Academic leadership: Dimensions and dynamics

Dr Tom Kennie, founding director of the Ranmore Consulting Group, proposes a model for understanding academic leadership.

The component dimensions and practice of ‘academic’ leadership vary in a number of ways from those processes associated more with ‘managerial’ leadership, although an area of common territory exists. To explore this assumption further I have developed a conceptual framework which builds on prior work by Andrew Munro, a fellow consultant, and Whatmore (1999) but is to a large extent based on my personal experience as an academic, consultant and coach working within a number of academic settings. My framework – outlined below and shown in figure 1 – is based on six different dimensions of academic leadership. Here I offer examples of some of the ways in which effective leaders deploy them in an academic context, and some early thinking about the dynamics at work, based on the interplay and patterns which arise from different combinations of the model’s six key factors.

**Dimensions**

1. **Credibility**
Academic leadership can only be truly practised if the academic leader has built a strong foundation of credibility. Without this fundamental underpinning, the ability to lead is likely to be severely limited; indeed leadership may even in some situations become impossible. Credibility needs to be demonstrated and earned in four domains: personal (academic achievements), peer (positive support from the academic community), positional (building the reputation of the wider academic unit) and political (dealing with the inevitable political challenges which arise in higher education).

2. **Curiosity**
Effective academic leaders possess and demonstrate a curious nature. They have an infectious fascination for their discipline, well beyond their own personal field of interest. Academic leaders require curiosity on a wide scale if they are to engage and inspire others. Through this intellectual curiosity, they also exhibit two other important attributes:

   - **Challenge**: Through engagement with others, academic leaders set and develop the academic agenda for their unit. Collins and Porras (2004) suggested to ‘managerial leaders’ that they need to articulate a BHAG (‘Big, Hairy Audacious Goal’) for their team or organisation.

   - **Horizon scanning**: An academic leader will also need to protect the individual and the team from distracting factors which may limit their ability to make progress. Horizon scanning helps to inform the leader’s approach to the future agenda. Successful academic leaders combine managerial horizon scanning with intellectual horizon scanning.

3. **Collegiality**
Academic leaders need to demonstrate collegiality personally, and encourage the process in others. From an outsider’s perspective, academic leadership might be perceived as being undertaken in a highly competitive, no-holds-barred, hyper-challenging environment. However, there is also open sharing of ideas, the contribution of colleagues in the field is encouraged, and a willingness to offer help to others is widely practised.

4. **Capabilities**
Capability is probably the area which has the greatest level of overlap with ‘managerial’ leadership. However, while the functions might be familiar, the emphasis is also slightly different. I suggest five domains:

   - **Creativity**: Breakthroughs in any area of enquiry typically demand a different way of looking at a problem. To facilitate breakthroughs, academic leaders need to foster the conditions which lead to intellectual risk-taking. Creating a culture where creativity is encouraged is key.

   - **Horizon scanning**: Successful academic leaders recognise the importance of preparing for possible contingencies before they become critical.

   - **Sense-making and planning**: No amount of horizon scanning can compensate for the capacity to make sense of any findings and translate them into tangible plans and actions. Successful academic leaders recognize the style of leadership that it becomes a seminal work in the field. In many other cases consistent performance over long periods of time is more likely to be key to success. To facilitate ‘performing,’ the academic leader will need the skills to deliver high levels of output by their team: defining outcomes, setting standards, regular review of performance and so on.

5. **Character**
Academic leaders need to set and develop the academic agenda for their unit. Collins and Porras (2004) suggested to ‘managerial leaders’ that they need to articulate a BHAG (‘Big, Hairy Audacious Goal’) for their team or organisation. I contend that academic leaders also need to establish the Big Hairy Academic Goal.

6. **Confidence**
An academic leader will also need to protect the individual and the team from distracting forces which may limit their ability to make progress on the academic BHAG. Whatmore (1999) offers further insights on the process of leading creative groups as do Goffee and Jones (2009) in their work on fostering and leading ‘clever people.’ The style of leadership is also important.

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**Note:** The figure 1: some dimensions and domains of academic leadership.
Connecting: The work of academic leaders in most fields can be enhanced by the contributions of others in the wider intellectual community, both internally and externally. Peer collaborators and access to private and public data sources or to instrumentation in other institutions will depend on building an academic network. This becomes even more crucial when leading an academic group.

Celebrating: The positive reinforcement of success through the celebration of individual and group achievements can be of real value. Not only does it act as a powerful source of individual motivation, it also builds cohesion within an academic team and ultimately builds enhanced levels of loyalty to the group.

5. Character
The notion of character in relation to leadership evolved from our use of this dimension in the area of managerial leadership. I propose three sub-elements, which remain of significance in the academic leadership domain:

Integrity: Integrity is central to all aspects of academic inquiry. In the academic leadership domain it is equally critical. Do standards exist and are they upheld in relation to ethics, plagiarism, recognising contributions? Without high ethical standards, academic leadership can become exploitative, dishonest and ultimately toxic as minor blemishes or oversights lead, over time, to seriously flawed and unethical practices.

Resilience: If the old adage that academic success is 10% inspiration and 90% perspiration is only half true, it suggests that academic leaders require the capacity to keep going personally when they find themselves ‘up an academic cul-de-sac’ or with inadequate resources to complete a project. Such resilience is also crucially important in relation to leading academics, and inspiring others to keep going.

Distinctiveness: Academic reputations are demonstrated and sustained on the basis of becoming known and respected through a series of distinctive contributions. As an academic leader, building a distinctive reputation is a key function.

6. Confidence
Confidence is another dimension which one might find shared with a more ‘managerial’ approach to leadership. All good academics need to possess a degree of inner intellectual strength and confidence if they are to take forward and develop their ideas. This also allows the academic leader to be more comfortable in the company of others who approach their work in a very different way. A lack of such ‘intellectual groundedness’ will ultimately limit the leader’s effectiveness. There will also be occasions when the academic leader requires a degree of ‘external confidence’ to fulfill, on behalf of the group, an advocacy role or ambassadorial function.

Dynamics
The way in which the various dimensions may interact with each other can be brought together in a ‘spidergram’. The dimensions of the model are independent factors, although some could conceivably be more correlated – say, credibility and capabilities – where it is probable that high (or low) score on one is likely to lead to an equivalent score on the other dimension. Others such as curiosity and collegiality may be correlated but could equally be quite different.

To aid interpretation, I have developed a pilot self-assessment tool to enable individuals to identify to what extent they have strengths or areas of potential weakness in each of these factors. On the basis of the relative effectiveness on each dimension, it is possible to create schematically an academic leadership profile. A copy of the self-assessment questionnaire to enable individuals to evaluate themselves is available for pilot usage.

Conclusions
The next step in the development of this work will be to gain feedback from others involved in academic leadership and leadership development. On the basis of this, it is hoped that a more complete model and associated diagnostic tools may be developed, to help both new and experienced academic leaders to be even more competent in the skills and processes required to ‘herd those academic cats’.

A full version of this article, including illustrations, is available online at www.lfhe.ac.uk/publications/reports

References


Dr Tom Kennie is a founding director of the Ranmore Consulting Group (www.ranmore.co.uk) and is programme director (with Professor Robin Middlehurst) of the Top Management Programme (TMP). He is also a key associate of the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education and a visiting professor at both Nottingham Business School and the School of the Built Environment at the University of Salford.

E: tkennie@ranmore.co.uk