

MAKING SENSE OF ACADEMIC LEADERSHIP

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Foreword

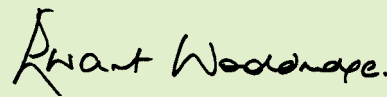
This compelling story of organisational development initiatives to underpin a merger of three universities in Finland resonates with me in many ways. It relates to our own growing Leadership Foundation activity to support universities in the area of collaborations, alliances and mergers, our current research into academic leadership, and the increasing importance of 'sensemaking' in the practice of leadership.

UK higher education has a mixed history of experiences of merger. This article stresses the importance of taking the long view, and of realising the payoff from integrating the reality of the change with embedded learning processes allowing for action and reflection.

The Leadership Foundation is working in support of Hefce on a major project on collaborations, alliances and mergers. The focus of this work is to make a determined effort to learn from the experiences of carefully chosen case studies, and to stress that this area is not just about mergers, that there is the potential to

benefit from a wider range of partnerships and collaborations, underpinned by sound development processes.

At a time when some may be stressing the importance of the business of managing universities in a competitive and complex world, they may be missing the point that it is the quality of academic leadership which may be crucial to embedding change. In the Finnish example, the linkage between academic leadership and sensemaking in their related processes of leadership development is very powerful. It clearly helped with the processes of redefining identity, and I believe, in the current upheavals in UK higher education, there is a crucial role for sensemaking or interpretative leadership.



Ewart Wooldridge CBE

Searching for leadership in academia

When you take three organisations – each with more than one hundred years of history – and merge them together, what is the most important element in ensuring the success of the venture? Yes, it is leadership. Based on years of experience and research on mergers and acquisitions, most corporate leaders accept that they need to pay attention to how a change like this is led. But if you take three universities with long traditions – each the best known of its kind in the country – and merge them together, how do you lead academic people through the change? Is there such a thing as academic leadership, or is it actually impossible to combine these two words, as many claim?

In any merger or acquisition, it is typical for all members of the merging organisations to feel that their culture is the only right one, the natural one to guide the daily work in their organisation. With academic institutions, different disciplines often attract different types of people and thus make space for different cultural and value systems. The systems of other institutions can then be very difficult to understand. In theory we all accept this, but in everyday situations it may be extremely difficult to understand why colleagues behave in a totally different way – and often in a way that seems irrational for someone representing another organisational culture.



Main entrance to Aalto School of Art & Design

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A year ago we were challenged to look into the leadership of the new Aalto University, a merger of three prominent universities in Finland: the Helsinki School of Economics, the Helsinki University of Technology and the University of Art and Design Helsinki. Based on dozens of interviews with academics and academic leaders inside Aalto University and benchmarking with universities on both sides of the Atlantic, we decided to share some lessons learned on academic leadership. And to be clear about our aim: this is not an academic text on leadership in practice, but a practical article on leadership in academia.

Background

Most departments in Finnish universities were originally built around single professorships. They have traditionally had a lot of power and as a consequence quite individual cultures depending on the leadership of the professor(s) and any specific characteristics of the discipline. There is no tradition of providing formal leadership training for academic leaders, and thus there are quite different interpretations of what good academic leadership is all about.

On the other hand, there has been a continuously growing demand for structured management – not leadership – practices, necessitated by the universities' public role. Until the end of 2009, all academic personnel were actually civil servants. So the shared general understanding of the role of academic leaders was that they were administrators and managers, not true leaders.

A change in the legislation governing universities in Finland enabled Aalto University to start its life after the merger as a new type of a foundation university. It permitted the university more independence, and required less reporting of information to the government. At the same time, leaders at all levels of the organisation were challenged to rethink the role of leadership in the organisation.

So a lot has changed. However, there is one key ingredient that will mainly stay the same: the people. Academic staff and their expertise form the core of any university, and thus it is important to make the change happen in such a way that the majority of the existing faculty remain on board. However, one way of changing things in practice is to bring in new people where necessary, and when recruiting new people during a major transformation it is crucial to pay attention to the type of people who are selected.

During major changes new people are often recruited to bring in competences and characteristics that represent something of the desired future, something that the organisation realises it does not have but will need in the future. What is often ignored is that it is the existing people who are responsible for the recruitment of the new ones – and recruiting panels often tend to gravitate towards candidates who share their existing value system. Additionally, the success of the new recruits relies heavily on their ability to adapt to their new environment. When recruiting people in the hope of bringing in changes, it is important that those people are able to show cultural intelligence, in other words to know when to adapt their own behaviour and when to stand firm and resist the old ways. And the existing staff naturally play a key role in either supporting or rejecting the new people and the new ways of working they introduce.

At Aalto University the transformation has also affected the leadership ranks. Some of the leaders already had leadership positions before the merger, but there are also new leaders, either brought in from outside the organisation or identified as potential leaders and promoted from within the three universities. So the leaders of Aalto University are not a unified group of people – on the contrary, individual situations and backgrounds vary quite a lot. Considering this, it is amazing how unified a picture we get of academic leadership when we talk to these people about their daily work as academic leaders!

