reflects the Imperial College mission:
Imperial College London embodies and delivers world class scholarship, education and research in science, engineering, medicine and business, with particular regard to their application in industry, commerce and healthcare. We foster multidisciplinary working internally and collaborate widely externally.

- That irrespective of the starting point we can each improve in something if we are determined.
- Top performance is achieved through leadership where ‘what’ I do and ‘how’ I do it matters. Results are not an accident but deliberate focus and applied effort.
- Peak performance can be identified, analyzed and key strategies that help create it can be shared and developed more widely in others.
- Science or academic performance and career management are two separate but closely interlinked strands of activity both of which need to be managed by the person for their success and that of the institution. As the institutional and personal success is interlinked, it follows that the institution has a vested interest in supporting this type of activity.
- Tangible results and external measures of success are only meaningful when they are reflected within the person and vice versa.
- True productivity is more holistic in nature and involves being able to balance work and life responsibilities with one’s own wellbeing and skills to look after the wellbeing of others.
- Talent as a concept is best left in the hands of those whose minds and/or hearts whisper or hunger for their talent to be expressed through action. This happens at different stages for different people and combined with the uniqueness of each individual this means that no one competes with others per se.

Key features of the ADC

Results-orientated
All participants start with a factual starting point based on a diagnostic I designed. This diagnostic is not shared with the College. Throughout the ADC journey, participants work towards clarity of vision and specific goals through practical exercises that directly produce the results being sought.

Collaborative Fellowship
Everyone is the programme is equal. ADC is based on a fellowship where everyone including me, the programme director is journeying towards greater expression of their leadership potential. Each person has things to teach the others and learn and everyone shares their journey with the fellows. The ADC is therefore fundamentally a community of like-minded people, who share certain values and we refer to the ADC as a family.

Practical Development
All activity and development is focused on areas that directly link to everyone’s performance so that time is utilized smartly.
Evidenced Based Diagnostics
All development takes place in a factual context whether that concerns past performance trend, actual grants obtained or lost, specific lectures or one’s existing external profile. ADC approach is heavily rooted in sport psychology and emphasizes self-awareness, building up discipline and observation and improvement of specific performance. Learning is pragmatic and directly applied.

Cross-College
The programme is specifically designed to attract staff from across the institution. This means that of the 30-35 people accepted each year, 30-35% are female and that there is an appropriate spread across medicine, engineering and natural sciences that reflects the College demographic.

Key learning points

- Academics are creative in nature. What is key for this is that each person is presented with an environment in which they can thrive, tools with which they can use to “tend their garden” and institutional standards that help give general navigational cues about how to pave their path between what they want and the institutional expectations. Creating a programme that can cater for these three parameters requires sophisticated organizational development skills where the OD practitioner works strategically to influence how performance is set and managed, designs a mixture of tactical and strategic interventions across departmental, faculties and the institution that contribute to the thriving soil and inspire and engage the participants themselves to take responsibility and step up.

- There is a difference between initial enthusiasm to participate and discipline to follow through. The key obstacle to success seem to be the need to overcome internal psychological barriers, willingness to face and deal with reality, timing, discipline to work towards goals and humbleness to ask for help.

- Leadership within any discipline takes courage, clarity and time. Courage to stick one’s neck out and dare to work towards being outstanding and clarity of life’s purpose which is not easy to pin down. The results require time and patience. For many ADC participants big successes may come in two to three years and it is only now that we can begin to see the real impact of the programme. It is a process but learning good productivity habits help unlock potential and top performance.

- Culture change takes time. It has taken four years to get towards a point where we now use a sharepoint site and this still remains low. Some culture changes however were quick to implant such as more effective use of E-mail. Institutional culture and ways of working can be hard to shift but steady chipping away makes a difference.

Tangible opportunities for ADC to inform OD work

There is no doubt that as a programme the ADC is effective and successful. But a programme of this nature offers much larger value to the institution in terms of organizational development strategy. Below are three specific examples:

1. Performance data as an aggregate can inform staff development resource allocation.

All data on the ADC is contracted to be shared exclusively between the ADC director and the participant. Collective overview matrix however can still be informative in pinpointing the relative strengths, weaknesses and profiles of staff within different parts of the College. And the design used in the ADC adopted a system where this can be eyeballed in minutes.