Making sense of academic leadership

Even though this is not an academic article, we have found an academic framework useful in structuring the findings from our interviews and discussions both inside Aalto University and with representatives from other universities. The framework we are using as basis for this discussion is that of sensemaking as proposed by Karl Weick – simply because it seems to make sense!

Weick (1995) proposes that sensemaking has seven key properties that are closely linked to one another (see separate box). We have grouped these seven properties into three bigger areas. We will start by discussing the identity of an academic leader – how the academics see their identity and how that identity is either strengthened or challenged by their working environment and their own actions. Secondly we will look at the transformation of expectations for leadership, examining how academic leaders make sense of these changes in their environment retrospectively, continuously and together. Thirdly we will discuss whether and how things will change in practice by looking at what kind of information academic leaders need about the new leadership, as well as how they create plausible explanations for either accepting or rejecting the expectations for changes in their leadership role.

This sensemaking approach allows us to handle leadership in the academic community from two viewpoints: how academics make sense of leadership, and what the end result of that sensemaking process is.

According to Weick (1995), sensemaking is:

- | Grounded in identity construction;
- | Retrospective;
- | Enactive of sensible environments;
- | Social;
- | Ongoing;
- | Focused on and by extracted cues;
- | Driven by plausibility rather than accuracy.

The identity of an academic leader

An academic leader, whether new or more experienced in the leadership role, is still more than anything an academic. All the academic leaders we interviewed emphasised that academic leadership was not a career they had planned. People stay in academia because they are interested in research and education, not in leading other people. If an academic shows interest in the career of an academic leader, it is usually seen by others as a sign of an unhealthy will to promote one's own interests. Academics also seem to look at academic leaders as competitors in the

field of research – competitors with power over some key decisions affecting the whole research community. Against this background it is understandable that most academic leaders are keen to stress they are leaders out of a sense of duty; not willingly, but because somebody needs to take on those roles.

At Aalto University, academic leaders at all levels of the organisation often refer to their own disciplines, their own research results and their experience as researchers and research group leaders when introducing themselves. They may be department heads or vice-presidents, but first and foremost they are professors of a specific discipline. Many professors openly admit that the “real” discussions, the powerful and meaningful discussions in academia, are those related to research topics. Even as a successful ex-researcher you may become an outsider to these discussions if you do not continue your own research alongside your leadership role.

One clear identity-related challenge that academic leaders have is that they willingly admit the characteristics of a good academic – a great researcher – are not necessarily those of a good leader; quite the contrary. How do you build self-confidence and a strong identity as an academic leader, when all of a sudden the strengths of an academic become the weaknesses of a leader? This challenge to self-confidence is intensified by the academic environment, which typically sees leadership as something negative and thus exposes academic leaders to continuous criticism of their behaviour, and even of the purpose of their behaviour.

From collegial relationships towards a new type of academic leadership

An interesting lesson learned during the change is that it seems easier to build something totally new than to change existing ways of working. A good example of a new concept is the Aalto University Design Factory, an innovation platform that brings together researchers, students and business representatives in a funky, inspirational setting. It was not a direct replacement for any existing structures but was created with the aim of building something new and innovative, and it seems to be very much appreciated as a new opening. However there are a lot of other examples that have not been as successful. Where there are existing structures or ways of working they often seem to be linked to individuals or groups of people, and it seems very difficult to stop doing something that has previously been successful and useful. Thus the expectation for big changes often ends up realised as minor modifications to existing systems.

Many leaders feel challenged by the expectations for new ways of working. With the new university legislation there are fewer legal requirements. As a consequence, there are continuous requests from individual leaders at all levels of the organisation for internal guidelines – especially for areas that used to be strictly governed in the earlier operating environment. Leaders seem to find it difficult to act as leaders when they should be making more decisions and taking more initiative than previously, and as a result they are still operating as they would have in the old environment. By requesting more rules and guidelines, they are in sense maintaining the status quo.

Another challenge in breaking the old practices is the lack of social support for the new type of leadership. Many leaders feel there is a need for peer support in developing their own leadership skills and handling challenges in their daily leadership. However there is a clear competitive undertone in most peer discussions, which results in peer support actually turning into peer pressure. In some situations the social aspect of sensemaking in leadership may not be based on real experiences by leaders, but they may need to behave as if it was easy for them to act as academic leaders. As a result these peer discussions can become a burden to leaders who are still building their leadership identity.

On the other hand, peer support is seen as very important by the leaders. For many leaders the biggest change is that the new leadership role is a role of real authority; the leader is no longer just one of a group of colleagues but actually the one who needs to ensure everyone plays by the shared rules. In the academic world there is – and there should be – a lot of room for movement in an organisation’s culture and ways of working, but on the other hand the leaders are responsible for ensuring a safe and secure working environment for all their staff. So all occurrences of, for instance, anti-social behaviour need to be identified and tackled as soon as possible. Based on our interviews with academic leaders, this element of “not always being able to please everyone” seems to be one of the most difficult to accept. There seems to be a lot of need for affirmation before leaders will accept that disciplinary actions are accepted – and even expected – when the best interests of the work community and organisation are under threat. The fact that disciplinary actions should not be used by leaders to promote their own interests or in competitive situations with other researchers does not mean they should never be used.