2. Gender differences and other demographic information can inform on specific tactical interventions to best support women in science.

Support for women in science remains a key priority for STEM institutions and companies. Gender differences from the ADC data show areas where female scientists perform better and less well than
men including everything from self-perception to actual performance. This level of detail is key for designing smart interventions that can eliminate disadvantages and ensure all staff are given equal chances to succeed.

3. Faculty level data can give clues into underpinning cultures. This information can support better work improvement OD projects such as Athena, Investors in People and other initiatives to improve staff performance, satisfaction and engagement such as mentoring schemes.

While there is not enough data to perform departmental analysis, broad measures of overall performance which the ADC collects at the start of the programme year on year are very informative and can be used to track the underpinning culture change within each faculty. For example clustering of responses around a specific value on a 1-10 scale versus broad distribution of scores can highlight degrees of consistency or lack of consistency within specific areas towards things like mentoring, career support, performance feedback and other useful productivity and well-being related parameters.

Imperial College has a robust level of OD activity where this level of work can be directly undertaken between OD consultants and heads of individual departments or faculty level deans. Using data has not been necessary to derive a rationale for action to date. Nevertheless there are further opportunities in using data should more strategic approach to OD develop.

**ADC Business Model and Return on Investment**

When the ADC was envisaged, the projected cost for the programme to cover room hire, catering and few carefully selected experts was projected at circa £15,000 of seeding money. As this money didn’t exist in the budget and to avoid delay, a new business model where the ADC asked each participant to pay £500 thus creating a bank of the necessary funds was adopted. The true cost of the programme is likely closer to £5,500 per participant based on external benchmarking to other providers of elements of the ADC.

Great savings have been possible by the director’s role being already funded, administrator being resourced from the existing learning and development team, internal coaches and by making greater use of academic expertise within the organization. The Director’s background and experience saved significant costs on the diagnostic, leadership weekend and productivity expertise.

Over the last four years the yearly income from the ADC serves close to 120 people, has expanded the existing talent pool, helped identified academic coaches for the internal coaching academy, and supported other academic events as well. This is not to say that one can run an academic provision on a shoestring. In fact one can’t. However, it is to demonstrate that lack of finances is not a sufficient block to a staff developer’s or OD practitioner’s vision. A lot can be done to establish the proof and secure stable funding once data is in hand.

**Results**

The ADC proved popular with participants who hold the programme in high regard. Below are a few quotes from past attendees followed by longer term ROI measures.

*I’m about half-way through the ADC. Two of the most impressive features about the ADC programme are its flexible structure, which enables me to get the most out of it in a time-efficient way, and the careful thought that has gone into it, making it directly relevant to my needs. I would certainly recommend it!*  
Arash

*The ADC is good as it gives across a message that I need to develop and not just run around trying to support students - I need to worry about me and not them. Since I started with the ADC my output of papers has gone up – it has helped develop my confidence. I now have 6 papers in review – some*
of them would have happened anyway but it has helped. I think this is the kind of programme that should have been offered to me when I started here. It focuses on the **academic career in its entirety** and not just on teaching. In short in comparison to 8 months ago I feel less overwhelmed, more confident and **happier**. I think this has a **positive impact on my productivity** and my ability to manage difficult situations here. This should be offered to anyone interested. **Catherine**

**Outstanding programme** that allows you to **connect** with other academics and take a broad view. The leader of the programme understands academic goals and values to a ‘t’. Don’t (dis)miss this!

**Anil**

Being part of the ADC has been an **inspiration**. Magdalena has provided an experience that is both **challenging and supportive**, and being part of this group has made me see the potential of my own work in completely different ways. I have really enjoyed being part of a community of colleagues with similar issues, and developing friendships outside my own field. The sessions on writing, pitching and narrative have been especially useful. During this year I have been **promoted to Professor**, have received an **HEA National Teaching Fellowship Award** and am **applying for major funding** in several completely new areas. The ADC is a tremendous initiative and I hope many more people will be able to take part. **Roger**