Getting there in practice

So how is this type of change implemented in practice? The answer is “slowly and with small steps”. Organisational sensemaking regarding changing expectations for leadership will take time; it is only through examples showing how the new behaviours will bring positive results that the institutionalised beliefs about academic leadership will be changed. What makes it exciting is that none of us can yet tell what the result of this ongoing process of sensemaking will be. We have jointly, with dozens of leaders, defined Aalto leadership principles as a starting point for the new type of leadership. Only time will tell how these are institutionalised into Aalto’s ways of working through the process of sensemaking.

As with many things, most academic leaders seem willing to try out small changes one at a time. By behaving differently and observing the changing reactions from the rest of the organisation, the leaders start making sense of what the new way of working means in practice. However, the continuous sensemaking and analysis of cues extracted from the environment may also have an opposite impact. If new leadership behaviours are tried out without full understanding and commitment the results may be negative, and thus the sensemaking on the new leadership also becomes negative: “This just does not work.”

One example of this type of leadership behaviour has been an attempt to involve employees in decisionmaking using new approaches. The change was made willingly, but that willingness did not always extend to keeping matters truly open for discussion, and decisions have

been made before involving certain employees. As a consequence people feel cheated, and leaders draw conclusions about the new type of leadership not working.

It is not just the leaders who find it difficult to make sense of the new behaviours. Leaders have explained how their attempts to act differently are met with disbelief from the people around them. This makes it more difficult to introduce new leadership styles – big, sudden changes simply do not make sense or do not seem natural to other people, and often it may seem that the most plausible explanation for the leader's different behaviour is that they are trying to achieve something suspicious.

Another important element in making the change become real is the example set by the top leadership of the organisation. What the change really means is to a large extent interpreted through analysis of the real-life actions of the top-level leaders: Do their actions match the message? This is naturally challenging for the top academic leaders, since they traditionally share the same framework as the other academics. So while the top leaders are in fact making sense of what the changing expectations mean to them personally, they are at the same time very much affecting the interpretation of the new leadership by the rest of the organisation.

Many leaders also openly admit that they would like help with learning to lead in a new way. In particular, competences needed in people and team leadership seem to be important from their point of view. What makes the situation challenging is that there are very experienced people who still have no formal education in leading people – and, depending on their personal views on leadership, they have invested a varying amount of time in developing their own personal leadership style. In this situation individual learning processes – for example through mentoring, coaching, peer support and tools such as 360-degree assessment – have proven successful. Reflection and discussion with others can help individual leaders to make sense of the new requirements for leadership, and to find ways of making the new behaviours plausible and understandable for themselves.

One final thing we have learned during this past year is that it is impossible to please everyone. An example was our work on reviewing the incentive practices across the university. The different cultures became evident when we asked for input regarding the development of new financial reward systems. In the School of Art and Design you need to be careful when rewarding people with extra money, as it can be seen as manipulation of artistic freedom. On the other hand in the School of Economics it is often money that talks; people who deal with money and financial systems as part of their everyday work may see financial rewards as the only ones with real meaning. So in many cases the wisdom seems to lie in knowing what has to be shared in order to create the necessary unity and what can stay different in the various parts of the organisation.

The final word goes to a participant on one of our leadership development programmes. He pointed out that he and the other participants represented such a mixed group of people that it was impossible to create a programme that would fully please everyone. Equally, though, he emphasised that it was those very differences, and the debates we had based on a variety of views, that made the whole

programme meaningful for the participants. For all of us in the classroom, his words crystallised how difficult a task we all shared in aiming to build a university that would offer the best for all its faculty and staff – and where bringing together different views without any of them losing their edge was the key strategic aim. **E**

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Biographies

Hanna-Leena Livio (DTech) works as director, human resources (HR) for Aalto University. She is part of the President's Management Team with overall responsibility for human resources for both faculty and staff. Before joining Aalto University at the beginning of 2010, she worked in HR roles for UPM plc and Nokia plc with responsibility for the global development of management, professional expertise, employee processes and data systems. Previously she worked as a specialist for the Finnish Funding Agency for Technology and Innovation Tekes and as a special researcher for VTT Technical Research Centre of Finland.

Henna Tomperi (MA) is head of leadership and competence development at Aalto University with overall responsibility for the human resources development and well-being of both faculty and staff, having taken up this role in April 2010. She has more than 15 years of experience as an expert and a leader in a variety of HR and Communications roles at UPM plc and Nokia plc. She was also the winner of the first European HR Award by EAPM in 2009. She is currently on study leave working on her PhD on ethical leadership.



Aalto has built strong collaboration with Tongji University in Shanghai. In the picture Aalto and Tongji students together