I have been to many personal development courses at Imperial, and they are generally very good. However, the ADC course **exceeded all my expectations**. I find the most appealing aspect is that the support and help are **tailored to your own goals** and specific needs, rather than general advice. The activities are **challenging and stimulating** to define your **long-term scientific vision**, and hence the best strategy to achieve it. As result, **improvements are seen very fast**, **productivity increases exponentially** and papers, grants and invitations to speak at meetings and funding committees come by. The encouragement and coaching by Magdalena and her team have been **fantastic** and underpin the success of the programme so far. Yet, one of the positive aspects of the ADC course is to form a supporting community among the participants in which we benefit from the experience of each other. It has been **extremely fun, hardworking and rewarding** as can be seen by my achievements. In my view, establishment of the ADC course is a **very important step forward** to provide staff with an integrated program to excel in their academic career. **Vania**

As a result of the concepts, practices and methodologies to improve my academic and personal skills that I have learnt through the ADC programme of workshops, retreats and one-to-one coaching, I have **engaged in international collaboration in new areas** of Respiratory Science (FluiDA, Belgium), **achieved 3 publications** in 2011 (two as senior author and one as first author), and have **given a prestigious lecture** at the largest international respiratory conference (20,000 delegates) – the European Respiratory Society (ERS, Amsterdam 2011). With Magdalena’s coaching I was successful in my application for a career award (July 2011). This is the first time the Career Development Fellowship has been awarded to Respiratory Science/Thoracic Medicine in the UK and only the second time Imperial College London has been a recipient of such an award. The ADC has been an **excellent and rewarding experience** for me with **key productive outputs** that have certainly improved my visibility in the International arena of Respiratory Science and supported my ambition to become a global leader in my research field. **Omar**

The ADC has surprised me in some ways, **inspired** me in many ways and provides **really practical help** at the level it is really needed. The guidance from Magdalena and the other coaches and staff is of the highest level and brings significant intellect and experience to bear on the challenging issues I face. The ADC has also **fostered a close community relationship within the cohort** and I have made **friendships** which will long outlast the course. Some of my ADC milestones so far: **Promotion to Reader, long overdue paper completed, plenary conference invitation received**. **Bamber**

**Longer term results**

While the best ROI is good feedback, and the ongoing interest from the academics in wanting to take part is the best measure of this, below is ROI analysis based on a diagnostic administered at the intake
stage for the 2010 group and their results 2 years later. What the results reveal is that the ADC experience has a sustained and impressive impact on the participant.

The impact is varied and significant often doubling performance, significantly improving work-life balance and satisfaction. There is a great improvement in general effectiveness as well. The data also make clear that candidates perception of the level of institutional support if markedly improved.
Traditional career paths are only part of the roadmap as new models and cultures of working are emerging within the HE landscape and these have to be taken into consideration. Most participants struggle with longer term career vision and this area needs to be supported if an institution wishes to attract, develop and retain talented staff.

Men to women ratio of participants within the programme suggests there is no evidence for the *leaky pipeline* phenomena or lack of ambition within either sex. That said, women as a group do seem to require more nurturing where men will on average ask for help outright.
True talent management of academic leaders at all stages whether in research or teaching or organizational leadership requires in depth understanding of personal aspirations, talents and experience in helping staff build and pioneer effective career pathways. This claim is supported by data from another senior organizational leadership programme for academics which was compared to a similar programme at NASA in USA by the author.

Positive effects can be realized at any stage from lecturer to professor and beyond. Each stage has goals and aspirations and something to work on.

Summary

Scientists are artists. Whether one is a chemist, an engineer or a medic, all scientists are creatives and they need to be treated as such. Career management is something that is an important factor especially when performance and potential exists. Traditional career paths are only part of the roadmap as new models and cultures of working are emerging within the HE landscape and these have to be taken into consideration. More academics are now interested in becoming social entrepreneurs as well as innovators and change makers. This requires an approach to development that stimulates and challenges the mind as well as engages and nurtures the participant’s heart.

True talent management of academic leaders whether in research or teaching or organizational leadership requires in depth understanding of personal aspirations, talents and experience in helping staff build and pioneer effective career pathways that will be unique to each person and help them trust their true aspirations. This means working with their uniqueness through heart and mind fusion and effectively deploying and engaging the logic driven critic (mind) and the kind and patient nurturer (heart) intelligences. Managing this endeavor well enables transformation in the person and offers an institution much benefit in terms of tangible performance results as well as the things that we can’t measure yet highly value: creating a workplace where everyone can truly thrive.